

## Chapter 71:

### A Bit of Poo

Jason didn't normally wear his battle robe around the city, but he was on the job. He had been assigned his first contract within the city itself and was meeting a contact at what was apparently a famous tavern in Old City. It was located in a district named Cavendish, after a family whose interests once dominated the area. The family had long-since relocated to the Island, but the name remained.

There was a bulk trade centre for goods coming in from the delta, one of several locations from which the bulk of Old City's food was distributed. To accommodate the lodging needs of traders and teamsters, many inns and taverns were to be found nearby. After dark, it was a centre for Old City nightlife.

The raucous activity of the night had no impact on the bustling day trade, Jason noted, making his way through crowded streets in search of his destination. The buildings around him were the usual desert stone, although most had some manner of wall treatment that had been painted in bright colours.

The same could be seen anywhere in Old City, but in Cavendish, it was especially prominent. This was especially true of the central thoroughfare, whose uncoordinated clash of colours earned it the moniker Rainbow Road. Jason turned off that main street in what he believed was the right direction.

He stopped at a public pump, where people were lined up to draw water. Unlike The Island, only the wealthiest residents of Old City had magic-driven indoor plumbing. Most residents used communal facilities, like bathhouses, group toilets and public water pumps.

Underneath Old City, water from the delta ran through an elaborate network of tunnels. Ultimately, it all emerged from drains into the artificial strait between Old City and the Island. All through Old City that water was drawn up, used, then the wastewater was siphoned off to processing hubs spaced across the city. There, waste material was extracted before returning the purified water to the tunnels under the city. Waste material was collected in bags and sold as fertilizer.

To Jason, the tunnels sounded like sewers, whatever he had heard about magical cleaning processes. Given that his current contract involved heading into those tunnels, it was suddenly a more pressing concern.

The public water pump Jason approached, like others around the city, drew up water that was magically cleaned to safe standards. There were a few people in line for the pump to fill up jars, bottles, or even whole barrels that would need to be moved by cart.

Jason was about to ask the people for directions when his aura senses picked something up. He projected his aura harmlessly over the gathered people, who all turned to look at him. He took out his Adventure Society badge and held it up.

“I’m an adventurer,” Jason announced, “about to do some adventurer things, so please clear the area.”

Most people knew the mortality rate of going near adventurers at work, so people picked up their buckets and jugs and hand cart and made themselves scarce. Soon it was just Jason and the five iron-rank auras he had sensed.

“You may as well come out,” Jason said.

“I think he noticed us, boys,” an arrogant voice said, its owner emerging from an alley with four others. They were young, with the light and practical armour of adventurers. They were all carrying wooden clubs and had recording crystals over their heads.

“I don’t know, Dink,” one of them said, voice full of reluctance. “You felt that aura. Maybe he isn’t as weak as you said.”

“Of course he is,” Dink said, the first one who had spoken.

“Is there something I can help you gentlemen with?” Jason asked.

“Yeah,” Dink said. “You can shut up and take a beating. I’ll allow some whimpering.”

“Did I do something to offend you?” Jason asked. “Is it the handsomeness? You might be ugly now, but just keep working on those essences and you’ll eventually get less awful-looking. It’ll never be great with what you have as a starting point, let’s be honest, but its magic, not miracles. Actually, have you tried the goddess of beauty? They probably wouldn’t let you in the church looking like that, would they?”

“Are you seriously mouthing off right now?” Dink asked. “How smart will that mouth be with no teeth in it.”

“I’m not sure you know how being smart works,” Jason said. “Or teeth.”

“Dink,” the doubter spoke up again. “If he was as weak as you said, I think he’d be more scared.”

“You should listen to your friend, Dink,” Jason said.

“I know all about you, Asano,” Dink said. “That Geller lady set up a fight so you could beat all her fancy trainees, teach them a lesson or some crap. But the whole thing was rigged, and really you’re weak. But since you beat those Gellers, people don’t know that yet. Someone is gonna make a reputation kicking the crap out of you, and it’s gonna be us.”

Jason let out a weary sigh.

"Alright, gentlemen," he said. "Do you want to do this with powers, or without? I suggest without because at least you get to limp away after you wake up. I don't think the Adventure Society will like it if I kill you all. To be honest, though Dink, the more you talk, the more it seems worth the trouble."

“You think you can bluff your way out?” Dink asked. “I don’t need powers to beat you.”

“Just that stick, then,” Jason said.

“I’m going to shove this thing down your throat,” Dink said, waving his club. He charged forward at Jason, then found himself on the ground, unsure of how he got there. Jason was standing above him, holding his club.

“You get that one, Dink,” Jason said. “Come at me again and you pay in screams.”

Dink scrambled to his feet, lunging at Jason immediately. Jason rapped him on the head with his own club, arresting his momentum. Jason tossed aside the club and grabbed Dink's arm, yanking him off balance. The first scream came as Jason tried to bend Dink's elbow the wrong way, the second when he did the same with the knee. The screams stopped as knuckles crushed Dink's throat, then he lost consciousness shortly after seeing a knee coming at his face.

Jason let Dink fall to the ground, looking over at the others all clustered together.

“I have a contract to get to,” Jason said. “Either all of you get over here and fight, or take this idiot and go.”

The doubter dropped his club to the ground, the others doing the same. Jason shook his head.

“How did you idiots collect fifteen essences between you?” Jason asked. He’d heard Rufus and others say the local adventurer standard was low, but he hadn’t really seen it. Most of the iron-rank adventurers he’d seen were Gellers.

“You’d best get this idiot a potion,” Jason said, prodding Dink with his foot. “Oh, and where can I find a tavern called the Townhouse?”

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The Townhouse, as it turned out, was the largest building in Cavendish. Once the city residence of the Cavendish family, that time was long past. It had been an inn and tavern for almost two hundred years. Going in through the large doors, Jason arrived in what was a surprisingly well-appointed bar room.

Quality wood was a rare resource in Greenstone, but in the Townhouse it was everywhere. From the polished floor to the wall booths; from the tables and chairs to the long bar. The windows were pristine glass and elaborate chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, the magic crystals bathing the room in warm light. The only place heavily featuring the stone that normally dominated Greenstone construction was the split staircase at the back of the room. Made from dark and expensive green marble, it offered passage to the higher reaches of the building in style.

The patrons were few in the early morning, just a few people quietly enjoying meals alone or in pairs. They were better dressed than the average Old City resident, as was the man behind the bar. He was a member of the runic race, stocky and hairless, with blue-black skin. On his skin were the glowing runes for which his race was named, holes in his outfit designed to show them off. Jason had interacted with his people very little, as they weren’t common to Greenstone.

He was packing away clean glasses, in preparation for the evening. He glanced up at Jason, who walked over.

"Hello, sir," the barman greeted. "Am I to take it from your attire that you are the adventurer?"

"Jason Asano, at your service. Are you the owner?"

"The owner isn't in right now," the barman said. "She will be grateful for your prompt arrival," the barman said. "If I may ask, is it Mr Asano, Master Asano or Lord Asano?"

"Stick to Jason and we'll do just fine," Jason told him.

"Very good, sir. My name is Farrokh. Allow me to lead you to the other gentleman, who is already in the cellar."

Farrokh led Jason behind the bar and through a door that led downwards. They arrived at a sprawling cellar. Jason reminisced about the Vane Estate and the cellar where he had once woken up inside a cage. It hadn't been his best moment, but it was where he first met Rufus, Gary and Farrah. That cellar had been empty, cages aside, while this one contained rows of massive barrels on huge racks. It looked like the storeroom of a whisky distillery.

There was a man already in the cellar, kneeling down near a brick wall. He was peering into a hole, large enough that he could have put his head through it, chewed straight through the masonry. There was a glowing magical barrier inside an arch of runes carved into the wall around the hole.

The man looked up at Jason. He looked around fifty, wearing loose coveralls and a workman's cap. He had a tool belt, in which Jason could see implements both magical and non-magical in nature. From the outfit, Jason took him as the kind of highly skilled tradesman with training in the magical aspects of his job. His aura revealed no essences; his expertise was wholly in external magic.

Jason's magical knowledge, coming from a skill book, was more extensive than the narrow, specialised training of a such a workman. That said, Jason had no illusions he would be the equal of this tradesman in his specialised field. Jason's magically imbued knowledge might be more comprehensive, but he knew it would pale in comparison to the workman's years of experience. The man introduced himself as Frank.

"I've chased 'em all back into this hole here, Mr Farrack," Frank said.

"It's Farrokh."

"Sorry about that, Mr Farrack. So once I got 'em all out, I sealed the hole off. It'll keep 'em out long enough for Mr Asarno here to do his job. You much of a rat catcher, Mr Asarno?"

"I guess we'll find out," Jason said.

The Adventure Society was not normally called in for lesser monsters, which posed a limited threat. Only in large numbers were they a problem that required Adventure Society intervention. In this case, a whole colony of stone-chewer rats had appeared in the tunnels underneath Old City.

"I was told you would provide access to the tunnels?" Jason asked Frank as Farrokh led them upstairs.

"Yeah, but I'll have to leave you down there," Frank said. "This place isn't the only ones with holes in the basement. You're not afraid of the dark are you, Mr Asarno?"

"I'm sure I'll muddle through."

Frank led them out of the building and down a side street, to a set of stone stairs in an alleyway that led down below street level to a metal door. Frank unlocked the door, revealing more stairs. Jason followed Frank down into what looked like a sewer tunnel. The ceiling was arched, dark water run down the middle, with walkways on either side. There was a chemical smell, heavy in the wet air. It wasn't exactly like chlorine, but very similar.

"You alright for light?" Frank asked. "I can lend you a glow stone, if that'd help."

"Wouldn't the rats run from the light?" Jason asked.

"Oh, you see a lot of critters like this in my kind of work," Frank said. "My experience has been more of a run-towards situation. They'll take a nibble out of you if they can, believe me. Your trouble will be the ones hidden away. There's pipes and crevices aplenty down here. Lots of places to nest that people won't fit in to."

"I'm going to let my familiar do the hard work," Jason said.

"That's like a magic pet, yeah?" Frank asked. "Not sure I'd want my dog running around down here. I mean, they clean this water, but there's clean and there's clean, you know?"

“My familiar is an apocalypse monster that can scour a world of life,” Jason said absently as he looked around the tunnel. “It isn’t going to be put off by a bit of poo.”

“Sounds fancy,” Frank said. “I don’t much know about apology monsters or whatever, but I suppose the big nobs wouldn’t have sent you if you weren’t up to it. You know, we had an infestation like this not long after I started on the job. Weren’t cleaned out properly, and you know how monsters get after a bit. Streaming out of the street drains, they were, terrorising regular folk. That was some kind of bug instead of rats, but I imagine it’d be much the same. You just be sure and get them all, yeah?”

“I’ll do that, Frank.”

“Right, well, I’ll leave you to it and get on to sealing up these basements. After that, I’ll come back and hang about until you’re ready to go. How long do you reckon you’ll be?”

“That depends on the rats,” Jason said.

“Fair enough,” Frank said. “Just try not to get lost; these tunnels all look the same. If you ain’t back here come dark, I’ll assume you got lost and come find you.”

Frank closed the door, leaving Jason in the dark, but his vision power was more than up to the task. Taking out a knife, he sliced open his palm, letting leeches pile out of the wound.

Colin wasn’t likely to go causing any apocalypses quite yet, but the neophyte life-devourer did have the power to sense out living things, wherever they might be hiding. The sanguine horror wasn’t fast, but it was multitudinous, and as Jason followed the main mass, small groups of leeches broke off to head down tunnels and gaps. Jason’s quest might not end quickly, but he would root them all out in the end.