

Chapter 66: A Stronger Weapon Than the One in Your Hand

Humphrey was returning to the family estate after completing a contract, muddy and spattered with monster blood. He was met by Phoebe, a distant cousin. Like him, she was iron rank but joined the Adventure Society more than half a year earlier.

The Geller family sprawled across continents. Although they shared a last name, Phoebe and Humphrey were barely related. They didn't even share an ethnicity, with her skin being darker and hair much lighter than Humphrey's. As was traditional for the Geller family, Phoebe had been sent to Greenstone for training and experience. Once she reached bronze-rank, she would return to her homeland.

"What is going on with that friend of yours?" Phoebe asked Humphrey.

"You mean, Jason?" Humphrey asked. "I've been busy with contracts, so I haven't seen him. Mother said was spending a lot of time in the mirage chamber."

"A lot of time is right," Phoebe said. "He's been in there almost all day, every day, for most of a week," Phoebe said. "He'll fight anyone who comes in; bronze rank, iron rank, he doesn't care. Your mother says its good experience for our people to face an affliction specialist."

"Is he winning?" Humphrey asked.

"Mostly he's losing," she said sharply. "People have a habit of dying after he's already been beaten, though. Those afflictions are nasty."

"I've seen him kill monsters with them," Humphrey said. "I'm not sure I want to see that on a person."

"I don't understand how he keeps going when he loses so much," Phoebe said. "That would really get to me."

"You learn more from a loss," Humphrey said. "I wouldn't bother trying to understand Jason, though. I think Mother is the only one who sees through him."

"He did manage a few unexpected victories," Phoebe said. "When the mirage chamber throws out a complicated environment he gets tricky to deal with."

"Oh?"

"He beat my brother."

"He beat Rick?" Humphrey asked.

"Rick is like you," she said. "Put the enemy in front of him and nothing at iron rank is going to survive. But the mirage arena put them in a ruined town. The post-surge, cleanout scenario, so monsters everywhere. He'd hit-and-run every time Rick was distracted."

The illusion power of the mirage area could combine environments and enemies into many different scenarios. A post-surge cleanout was set in a town that had been overrun during a monster surge. It was a favourite of the Geller family trainers, due to the complex environment and constant threat of hidden monsters. Often it was used to train search-and-destroy missions, but it also made a dynamic arena for combat.

"I'm guessing Rick asked for a rematch," Humphrey said.

"Straight away," Phoebe said, "but your mother stepped in and took over and decided to make a demonstration of it. She must have been watching."

"I think Jason fascinates her," Humphrey said. "She likes to take people apart like puzzles, to see how they work. Jason is nothing if not puzzling."

"She put out a notice for everyone on site to assemble in the viewing room in..."

She pulled out a pocket watch to check the time.

"...just under two hours. Enough time for you to take a shower first. You smell like swamp and dead monster. Why didn't you use some crystal wash?"

"I ran out. It's been hard to get a hold of lately," Humphrey said.

"Actually, I noticed that too," Phoebe said.

The mirage area viewing room was laid out like a lecture theatre, and Geller family trainers would often use it as such. With tiered seats looking down on a large viewing window, trainers could talk while mirage arena images, live or recorded, were projected behind them. It was already half full when Humphrey arrived, with more people coming in behind him.

"Your mother tweaked the rematch," Phoebe said as Humphrey took a seat next to her. "This time Rick will have his whole team."

"All of them?" Humphrey asked. "Who does Jason have with him?"

"No one," Phoebe said. "Although I suspect your mother's hand will be firmly pressed down on the scale."

"Rick has Claire on his team," Humphrey said. "She'll just cleanse all of Jason's afflictions."

"Your mother set the conditions of the match," Phoebe said. "I'm not the one to complain to."

"I'm going to go find her," Humphrey said, standing up.

"Sit back down," Phoebe scolded, putting a restraining hand on his arm. "Do you honestly think you can change her mind?"

Humphrey did as he was told and sat down.

"I never have before," he said.

"I'm not exactly sure what the point is," Jason said. He was alone with Danielle Geller, in the control room of the mirage area. They were awaiting the arrival of Rick Geller and his team.

"The point," Danielle said, "is to learn. That's what we do here. We teach, and we learn. My family has spread across the world, but this is the place we first became adventurers. It's where we still do."

"I meant more specifically," Jason said. "I'm not sure I can hold up against five of your family members long enough to make any kind of educational contribution."

"When Rufus first described you to me, do you know what he said?"

"Rakishly handsome?"

Danielle chuckled.

"He told me that when you were all prisoners, you showed him what it meant to find something inside yourself you didn't know was there. To do what didn't seem possible."

"He may not have been paying attention," Jason said. "Mostly I freaked out and got hit with shovels."

"Yet you took down Cressida Vane," Danielle said. "I knew her, you know."

"You did?" Jason asked. "Was she always massively overconfident? That's what got her killed."

"She was, actually, yes," Danielle said. "It doesn't surprise me at all that it killed her in the end."

"I've died seven times today, in your mirage arena," Jason said. "Maybe three dozen, this week. It feels real. The despair, the panic, the helplessness. It still comes, every time."

"Good," Danielle said. "I want to see what Rufus saw. I want to see you do the impossible. More importantly, I want the young members of my family to see it."

"And if I fail miserably?" Jason asked.

"Then perhaps you'll think twice before trying to make my son question the fundamental makeup of our society."

Jason laughed.

"Yeah, sorry about that," he said, sheepishly. "I have a way of climbing up on my high horse."

"My son has started asking questions that I'm not entirely sure I like," she said.

"Yes you do," Jason said with absolute confidence.

She chuckled again.

“Yes, I do,” she acknowledged.

The door opened and Rick walked in. Like his sister, his skin was dark brown, his hair light brown. His build was more like Humphrey, tall and broad-shouldered. He led in four more people behind him.

Teams were not uncommon amongst adventurers, usually three to six members. Only in a relatively safe region like Greenstone was solitary operation commonplace.

Rick’s team had an archetypal distribution of roles, with a couple of resilient front-liners, some damage specialists and a healer. Not every team could find a good healer, with even someone like Rufus yet to find a one. His experience with Anisa demonstrated that team dynamics were as much about the balance of personalities as the balance of powers.

Rick shook Jason’s hand and introduced his team members. It was obvious to Jason that his demand for a rematch wasn’t rooted in pride, but a drive to improve himself common to the Geller clan. He had been as surprised as anyone when Danielle set up Jason against his entire team.

Only three of the five were Gellers, the other two being a pair of twin elf sisters. Jason shook hands with each of them in turn. While Rick may not have been driven by pride, not everyone on his team was the same, and the largest member of the team squeezed Jason’s hand brutally as he shook it.

“Ow,” Jason said, cradling his hand after taking it back. “Strewth, mate. What was that for?”

“Jonah,” Rick scolded. “What are you doing?”

“This idiot thinks he can take us one-on-five,” the big guy said.

“Actually, that was my idea,” Danielle said, drawing everyone’s attention. She had faded into the background so well as they were making introductions that Jason suspected it was some kind of aura trick. Just a subtle rise in her aura suddenly made her the centre of attention. Jason had been working hard on his aura control but realised he still had a long way to go.

Most of the group looked at Danielle respectively, but Jonah looked defiant.

“Do you really think this guy is better than all five of us?” he asked.

“It isn't about being better,” Danielle said. “He may not have been training as long as you have, or used the carefully curated awakening stones you all did, but I've been watching him here in the mirage arena.”

“You have?” Jason asked, looking disconcerted.

"I have," she said. "Jason might still be settling into his martial techniques, but he has completely learned a lesson that everyone here would do well to give more attention. So I set up this little match for everyone to see. I've queued up just the right scenario to make my point."

"Rigged the fight, you mean," Jonah asked.

"Oh, good," Jason said, letting out a relieved breath. "Just between us, I was a little worried."

Danielle chuckled.

"The scenario is a fugitive hunt. Rick, your team has two hours to find and capture or kill Jason. Jason, you need to avoid capture for the full duration, or incapacitate Rick's team."

"Not like likely," Jonah muttered.

"You have something to say, Jonah?" Danielle asked.

"I sure do," Jonah said, either not noticing or not caring about the warning in Danielle's voice. "I'm going to show this little no-name weed what it means to fight a Geller."

Rick punched him on the arm.

"Shut up, idiot. He's been in here fighting Gellers all week."

Danielle gave Rick an approving smile.

"One more thing," she said. "This scenario will be set during a monster surge."

Danielle walked into the viewing room, striding up onto the platform in front of the viewing window, with a crystal rod in her hand. The room went quiet. No-one had the courage to still be talking when Danielle started speaking.

"The Geller name is a good one to have," Danielle said. "Each of you in this room either carries it or are the boon companions of those who do. It is a name that opens doors, garners respect. It is a name to be proud of."

She panned her gaze over the audience. Geller trainees, their companions, and a few of the instructors who trained them. She continued her speech.

"I was just reminded, however, that pride can be a danger. We are not made great because our name is great. Our name is great because we make it so. Every one who bears the Geller name has the responsibility to live up to it. We are born with this name and a lot more. It is our responsibility to spend our lives earning them."

She waved the rod in her hand at the viewing window, which blinked to life. It showed a common scene from the delta; muddy ground filled with tangled tree roots, the canopy

overhead casting everything in shadow. Rick and his team trudged through the mud that sucked at their boots with every step.

“As instructors, we find some lessons take longer to sink in than others,” Danielle said. “You are all filled the realisation of your new power. You feel strong, unbeatable, even. It can make you disrespect the forces outside of yourself as determinates of success and failure.”

She glanced back as the team struggled along the wet ground. Hidden roots and unexpected deep patches on mud made for stumbling progress. The thick foliage above them forced them to rely on a magic lamp for light. It was an expensive one that would float over them without occupying a hand, but it filled the space around them with the dancing shadows of the trees.

“Your surroundings,” Danielle picked up, “can be a stronger weapon than the one in your hand. Monsters rarely spawn in training halls and fighting arenas. In most cases, you will be engaging them in their own environments. While you are watching, I want all of you to pay attention to this point. Who is using the environment, and how.”

Chapter 67: This is What it Means to Fight Me

Jason moved comfortably through the marshy woods. His feet didn't sink into water or mud, while his eyes easily pierced the darkness. Clusters of scraggly trees and other obstacles were no bother; he could vanish into the ample shadows and appear on the far side. Despite being all an illusion, it felt completely real. The hot, heavy air, the tiny insects swarming around him. A small burst of aura projection sent them scattering.

A thick strand of webbing launched itself out of a shadow, striking the spot where Jason had been moments before. It was not the first such miss, as Jason's eyes could dig out the trap weaver's in the darkness. Even if they hit, the webs slid off. They could not adhere either to his essence ability cloak or the armour underneath.

➤ **Effect: Resistant to adhesive substances and abilities with adhesive effects.**

The woods were filled with trap weavers, leaving behind a maze of sticky threads as they attempted to ensnare Jason. He flashed through the shadows, dagger planting in the head of the giant spider. It dropped to the ground as he continued strolling through the woods.

In the viewing room, Danielle controlled the perspective of the viewing window with the rod in her hand. She used it to follow Rick and his team's journey through the dark, marshy woodlands.

Henry Geller threw out his hand as he chanted a quick spell.

"Fire Bolt."

Flame launched from Henry's fingers, missing the fleeting, shadowy figure to burn out as it hit a tree trunk. Hannah's arrow had come closer, but Jason's figure was gone before it too stuck harmlessly into a tree.

"Henry?" Rick called out.

"He jumps around too much," Henry said. "It's like he's everywhere."

Henry wielded magic of wind and fire, and they had been tracking Jason by reading his scent on the air. They had caught glimpses of him, but seen little more than shapes in the darkness.

The group continued searching the murky, woodland bog. Jonah was their bulwark, but his heavy armour and shield slowed him to a crawl. Rick was their other frontline fighter and he was coping better. His armour wasn't as heavy and his might essence gave him the strength to plough through the mud. His greatest problem was that his long, heavy sword was hard to swing among the trees.

Rick and Jonah, along with Henry, were all members of the Geller family. The two remaining team members were the elf twins, Hannah and Claire Adeah; an archer and the team healer. As the healer, Claire was always the most important team member to protect. Her ability to cleanse Jason's afflictions made it doubly true. For this reason, she was in the most guarded part of the formation as they made their sluggish way through the marsh.

"What's that?" Jonah called from the front. The others looked at he pointed out ahead. The trees grew closer together, and streamers of webbing, thick as an arm, were draped through them like party decorations. It wasn't any kind of pattern, instead wild and scattered. It was thickly laid out, to the point of being hard to find a passage through.

"Trap weavers," Hannah said. They had already encountered several, most of which had been pinned to trees by her arrows.

"Trap weavers are careful," Rick said. "This doesn't look careful."

"I think Asano might have provoked them," Henry said. "This whole area is riddled with his scent."

"I don't think going through that is a good idea," Jonah said.

"We have to," Rick said. "He hides, we chase; that's the game. If we refuse to go somewhere, he can just wait there and time us out."

"That's not a fair condition," Jonah said.

Hannah looked at him like he was an idiot.

"There's five of us," she said.

"I'm just saying," Jonah said sullenly.

"Hannah," Rick said. "Your eyes are the best. Find us the clearest path."

The webbing proved to be very widespread.

"How did he get trap weavers to do all this without getting caught by them?" Claire wondered.

"He's tough to pin down," Rick said. "He may need shadows to teleport, but he can keep doing it, over and over. In a place like this, he's a ghost."

As they headed into the web-strewn trees they were plunged into shadow, the canopy above them low, but thick. They were moving slower than ever as they picked their way through the webs.

“I don’t like this,” Henry said.

“We just need to get a good look at him,” Hannah countered. Her bow was always at the ready. She was not worried about the obstructions, prepared to fire from her short bow at a moment’s notice.

“Can you burn through these webs?” Rick asked Henry.

“Trap weaver webs don’t burn easily,” Henry said. “I’d blow through my mana and barely make a dent.”

Around them was eerie quiet. Only the buzzing of insects accompanied the squelching of their feet in the mud, so a sudden new sound arrested their attention.

The sound of feet pounding rapidly through mud came from somewhere in the distance. The sound stopped for a moment, then they heard panicked swearing and the sound started again from a different direction. They heard the wet slap of something landing in the mud and a startled yelp.

“He’s got monsters on him,” Rick barked at the others. “Go!”

They started surging over the marshy ground. Hannah had found them a path that was relatively solid and even Jonah powered forward in his heavy armour. What they found was an indentation in the mud.

Rick looked around, peering at every shadow.

“Hannah?” he asked. When there was no response, he glanced back.

“Hannah?”

The whole team craned their necks searching in every direction.

“She was right behind me,” Claire said. “We were all running, and…”

“Back the way we came,” Rick said decisively, and so they went. What they found, to their horror, was Hannah’s body, barely moved from where they had started running. Her throat was cut and she dangled macabrely from thick strands of webbing like a puppet on strings.

“It’s not real,” Rick told Claire, who was looking at her sister with a hand over her mouth, eyes shocked wide. He put a supportive hand on her shoulder.

“It’s just illusion,” he told her. “We’ve been through this before. Henry, do you have a scent?”

There was no answer, and they looked again. While they had been looking at Hannah's corpse, Henry had vanished. That left the two men in their heavy armour and the healer.

"How did he do that?" Jonah asked.

"He's going for the ones he can kill quick and quiet," Rick said. "The rest of us won't go out like that. Our armour and Claire's magic shield means he can't take us easily.

Suddenly blue light flared around Claire in the form of a bubble as objects struck it, three in quick succession. They were throwing knives, falling harmlessly into the mud after bouncing off the protective barrier.

"That way!" Jonah called out, but Rick grabbed his arm.

"He's baiting us," Rick said. "The way he baited the trap weavers into making all this mess. From now on, we go carefully."

"How do we find him now?" Jonah asked. "Henry and Hannah were our spotters."

"We've been dancing to his tune the whole time," Rick said. "Time to change the music. Use your shout."

"Are you sure?" Jonah asked. "You know what that'll do to the monsters."

"He took out our spotters," Rick said. "The best advantage we have now is a straight-up fight."

"I don't think he's suddenly going to step out for that," Jonah said.

"It's not us he'll be fighting," Rick said. "He might be able to dodge a handful of trap weavers, but look at all these webs. That's more than a handful. If they all go berserk, he'll have a harder time dealing with them than we will."

"Are you sure about that?" Claire asked.

"No," Rick said. "I'm open to alternatives."

The others shook their heads.

"Alright," Rick said. "Jonah shouts, then we fight off the monsters while we wait for them to flush him out."

Jonah nodded, then took a deep breath. Throwing back his head, he roared; a primal scream that blasted through the marsh like an explosion. As he fell silent, animal shrieks rose up in answer, echoing out what felt like miles. Rick grinned, hefting his heavy sword in readiness.

"Let's see how he... crap!"

Everything went dark as a thrown dagger shattered their floating lantern. Rick felt a sting on arm, as did Jonah moments later. Light bloomed, illuminating the area from a glowing orb over Claire's raised hand. They looked around, but Jason was already gone.

“Keep the orb up,” Rick told Claire. “I know it uses your mana, but not that much and another lantern would be vulnerable.”

She nodded, looking at the wounds on Jonah and Rick.

Jason had found gaps in their armour while they couldn't see to defend against him, but he had barely drawn blood. They were minor cuts, but Rick had warned them early that it was all Jason required. Claire extended an arm towards Rick and chanted a spell.

“Be made clean.”

A glow of white-gold light glowed out from under Jonah's armour, and a black smoke arose from the gap where Jason's knife had cut. She did the same with Jonah.

“A poison and a curse each,” Claire said. “All gone, now.”

“His hit and run attacks have done all the damage they can,” Rick said. “He can't quickly finish the rest of us, and now the trap weavers will flush him out. We move carefully, fend off the weavers that come for us, and either find his corpse or make it.”

“Like this body?” a mocking voice asked. There was a lilting malevolence to it, like the speaker was slightly unhinged. They turned, seeing Jason's shadowy figure behind the dangling corpse of Hannah, still strung up on webs. It was their first clear look at him, although clear wasn't exactly the word. He looked halfway made of shadows, his cloak of darkness wrapped around him. The dark, flowing lines of his battle robe melded into the shadows and his face was shrouded in the darkness of the hood. Even with the light of Claire's orb, he was hard to see standing in front of them.

Rick threw his massive sword. It spun through the air at Jason but buried itself in Hannah's body as he moved further behind it for cover. Rick held out his hand and the sword yanked itself from Hannah's corpse, flying back to Rick's hand.

Standing behind the dangling, macabre puppet that was the ravaged corpse of their companion, Jason's laughter was filled with sinister mirth.

“So much for camaraderie,” he said.

“We're going to kill you, you sick prick!” Claire said to Jason, who laughed again. His response was to chant a spell, voice filled with malevolent relish.

“As your life was mine to reap, your death is mine to harvest.”

A dim red light shone from Hannah's body, which was quickly devoured by Jason. As it did, Hannah's skin grew dry, pulling tight over her skeleton as if years were passing in moments. Only a desiccated husk remained in her blood-stained clothes.

Claire screamed out in anger, raising the wand in her hand. A bolt of white magical energy fired at Jason, tracking him through the air, but he stepped closer to the corpse which intercepted the attack. The withered body fell apart, tumbling piecemeal to the

ground. Claire watched in horror as her sister's body crumbled into dried-up chunks, splattering into the mud. Than responsible, Jason, was already gone.

"You should be careful," his voice mocked them, first from one direction, then another. "I thought I had the spiders riled up, but you really went and did it."

Jason's voice was playful and cruel as he taunted them. Each time he spoke, it came from a new direction.

"My friends are coming for you," he said. "You might want to get out of these webs." His laughter rang through the trees.

"Rick?" Jonah asked.

"He's not wrong about the webs," Rick said. "Slow and careful. Claire in the middle and I'll bring up the rear."

"I'm going to kill the evil weasel," Claire said.

"Hannah's fine," Rick said. "She's already awake, back in the control room."

"I hope she stabs him while he's still in here," Claire said.

Jonah yelled out, standing awkwardly in place. He had stumbled into a near-invisible web. At the same time, a thick stand of webbing launched out of the shadows to drag Rick stumbling back.

They were an experienced team who had handled trap weavers in real life, so they moved quickly into action. Claire's wand, glowing at the tip, cut Jonah free of the web as she used it like a knife. Rick planted his feet, and even with the mushy ground underfoot, his immense strength arrested the force dragging on him. He gripped the web and yanked hard, yanking a huge spider off a tree to sail through the air towards him. Swinging his huge sword in one hand, he cut the monster in half as it tumbled through the air, then scraped the sticky web off his hand with the blade.

Jonah sloshed back through the mud, putting up his huge shield as the three of them backed away. Multiple strands of web shot at it, but slid off, as if it were greased in oil. Spiders were crawling all over the trees around them now, leaping from one to the other.

"How are there so many?" Claire asked, firing off bolts from her wand. With each bolt, a spider fell but the tree-hopping creatures were outpacing their careful withdrawal. Surrounding them, the spiders were able to fire webbing from the sides where Jonah couldn't cover, but it accomplished little. Claire ignored the webs, her barrier offering even less purchase than Jonah's shield. Rick danced around as if he wasn't shin-deep in mud, his huge sword flashing out, quick and deadly.

One of Rick's trump cards was an essence ability that temporarily ramped up his speed and power, and he put it to good use. His huge sword was incredibly heavy, but he

waved it like a baton, intercepting webs and slashing through spiders. The blade of his sword was glowing red hot and had burst into flame, cutting through webs and spiders alike with a searing hiss. He had been saving his abilities for a crucial moment, but there was an army of spiders bearing down on them.

“This way!” Jonah shouted, wading into thigh-deep water. “They don’t swim.”

It was a wide patch of water, common enough in the marsh, but it had one advantage: no trees were rising out of it. Following Jonah let them escape the trap weaver onslaught. The lack of trees gave the monsters no place to jump to, and the absence of canopy meant no shadows for Jason to jump out of. Reaching the middle of the water, it had never gone deeper than Claire’s waist.

“Now we wait,” Rick said. “Without us, Jason becomes the only food on the market. He can’t avoid them all, riled up like they are.”

The three waited, back to back as they watched the tree-line for movement. The glowing orb was floating over them, light shining off the water. The screeching sounds of trap weavers came from all around. The water stilled around them as they stopped moving. Eventually, the trap weavers started calming, their shrieks diminishing down until they finally stopped.

“Do you think they got him?” Claire asked.

“They had to, right?” Jonah said.

“We have to go check,” Rick said. “I think the loudest concentration of screeching came from over... did anyone else feel that?”

“I can feel it crawling on my boots,” Jonah said. “There’s something in the water.”

“Out of the water,” Rick commanded, pointing in a direction. Even as he did, the water around them started roiling like a boiling soup. The barrier around Claire started flashing in staccato rhythm.

Jonah grimaced and Jonah let out a painful grunt.

“What is that?” Claire asked, pushing down panic. “It keeps attacking my shield. It’s going to eat through all my mana.”

“Just keep moving!” Rick yelled. Their resolve showing as they kept didn’t slow their pace, even as something attacked them under the water.

Claire’s shield absorbed attacks at the cost of mana, regardless of the strength of the attack. Rapid, weak attacks were the shield’s weakness, and something was attacking it in swarms under the water. Unhappily, she let the shield drop before her mana was emptied out, immediately feeling the sting as something started biting into her legs.

Their attackers were revealed to be leeches as the creatures climbed high enough up their bodies to rise above the water. The leeches crawled over them in search of vulnerable flesh.

Claire fought through the pain to chant spell after spell, cleansing afflictions and healing through bleeds. The others had dropped their weapons to have their hands free, Jonah yanking the shield off his arm. They tugged off leeches with both hands and tossed them away, the leeches taking gobbets of flesh with them. The adventurers' efforts made little headway with the swarming leeches.

"My spells can't keep up!" Claire yelled. The leeches constantly inflicted bleeds and afflictions, faster than she could chant. The afflictions slowly but surely stacked up while the bleeds soaked up the healing. Their skin started to blacken around the leech bites. All the while, they kept making for the shoreline, finally struggling out of the water.

Suddenly Jason was there, a lunging kick sending Claire splashing back into the water. Jonah threw a gauntleted fist, but Jason danced lightly away on the surface of the water. Claire sat up, spluttering, only for Jason to kick her in the teeth in passing, sending her back down. He pointed at Rick.

"Your fate is to suffer."

Rick had his hand extended out in the direction of the water. His huge sword was spinning through the air, throwing off droplets of water as it flew past Jason and into Rick's hand. Jonah held his own hand out and an iron spear appeared in it.

Both men threw their weapons. They struck home with accuracy but kept going, Jason's cloak suddenly empty. After being dragged through the air, the cloak disappeared and Jonah could see his spear splash uselessly into the water. Rick's sword stopped in the air and flew back to his hand.

"What was that?" Jonah asked, looking around for Jason as he yanked off leeches. "I thought he could only teleport through shadows?"

"I don't know," Rick said, likewise yanking off leeches.

"My cloak is a shadow," Jason said, walking out of the trees well out of melee range. His cloak was no longer around him and they could see his face. His eyes were wide and his mouth was twisted in a deranged smirk. He looked hungry for something that definitely shouldn't be food. The cloak formed around him once more, hiding his face and its disturbing grin.

"Finally ready for a fair fight?" Jonah asked, another spear appearing in his hand.

"Two against one is hardly fair," Jason said.

"You mean three," Jonah said. Rick was quicker on the uptake, looking to the water behind them. Claire's body floated on the surface with the awkward stillness of death, leeches swarming over it.

"She focused her healing on us," Rick said bitterly as they looked at her corpse, robbed of dignity in death. He turned to spit invective at Jason, but had vanished again while they were transfixed by the fate of their healer.

"I'M GOING TO RIP YOUR HEAD OFF!" Jonah screamed into the air.

"Are you sure?" Jason's voice came from the trees, lilting and off-kilter.

"Your healer is gone," his voice came from another direction.

"All I have to do now is wait," he said, from a new direction again.

Rick grimaced, knowing Jason was right. They had managed to tear off most of the leeches, which couldn't move through the mud like they could in the water, but the damage was done. Standing around with no recourse, he could do nothing, even as he collapsed to the ground. That left only Jonah.

Jonah had the greatest fortitude of the team. His resilience and heightened resistances let him last well beyond his comrades, but he could do no more than Rick. He screamed rage into the shadowy woods, then spotted Jason emerge, once again at a distance. He threw his spear, expecting Jason to vanish into darkness again. Instead, Jason made no move to avoid it and the spear impaled him, low and to the side of his torso. He staggered back several steps before righting himself, not having made a sound.

Jason regained his balance, then pulled the spear from his body, hand over hand as Jonah watched. Holding the spear in one hand, Jason pushed the hood of his cloak back with the other, revealing his face. He took the spear and slowly ran his tongue along the shaft as Jonah watched in shock. Jason tossed the spear aside, eyes wide as lips, tainted with his own blood, took on a maniacal grin.

"I taste good," Jason said, looking absently at the blood on his hands. Then he looked up at Jonah.

"I wonder how yours will taste."

"You aren't touching my blood, you crazy freak!"

"Are you sure?" Jason asked, then chanted out a spell.

"Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast."

Red life force started shining out of Jonah's body, streaks of dark colours reflecting the afflictions he was suffering. Red light streamed away, through the air toward Jason. Jason threw his arms back, pushing his head forward with a wild and hungry grin. The life force vanished into his face as he moaned with pleasure.

“You’re seriously messed up!” Jonah said as his remaining life force returned to his body. He could barely stand now, blackened veins visible under his skin.

“You’re not looking so good, Jonah,” Jason said. “Don’t worry; I can clear that right up.”

“Feed me your sins.”

“The red light appeared again from within Jonah, but this time the tainted colours poured out into Jason, leaving the dim light of Jonah’s life force clean.

“Refreshing,” Jason said, as if Jonah’s affliction were a cup of iced tea.

The curse and poison were cleansed, but the bleeding continued and Jonah was too far gone to rally.

“You said you would show me what it means to fight a Geller,” Jason said, walking slowly forward. “But I’ve fought Gellers, Jonah, and I’m not sure you live up to the name.”

Jason stepped onto the water, walking past Jonah to Claire’s body. Jonah could barely keep his to his as he turned to face Jason, almost stumbling into the mud. He watched Jason, standing over Claire’s body, grip the elf’s long, blonde hair, stained dark by muddy water and her own blood. He pulled her up out of the water.

“Look at your friends, Jonah. You were meant to protect them, but they died helpless and agonising deaths. Like you will. I’ve seen what it means to fight a Geller, Jonah. This is what it is to fight me.”

He let Claire drop back into the water.

“Just end this, you sick lunatic,” Jonah said, glaring defiance.

Jason walked casually up to Jonah, who could barely stand, let alone fight back. Jason walked around him, looking him over like a slab of meat in a butcher shop. Jonah lacked the strength to turn and face him again. Jason shoved him in the back and Jonah toppled into the mud. Jason stepped forward, pushing down Jonah’s head with his foot.

“I’ve never seen anyone drown in mud before,” Jason said.

In the viewing room, the window went dark as Jonah’s feeble struggling came to a stop. In the aftermath, there was silence.

Chapter 68: Good News For Clive

The common room of Jason's inn was a sprawling, luxurious space, with dining area, bar and lounge. Jason was in the lounge area with Rick Geller, who had sought him out in the early hours, eager to discuss their fight. Jason was quickly realising that Rick was obsessively dedicated to training, even compared to other Gellers.

To Jason's surprise, he bore no animosity against Jason for the loss or wariness over his tactics. Instead, he was excited to encounter a style unlike any he'd encountered before.

"It was incredible," Rick said. "Sometimes people can get lax in the mirage chamber because it isn't real. The way you got in our heads, though? You had me making rush decisions, panicking. I've watched the recording at least half a dozen times, and I just keep screaming at myself to do something different."

"There's a recording?" Jason asked.

"There certainly is," Rick said. "It's all from our perspective, so you're barely in it until the end. You're always this crazy threat, lingering just out of sight. That crazy laugh, that creeps me out. It really felt like you'd lost it."

"A lot of guys ignore the laugh," Jason said, "and that's about standards."

"Hannah thinks you're amazing."

"Isn't she the one I ambushed, cut her throat and strung her up to use as a shield?" Jason said uncertainly.

"She saw most of it from the control room," Rick said. "She had copies of the recording made and she's been showing them off to people."

"Why would she do that?"

"Hannah's very spirited," Rick said. "Always ready to go, ready try anything. She'll take almost anything, good or bad as an experience worth having. She's kind of amazing."

"Oh?" Jason said, arching his eyebrows meaningfully.

"Not like that," Rick said.

Jason shook his head. It wasn't that long since he was a teenager himself, but it had been a hard exit, relationship-wise.

"Don't let it just sit there," Jason said. "Tell her and find out one way or the other. Trust a guy who didn't for far too long."

"The others are mixed in their reactions," Rick said, forcibly steering the topic in a new direction. "Henry is a little scared of you, I think. Claire is ready to stake you out and

leave you to the marsh ants. More for what you did to her sister than her, but she didn't like those leeches. Were you actually controlling them?"

"That's may familiar, Colin," Jason said.

"Colin? Wait, your familiar is a swarm of leeches?"

"That's right," Jason said.

"Swarm-type familiars are really rare," Rick said. "I've seen more dragon and phoenix familiars. The only other swarm type I've seen is a gold-ranker back in my home city. He has these fire hornets that suicide attack to inflict a burning condition, and when they kill something, a bunch more hornets burst out of it."

"Nasty," Jason said. "How did Jonah take how our fight turned out?"

"Jonah can be obnoxious and strong-willed, even to his own detriment," Rick said.

"I won't hold that against him," Jason said. "I've been guilty of that more than once myself."

"Well, you've earned his respect," Rick said.

"Seriously?" Jason asked. "How does that work?"

"Jonah can be prideful, and quick to look down on people," Rick said. "He respects strength, though. He doesn't care if you're a king or a commoner; show him you're capable and you have his respect. He just needs to stop making snap judgements about people before he knows what he's talking about."

"Also something I've also been guilty of," Jason said.

"I think you might have startled Humphrey quite badly, though," Rick said. "I don't think he realised you had that in you."

"I'm not sure I did either," Jason said. "I think that might have been bubbling up for a while. I'm really surprised you don't have more of a 'burn him, he's a witch' attitude."

"You're not actually some kind of blood-thirsty lunatic, right?" Rick asked.

"Of course not," Jason said. "It was just a persona. I might have got carried away with it, a bit, though. I felt so... free, afterwards. Like I finally started pushing back on all the pressures I've been feeling. Still, you really aren't freaked out?"

"You don't know a lot of adventurers, do you?" Rick asked.

"I know a few," Jason said.

"Once you know more, you'll understand. As long as the Adventure Society isn't sending people to hunt you down, anything is on the table. Fear, misery, despair. If those are your weapons, use them. If you have them and you don't use them, you're an idiot. Of course, that's a generalisation. Everyone has their own opinion."

"Humphrey?" Jason asked.

"Humphrey," Rick said.

"I should talk to him," Jason said. "I don't have enough friends to start scaring them off."

"In my experience, it's best to just leave him be," Rick said. "He'll work things through and then come find you."

"Alright, thanks," Jason said.

"So when are we having a rematch?" Rick asked.

Jason went downstairs to the common room. He was dressed in cool and comfortable clothes; loose tan pants, colourful shirt and sandals. He was about to set off on a contract, but there was a decent travel time and he could change clothes in little more than an instant. He might as well travel comfortably.

"Mr Asano."

Clive Standish stood up from where he had been quietly sitting in the common room, under the baleful eye of Madam Landry.

"Jason is fine," Jason said as he walked past Clive and out the door. The sun had yet to rise, the predawn light washing out all the colour from the world. Jason observed the similarity to how things looked with his ability to see through the dark.

Clive followed Jason outside and down the street.

"Uh, Mr Asano. Jason. This was the agreed-upon time for our meeting."

"I've got some good news for you, Clive," Jason said, walking down the street. "Our meeting is going to be extra long."

"Why is that?" Clive asked warily as he followed along.

"I have a contract," Jason said. "Probably take me a few days. We'll have a nice, long meeting on the way."

"On the way where?"

"There are some villages, deep in the delta," Jason said. "They're being menaced by something called a mangrove snatcher."

"A large lizard-type creature," Clive said. "It attacks by ambush after hiding in waterways or burrowing itself into mud or wet earth. Unusual for a monster prone to such tactics, it doesn't have the ability to hide its own aura. That makes it bad at hunting animals, which are sensitive to auras."

"So it goes after people?" Jason asked.

“It does,” Clive said. “Any essence user who has reached iron rank will sense its aura, making it a minimal threat to adventurers. To ordinary people, on the other hand, it can be quite the danger.”

“You know your stuff,” Jason said. “You’ve dealt with them before?”

“Oh, goodness, no,” Clive said. “I may ostensibly be a member of the Adventure Society, but I am not an active one.”

“Well, you are this week,” Jason said.

“What?”

“Your coming with me,” Jason.

“No,” Clive said. “No, I’m not.”

Jason pulled out a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handing it to Clive, who read it as they walked.

“This is the contract,” Clive said. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Four different villages in the area sent word that the mangrove snatcher came right into the village. Aggressive little pricks. The messengers all came in overnight and the contract was assigned to me. I was told to head out at first light.”

He waved an arm at the sky.

“And here we are,” Jason said. “First light.”

“I realise that being assigned a contract pre-empts our appointment,” Clive said, “but it does not mean that I am going to participate.”

“You might want to take another look at the contract,” Jason said. “Down the bottom.”

Clive looked over the contract again.

“It’s been amended,” he read, disbelievingly. “It’s been assigned to me as well.”

“I don’t know if you’re aware,” Jason said, “but the new branch director has kind of a thing about Adventure Society members who don’t actually go on adventures.”

“You did this!”

“Well, I knew we had that meeting,” Jason said.

“Did I do something to offend you, Mr Asano?”

“Just call me Jason.”

“What I call you isn’t the issue!”

Jason stopped walking, turning to face Clive.

“Clive – can I call you Clive? Clive, do you know what an outworlder is?”

“I do,” Clive said. “Astral magic is actually my specialty.”

"I know a little astral magic," Jason said. "Found this skill book when I first... that doesn't matter. Clive, I'm an outworlder. I was keeping that under my hat, but too many people know now for it to be a real secret.

Clive goggled at Jason.

"I have so many questions," he said

"We'll get to that," Jason said. "The thing is, I arrived in this world in less than ideal circumstances. Everything was strange, people were trying to kill me and I had no idea where I was or what was going on. So I kind of have a thing about getting ambushed. And then comes you, asking questions, knowing who I am and where to find me. I don't like it, Clive."

"I did introduce myself," Clive said.

"Clive, have you heard of lying?"

"Of the concept of lying?"

"Yes."

"Of course I have," Clive said.

"There you go," Jason said.

Clive shook his head.

"Having a conversation with you is like wrestling an eel," Clive said.

"When did you ever wrestle an eel?" Jason asked sceptically.

"I grew up on an eel farm out on the delta," Clive said.

"Really?" Jason said, looking at Clive with new respect. "It must have been a lot of work to get from there to here."

"I had some good fortune," Clive said.

"My friend's grandfather says the great adventurers are the one who turn luck into fortune."

"Is your friend's grandfather someone worth listening to?" Clive asked.

"Never met the man, so I'm not sure," Jason said. "He runs a school in Vitesse. I've haven't had a chance to visit, yet."

"Wait, are you talking about Rufus Remore's grandfather?"

"Well, best get going," Jason said, setting off again.

"Wait," Clive said. "We need to go to the Magic Society first. If I'm going to be gone for several days, I need to make arrangements for my other duties. Also, we can pick up some transport. I'm not riding a heidel; I hate those things."

That got Jason's attention.

"Me too," Jason said. "What kind of transport are you talking about?"

“How has no one told me about these?” Jason called out joyously. They were skimming over the water in an airboat. Instead of a fan at the back, there was a vertical metal ring, around which had been engraved a magical diagram. Propulsion came from air sucked in through the front of the ring and propelled from the rear with great force. Sitting in front of it, the occupants were bombarded by the loud air rushing in. At the front of the boat was Clive’s familiar, a rune tortoise named Onslow. His head was jutting forward like a dog with its head out a car window.

They left the city from a different gate than Jason had previously, as it gave them better access to the waterways of the delta. Although verdant and filled with wetlands, only some parts were completely navigable by boat. Clive piloted the airboat by holding his hand over a glowing blue cube. With tiny hand gestures, he could speed up, slow down, or turn the boat.

He drove it with confidence, sending them careening over the water. Occasionally they would need to pass through one of the artificial embankment roads that divided up the delta. There were many bridges built into them, so as not to obstruct the waterways. The airboat was just short enough to pass under them, with a wide margin on either side. There were handles on either side of Jason’s padded seat, on which he kept a white-knuckle grip each time Clive sent the boat shooting through the tiny space under a bridge.

“Can you teach me to drive one of these things?” Jason asked. They had to talk loudly to be heard over the rushing air, almost at a shout.

“You can only drive these if you have the right essence ability,” Clive yelled back at Jason. “It usually comes from the magic essence. The same power lets you use magical weapons like wands.”

Jason was learning there was a lot more to the gangly scholar than he had initially presumed. Gone were the too-large robes, replaced with more practical wear for the delta, with sturdy-looking pants, shirt and vest. Jason spotted a bracelet on Clive’s wrist, identical to the one on his own. It was a cord looped through small blue stones, each with a hole in the middle.

Item: [Oasis Bracelet] (iron rank, uncommon)

A bracelet that draws on the power of water quintessence to bestow the blessings of a personal oasis (accessory, bracelet).

- Effect: When a water quintessence gem is set into the bracelet it keeps the wearer cool and refreshed.
 - Effect: Reduces incoming fire and heat damage. This effect accelerates consumption of the water quintessence gem.
-

There was also what looked like an ordinary stick sheathed against Clive's thigh. Jason realised it must be a magic wand.

"I was expecting you to fight me more on coming out here," Jason called out.

"When I have an outworlder's captive attention?" Clive asked. "There's no way I'd pass that up. As you said, we can have a nice, long meeting on the way. I have so many questions."

"I did say that, didn't I? Alright, Clive. Ask away."

They arrived at the first village, where there were signs of the monster attacking. The villagers had reacted quickly, barricading themselves in their homes. There were signs of the monster attacking them, but nothing had been breached the thick, mud-brick walls. The villagers told them that they had been attacked every day while they waited for their messengers to reach Greenstone.

Jason told them to keep themselves locked away while they checked on the other villages. He and Clive got back in their airboat and took off again. As they travelled, Clive continued his interrogation of Jason.

"You killed Landemere Vane?" Clive asked.

"And his mum," Jason said. "Did you know them?"

"I knew him," Clive said.

"He wasn't a friend, was he?" Jason asked.

"No," Clive said. "The whole family was reclusive. I only knew him at all because we specialised in the same field of magic."

Jason looked up and around.

"Hey, we're almost at the next village."

"You know this area?" Clive asked.

"No, one of my outworlder abilities is a map that only I can see. Places only appear on it when I get close, though."

“Fascinating,” Clive said. “Have you tested the effects of going to a high place with superior sight lines?”

“I haven’t,” Jason said. “That’s a good idea.”

“This is why you need to let me study you,” Clive said.

“Definitely not,” Jason said. “I get enough of that from Farrah.”

“Who?”

“A friend of mine. She’s Magic Society, too. I’ll introduce you.”

Chapter 69: Dumpling Soup

There was a small jetty from which they could see the village. There were several dinghies tied up, one of which had been sunk in the shallow water. A streak of dried blood was on the part jutting above the waterline.

"Looks like someone's hurt," Clive said as he tied the airboat to the jetty.

"I hope so," Jason said.

"You hope someone's hurt?" Clive asked.

"You can fix hurt. Can't fix dead."

Jason stopped, looking at Clive.

"You can't fix dead, can you?" Jason asked. "It never occurred to ask."

"Not at our rank," Clive said. "Some gold rank healing effects can bring you back if they're used immediately," Clive said.

"Like magic CPR," Jason said.

"I don't know what that is," Clive said. "There's also diamond rank, but there are always rumours about diamond rank."

They walked towards the village. Like the others they had visited, there was no one to be seen. The people had holed themselves up as they waited for adventurers to arrive. The buildings were mudbrick, with woven reed doors and window shutters. Many of the doors had been scratched into shreds, revealing barriers of stone or metal that had been placed behind them. The people of the delta were prepared for monsters.

Jason loudly announced their presence and the village mayor came out to meet them. She described the monster, which sounded to Jason like a claw-footed, six-legged crocodile.

"That's a mangrove snatcher alright," Clive said.

"Is someone hurt?" Jason asked.

"There is," the mayor said. "We're worried because the healers don't make it out here every month. Even if they do come, I don't know if he can last that long. The injury is bad enough, but the infection has set in."

"Best show us, then," Jason said. The mayor started leading them through the village.

"I imagine infection would be a problem here in the delta," Jason said.

"It is," the mayor said. "Do you have healing abilities?"

"I can handle the infection," Jason said. "The injury will take a potion. Unless you can heal injuries, Clive?"

“No,” Clive said, shaking his head. “I have some self-healing, but I can’t use it on others.”

“We can’t afford potions,” the mayor said. “We could probably put together enough for some healing ointment, if you have some.”

“Ointment won’t get the job done on deep wounds,” Jason said. “I learned that the hard way. I’ll probably use a potion, maybe two.”

“We really can’t afford it,” the mayor said.

“We’re here to save the day, Madam Mayor,” Jason said. “All part of the service,” Jason said.

The mayor looked at him, nonplussed.

“You’ll just give us a potion?”

“Adventure Society,” Jason said, flashing her a smile. “We’re here to help.”

The mayor called out at a house and the barricade was removed from the door. Inside was a man laying on a bed, stripped down to his underwear, with a stained-through bandage wrapped around his leg. He was sweat-covered and muttering to himself.

Jason winced.

“I’d better get straight onto that.”

Jason walked over to the bed, where a woman was dabbing the man’s forehead with a wet cloth.

“Excuse I,” Jason said as he stood next to her. He held a hand over the injured man and chanted out his spell.

“Feed me your sins.”

Red life force shone out from the man, tainted with the yellow and purple colours of a bruise. Those infecting colours rose up from the red light, disappearing into Jason’s hand. What remained was the clean red glow of life force, which retracted into that man’s body.

-
- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Infection] from [Human].
 - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Sepsis] from [Human].

 - Your stamina and mana have been replenished.
 - Stamina and mana cannot exceed normal maximum values. Excess stamina and mana are lost.
-

The injured man took a shuddering breath, then started looking about, confused. His eyes became focused, looking at all the people around him.

“Welcome back, mate,” Jason said. “I’m Jason. Adventurer, raconteur, man-about-town.”

“What?”

Jason pulled a knife from his inventory. It wasn't his fighting knife, but a magically sharp utility knife he had purchased. He dug it under the filthy bandages and cut them away with a single, smooth slice. There were deep claw marks underneath that started pulsing out blood immediately. Jason pulled out a healing potion, carefully pouring it into the wound.

“Alchemist mate of mine made this stuff,” Jason said. “More effective on external wounds than just chugging it straight down.”

The wounds quickly closed up. An iron-rank potion was more effective on a normal person than it was on an iron ranker. The fact that it would be longer before they could use another was a middling drawback, which was why many adventurers kept a high-rank potion on hand for emergencies.

In moments the open wounds had closed into glaring welts. Jason took out a tin of ointment and handed it to the woman by the bed.

“Give him a half-hour for the potion to work its way through his system, then use this,” Jason instructed. “There won't be a mark left on him.”

“We can't afford this,” the woman said, although Jason noted how tightly she clutched the tin.

“On the house,” Jason said. “Well, on me. This is your house. Come on Clive; we've got more villages to check on.”

“Something's not right,” Jason said.

“You mean other than your idea to stake me out, covered in meat?” Clive said.

“Still with this? It was an early stage of planning.”

The third and fourth villages were like the first two, with villagers barricaded inside. Nothing else demanded immediate action and they turned their minds to hunting the monster. They sat down in the shade of a large tree, Jason on a folding chair from his inventory, Clive on the shell of his rune tortoise familiar, Onslow.

“I understand the part about covering me with meat,” Clive said. “I don't appreciate it, but I understand it. But tethering me to a stake? I'm not going to wander off.”

“You might,” Jason said. “I'm sensing resistance to the plan.”

“I could just pull out the stake.”

“See, this is the kind of resistance I'm talking about. It's not my fault your world doesn't have goats.”

“I still don't know what goats are. I'm surprised you didn't want to use Onslow as bait.”

"I'd never do that him," Jason said, reaching out to scratch the tortoise under the chin. "But when I said something's not right, I meant about these monster attacks."

"How so?" Clive asked.

"How fast is this mangrove snatcher thing?"

"They attack in short bursts of speed," Clive explained, "but if you're talking about overland speed, then no faster than a person."

Realisation crossed Clive's face.

"Every village reported daily attacks," he said. "There's no way one monster got around to every village in a day. There's more than one monster."

"That's what I was thinking," Jason said.

"We need to know how many there are," Clive said. "Given the distances, it's at least three or four. It could be more than that. People don't stop when they spot the first monster to check if it brought a friend."

"Well, I don't have a way to check how many there are," Jason said. "But I should be able to tell once we've got them all."

"Oh?"

"I told you about my quest system, right? I got a quest for this contract, the same as the others."

Quest: [Contract: Mangrove Snatcher]

A number of villages have reported being attacked by a mangrove snatcher.

➤ Objective: Eliminate the [Mangrove Snatcher] threat to the four villages 0/1.

"The objective is to end the mangrove snatcher threat. Once we get the last one, the quest should complete."

"That's good," Clive said. "Otherwise we'd be waiting around for days, not knowing if we were finished or not."

Like Jason, Clive had a dimensional space that could store objects. A magical circle appeared in the air, lines and runes glowing with golden light. In the middle was a murky darkness Clive reached into, pulling out a notebook and pencil.

"Your abilities all seem very practical," Clive said as he took notes. "There is a theory that the unique outworlder racial gifts are an unconsciously derived mechanism of self-protection. Possibly as a reaction to the original body being annihilated."

"I'm sorry, what now?" Jason asked, his gaze locking onto Clive. "What do mean by the body being annihilated?"

"You didn't know?" Clive asked. "It's one of the better-known aspects of outworlder knowledge, because of what we already know about the astral."

"Didn't know what? What annihilation?"

"How much do you know about the astral?" Clive asked. "The space between worlds."

"I read a skill book of astral magic," Jason said. "I took it from Landemere Vane."

"So, basically nothing," Clive said. "Those books are all practice, no theory. Alright, here we go: If you could encapsulate the cosmos, as in all of everything, your world, my world, the space in between, it would be like a bowl of dumpling soup."

"Dumpling soup?"

"Do they not have dumpling soup on your world?" Clive asked. "Or do they not have analogies?"

"We have both," Jason said. "We also have smart guys getting punched in the face for running their mouth."

"That's rich, coming from you," Clive said.

"I'm a 'live by the sword, die by the sword' kind of guy," Jason said. "You either keep your mouth shut or accept that someone's going to put a fist in it from time to time."

Clive shook his head.

"You're a crazy person," he said. "Just listen up, alright? So, all the cosmos is a bowl of dumpling soup."

Clive paused, tilting his head in thought.

"Now that I'm talking about it," he said, "I really could go for some dumpling soup."

"I know, right?" Jason said, nodding his agreement.

"I know a really good place back in the city," Clive said.

"We'll go when we get back," Jason said. "Annihilation, the cosmos is soup, remember."

"Right. So, in this dumpling soup, each world, each physical reality, is a dumpling. Your world, a dumpling, my world, a dumpling, every world out there, a dumpling. The astral is the soup through which we are all the dumplings, all the worlds, are floating."

"Alright," Jason said. "With you so far."

"The astral, the soup, is also the source of all magic," Clive said. "That's what it is, just magic. Pure, unadulterated; the most fundamental building blocks of reality. Every world, every dumpling, is swimming in it. Some dumplings soak up a lot of the soup, like this world. Our world soaks up the magic, which takes various forms as that magic gets shaped by our physical reality. That's why we have essences, awakening stones, quintessence, monsters, all just appearing out of nowhere."

"But my world doesn't have any of that," Jason said.

"That means your dumpling soaks up very little of the soup."

"So, how did I end up here?" Jason asked.

"Alright, think of the soup kind of congealing around a dumpling. That's how you get astral spaces, which are a sort of magical dimension attached to a world."

"Like the one that produces all the water that makes this delta," Jason said.

"Exactly like that," Clive said. "But not all that congealed magic is as stable as an astral space. It can kind of drift away, especially if someone goes and pokes a hole in the side of the dumpling."

"Like a big summoning spell," Jason said.

"Precisely like a big summoning spell," Clive said. "Some of that congealed magic can drift off the side of the world, like a tendril. And if it happens to touch another dumpling, a brief, unstable link is formed. In this case, that link was between a world very good at soaking up magic, and one that isn't. So my world sucked in a part of yours through that magical link."

"How big a part?" Jason asked.

"Tiny," Clive said. "Otherwise, you wouldn't have been the only one to arrive. But that link was never established properly; it was a phenomenon created through random forces, which means a couple of things. One, the link would have collapsed, almost immediately."

"So, no using it to get home," Jason said.

"No," Clive said. "The other important thing is that the link wasn't some purpose-built channel designed to transport physical material through the astral. I can't even imagine the kind of astral magic that would take. Gold rank at the least, probably diamond."

"So?" Jason said.

"So, you were pulled straight through the deep astral," Clive said. "And the thing about the deep astral is that it's just magic. Only magic."

"You said that," Jason said.

"Yes, but the point is, physical substance can only exist in a physical reality. I said your body was annihilated, but that wasn't exactly accurate. Your body ceased to exist because it went somewhere where the physical substance it was made of cannot exist. That's also why any physical material dragged into the link with you, didn't arrive with you."

"ceased to exist? The goddess of knowledge said my body was changed."

"Your body didn't change," Clive said. "Your body is gone. Not melted away, not blasted into pieces too small to see, just gone. It stopped existing. You must have misunderstood what the goddess told you."

“Or she lied.”

“She wouldn’t have done that,” Clive said. “Lying is one of the core sins of her religion.”

“She isn’t a member of the religion,” Jason said. “She’s the object of it.”

“Maybe she just told you what you were ready to hear,” Clive suggested.

“You’re telling me that I died,” Jason said, pulling things back on topic.

“I suppose you did,” Clive said.

“Then how am I here?” Jason asked.

“Well, the body died, but the soul isn’t physical. It’s magical. Do you know how summoning a familiar works?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Well,” Clive said, “summoning a familiar is like deliberately creating a monster. A chunk of magic is brought into our world and forms a body. What makes it different from a monster is that it also summons a creature from the deep astral. Such entities are purely magical, like a soul. They normally can’t exist in physical reality, any more than we can exist in the astral. But they inhabit the body you’ve made. Give it a mind, and stability. So it doesn’t break down and go berserk.”

“You’re saying that I’m basically a familiar?” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Clive said, with academic fascination. “Your soul came into this world, and like any other chunk of magic, constructed a physical manifestation for itself.”

“So, my body is the same thing as a monster’s, just with a soul to stop it breaking down.”

“Yes,” Clive said. “You’re picking this up very well.”

Clive’s enthusiasm had blinded him to the growing horror on Jason’s face. Jason leaned forward in his chair, head in his hands.

“Jason?”

“Give me a minute, Clive. You kind of dropped a bomb on me.”

“Oh,” Clive said, realisation suddenly hitting. “Sorry about, you know, dying.”

Jason sat head bowed, mind reeling.

“Is this why I didn’t have hair?”

“Uh, Jason?”

“I said give me a minute, Clive!”

“Not sure you have a minute,” Clive said. “I just sensed the monster’s aura.”

Chapter 70:

Rewards

The village was located right on the water. The monster sensed a potential meal out in the open and burst from the water to scramble in the direction of Clive and Jason. It looked like a large, six-legged crocodile. Clive, still sitting on the tortoise, pointed at the ground in the path of the rushing monster. He quickly chanted a spell.

“Emplace the mark of power.”

A rune appeared on the ground, glowing red. The monster ran straight over it and Clive snapped his fingers. The rune exploded, sending ruptured gobbets of monster raining through the village. Jason’s cloak appeared to shield him from the monster remains.

“Mind if I loot?” Jason asked.

Clive looked at the liberal spattering of monster on his clothes, wiping it off his face.

“Sure,” he said, grimacing at the mess.

Jason poked at a chunk of flesh.

➤ [Would you like to loot \[Mangrove Snatcher\]?](#)

Jason held his nose as the flesh dissolved off his cloak and off of Clive, who was coughing and spluttering.

“I can’t believe you,” Jason asked, giving Clive a flat look.

“You mean the mess?” Clive asked. “It was coming right at us.”

“No, I don’t mean the mess,” Jason said and pointing at the small crater left by Clive’s spell. “If you can do that, why don’t you hunt monsters?”

“I’m really more of a scholar.”

“I hate to break it to you, Clive, but whatever you call someone with magic land mines, it isn’t a scholar.”

“Land mines?” Clive asked.

Jason groaned.

“Let’s just go to the next village.”

Quest: [Contract: Mangrove Snatcher]

- Objective complete: Eliminate the mangrove snatcher threat to the four villages 1/1.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“That was the last one,” Jason said.

In the end, Jason was the one who ended up playing bait. When not triggered immediately, Clive’s rune trap faded away until only special senses could locate it. This made the enthusiastically predatory monsters easy to handle. Jason just stood there as they charged at him, only to die at a snap of Clive’s fingers.

“It only goes off when you trigger it?” Jason asked.

“I can set it to trigger when something steps on it, too,” Clive said. “That seems like it could be dangerous, though.”

“You’re worried about stumbling onto it yourself?” Jason asked.

“My vision power lets me see magic,” Clive said. “I can spot it even when it’s hidden. The same doesn’t go for anyone I’m working with, though.”

“It’s a good power,” Jason said.

“It has its weaknesses,” Clive said. “It takes a few moments to activate and glows bright red when I cast it. Anything other than dumb monsters know to get out of the way.”

“Good news,” Jason said. “Fighting dumb monsters is most of what adventurers do.”

“I will admit to not having a terrible time,” Clive said, “the smell of dissolving monsters, aside. I’m hardly going to start making regular trips to the jobs hall, but if you need a ride out here again, then come find me.”

“I just might do that,” Jason said. “Do you have a bag or something?”

“What for?” Clive asked.

“I was rewarded a hundred coins for the quest,” Jason said. “You did all the work, so you should get the pay.”

“That’s your ability,” Clive said. “You keep it.”

“No dice, mate,” Jason said. “You do the work, you get the pay.”

“Half then,” Clive said, taking a money pouch from his dimensional space. “Use the rest to restock your potion supply.”

“Sounds fair,” Jason said. He withdrew seventy coins from his inventory and dropped them into Clive’s bag.

“I put in half of what I took from the monsters, too.”

Their task complete, they used the airboat to notify the villages that the threat had passed. Clive then directed the boat back in the direction of Greenstone.

"Hey," Jason called out over the noise of the airboat. "Didn't you say something about knowing a good place for dumpling soup?"

"Yes," Clive called back. "Yes, I did."

The airboat emerged from the delta waterways in the late afternoon, approaching the Old City Water Gate. A distributary running out of the delta led into Old City's canal district, through a massive, portcullised arch. The canal docking area was a bustle of activity. Clive drove their airboat right into a building, which was set up like a submarine dock. It belonged to the Magic Society and was quiet compared to the brisk goings-on of the canal docks outside.

"I need to get back to the Magic Society campus," Clive said. "I'm going to have so much to do."

Their trip had involved navigating deep into the delta, checking on all the villages, going through them to kill the monsters, going around again to give the all-clear, then finally come back. By the time they arrived back in Greenstone, they had been gone for more than half a week. When he first decided to drag Clive along, Jason had expected him to balk at the rough delta accommodations. He hadn't expected Clive to have grown up in such conditions.

"I'll go make the report to the Adventure Society," Jason said. "You should be able to drop by the jobs hall anytime and collect your share of the reward."

Clive requisitioned a small, magic-driven carriage from the Magic Society to take them back to the Island, stopping at the Magic Society campus.

"Lunch tomorrow?" Jason asked as they parted ways.

"Dumpling soup," Clive said with a wave.

Since Jason had started taking jobs at the contract hall, Rufus, Gary and Farrah had been increasingly busy. They each had their own projects, and in-between they were taking bronze-rank contracts from the jobs hall. One of their key reasons for coming to Greenstone was the chance for some independence, after all. Between the Vane Estate contract going wrong and Jason's training, their own adventuring had moved down the list. Now Jason was a full-fledged adventurer, they were back to adventuring themselves.

While they were all busy, Jason was seeing a lot less of the trio. He was unsurprised, then, that evening found him alone in his room at the inn. He decided to go out and see if there was anything on at the concert hall, seeing as it was so close.

Although there wasn't anything on the scale of the grand magical symphony, there was a string section recital taking place. He thought it might be interesting to see it from the main floor, given that he usually watched performances from the Geller's private viewing box. He was looking for a ticket box when Cassandra Mercer had spotted him wandering about.

"Mr Asano," she called out as she approached.

"Miss Mercer," Jason said. "Fancy meeting you here."

"You seem a little lost," she said.

"Well, I've never actually purchased a ticket before. I've been meaning to sign on to the patronage program with the Musical Society, but I've been a bit busy."

"The life of a new adventurer," she said.

"Mostly," Jason said. "I did spend the afternoon working in a dumpling restaurant."

"You got a job in a dumpling restaurant?" she asked incredulously.

"I didn't get a job there," Jason said. "I just worked in the kitchen for the afternoon. I wanted to learn to make dumplings with local ingredients."

Cassandra inviting him to view the recital from the Mercer family's private box.

"Thadwick won't be there, will he?"

"Thadwick treats culture like catching a cold," Cassandra said. "You can't always avoid it, but you can take precautions."

Jason laughed. Cassandra explained the reason Jason hadn't found the ticket box was that it was on the other side of the building. He had been looking where he usually entered, which he discovered was for patrons, private box holder and their guests.

The patron lounge was a place for concertgoers to engage socially before the performance and during intervals. They took drinks from the long bar and sat down in a pair of comfortable seats. Jason had a tall glass filled with rainbow layers of liqueur, while Cassandra took a neat measure of amber spirits.

Jason wasn't used to drawing a lot of attention at such events. He was usually an adjunct to groups with Rufus and Danielle Geller, who were much more interesting to high-society mavens. Being the solitary companion to Cassandra Mercer proved very different.

"How is it that you were having an evening out unaccompanied?" Jason asked. "I have to imagine people falling over themselves to be in your company."

"There's a difference between company and engaging company," she told him. "The men in this town are a little simple for my taste."

"You like a sophisticated gentleman," Jason said.

"Sophisticated is good," Cassandra said. "Complicated is better. As for the gentleman part, I can take it or leave it. What about you, Mr Asano? What are you looking for in a woman?"

"Evil genius," Jason said casually.

"Evil genius?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

"Why not?" Jason asked. "Smart, confident, assertive, driven. What's not to like?"

"The evil?" Cassandra ventured.

"That could be a problem long-term," Jason acknowledged. "Maybe what I need is a naughty genius."

He thought it over for a moment as an impish grin took over his face.

"Yeah," he said, voice purring. "That sounds exactly right."

As they continued to chat, several people attempted to join their conversation, usually young men. Jason admired Cassandra's ability to send them off with diplomacy and tact.

"You're very good with people," he complimented.

"You are as well," she said.

"No," Jason said. "I'm good *at* people; there's a difference. Usually, in how angry they get once they realise what just happened."

She laughed.

"Is something odd going on this evening?" Jason asked, looking around the room.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"There's a lot of adventurers here."

"Patronage isn't cheap," Cassandra said. "People of means tend to be essence users."

"I don't mean the attendees," Jason said. "There are people in the shadows."

He nudged his head in various directions, pointing out the people discreetly placed around the room. Cassandra frowned at she let him lead her gaze.

"I didn't notice at all," she said, with self-recrimination. "Perhaps I rely too much on my aura sense. All these essences users are aura camouflage."

"I wonder what they're up to," Jason said.

"Oh," Cassandra said, realisation dawning on her face. "They must be here for the open contract."

"There's an open contract?" Jason asked. "I must have missed it while I was out in the delta."

"Yes, there's actually been some excitement. Two rather brazen robberies."

"Robberies?"

“Yes. The first was in the theatre district. Someone snatched a rather valuable piece of jewellery right off the neck of someone attending a play, then made a run for it. It was some cousin of the Duke of Greenstone, no less.”

“That’s certainly bold.”

“That’s only the beginning,” she said. “A man was attacked right here at the concert hall. He was out on a balcony during the interval when he was attacked and robbed of all his valuables. I know the man in question and he rather had it coming, but still.”

“The same thief?” Jason asked.

“So it would seem,” Cassandra said. “In both cases, it was a woman dressed all in black. The interesting part is that, given the people involved, they were able to get a sense of her aura. She only has a single essence, yet managed to escape both times.”

“That seems wildly reckless,” Jason said. “I can’t imagine the reward to be commensurate to that kind of risk.”

“It certainly does raise questions,” Cassandra said. “The Duke of Greenstone had the Adventure Society put out an open contract for her capture, but the Adventure Society director restricted it to iron rank.”

“Why?” Jason asked.

“It’s the long-standing policy of the Society to send appropriate measures to deal with appropriate problems, and it is one person with only a single essence. That’s a widespread policy, not just here in Greenstone. Of course, the local powers have never had much time for Adventure Society strictures, and have been vocal in their displeasure. They don’t like that the director worked her way up from poverty instead of coming from the established families. They’ve also learned that pushing her does not tend to go well.”

“I see,” Jason said.

“Have you met Elspeth Arella, yet?” Cassandra asked.

“I have,” Jason said. “In fact, it was just before I met you.”

Lucian Lamprey stormed through the grounds of Clarissa Ventress’ estate. The silver-ranked Director of the Magic Society practically blasted away her guards with the power of his aura, using it to announcing his arrival. Ventress came out to meet him in the garden, sending her people off with a gesture. She grimaced as she fell under the suppression of his aura.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, Director Lamprey?” she asked, voice strained.

“She’s meant to get caught,” Lamprey said, “not cause a huge ruckus and get away.”

“Director, I can assure you that this is the way that meets both our needs.”

“Do you realise how many eyes are on this now?” he asked.

“With respect, director, I think you may be missing the point,” she said. “You need to start attending more social events.”

“You want me to catch her myself?”

“No, Director. But given your widely-known patronage of the Fortress and its fighting arena, you would, of course, recognise her aura. Should she make an appearance at an event you attend, of course, a civic-minded gentleman like yourself would reveal her identity. After that, the hunt begins and you have a seamless pretext for taking an interest in subsequent legal proceedings.”

Lucian frowned as he thought it over. Ventress was visibly relieved as his aura retracted.

“Where is she hitting next?” Lamprey asked.

“Even I don’t know that,” Ventress said. “Keeping each element isolated allows us to control the information. As you said, there are many eyes on this.”

Lamprey looked dissatisfied but gave a reluctant nod.

“My patience is not infinite, Ventress.”

“But it will be rewarded, Director.”

Lamprey departed, leaving Ventress alone in the garden. Fury filled her face and she spat at a bush which withered and blackened, letting off an acrid smoke.

“Darnell!” she called out, and her leonid body came quickly.

“Belinda and Sophie,” Ventress said venomously. “Where are they?”

“After the last time you called them in, they holed up somewhere,” Darnell told her. “If you made it known their protection was withdrawn, they’d be flushed out quickly enough.”

“No,” Ventress said, regaining her usual composure. “Make inquiries, but keep it discreet. So long as they get caught, everything works out.”

“What if they tell the authorities that you were behind it all?”

“Lamprey will keep a lid on that,” Ventress said. “So long as he gets what he wants, he’ll want to make use of us again. His backing will make us untouchable in Old City.”