

## Chapter 181:

### Blob Body

Clive performed the next essence ritual for Belinda.

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

Ability: [Blessing of Readiness] (Adept)

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

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

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

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

Ability: [Quick Learner]

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

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

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

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

“You’re an adventurer, now.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What do I do?” Belinda asked.

“Reach out and take it,” Clive said.

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

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

Ability: [Echo Spirit] (Charlatan)

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

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

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

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

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

Ability: [Face in the Crowd]

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

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

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

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

Ability: [Form and Function]

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

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

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

“Not quite,” Clive said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“My body? You mean an outworlder body?”

“I do.”

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

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

“What?” Jason asked in horror.

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

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

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

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

“Habit,” Clive said.

“Habit?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This time everyone gave Clive horrified looks.

“What?” he asked. “It’s true.”

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

“That’s broadly accurate,” Clive said.

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

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

"I suppose not," Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

"That explains so much," Humphrey said.

"I know, right?" Jason agreed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Emir chuckled, shaking his head.

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

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

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

“Nice.”

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