

## Chapter 151:

### Wake

Farrah hadn't had a formal memorial, just a handful of dinners and informal gatherings story-telling and everyone getting blind drunk. With the unexpected appearance of her parents, Rufus had bounded into action, organising a formal memorial for the day before the adventurers left for Emir's contest.

After the service, the traditional wake was held not in a bar but the guest wing lounge of the cloud palace. If nothing else, it had a better stock of alcohol than most taverns. Jason looked over the group, some of them from afar while others Farrah had come to know in her months in Greenstone. Some were friends, others less so, but there was no antagonism on display as people paid their respects. Jory was present, the kind-hearted man looking red-eyed as Belinda stood beside him for moral support. She and Sophie had never met Farrah and Sophie was not present with her friend.

Elsbeth Arella and her deputy, Genevieve, stayed just late enough to be respectful and left early enough to be discrete. Madam Landry, their long-time landlady appeared. She was not an essence user and was somewhat overwhelmed by the cloud palace and the company until taken in hand by Farrah's parents. Her fellow Magic Society members were in attendance, in two contingents.

One was the group around Clive who actually knew and worked with her; the other Lucian Lamprey and his deputy, Pochard Finn. Despite the superior schooling in social niceties between a foreign nobleman and the secret child of a crime lord, Lamprey lacked the social delicacy of Arella, overstaying his welcome long after she had left. Jason was grateful that Sophie was not in attendance, struggling to restrain his own distaste for the man. Determined not to make a fuss at Farrah's wake, he diplomatically avoided Lucian to avoid triggering any of his bad social habits.

Lamprey himself, however, had other ideas. He was drinking Emir's expensive alcohol faster than anyone else in the room and, half in the bag, sought out Jason with an expression of half confused drunk and half determined anger.

"Asano," he called out loudly as he approached. Rufus moved to intervene but was arrested by Danielle Geller's hand on his arm.

"If Jason is ever going to live up to his potential," she quietly told Rufus, "he needs to show that he can deal with situations with tact instead of bombast, bravado and provocation."

"Now isn't the time for lessons," Rufus hissed at her.

“This is exactly the time,” she asserted. “We are adventurers, Rufus. Our most important lessons come from confronting monsters.”

Lamprey swaggered up to Jason, glancing around to make sure he had an audience. His deputy, Finn, tried to guide him away but Lamprey brushed him off. Jason turned from the conversation he was having to face Lamprey. Jason’s expression was schooled into blank composure.

“Director Lamprey,” Jason said. “Thank you for attending. Farrah’s membership in the Magic Society was very important to her; I know she would appreciate the strong representation the society has presented here. For you to come in person is very gratifying.”

“You think I don’t see through you, Asano?” Lamprey said in the way drunk people have of being loud while thinking themselves quiet. “You think you’re so smart, playing people off one another, bending the rules into whatever shape you like. But cleverness didn’t save your friend, did it? When she came face to face with power it cut her down in an instant. You didn’t even have the courage to be there when it did.”

Everyone in the room was watching now as Jason gave Lamprey a slight smile.

“It shows you as a man of character, putting aside personal animosities in the face of a greater threat,” Jason said, aggressively misrepresenting Lamprey’s intent. “I’m glad that such a man can come here today and put aside old problems, that we might face the new ones together.”

He took Lamprey’s hand, solemnly shaking it. “We appreciate your commiserations, Director. I believe your deputy was just saying that you have to go, which is understandable. A man of your position has so many calls on his time. We do thank you for coming, though.”

Pochard Finn rapidly stepped up as fury crossed Lamprey’s face, ready to erupt. Emir also moved alongside Finn, discretely using his aura at close proximity to squash Lamprey’s impending outburst.

“Thank you, Director Lamprey, Deputy Director Finn,” Emir said as he and Finn ushered lamprey to the door. On the other side, Emir’s staff helped Finn guide Lamprey out of sight as Emir returned, the door closing behind him.

“See?” Danielle said to Rufus. “I told you from the start; the boy has a political mind.”

Lamprey was the last of the socially obligated attendees to leave by far. In the wake of his departure, sombre, controlled expressions gave way to real emotion as the wake truly began. The drinks flowed, eyes grew damp and there was even some laughter as stories were shared.

One group of attendees was a team of iron-rankers, looking nervous at the preponderance of high-ranking people around them. It wasn't just no-name silvers of a provincial city, either. Their host, Emir Bahadir, was drinking with Thalia Mercer and the time witch, Danielle Geller. Constance, the famously unyielding head of Emir's extensive organisation, was disconcertingly expressive as she casually chatted with Gabriel and Arabella Remore. Even after years at Remore Academy, the iron-rankers were intimidated by Instructor Gabriel.

The iron rankers were a team from Vitesse, having trained at the Remore academy. Gabriel had discovered them when they were shipping out and had been the one to invite them to the memorial and wake. They had come up through the academy a few years behind Rufus, the Remore family's own prodigy whose presence had loomed over the other students.

Just the auras flowing around the room were enough to disconcert, even to those with years of aura training. There were a few other iron-rankers who were seemingly calm under the pressure, except for the one man who disregarded it entirely. They watched him swan about like he owned the place, for all the world as if the potent aura soup wasn't there. He walked up to legends and spoke to them like they were normal people. Even more startling was that they didn't seem to look down on the iron-ranker at all, welcoming him into their conversations.

"Nate, who is that?" Lance asked. Lance was an elf and the leader of the team. His long, light brown hair was cinched back behind his head.

"The outworlder we heard about," the leonid, Natalie, told him. "Asano."

Natalie was a female leonid and, like others of her kind, was smaller than males like Gary.

"He's the one Rufus has been training?" Maximilian asked. He was a member of the rare draconian race, larger even than male leonids and covered in glossy scales. His were the colour of dark leaves, green moving into purple.

"That's what I've been hearing," Natalie told him.

"What kind of training?" Oscar asked. He was a handsome celestine with dark skin and matching silver in his eyes and hair. "The aura training at the academy didn't teach us to handle auras that well."

The last member of the group was a smoulder with the typical midnight skin and burning-ember eyes. Her hair was cropped extremely short. She had her gaze locked on Jason as the others talked.

"Farrah also trained him?" she asked.

Frowning at her friend's intensity, Natalie nodded. The smoulder strode out from the group in his direction.

"Padma!" Lance called out under his breath but she ignored him.

Jason spotted the smoulder girl marching across the room like a woman on a mission. She couldn't have been any older than Humphrey, probably younger. She was the one he had been told about, coming at him with emotion storming through her aura. A Remore Academy graduate should have better control but the girl was clearly in turmoil. When she reached Jason it was like the wind dropped out of her sails, leaving her standing in front of him, becalmed.

"Padma?" he asked softly. She nodded and he gave her a gentle smile.

"I'm Jason Asano. How about we get you away from these obnoxious auras and have a chat?"

He didn't wait for a response before sweeping off, picking up two glasses and a bottle as she meekly followed him to a quiet corner of the room. Jason slowly teased Padma's story out of her as she clutched the glass of sweet liqueur in her hands like a talisman. Jason kept it refreshed from the bottle as she talked. She was hesitant at first, but with sympathetic prompting from Jason, the words were soon pouring out of her.

Padma and her team had trained at Remore Academy, a few years behind Rufus. He graduated ahead of them but his presence at the academy hardly lessened, a symbol for the students that came after. When he first brought back his team, Rufus had sought Padma out, who didn't even realise Rufus knew who she was. Rufus' new team member, Farrah, had the same essences as Padma and Rufus had introduced them. Farrah took the young smoulder under her wing, becoming something of a mentor.

Jason listened with no more than a few nods and words of acknowledgement to show his attentiveness. He quickly realised that Farrah had been more than just a mentor to Padma. Farrah had been her idol, a source of inspiration and a guiding hand. Padma had been eagerly awaiting her return to Vitesse, proud of her successful induction into the Adventurer's Society while Rufus and his team had been far away in Greenstone.

Padma had been looking forward to a reunion where she could share her pride, only for news to come of Farrah's death. When Emir's call went out for adventurers she didn't hesitate. Each berth on the ships bringing people over was a prize, Emir's people organising tournaments to bring the best. Despite her inexperience, her team supported her and won through. She wasn't even certain in herself why she had to go, but she felt driven, compelled by some internal need she didn't fully understand.

After she finished her story, Jason nodded. He shared a little of his own experience of learning from Farrah, leading to an exchange of what her mentorship had been like. Jason could plainly see that Padma had weeks of bottled-up frustration, aching to get out. He methodically used questions and little anecdotes to poke holes for it to vent out.

They sat in the corner talking for more than an hour before the speeches began. Rufus and Gary gave short speeches; anecdotes now smoothly-honed in the retelling. Jason got up to speak last. Stepping out in front of the group. His eyes lingered on Farrah's parents, who he had come to know over the last few days. Farrah's mother gave him a sad, encouraging nod.

"I've known Farrah since the day I came into this world," he said, then frowned. "That's was roughly half a year ago; not when I was a baby or something. I think everyone here knows my whole thing."

"Stop talking about yourself, you dinkle," Gary called out getting a round of laughs.

"I'm setting a scene, you hairy goon," Jason shot back. "I'm building up a narrative."

"Build faster," Gary said. "I don't want to sober up while you're prattling on."

"Maybe if I don't keep getting interrupted. Where was I?"

"You're very sad, the end," Gary said. "Let's drink more."

"That's enough out of you," Jason said, jabbing a finger in his direction. "Right, so, I met Farrah on the worst day of my life. I had no idea of where I was, what was happening or even if I was in my right mind. My first encounter with real power was when she blasted lava across the room like that was a normal thing that can happen. And that was Farrah; unassumingly awesome."

He looked down, smiling in reminiscence.

"After that, she introduced me to the world. Rufus taught me to fight like an adventurer and Gary taught me to move like one. Farrah, though, she taught me to *be* an adventurer. How to look at the world around me, literally and figuratively. I have a habit of running my mouth before my brain gets going and long before I have any idea what I'm talking about. Farrah was the one who brought me crashing down to earth before I let what I didn't know get me killed."

He looked up and around at the gathering.

"We all know that she died like an adventurer," he said. "There are people in this room who wouldn't be if she hadn't stood tall in the face of the most terrible enemy. The monstrosity that cut her down, his time will come, but this isn't about him. It isn't even about adventuring, really. At least, not for me."

Jason paused to sip at the drink in his hand.

“Yes, she taught me,” he continued. “Yes, I fought with her. By which I mean that I stood around while she blew up an apocalypse monster. It seemed very involving, in the moment. But most of my time with Farrah wasn’t as a fledgling adventurer. It was as a friend. The big moments are the tales we’ll retell but it’s the little ones I look back on and smile. Sitting around as Farrah and Clive talked some theoretical nonsense over everyone’s head. Farrah and Gary teaming up on Rufus because he’s gotten too stodgy. Sharing a meal, or an afternoon in the park. The adventures will be the stories we tell, but the friendship is the thing we’ll miss. To Farrah. Our friend.”

He raised his glass and everyone did the same.

“That is where I was going to leave it,” Jason said. “When Rufus told me to speak last tonight, I was reluctant. But he said that it should be me. That the last word should be one of legacy which, like it or not, I’m a big part of. It was convincing enough to get me up here, but this evening I met a young woman with at least as much claim to that as I. She hasn’t prepared any words, but I’ve seen for myself that she has them inside here, ready to go.”

Padma was listening to Jason with dawning horror. Smoulders were physically incapable of turning white, but she had at least gone a shade of very dark brown.

“Padma,” Jason said. “Please come over. The last word is yours.”

Everyone followed Jason’s gaze to the girl trying hard to look like a nondescript piece of furniture.

“You have things to say and I’ve already heard you say them well,” Jason told her. “They’re worth sharing.”

She stayed rooted on the spot until Gabriel’s voice pierced through the room with practised authority.

“Cadet Padma Parsell,” he said with the projection of a theatre veteran. “Front and centre.”

Padma’s body moved, Instructor Gabriel’s voice triggering a conditioned obedience. She found herself standing next to Jason, in front of the assembled high-rankers. Jason gave her a smile and an encouraging pat on the shoulder before moving off.

She started speaking. It was hesitant, with a staccato rhythm as her nervousness had her pausing and losing track of what she was saying. As she continued it became smoother, nervousness washed away by passion. It wasn’t a great speech but no one in the room doubted her love and sincerity. Jason stepped in just before she started to flounder.

“There we are,” he said. “Passion has an eloquence that transcends words and I think we can agree that none of us will top the passion of this young lady. So let the words be done and we can do what Farrah would do: get hammered on Emir’s expensive booze.”

After the speeches, the real drinking started in earnest. Farrah’s parents, Amelia and William, took Jason aside to thank him for his words.

“Farrah said you could be good with words,” William said. “A little too good, she told us. Likely to get yourself into trouble.”

“She talked about me?”

Farrah’s parents lived in the town Farrah grew up in, albeit in a much larger house, courtesy of Farrah’s adventurer earnings. There were no water-link speaking chambers there, but they had travelled to Vitesse every month to speak to their daughter.

“She certainly did talk about you,” Amelia said. “We weren’t sure quite what to expect from her description, though.”

“You should know that she thought you had an incredible potential,” William said.

“If you could learn to get out of your own way,” Amelia added. “I think she’d want that pointed out.”

“It does sound like her,” Jason said. “I’m so sorry she’s gone.”

“We always knew there was a chance this would happen,” Amelia said. “That was something we accepted when we first started working to get those essences for her.”

“Doesn’t make it hurt less,” William said. “But we were at least a little prepared for it.” Jason nodded.

“What about your family?” Amelia asked. “Farrah explained your situation to us, which seems a little unusual, even by adventurer standards.”

“I’m not sure,” Jason said. “I don’t know if they think I’m dead or missing. I make recordings for them, for if I ever get home. When I get home.”

Jason suddenly frowned.

“I’m sorry, but something just occurred to me. I’ll leave you to the condolence of others. Again, I’m so sorry.”

Jason made his way over to where Rufus and Gary were speaking with Clive, leaving Farrah’s parents seeking out Padma to speak with her.

“I just had a thought,” Jason said to Rufus, Gary and Clive. “Farrah’s parents were asking about my own parents and I thought of something. I got here because of Landemere Vane, and you think he was getting some kind of advanced astral magic from the Builder, right Clive?”

“It’s a possibility,” Clive said. “What he was doing wouldn’t get you home, though. It only served as an accidental catalyst for much larger, natural forces, though.”

“But what was he trying to summon?” Jason asked. “Something from the Builder’s world in the astral? That’s interdimensional travel. Landemere’s knowledge might not have the answers, but it could have clues.”

“All his notes and writings were taken by the church of Purity,” Rufus said. “They would be impossible to get a hold of, even if they weren’t destroyed.”

“You’ll also need to up your knowledge of astral magic theory if you ever want to understand them,” Clive said. “Skill books won’t be close to enough.”

“But they’ll be a start,” Jason said. “They bestow whatever knowledge was put into them, and I got those books from Landemere Vane himself. Even if they don’t have something that might help me get home, they might have something that helps us against the Builder.”

“You can’t use them until you hit bronze-rank though,” Gary said. “That’ll be months.”

“Oh, there are ways around that,” Clive said. “They’re a little rough, but we can look into it after Emir’s event.”

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “It’s a plan.”



## Chapter 152: I Can't Trust Any of It

A crowd of hundreds was gathered at the Adventure Society campus, in front of the cloud palace as they waited for Emir to emerge. There was a sea of iron rankers, plus all manner of city luminaries and others all eager to witness the commencement of Emir's grand event. Along with the mystery surrounding it, finally on the cusp of giving out answers, many were looking for a change of pace. Ever since the expedition, a pall had been hanging over the city's adventurers and the major families to which they belonged.

Emir's contest offered danger as well as opportunity. Many Greenstone families had taken the expedition as a lesson and were not allowing their scions to participate. After the results of the last astral space incursion, they were unwilling to throw people into another. With an enigmatic enemy targeting astral spaces for unknown reasons, the idea of sending their most inexperienced members into another one gave many families pause.

Not every family took safety as the highest priority, however. The inquiry had been sweeping with the demotions and the most affected families were desperate for ways to snatch back their lost prestige. While the astral space expedition had technically been a success, having excised the problem that was affecting the astral space, many viewed it as a failure.

Most of Greenstone's major families had never cared about the expedition's actual objective, instead, seeing it as a chance for individual glory. With the massive losses sustained in the fighting retreat, from that perspective it was a failure. Emir's expedition was a chance for them to rewrite their image after the expedition.

Then there were those families who, like the Gellers, simply wanted the next adventure. They recognised that there was always danger, but that was the nature of the adventuring life. If their young people were ever going to be the equal of the Gellers or the visiting adventurers, they had to push themselves harder, confronting greater threats.

The iron-rankers in the crowd were divided into three general groups: the locals, the Gellers and the outsiders. Even with many local iron-rankers sitting out, the locals were the largest group. The Gellers were the smallest of the three groups, with seven teams participating, not including Humphrey and his team. The Gellers were mostly from distant lands, but the family's deep roots in Greenstone kept them from being true outsiders.

Humphrey's team wasn't counted due to being made up of locals, with even Humphrey himself being Greenstone born and raised. Only Jason was not local but he still counted as more of Greenstone local than he did anywhere else in the world.

The outsiders and the Gellers were throwing each other a lot of assessing glances, largely dismissive of the locals. The outsiders had answered Emir's call from many different lands, but competition had been fierce for a spot on the boats Emir had brought in. No one underestimated the abilities of those who had made it.

As for the Gellers, their high standards were known the world over. This was hammered home by the presence of Danielle Geller. The time witch was more famous than most gold-rankers and it was well known she was close to joining their ranks herself. Once she did, she would stand at the pinnacle of the adventuring world.

Amongst the visiting adventurer teams was the one who had attended Farrah's memorial and wake, although only four of the five were present. Like all the teams awaiting Emir's appearance, they were made up of people in mid-to-late teens. Less usual was the complete absence of humans from their team. The leader, Lance, was an elf whose swordsmanship relied as much on the finesse of his magic as the finesse of his hands. Like Jason, his preference was for flowing combat robes. He had fair skin and his light brown hair was cinched back practically behind his head.

Next to Lance was Padma, with the onyx skin and fiery eyes typical of her people. Also typical of her people were her heavy clothes as she was wholly unaffected by heat. The effect of the delta on the climate was to keep things hotter than elsewhere in the region, even as autumn moved closer to winter. To a smoulder, though, even the most scathing desert was as cool as a mild spring day.

The team healer, Oscar, was a celestine man whose handsomeness eclipsed even the elven team leader. The comparison was made all the stronger as he mirrored Lance's hairstyle by tying it back in a simple cinch. Of the same ethnicity as Sophie, he had chocolate skin with silver hair and eyes. His clothes were white, neat and fashionable in the Vitesse style that Rufus favoured. They were also adventure-ready, the combination of form and function speaking to their extravagance.

Standing with him was the tallest person currently in Greenstone, the only member of the draconian people present. Maximilian was an imposing figure with his size and long, hairless head. Instead of skin, his scales in dark shades of green and purple were glossy under the bright sun. His clothes were designed to show them off, little more than tasselled shoulder pads and a loincloth.

A human they didn't know was walking towards them, only for her appearance to change to that of a female leonid, their team member, Natalie. Compared to male leonids like Gary, the women were smaller, lithe and sleek, with shorter fur and facial features closer to that of humans, elves and celestines. In the case of Natalie, her lissom body was

attractive even to human eyes, her naturally sinuous movements exuding sultry like it was their job.

“Nate,” Lance greeted. “We were starting to wonder if you were going to turn up.”

“You’re the one who asked me to do some digging around,” Natalie said. “There was more to unearth than I expected.”

“Let’s start with our competition, then,” Lance said. “What do you have on the Gellers?”

“What you’d expect, mostly,” Natalie said. “Well-trained, well-resourced. Good team synergies.”

“Any stand-outs?”

“The ones to watch were apparently the team lead by a Rick Geller, but he’s had to rebuild the team after losing people. The big clash here with those people invading astral spaces. Lots of dead adventurers.”

“Like Farrah,” Padma said.

“Yes,” Natalie said. “This Geller team lost two people. The leader added his sister and a local to replace their losses but their team cohesion isn’t fully there yet. They had to change most of their methods for the new composition.”

“What about locals?” Lance asked.

“Worse than you would expect, even for an out of the way place like this. Only one team is considered to be competitive.”

“How competitive?” Lance asked.

“Enough that the Geller teams consider them a real contender. They had a mock battle with the team I was just talking about and another team led by a Geller. Danielle Geller’s son.”

“Humphrey Geller?” Lance asked.

“That’s right,” Natalie said. “He’s just recently put together a team of locals instead of using his family members and connections.”

“Interesting,” Lance said. “I chatted with Humphrey a little bit at the wake, but we didn’t talk business. I know him a little from when his mother brought him out to Vitesse a few times but that was before either of us were essence users. I don’t even know what his essences are.”

“His confluence is the dragon essence,” Natalie said.

Maximilian gave an unhappy groan.

“False dragon,” he complained. Draconians took pride in their claimed dragon ancestry and often had issues with other races wielding the dragon essence. Maximilian had the dragon essence himself.

“Don’t start with that again,” Oscar said.

“I’m not starting anything,” Maximilian said unhappily. “He just shouldn’t go around acting like he has true draconic power.”

“Max, he’s not claiming to actually be a dragon,” Oscar said. “Not any more than Lance, with his sword essence, is claiming to be an actual sword.”

“How well do you know this Humphrey?” Natalie asked Lance.

“Just in passing, socially. I’m surprised to hear his mother let him make a team of locals, though. I can’t imagine she would let him add just any local idiot to his team.”

“Oh, he didn’t add just any local idiot,” Natalie said. “From what I hear, this idiot is special. Trying to make sense of the things I heard about the guy was crazy. I still don’t know how much of it is true.”

“Who is he?” Lance asked.

“Padma’s new friend,” Natalie said. “Jason Asano; the one Farrah was helping train with Rufus.”

“Jason?” Padma asked, startled. “He was really nice. Other than putting me up in front of everyone like that.”

“Well, the things I’ve heard about your new friend are pretty wild. Some people are scared of him, others think he’s an idiot or a madman. Some have even called him a genius, working his way up the social hierarchy. He ended up on Humphrey Geller’s team, after all.”

“What’s your assessment?” Lance asked Natalie.

“I honestly have no idea,” Natalie said. “Either most of what I’ve heard is false, which would make sense, or the man is some kind of insane magic pixie. Remember at the wake, the local Magic Society director getting drunk and confronting him? Apparently, there’s some kind of feud there, where Asano somehow came out on top.”

“What would an iron-ranker be feuding with a Magic Society director over?” Padma asked. “And how would he win?”

“Word is, it was over an indentured servant,” Natalie said, “which brings us to the next thing. You remember that commotion last week before the big meeting?”

“That was over an indentured servant,” Oscar said. “I can see why, having seen her myself. An arresting woman.”

“That was Asano,” Lance realised, thinking back. “Didn’t Bahadir kick him off the cloud palace for that? They seemed friendly during the wake.”

“That whole incident was a ruse,” Natalie explained. “Turns out it was some kind of plan to bait these astral invaders. I’m not sure on the details but it apparently worked.”

“It sounds like Jason is in the middle of a lot,” Padma said.

“That was my impression,” Natalie said. “I came across to many conflicting stories about him, though. There was apparently some kind of rivalry with the Adventure Society director, but she promoted him to three stars anyway. I heard he spent months healing the poor for free. I also heard he went a dozen to one with a bunch of adventurers in a shopping arcade in the middle of the day, killing half of them. I even heard he’s an outworlder.”

“That sounds made up,” Oscar said. “You can’t just kill a bunch of adventurers.”

“Twelve against one is even less plausible,” Maximilian said.

“The locals are sub-standard,” Natalie said. “Any of us could probably go twelve against one. Apparently, there’s a recording of the people going at him first, so self-defence. I’ve heard about a few recordings of the guy floating around, including that mock battle they mentioned. He’s apparently really big on recording crystals.”

“You’re right,” Padma said. “He’s using one right now.”

She had spotted Jason, some distance away in the crowd as he spoke into a recording crystal floating in front of him. She waved in Jason’s direction, the man next to him spotting her and pointing her out. He waved back with a friendly grin.

“So, what’s your take on the guy?” Lance asked Natalie.

“Unpredictable and dangerous,” she said. “I didn’t want to spend the whole time investigating one guy, so I decided it was best if you and Padma went and asked Rufus Remore,” she said. “You two know him better than the rest of us.”

“Did you hear how he came to have Rufus and Farrah’s teaching him?” Padma asked. “When I brought it up last night he just said that they found him out in the desert, lost and confused.”

“Form what I found out, that’s a very incomplete explanation,” Natalie said. “Not that what I heard was any more likely. I was told that Asano saved Rufus’ team from getting killed before Asano was even an essence user.”

“That doesn’t sound likely,” Maximilian said.

“As I said, the things I’ve been hearing about the guy are wild. Enough of it was so obviously false that I can’t trust any of it.”

“What about the rest of Humphrey’s team?” Lance asked.

"It's an unusual bunch," Natalie said. "One is a Magic Society official. He's some kind of astral magic expert who has apparently been instrumental in finding out about these astral invaders."

"And he's an iron-ranker?"

"Yeah, but he's apparently the real thing. The locals have been digging out information the big Adventure Society branches have been keeping under wraps and I've heard this guy is a key reason."

"What kind of secrets?" Lance asked.

"Not sure yet," Natalie said. "I've got a better chance of prying out secrets here than back home, though, once we're finished with whatever Bahadir has in store."

"Who else is on Humphrey's team?" Lance asked.

"There's some local, minor nobility. Nothing remarkable that I found from a quick check around. I've heard he's a solid healer but not much else. The last member is that indentured servant we were talking about."

"Really?" Oscar asked, edging forward with curiosity.

"An adventurer is an indentured servant?" Lance asked.

"Seems she was some kind of thief. She was robbing the local nobility for months but no one could catch her. Until Asano did, then went and made her an adventurer after claiming her indenture."

"Why would he do that?" Padma asked.

"You'll have to ask him that yourself. I heard a lot of postulation, most of it fairly disgusting."

"That's weird," Lance said. "Who makes their indentured servant an adventurer?"

"A smart man with a gorgeous indentured servant," Oscar said. "That's the kind of gratitude that does some real work."

"See?" Natalie asked. "Fairly disgusting."

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"Jason, that team you waved at is talking about you," Beth said.

"You can hear them from over here?" Jason asked. "Is that an elf ears thing?"

"No!" Beth said, raising her hands to her ears in a gesture of self-reassurance. "It's an essence power thing. What's wrong with my ears?"

"Nothing," Jason said, his eyes on the distant team. "Is that what female leonids look like? I hope this doesn't awaken anything in me."

"What are you talking about?" Neil asked.

"I don't like what's happening in my head," Jason said. "Am I a furry now? I don't want to be a furry."

"Why would you be furry?" Clive asked.

"I'm not above exploring new things," Jason said. "I just don't have time to work on the costumes. Making them, cleaning them, dear gods. Maybe Jory has something that could help."

"Is any of this making sense to you?" Beth asked, looking at Jason's team.

"Best not to ask," Neil said. "You learn that lesson quick"

"I bet it's a sex thing," Sophie said. "It's a sex thing, isn't it?"

"Uh... no," Jason said.

"Who are they?" Niko asked. The smoulder member of Beth's team, he was looking at Padma. "She looks sad. Should I go see if she needs comforting?"

Beth slapped the back of his head.

"Don't be a sleaze," she scolded.

"How am I the sleazy one?" Niko asked. "Jason has a sexy slave girl."

"I don't have Sophie," Jason said. "That's just a necessary legal fiction."

"Damn right, you don't," Sophie said.

"Unless I want to," Jason said.

"Do you want a slap too?" Sophie asked.

"Would you think less of me if I said yes?" Jason said. "My safe word is munificent."

"You are impossible to deal with," Sophie said.

"I told you he was the sleazy one," Niko said.

"Could everyone just act with a little decorum?" Humphrey asked.

"That would be excellent," Beth agreed.

"Humphrey, you really put together the wrong team for that," Neil said.

"Everyone quiet," Clive said. "Emir's coming out."

## Chapter 153:

### Legacy

Emir and Constance were walking toward the cloud palace main exit.

“Who did the voice projection circle?” Emir asked.

“Trent,” Constance said.

“Do you mean ‘the glass definitely won’t break’ Trent or ‘can’t hold up a fish’ Trent?”

“We’re not calling him that,” Constance admonished. “It was a suppurating grease fish. No one could have held it up.”

“Elspeth Arella could have,” Emir said. “We should have gotten her fired so we could hire her ourselves.”

Constance shook her head in weary exasperation.

“You need to stop doing that.”

“Danielle wanted me to do it.”

“We stay hands-off in local politics,” Constance said. “That’s your policy.”

“It seems warranted, here.”

“It always does to you, which is why you put me in charge of not letting you.”

“We’re already neck-deep, with this astral space business.”

“That’s not local politics,” Constance said. “It’s international politics. Interdimensional, if Standish is to be believed.”

“Clive,” Emir said with a sigh. “I can’t believe Jason snaked him out from under us.”

“That is exactly how you described your own recruitment attempt.”

“He’s a good lad, Asano.”

“It wouldn’t have worked, you know,” Constance said.

“Oh, I reckon we could have won him over. He’s wasted in this backwater.”

“No, I mean the fish,” Constance said. “Arella actually couldn’t have held it. Suppurating grease fish oil is resistant to telekinesis.”

“It is?”

“That’s why we went to so much trouble to find it.”

“I thought we were just going to cook it.”

“You thought we spent three weeks, using over a dozen people to find and catch a very specific and hard to find fish just so we could eat it?”

“No,” Emir said unconvincingly. “What did we want it for again?”

“The Rimaros job.”



“Oh, right. Where we dug that tunnel through the bottom of the floating island and slipped out with the... what were we stealing again?”

“We weren’t stealing,” Constance said. “We were repatriating the royal ceremonial armour of Kodin.”

“Right, yes. That ridiculous armour that looked like someone inflated it. I’m surprised they even wanted it back.”

“It has cultural importance to the people of Kodin,” Constance said.

“It felt like stealing. Did they figure out it was us?”

“They did,” Constance said. “Greg didn’t get the mango cart in place in time. On the bright side, they couldn’t admit they had the armour in the first place, so everyone’s pretending it didn’t happen.”

“Right,” Emir said, nodding. “‘Not enough mangoes’ Greg.”

“No, that was ‘fruit cart’ Greg. We got rid of ‘not enough mangoes’ Greg after what he was caught doing to those hairless oxen.”

“That was him? Good riddance, then. We lost a bundle cleaning that mess up. What happened to him?”

“We released him to the local authorities. Have you ever considered not basing your hiring policies on getting people with the same name?” Constance asked.

“I tried that in the early days,” Emir said. “People are much more resistant to nicknames when there’s no one else with the same name as them.”

“Are the nicknames an essential part of the operation?”

“Why do you think I do all this?” Emir asked.

“Money, power, travel, excitement and connections.”

“Those are the tawdry goals of the weak,” Emir said loftily. “We gold-rankers strive for higher purpose.”

“I think you’ve been spending too much time with Jason. You’re talking increasing amounts of rubbish.”

They reached the exit and started walking across the cloud bridge to the shore where the iron-rankers and other attendees were assembled next to the reception building.

“Is everyone out of the palace?” Emir asked as they surveyed the crowd of adventurers.

“We’re the last,” Constance said. “It’s ready to change over.”

At the end of the platform, in front of where everyone had assembled was a faintly glowing ritual circle. After he and Constance stepped off the cloud bridge, Emir reached into his jacket and pulled out a large, round-bottomed flask. He shook the flask, then took

out the stopper, releasing four streams of mist that each took different shapes. One looked like a house, another like a large vehicle. The third was a small replica of the cloud palace, while the fourth was a ship. Emir put his hand through the mist ship and the four images returned to the flask. As he put the flask back into his dimensional jacket, the cloud palace slowly started to warp out of shape.

Emir turned from the palace which was beginning the process of turning back into a cloud ship. He stepped into the glowing ritual circle and began to speak.

“Greetings, fellow adventurers,” he said, the magic circle projecting his voice over the crowd. “As you all know, I have come to this fine city with a purpose. Many, I’m sure, have heard whispers and rumours, but today, all shall be laid bare. Centuries ago, there was an ancient order of assassins. Known and feared the world over, their enemies came together to scour them from the face of our world. Today, only hidden remnants can be found, and those only with time and effort. Myself and others have undertaken that time and effort, which brings us to today.”

He panned his gaze over the crowd.

“This order of assassins was known as the Order of the Reaper. Going all the way back to the days of their organisation was wiped out, there have been legends of a legacy they left behind. Of a test, for those with the potential to receive this legacy. For years now, I have been seeking that legacy, and finally, I have found it. In the days before this city was founded, the last fortress of the order was hidden away in what was then a remote and unpopulated region.”

Not everyone had their full attention on Emir as the cloud palace deformed behind his back in the transition from grand residence to ocean-going vessel.

“As you have no doubt surmised,” Emir continued, “the purpose for which you have been gathered is to claim this legacy. The ancient, hidden fortress is now in ruins, but the true heart of the complex remains unpenetrated. It lies within an astral space of its own, waiting for those brave and skilled enough to face the trials within. This is no ordinary astral space aperture, however. To protect their secrets the Order had it sealed, the means of opening it scattered across the world. Those means have now been gathered and the aperture is ready to be opened. The trials are ready to begin.”

He made a sweeping gesture, taking in the crowd.

“Just from the fact that I have gathered you all here, you have all certainly realised that things are not so simple as I have described. Even once opened, the aperture still comes with restrictions, for within lies the true test. A series of trials left by the Order of the Reaper. Tests, to see who can live up to their ideals. Only those with the most untapped

potential, iron-rankers, may enter. The first of those to pass every trial will receive the legacy left behind. As a warning, the trials shall remain open for eighteen days, after which they will again seal themselves closed. Any of you who have not returned by then will not return at all.”

Emir took an object from his jacket and held it in front of him. Above his head, a large image of a gold and black scythe appeared.

“No one knows the full extent of the order’s legacy. What we do know is that it includes this object. It is the ancient symbol of the order and the object of years of searching. The goal for each of you is to bring me this item. Anything else you find in that place, part of the order’s legacy or not, is yours to keep. Additionally, whichever team brings the scythe to me will receive five legendary awakening stones, which you may be chosen freely from my stores. If you are a team of one, then all five shall belong to you. Beyond the stones, however, is another prize.”

Emir gestured behind him, where the cloud palace was still deforming.

“My cloud palace is a wonder, but it did not come to me as you see it here. It is a growth item I had the good fortune to come across when I, like you now, was only an iron ranker. Many years later I came across the man who created it, a diamond ranker. In payment for a service rendered, he gave me a second one, still at iron rank. Whomsoever brings me the scythe will receive it for themselves.”

A susurrus of noise rippled through the crowd. The cloud palace had been dominating the skyline of the Adventure Society skyline for weeks. Every person assembled wanted to claim one.

“So, you all now know what you are here for. Once the cloud palace has returned to the form of a ship all the iron-rankers participating may come aboard to see it for themselves. We will sail along the coastline to the closest location to our objective and travel overland from there. Our destination is one the locals may know of: Sky Scar Lake. The ruins are at the bottom of the lake, which is very deep, so you have until my ship leaves in four hours to prepare for that dive. Consider it your first challenge. Be here and ready to board at that time.”

Emir stepped out of the speaking circle. People immediately tried to approach but a portal appeared next to him, which he stepped through with Constance before it vanished.

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The crowd was thrown into turmoil as Emir finished his speech. Some were being exhorted by their family elders to obtain a cloud palace at any cost. Others were already

dashing in the direction of the trade hall, looking for items to let them handle the water of the lake.

Jason and Beth's teams were caught up in the swirl of people pushing their way out of the crowd.

"Does your team have a way of getting through the lake?" Beth asked once they were free.

Jason nodded. "There's a ritual I know. I assume you do too, Clive."

"I know the one you're talking about. I'd have to look it up, though."

"I can do it, no worries," Jason said, then turned back to Beth. "What about you?"

"I have the water essence," she said. "One of my abilities will do the job."

"I guess we'll make some final preparations and see you in a few hours, then."

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Many people were eager to get aboard the cloud palace, now transformed back into a ship the size of an ocean liner. Boarding did not go as smoothly as planned for some when it was revealed that a requirement of participation was a simple aura test. Anyone whose aura didn't match the Adventure Society records from prior to the expedition was excluded. Only a handful of people were caught out like this but were vocal in their protests. Instead of being heard out, however, they were taken away for closer examination.

On the ship, Jason's team were given their own cabins, alongside those assigned to Rufus, Gary and Farrah's parents. Rufus' parents were staying in Greenstone, making discrete inquiries into the church of Purity. Their teammate, Cal, had already left to check out the Landemere estate. The bulk of the iron-rankers were all bunked together in crew dorms, while the actual crew enjoyed cabins like Emir's guests.

As with the guest wing when it had been a cloud palace, the ship had a guest lounge with access to a broad side-deck. Humphrey quickly went off to invite their friends out of the press of people domiciled together below decks, bringing back Rick and Beth's teams. He also brought along Lance and his team as well.

"Mose!" Jason greeted happily. "It's been a while. What's up, mate?"

"Beth finally let me in her team," Mose said happily. "I think she wanted some extra power after you beat her like that."

Mose Cavendish was Beth's cousin, who Jason had known longer than Beth. They had met on a mission to escort spirit coins, where Jason had witnessed the destructive power of Mose's spells.

"That wasn't me," Jason said. "You can blame Humphrey for that one. He's predicted exactly how your cousin would react if we could put her on the back foot."

Rufus and Gary soon joined them and the group socialised as the ship sailed its way south down the coast. It was only a few hours before it sailed into shore at an unremarkable patch of desert. Emir's people started unloading sand barges from the ship. None were the size of the great Ustei tribe barge, but three of them were enough to transport the whole group inland to Sky Scar Lake.

It was hours more, going into the night by the time the barges arrived at the lake, vast almost to the point of an inland sea. It was a vast oasis in the desert, a blessed eye of blue and green in the hard, yellow face of the desert. The lights of villages situated all around the shore of the lake shone in the early dark. There were towns and villages situated all around the lake and the sand barges disembarked their charges at the largest.

The adventurers were gathered and notified that they would begin in the morning. The townsfolk had been warned ahead of time about the coming influx and had beds for those who wanted them or food and drink for those who didn't. Emir brought out the cloud palace again, right on the surface of the lake, allowing selected people to use that for accommodation.

The next day, the locals set out tables and brought out food and drink en masse to feed the anxious horde of adventurers. Not even the elite adventurers from overseas were immune to the nervousness. For all their training and prestige, they were still iron rankers and, coming from high-magic regions, they didn't have the individual monster hunting experience of the locals.

Some didn't eat out of nervousness while others couldn't wolf down food. Humphrey walked around with Neil, Sophie and Belinda.

"Next time you'll be an adventurer, too," Sophie told Belinda.

"Very likely," Humphrey said. "An astral space untouched for centuries will likely have accumulated a good number of essences and awakening stones. If we're lucky, they'll be unusual ones, although that's down to the nature of the astral space."

"People don't talk about it much, because of how it went," Neil said, "but the expedition was quite a good haul."

"That's how Jason got you so many awakening stones on the open market," Humphrey said to Sophie. "Did you see him leave this morning?"

"I saw him duck out early with Clive," Sophie said.

"Is that them there?" Belinda asked, pointing. The others followed her gaze to see Clive and Jason behind some kind of cooking stall in aprons. There was a line of people leading up to them as they rapidly worked a large grill plate in front of them. Jason was

wearing some kind of puffy white hat and his aprons had the words 'you can't fight monsters on an empty stomach' emblazoned on it.

"Oh, hey!" Jason called out as he spotted their approach. "Clive is teaching me to barbecue eels properly!"

## Chapter 154: A Rash Decision

“Now,” Jason said happily, “this is what adventuring should be like.”

Adventurers were spreading out over the surface of Sky Scar Lake like a huge flock of geese, using all manner and means of transportation. There was a wild array of essence abilities, rituals and items from water-walking books to cloaks that let the wearer swim like a manta ray. Jason himself had a useful item he had acquired from the tidal troll he defeated.

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Item: [Necklace of the Deep] (iron rank, uncommon)

*A necklace containing the power of the deep ocean giants (jewellery, necklace).*

- Effect: Ignore the effects of high pressure and pressure variance.
- Effect: Breathe water.
- Effect: Your weight is increased. You cannot use iron-rank weight reduction abilities or items.

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Jason could use it to walk along the bottom of the lake but his team couldn't, so it was staying in his inventory. It was nice to have on hand, though, and he could always test it out later.

His team were near the edge of the shore, a few of hundreds making their way into or onto the lake, depending on individual methods. They were geared up and ready, Jason's starlight cloak already in place, which he was beginning to regret.

“Nice cloak,” an adventurer said to him. “How much to buy it off you?”

“It's an ability,” Jason said. “Can't sell it.”

“He's lying, Brandon,” a second adventurer said. She was plastered to Brandon's side. “He just doesn't want to sell it to you.”

“Come on, how much?” Brandon asked.

“It really is an ability,” Jason insisted.

“Guy, you do not want to mess with me,” Brandon said. “Just sell me the damn cloak. Do you have any idea who my father is?”

Standing next to Jason, Neil winced, pinching the bridge of his nose. The cloak vanished from around Jason.

“See?” Jason said. “All gone.”

The cloak reappeared.

“It’s an ability,” Jason reiterated. “Try an awakening stone of the stars; that where I got it.”

“Forget this guy,” Brandon’s hanger-on said and Brandon nodded.

“Neil, your new teammate is a rolling turd wagon,” Brandon said and they hurried off to catch up with their team. The girl slapped Brandon on the arm for eyeing Sophie as they went. Neil and Humphrey let out a sigh of relief.

“You know that guy?” Clive asked Neil.

“One of Thadwick’s peripheral hangers-on,” Neil said. “His family are want-to-be aristocrats and he’s the dregs of the bloodline. If his family knew he not only failed to recognise Humphrey but mouthed off in front of him, they’d drown him in this lake.”

“I’m just grateful Jason didn’t take the bait,” Humphrey said.

“Farrah tried to hammer into my head that I should only start trouble when trouble is what I want.”

“Since when do you ever not want trouble?” Sophie asked.

“You’ve been listening to other people too much,” Jason said. “When did you ever see me start trouble?”

“You killed a bunch of people in a shopping arcade in the middle of the day!”

“I didn’t start that,” Jason said.

“He’s right,” Neil said. “Thadwick sent them to kill him when he panicked over Jason uncovering his lumber mill scam. Dustin and I didn’t find out until later, so by the time we went to Thadwick’s father to stop it, Jason had already killed them and given a recording of him doing it to Thadwick’s mother.”

“Some guy tried to have you killed and you just let that go?” Sophie asked. “If you let that go, what’s to stop him from trying again.”

“I would have liked to deal with him at the time,” Jason said, “but there were mitigating circumstances. Even disregarding the power of his family, I wasn’t going to kill my girlfriend’s brother.”

“Wait,” Sophie said. “That Cassandra girl’s brother tried to kill you?”

“He did,” Jason said. “It was a rash decision.”

“Does he have a weird sister thing or something?” Sophie asked.

“Not that I know of,” Jason said. “Neil?”

“No,” Neil said. “Thadwick isn’t the greatest guy in the world, but he isn’t that kind of creepy.”

“That’s where the indignation comes in?” Jason asked. “We were just talking about how he tried to kill me.”



"I'm pretty sure you sleeping with his sister helped that decision along a little," Neil said.

"I eventually realised it's for the best," Jason said. "What would killing him get me? Killed by his Mum, that's what. Then Emir and Rufus come down on the Mercers."

"My family too," Humphrey said. "My mother and Lady Mercer are close, but Mother wouldn't tolerate her killing you."

"Exactly," Jason said. "The wheel doesn't stop turning until someone steps off and forgives and it might as well be me. Besides, Thadwick has problems enough to be going on with."

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Thadwick had been in the constant company of Mercer family bronze-rankers since having the star seed purged out of him. They stood watch as he slept for days in recovery, then they stood by his room at his parents' 'suggestion' that he stay put and focus on getting better.

Although his rooms in the Mercer family home were the opposite of prison-like, he chafed at the confinement. His sister had visited, only to be chased-off by screamed accusations of whoring herself out to outworlder trash. His father would not tolerate such tantrums and had not been back since teaching that lesson with the back of his hand. His mother was more gentle but no less unyielding. She probed him with incessant questions until he told her to leave him to rest.

Thadwick's memories of his time with a star seed were hazy. His last clear thoughts were of being taken in the astral space and knocked out. From there it was only disconnected flashes; fleeting moments without context or comprehension. Clarity only came when he woke up out of recovery, the star seed removed.

His mother had told him that the others had experienced much the same. She wanted to know everything he could remember, everything he could piece together. She was meant to be his mother but instead giving him the things he wanted she pestered him again and again with questions. In the end, she was just one more person who only wanted something from him. Like everyone else, she was blinded by whatever strange methods Asano was using to make everyone love him.

She was so enamoured of that filthy, interdimensional bastard. She had made no secret of her plans to match him with Cassandra. At least the family had put an end to that sordid idea. The thought of his beautiful, capable sister being wasted on such a vile creature filled him with anger.

Everything had started going wrong the moment Asano appeared. Showing him up in front of everyone at the field assessment gathering. Winning over the Gellers, the out-of-town big shots and even Thadwick's own mother. She once even had the gall to say that he could stand to be more like Asano.

Every step of the way, Asano was plotting to bring himself up by putting Thadwick down. He wormed his way into Cassandra's affections, just to rile him up. How long had Asano worked to uncover Thadwick's brilliant plan to show his father that he was ready to step up in running family affairs? Asano must have been looking for some way to undermine him from the moment he arrived in the city to figure it out.

Every since Asano's arrival in the city, Thadwick had been feeling increasingly powerless. The sheer magnitude of Asano's plotting was mind-boggling, and Thadwick was the only one smart enough to see through it. The only time he had felt powerful in months was in a handful of moments he didn't understand. The memories were scattered, but one thing had been present in all of them: an incredible sense of power.

His memories included a few faces and places he recognised. Scraps of conversation he hadn't told his mother when she was questioning him. He had a better use for those snatches of memory: he wanted that feeling of power back.

He got up and stripped out of the bedclothes he had been wearing throughout his confinement. He picked out some street clothes, yanked them on and marched out the door.

"Young master Mercer," one of the bronze-rankers said as Thadwick strode past.

"Your mother told us it would be best if you stayed in your rooms to rest," the other said.

"I've rested enough," Thadwick said, not stopping. One of the two followed him, the other going off in the other direction. As Thadwick reached the ground level and was just leaving the tower, his mother teleported in front of him, along with the guard that had gone to fetch her.

"Thadwick, dear," she said. Her sincerity might fool others but he saw right through it.

"I'm going out, mother. I've been cooped up long enough."

"I don't think that would be best," she said.

"Am I a prisoner in my own home?" he asked.

"Of course not, dear."

"Then I'm going out," he said firmly.

“Very well,” she said, having no way around his masculine confidence. “With so many out of the city things should be quiet, so now may be the best time. But Geoffrey and Kyle will be going with you.”

“Who?” Thadwick asked.

Thalia gestured to the guards that had been stationed on Thadwick’s room for weeks, the one that had followed him and the one that had fetched her.

“I need them with you,” she said. “To keep you safe.”

“Fine,” Thadwick said. He didn’t care what they would suffer where he was going.

Almost two hours later, Thadwick and his escorts were walking through the streets of Old City. Close to the fortress ruled by the Big Three, many establishments were offering the kind of very specific services only the wealthy could afford.

“I don’t think this is where your mother would like you to be, young master Mercer,” one of his guards said.

“You aren’t paid to think, Geoffrey.”

“I’m Kyle, young master.”

“I don’t care.”

Thadwick took a familiar path down some stairs to an unmarked basement shopfront. A slat opened up, the eyes behind it taking in Thadwick and his guards.

“You know better than to bring people wearing house colours here,” a voice came from behind the door. Thadwick’s guards were indeed clad in the uniform of the Mercer household.

“Take it up with my mother,” Thadwick said. “You don’t have the stones to keep that door closed in my face, so hurry up and open it.”

The eyes glared but moments later the door swung open. Thadwick smirked at the doorman as he went past, his guards trailing behind. After a short hallway was a large, luxurious lounge. There was a long bar and a variety of booths that offered convenient seclusion. The room was adorned with beautiful men and women in provocative clothes; elves and humans, celestines, smoulders and even a few burly male or lithe female leonids.

Thadwick’s guards drew attention but people quickly turned back to their own affairs. Thadwick glanced around and spotted the person he was looking for. An indolent man splayed in a booth with a woman to either side of him.

“Thadwick,” the man greeted him, glancing over the Mercer guards. “I see your mother let you out, so long as you wore your leash.”

“I knew you’d be here, Timos.”

“I take my pleasure where I can find it,” Timos said. “You can hardly blame me for being so good at looking for it.”

“We need to talk.”

“Then, by all means, take a seat.”

“You’ll want this little chat in private, Timos.”

“Oh? Finally learning to explore all the tantalising treats life has to offer, Taddy?”

Thadwick leaned in, grabbing the front of Timos’ clothes and whispering in his ear.

“I’ve been having these very interesting flashes of what I went through, Timos. Some faces I recognised when I was captured during the expedition. If you don’t want to talk about them, I bet my mother will.”

Thadwick stood back up, looking with satisfaction at the Timos’ face, the dismissive sneer wiped right off of it.

“What about your boys, here?” Timos asked.

“I don’t care what happens to them.”

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With all the auras, abilities and magic items being used, the ambient magic had become turbid. Clive closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath, sending out a wave of magical stillness that even those without magic perception abilities could feel.

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- Party member [Clive Standish] has used [Mana Equilibrium].
  - Ambient magic has entered a harmonious state.
  
  - The next spell cast in this area will cost reduced mana, and the harmonious state will be disrupted.
- 

“So handy,” Jason said. “Thank you, Clive.”

Jason quickly enacted the ritual whose circle had been inscribed into the flat top of a large, lacquered board, ideal for marking with inscriptions. After a short chant from Jason, a shimmering bubble appeared around the board. Humphrey reached through the bubble unimpeded, picked it the platform and dropped it onto the water. It didn’t strike the water, instead, stopping in the air over the surface. The water was visibly indented by the bubble.

The team all stepped into the bubble, onto the board which remained completely stable. It was a good-sized board, but it was standing room only with the five people on it. They watched as nearby, Beth’s team sailed off on a boat made of condensed water that somehow didn’t get the people in it wet.

“Maybe we should have used a bigger board,” Neil said.

“This as big as we can go before the ritual starts getting costly in materials,” Jason said. He concentrated on the board and it started floating slowly out onto the lake.

“Exactly right,” Clive said. “It may not be fast or big, but it will do what we need.”

They floated out, part of the mass of adventurers. Eventually, they found Rufus standing on the surface of the lake. On his feet were large, garish, blue boots, from which mist was drifting in wisps. He was directing people to descend to the bottom of the lake at that spot. He gave them an encouraging wave but didn't pause his task to speak with them. Jason directed the board to go down, the water enveloping their bubble as they descended into the lake.

## Chapter 155: It's A Good One

Jason and his team descended through the water as the daylight shining through the surface of the lake above grew increasingly dim. They stood close together on the platform as the sphere around them held off the water, encapsulating them in a perfect orb. As it grew too murky for anyone but Jason to see, Humphrey took out a light crystal, tossing it up to float around his head. In the dark around them, other teams took similar steps. The result was a rain of light, plunging down through watery depths.

"This is awesome," Jason said, looking at the lights descending through the dark. "I know I'm from another world and maybe you all get to see things like this all the time but I'm loving this."

"It's certainly impressive," Humphrey agreed. "We may not get to see such things all the time, now, but we're only beginning our time as adventurers. We have lives of wonder ahead of us."

Jason looked at Humphrey's handsome face and broad shoulders as Humphrey gazed winsomely out of their bubble.

"Damn, Humphrey," Jason said. "You must be beating the ladies off with a stick."

"I do alright," Humphrey said. "Things didn't end well with Gabrielle, but the start and middle were good. I don't regret our time together and it gave me some important perspective."

"Listen to you all mature," Jason said. "What happened to that nervous guy from half a year ago?"

"He got a friend who pushed him into trying new things. Even if those were sometimes poison soup."

"Oh, that was one time," Jason said. "How was I meant to know they swapped out the regular cook instead of closing for the day? And it wasn't poison soup, it was just... improperly prepared."

Jason glanced at Sophie, looking around as wide-eyed as the rest of them.

"If you'd decided against being an adventurer right now, where would you be?" he asked her.

"No place good," she said. "I'm glad Belinda talked me into it."

"This is just the beginning," Humphrey said. "We'll have many days like this."

As they neared the bottom of the lake, they saw domes of air over dark ruins lit up by cheap magic lamps.

“Those domes are big versions of what we’re using, right?” Jason asked Clive.

“I’m not sure,” Clive said. “I’d like to take a look for myself.”

“Which one do you think Emir was talking about?” Jason asked. “He said the middle dome but there’s a whole cluster of them.”

“There’s meant to be tunnels connecting them,” Clive said. “Just pick one and we’ll figure it out.”

Jason directed the orb of air they were floating in to the base of one of the domes. The dome held out only the water, so once the dome and their bubble connected they could easily step into it and off the platform, without getting wet. As Clive put the platform away, they saw plenty of other adventures were likewise finding their way in.

Looking around at the inside of the dome, their surroundings were an ancient stone village. Long claimed by the lake’s water, the village was once again dry from the dome holding back the lake. The borders of the village were an exact match for the dome of air. Slimy growth was everywhere, fortunately giving traction to what would have otherwise been slippery cobbles underfoot, worn smooth by water. As the others looked over the buildings, Jason and Clive turned their attention to the dome. In what looked to be a circle around the entire village, a stone ring engraved with runes was set into the ground.

“Look at this,” Clive said, pointing it out to Jason. They crouched down to examine it more closely.

“The cobbles end right at this ring,” Jason said. Outside the stone ring and the dome of air that followed its curve around the village, the lake bed was all silt, rock and submarine growth. On the inside of the ring was cobbled ground.

“I’d say this ring was once used to keep this dome up permanently,” Clive postulated as he examined it. “See these repairs? I’m guessing the domes collapsed when this place was abandoned and Emir’s people used the ring as a platform for these new domes. They’ll only be temporary, though. Re-establishing permanent domes would be prohibitively expensive, even using the existing infrastructure.”

Now Jason was working more on grasping magical theory, he was becoming more interested in the functionality of magic. Clive was more than happy to play the role of mentor.

“We might want to get moving,” Neil suggested. “If we stop to examine everything we see, we’ll never get anywhere.”

“He’s right,” Humphrey said. “We need to find our way to the right dome because I don’t think this one is it.”

“Do you all feel that?” Sophie asked. The rest of the team looked at each other and collectively shook their heads.

“Outside the dome,” Sophie said. “A half-dozen iron-rank auras.”

As the only team member with an aura sense power, Sophie had detected the approaching monsters first. She pointed and the others looked, spying a group of monsters moving along the bottom of the lake. They were large with shark bodies and crab legs, all covered in shell plating. They were heading straight for the dome.

“Shabs,” Jason said. “How nostalgic.”

“Take a three-two formation,” Humphrey instructed and the team moved into position. Humphrey, Sophie and Jason formed a line behind which were Neil and Clive. Clive had his hands up in front of him, where a magic circle appeared vertically in the air. He was feeding mana into it, ready to trigger. Humphrey conjured his large sword and waited while Sophie stood, relaxed, beside him. Jason's cloak was already in place and he conjured his dagger, looking between it and Humphrey's giant dragon wing sword.

“Ready?” Neil asked as the shabs neared the dome.

“Go for it,” Sophie said and Neil immediately chanted a spell.

*“Strike hard and true.”*

Sophie started shimmering slightly with silver-gold magic.

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#### Ability: [Bolster] (Growth)

- Spell (magic, boon)
- Cost: Moderate mana..
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Iron 6 (19%)
- Effect (iron): The next essence ability used by the targeted ally has increased effect.

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Sophie sliced her leg upward in a vertical kick that demonstrated impressive flexibility. A blade of wind slashed out, passing through the dome unimpeded and striking one of the approaching shabs. It exploded in a wash of red liquid and a storm of bubbles that obscured the others.

“You weren’t kidding about that explosive effect in water,” Humphrey said.

“Split, please,” Clive requested, Humphrey and Sophie moving aside to give him an unobstructed line to the enemy. The remaining five shabs passed through what was left of the first and Clive chanted a spell.

*“Feel the power of reality remade.”*



A beam of rainbow light passed out of the magic circle floating in front of Clive's hands, locking onto the next-closest shab. The red faded from the rainbow, which then vanished. The shad stopped dead, fluid boiling out from under its shell plates.

"I figured heat would be enough," Clive said. "I didn't want to burn through too much mana."

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Ability: [Wrath of the Magister] (Magic)

- Spell (fire, magic, curse, poison, wounding, ice, dimension)
- Cost: Moderate mana plus additional mana per effect.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.
  
- Current rank: Iron 5 (38%)
  
- Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to alter the target's reality, using any combination of the available colour effects. This cannot be used in conjunction with the other variant of this spell, which requires an alternate incantation.
  
- Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to unmake reality in a localised area, creating an annihilating void sphere inside the target. This effect requires magic to be channelled into the target at an extreme mana cost until sufficient mana has been channelled to trigger the effect.
  
- [Red] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly increased (frost burn if combined with blue).
- [Yellow] (high mana): Target's abilities have increased mana cost.
- [Pink] (moderate mana): Target's resistances are reduced.
- [Green] (moderate mana): Target's blood is poisonous to itself.
- [Purple] (very high mana): Expend mana harms the target.
- [Orange] (very high mana): Target suffers increased damage from all sources.
- [Blue] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly decreased (frost burn if combined with red).

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Humphrey and Sophie slid back in front of Clive and Neil. Three shabs were down before they even reached the dome.

"What's that?" Neil asked, pointing at another shape approaching through the water. It looked something like an octopus made of thorny vines. "It looks nasty,"

"That's Stash," Sophie said, who could sense the shape-shifting dragon's aura. Humphrey had let his boisterous familiar make his own way through the wake. Jason's summoned familiar had many advantages over a bonded familiar like Humphrey's, but a bond had its own advantages. Where Jason could only sense Colin while the leech swarm was subsumed into his body, Humphrey and Stash could always sense one another. They would each know the other's general condition and could find one another over any distance.

Stash wrapped his thorny tentacles around the rearmost shab, seeking out vulnerable crevices between shell plates. The other two shabs finally reached the dome. One was met by a huge sword swinging down, cutting through the front half of the monster and leaving a ragged split.

In a more competent version of his very first shad fight, Jason rolled under the monster, coming up and slitting his dagger through the monster's vulnerable underside. Ichor splattered down over his cloak and he extracted himself as the monster fell dead. He tossed away the despoiled cloak which then vanished. The ichor that had been on it was suddenly unsupported and fell to the ground.

"That was good," Humphrey said, right before Stash splashed through the dome, his giant octopus from drenching Jason and Humphrey with shab guts and water. Sophie vanished before being struck, reappearing nearby. Stash turned into a puppy, looking up at Humphrey with innocent eyes.

"Ew," Jason said unhappily.

"I guess we know which of us is going out there to loot the monsters," Neil said. "No point me getting all messy if you're already like that."

Jason groaned, taking out his necklace of the deep, a series of round, colourful stones strung on a sinewy cord. Clipping it around his neck, he closed his eyes and mouth, holding his nose as he stepped through the dome.

The necklace shielded him from the pressure of the depths and weighed him down as he walked blindly through the shab-tainted water. He held his breath in spite of the necklace's power to let him breathe water. Its fierce chill would have made it an unpleasant proposition in any case. Unwilling to open his eyes, he stumbled about until he felt he had touched enough shab goo to trigger three loot notifications. He kept his sense of direction enough to find his way back without opening his eyes.

Everyone backed off as he remerged, drenched in water and semi-liquid shab remains. Opening his eyes he saw the notices were there and accepted them, all the goo in the water and on Jason and Humphrey dissolving in rainbow smoke. Outside the dome, the rainbow smoke bubbled its way up towards the surface of the lake.

The coins looted from the shabs appeared in the dimensional storage abilities of Clive, Rufus and Jason. Neil, experienced from his own looting ability, stepped back and neatly caught his own bag of coins as it fell from overhead. Sophie, less experienced, had it bounce off her skull.

"You could have warned me," she told Jason.

“When you go wading into a freezing cold lake to fish out money for everyone,” he said. “We'll see how much your mind is on the little details.”

He pulled a vial of orange liquid from his belt and drank it.

“Ooh, spicy.”

Steam started rising off of Jason's body and clothes. After a few minutes his skin, hair and clothes were all dry.

“Glad I bought those,” he said. “Remind me to thank Jory for suggesting them.”

Jory was actually participating in the event, although Jason hadn't seen him. The various crafting associations had decided there was a good chance of lost crafting secrets being found and had formed several teams to join in. To avoid conflict, each team was made up of different kind of magic craftspeople, from leatherworkers to weapon-smiths, engravers to alchemists.

They had no intention of seeking out Emir's scythe, instead intending to scour the hidden astral space for item-making secrets. Jory had travelled with the craft association contingent and hadn't run into Jason.

After handling the shabs, Jason and his team went looking for the central dome. While they had been fighting, other teams had found the tunnel and they followed the other adventurers. The tunnel sloped down under the lake bed, leading underground between domes. The central area was obviously more important than the dome they had come from. The buildings were larger and more impressive, looking more like the central location of a city than the village of the dome they had come from.

Following the crowd, they found Emir standing near to archway of dark stone, right in the middle of a large square. This allowed the adventurers to spill in around it. Gary was present, along with Constance and some of Emir's people who were drawing an elaborate ritual circle around the archway. Placed at various points within the ritual diagram were more than a dozen items, all long-weather stone artefacts. Emir's people kept the adventurers back, warning them against using abilities that would interfere with the ambient magic. Just the presence of so many essence users and their magic items was bad enough.

There was a long wait as all the adventurers either arrived or were rescued from their poor preparations for underwater travel and returned to the surface, destined to participate no further. One of the main culprits was the difficulty of getting rituals right amongst all the adventurers. Without a power to smooth out the ambient magic, like Clive had, rituals could easily go awry. Emir had a ritualist with a similar ability on staff for that exact reason.

Once Emir confirmed it with his people, he addressed the crowd.

“And here we are at last,” he called out loudly. He wasn't using a voice projection circle this time, again to not disrupt the magic. “Here we have reached, together, the limit of what I can tell you. The door will open soon and my people will direct you through it. I ask that you are patient while waiting for your turn to enter, as my people will deal with anyone acting in a disorderly manner. Remember, the team that brings me the scythe is the team that wins the grand prize.”

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Quest: [Legacy of the Reaper]

*You have joined the mission to retrieve the Order of the Reaper's legacy.*

- Objective: Pass the reaper trials 0/5
- Objective: Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes.
- Objective: Obtain [Golden Scythe of the Reaper] 0/1.
- Objective: Deliver [Golden Scythe of the Reaper] to Emir Bahadir 0/1.
  
- Reward: Racial gift transfiguration.

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“I've been waiting for that,” Jason said. “Oh, it's a good one.”

It was not the first time the party had seen a quest appear, having cleared various contracts together. This was the first time they had seen a reward that wasn't just spirit coins, however. Neil's eyes were transfixed by the listed reward.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asked.

“I think so, yeah,” Jason said. “Should be for all of us, since we all got the quest.”

“How is that even possible?” he asked.

“Not sure,” Jason said. “My theory is that once you reach a certain threshold for handsomeness, it flows over and starts having weird effects.”

Despite the astounding quest window in front of them, the team all turned to look at Jason.

“What?” he asked.