

Chapter 99: Someone Else's Game

Dean Tuckell was part of a team of adventurers that arrived in a village in the delta. The team was a makeshift one put together for a road contract, patrolling a fixed route through the delta and beyond under the supervision of a bronze-ranker. The others were unhappy to be on punishment duty instead of the big expedition, while Dean was just happy to get away from the city. He didn't want the people still working for Thadwick Mercer to find him and take him out for a little chat.

The team moved straight to the adventure noticeboard.

"This one actually has a notice," the bronze-rank team leader said, taking it from the board. This was their third village for the day, and every noticeboard had been empty.

"Trap weavers," the bronze-ranker read, causing the iron-rankers to groan.

"Wait, this one's been claimed already," the bronze-ranker said. "Just not completed, yet."

As he said it, the paper dissolved away to nothing in his hand.

"And now it has," he said. "Next village on the list, then."

"Can't we stop for a drink?" someone asked. "There's a tavern right there."

"We can stop once we've dealt with at least one monster," the bronze-ranker said.

"Assuming we can find one."

Jason dropped a stack of papers on the registration desk in the jobs hall.

"Three contracts, eleven board notices," he said.

"In three days," Albert said. "That's some schedule you've got going."

"Any assigned contracts for me?" Jason asked.

"No, but there are a few incentivised contracts. Fewer adventurers means less competition."

"I think I'll leave those for others," Jason said. "Maybe it'll get a few more people picking up contracts."

Jason didn't need to go back to his inn for a shower, having cleaned himself off with a bottle of crystal wash. Switching from his battle robes to casual civilian attire, he caught the loop line out of the Adventure Society campus to the park district and bought a flatbread wrap from a food cart. He ate it on a park bench with a fruit drink from his inventory while he watched the sun go down.

"Not bad," he said to himself.

He took the world phoenix tablet from his inventory and looked at it in his hand. Since being told it was his way home, he'd considered throwing it away time and again, closing that door forever. As always, he put it back in his inventory.

When the sun dropped below the horizon, a city worker came along the pathways of the path district, lighting up the magic lamps. Jason got up, walked away from the paths and into the darkness. He took out his sword and a crystal, similar to a recording crystal. He tossed it away from himself, where it stopped and floated in the air. A few moments later, a soft, entrancing sound started coming from it. Jason drew his sword from its scabbard, which he dropped onto the grass as his cloak of stars appeared around him. He started moving in time with the meditative music.

His movements were slow and small, deliberate and smooth; something between a sword kata and a dance. Gradually his motion became larger, with moments of speed, although always completely controlled. His cloak flowed around him, throwing off motes of light.

The Dance of the Sword Fairy was a meditation technique Rufus had taught him that merged mind and body. Despite the inclusion of the sword, it wasn't about fighting technique. The goal was to meld the conscious and unconscious. Rufus had described the goal not as using the sword, but becoming it.

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- Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Iron 0 (100%).
 - Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Iron 1 (100%).
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Jason ignored his newest ability advancing, losing himself to the dance as movement and meditation became one. He felt as if he were merging with the world around him. Something tickled at his senses, so faint he wasn't sure it was there at all. He continued on but sensed it again and this time he was sure. He stopped, looking off into the darkness.

"You sensed me," a male voice said. "That's quite the surprise."

The accent reminded Jason of Rufus. He couldn't see anything in the dark, even with his vision power, and he could no longer sense what was out there.

"Meditation increases sensitivity," Jason said to the hidden person.

"An impressive feat, even so," the man said, "you must have deep in it. My apologies for disturbing you."

A man walked out of the darkness, which Jason found disorienting. He could see through the darkness, yet the man was invisible to him until he didn't want to be. He had midnight-black skin like Rufus, but instead of being bald, his hair was dark, woven into

rows and threaded with colourful beads. His outfit was neat and fitted, also like Rufus preferred.

“Not at all, Mr Bahadir,” Jason said. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

The man raised an eyebrow.

“How did you know?” he asked.

“Your aura,” Jason said. “I’ve been around enough silver-rankers to know what it feels like when they restrain their aura. There’s a stillness, almost an almost an absence of power, like the shadow of an unseen object. Your aura melds into the surroundings, like there’s nothing there at all. There’s only one gold-ranker expected to come here, and the accent and the clothes just clinch it.”

Bahadir laughed, moving closer to shake Jason’s hand. From that simple contact, Jason could feel the power flowing through him. Bahadir’s hand was perfectly controlled, lest his gold-rank strength crush Jason’s hand with more ease than crushing an egg.

“Emir Bahadir,” he introduced himself.

“Jason Asano.”

“I’ve been hearing a lot about you, and wanted to see for myself.”

“I’ve been hearing about you too,” Jason said. “How was the wine festival?”

Bahadir laughed again.

“Very fine, thank you. How have Rufus and his friends been?”

“Also very fine,” Jason said. “They’re not in town, right now.”

“So I’ve heard. There’s no rush; I’m not officially arriving for a little over a week.”

“Well, if you’re looking for something to catch your interest, I suggest a visit to the Magic Society. They’re excavating a complex out in the delta that belonged to the Order of the Reaper. That is why you’re here, right? To investigate the ancient order of assassins?”

“I didn’t think Rufus had such loose lips.”

“Oh, he didn’t tell me,” Jason said. “Neither he nor the Magic Society knows about the connection.”

“But you do,” Bahadir said.

“Some friends and I found the place, but the Magic Society cut us out. You’d be amazed at what a rogue Magic Society official and an acolyte of knowledge can dig up between them. Someone tried very hard to erase these assassins from history.”

“So if you haven’t told Rufus, and you haven’t told the Magic Society,” Bahadir said.

“Why tell me?”

“You wanted to see me for yourself,” Jason said. “Call this me wanting to make a good first impression. At the very least, I’m capable of piquing your interest until Rufus gets back. Let’s just hope he doesn’t take three months.”

Jason stood in the ruins of a coastal village. It had been one of many such villages scattered along the desert coast. They made an industry out of scouring the waters for water quintessence, which formed in larger than normal proportions due to the magic of the Mistrun River washing out to sea. Villages up and down the coast made a living from that and fishing, but it was not a practice without risk.

“Sundown, right?” Jason asked.

“That’s the normal pattern,” Vincent said. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

They glanced around at the broken remains of the village. It was very small, mostly constructed from bamboo, and it looked like a hurricane had passed through. Boats and buildings ranged from severely damaged to smashed into pieces. There were net-drying racks and other paraphernalia of a coastal village, none of which was left untouched. Scraps of netting, broken barrels and the remnants of objects too destroyed to recognise made up a carpet of debris.

The only two-storey building was stone on the bottom floor and bamboo on top. There was a dinghy jutting out of the wall of the upper level. The doorway on the ground floor had been ripped wider, brickwork cast aside in huge chunks. Inside was some kind of nest made out of debris and the bones of large sea animals. Jason spotted the skeletons of fish upward of a metre and a half long

“That’s where it’s been coming back to,” Vincent said. “That’s the normal pattern. Roam the waters attacking deep-sea fish and coming onshore to raid villages. It picks the first territory it conquers to make a lair.”

"But it's slower out of the water right?" Jason asked.

“Very,” Vincent said, “but you can see for yourself how strong it is. If it’s hurt badly, it will retreat into the ocean. Submerged, it will move faster and heal very quickly. Do not pursue it into the water.”

“Other than that, though, no exotic abilities?”

“No,” Vincent said.

Jason knew all of this but wanted the assurance of double-checking. The tidal troll was the first bronze-rank monster Jason would face on purpose, and he was facing it alone. He brought up his character sheet to help his resolve.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: iron
- Progression to bronze rank: 10% (2/4 essences complete)

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood):[Iron 2].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Iron 0].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Iron 0].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Iron 2].

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Party Interface].
- [Quest System].
- [Inventory].
- [Map].
- [Astral Affinity].
- [Mysterious Stranger].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (3/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 7] 84%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 6] 19%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 6] 21%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 5] 18%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 5] 78%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 4] 97%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 5] 16%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Iron 2] 46%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron 5] 83%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 5] 91%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 5] 69%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Iron 5] 67%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Iron 2] 32%.

Doom [Spirit] (4/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 5] 66%.
 - [Punition] (spell): [Iron 3] 57%.
 - [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Iron 2] 08%.
 - [Verdict] (spell): [Iron 1] 00%.
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His abilities were coming along, with only three more to awaken before he was truly on the way to bronze.

“If anything goes wrong, I’m stepping in,” Vincent said.

“That’s why you came along?” Jason asked. “You think I’ll fail?”

“Actually, I had a favour to ask.”

“Oh?”

They were looking out at the ocean, sun lighting the sky with gold as it dropped to the horizon.

“It’ll return to its lair, soon, but we should have time to talk,” Vincent said. “You’re aware of the open contract? The thief girl?”

“I’m aware.”

“Have you considered going after it? The Society has added an awakening stone to the rewards.”

“It smells political,” Jason said. “I don’t have any interest in jumping on the board, just to end up a piece in someone else’s game.”

Vincent smiled wanly.

“I know exactly what you mean,” he said. “I support the changes the director is trying to make, but she’s pushing back against a long-entrenched network of power. No one is playing fair and it’s the mid-level officials like me being squeezed between powerful forces.”

“This thief’s activities are becoming a point of contention between the director and the traditional power-brokers?”

“It could have been anything, I think. This just happened to turn up and she’s using it.”

“And now you have pressure from both sides,” Jason said.

“Exactly. I don’t want to go against the director, but she either doesn’t know or is willing to accept the collateral damage. I’m not sure she understands how much that is hurting her. A lot of people have been happy to move away from the corruption of the past, but the director is pressuring the aristocrats, who are pulling hard on all the old levers. People who should be the director’s allies are becoming very unhappy.”

“So you want me to take this point of contention out of play,” Jason said. “Give people some room to breathe while the big nobs find the next vicarious battle.”

“Yes. The director has been relying on the fact that there aren’t a lot of iron-rankers with the skill-set to chase her down. You’re fast and good in darkness, and the thief mostly strikes at night. Have you noticed that any time you aren’t busy with a contract, one gets assigned to you?”

“Sounds familiar.”

“I’ve been looking at any adventurers with the right skills to chase the thief, and they’ve been getting the same treatment. For most of them, the assigned contracts have been lucrative enough to not turn down. She knows that isn’t your driving factor, so she’s been assigning contracts she thinks you’ll find interesting. Underground tunnels. Spirit coin farms. Recovering a dead adventurer’s remains.”

Jason considered as they watched the drop below the horizon.

“You know you’re asking me to do something she won’t like,” he said.

“That’s why I came to you. Out of the various adventurers she’s been keeping busy, you’re the only one that would do it anyway.”

“That, and I bet she shuffled the rest off on the expedition.”

“Most, but not all. We do need some competent people left to actually do the work.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “The best I can do is look into it; I’m making no promises.

There’s every chance she runs rings around me the same as everyone else that went after her.”

“That’s all I can ask,” Vincent said. “Rufus believes in your resourcefulness, as does the director. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be keeping you busy.”

It was near dark when a huge form rose up from the water. Vincent withdrew as it moved closer to shore, more and more of a huge body rising above the surface until it strode onto the beach. It moved into the village where Jason got a better look at it than he wanted, realising the monster was buck naked. It was around five metres tall and over one shoulder carried a dead shark that could have swallowed Jason whole. The troll’s skin was the blue-grey of the ocean on an overcast day, and rough like that of the shark it was carrying. Dangling in a tangled mess from the troll’s head was what looked more like kelp than hair.

Light erupted from Jason’s cloak, scattering motes of illumination through the village. Shadows were everywhere in the shattered remains of the beach hamlet, from broken boats to half-collapsed buildings. The Tidal Troll roared at Jason and lumbered forward, swinging the shark like a flail.

Jason started with his old snake-tooth dagger, which ignored bronze-rank poison resistances and damage reduction. Appearing behind the monster, Jason scored the back of its leg.

➤ [Weapon \[Night Fang\]](#) has inflicted [\[Umbral Snake Venom\]](#) on [\[Tidal Troll\]](#).

By the time the sluggish giant turned around, Jason was gone. Soon after the monster was sprayed with leeches from another direction, and they had plenty of flesh to latch onto. From the shadows, Jason winced as they bit into parts of the troll Jason would have preferred remain covered.

The monster was tough, perhaps even tougher than the hydra, and with resistances to match. The sheer quantity of leeches meant afflictions were landing, however, and Jason went to work on bringing those resistances down. Switching to his conjured dagger, he ran shadowy rings around the troll as he landed strike after strike.

➤ **Weapon [Ruin] has inflicted [Vulnerable] on [Tidal Troll].**

Between his elusive strikes and casting spells from the shadows, all of Jason's afflictions eventually took hold, while the troll alternated flailing ineffectually at Jason and brushing away leeches with its huge hand. It stomped on those pushed onto the ground, but even its enormous feet could only catch so many. All the while, every instance of the sin curse allowed Jason's aura to further decrease the troll's resistances, as did the vulnerable affliction from his new dagger.

➤ **[Vulnerable] (affliction, unholy, stacking): All resistances are reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to cleanse instances of [Resistant] on a 1:1 basis.**

With inexorable doom racking up more instances of both, the troll eventually stopped resisting the effects at all. With leeches in full effect, the creature was ravaged and fled for the ocean. Vincent ran up to Jason.

"It's making for the water," Vincent said urgently. "If it makes it in, it'll start healing."

"No it wouldn't," Jason said, "but it won't get that far anyway."

He didn't move from where he stood. Unhurried, he raised an arm in the monster's direction and chanted a spell.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

The creature's resistances were in ruins, but its bronze-rank damage reduction was still in effect. Even so, the punishment spell inflicted damage for each of the myriad afflictions on the troll. It was enough that most monsters, even at bronze-rank, would be dead already. The troll stumbled as its flesh withered and turned black, but continued staggering forward. Jason chanted a final spell.

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

Light of silver, gold and blue shone down on the troll from above, and under its radiance, the monster's body started rapidly dissolving into rainbow smoke. Leeches dropped out of the air as the flesh they were burying themselves in vanished. In the spot where it had been fighting, gobbets of blood and flesh remained, patches of light shining to eradicate them as well. In moments, there was nothing left of the troll but a memory.

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Conjunction (execute)
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: 30 seconds.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Deals a small amount of transcendent damage. As an execute effect, damage scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury.
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"Was that transcendent damage?" Vincent asked incredulously.

"Yes," Jason said as he glanced over the rewards.

- You have defeated [Tidal Troll].

- [Tidal Troll] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
- [Gauntlet of the Sea Giant] has been added to your inventory.
- 10 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

Quest: [Contract: Tidal Troll]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Tidal Troll] 1/1.
 - [Necklace of the Deep] has been added to your inventory.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
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"What ability was that?" Vincent asked as he started at the spot where the monster had been annihilated.

"That's a rude question," Jason said absently, also staring at the space where the troll vanished.

"You're dealing transcendent damage with an iron-rank ability! Do you know what transcendent damage does?"

"I do," Jason said.

Help: Transcendent Damage

- Transcendent damage ignores all forms of physical and magical defence, damage reduction and resistances.
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“So, what ability is that?”

Jason turned to look at Vincent, his face unreadable.

“It’s the end,” Jason told him, his voice flat and emotionless.

“The end? The end of what?”

“Of whatever I want.”

Jason’s hard expression suddenly broke into a grin and he laughed.

“Listen to me, right? ‘Whatever I want. I’m very scary.’ I need to stop listening to that chuuni angel on my shoulder. Colin, gather up. This sea air isn’t good for you.”