

Chapter 171: Irreconcilable Ideals

Shade led Jason upstairs into a square room. The stairs emerged from an alcove in the middle of one wall, with a sealed door on the opposite wall. The walls to either side were covered in square panels marked with what looked like scrambled segments of constellations. On the walls and floor were images of constellations that were whole and in order. Jason was about to enter the room when Shade stopped him.

“Once you enter this room,” Shade warned, “the next trial shall begin.”

Quest: [The Fourth Trial]

The trial of intellect will test whether your mind is not just sharp enough, but calm enough to save you from a grisly fate.

- **Objective:** Successfully solve the puzzle room.
- **Reward:** Random magic item.

“The virtue this trial will test is intelligence,” Shade continued. “If you fail to pass this test within the time limit, you will die.”

“Again with the succeed or die?”

“The Order of the Reaper needs those who are not just intelligent, but who can use their intelligence under pressure. An intellect that fails when it matters the most is worthless. Though the Order may be gone, it is their trials that remain and their standards you must reach.”

“So, what’s the time limit?”

“That will become clear once the trial begins. If you wish to withdraw at this point, you may. I will call a gate and allow you to leave. Once you have accepted the trial, however, I will not do so again. The remaining questions, then, become how smart do you think you are, and are you right?”

Jason took a long, calming breath as he looked into the room.

“That’s a tricky question, isn’t it?” Jason said. “People have a tendency to overestimate their own intelligence and I’m sure I’m no different. I mean, I think I’m pretty cluey but do I really believe that deep down?”

“You have the day to complete the final trials,” Shade said as Jason pondered over how much of his self-confidence was warranted. “You have time to consider.”

“No, I’m good,” Jason said, rolling his shoulders as he steeled his resolve. “If I’m going to be the kind of adventurer, the kind of person I want to be, I’m going to face tougher challenges than this.”

Shade stepped aside and Jason went to move forward, then stopped.

“Actually,” he said, “I think I will take the time to stop and consider.”

Shade was an indistinct silhouette, yet Jason somehow got the sense of a wry smile coming from the shadowy invigilator.

“Very well, Jason Asano. When you are ready to begin, step into the room.”

Shade vanished and Jason turned to the room. He started looking over the patterns of constellations on the ceiling and the floor, then comparing it to the walls. From the looks of it, he had to slide the square wall panels to make the correct patterns, based on the complete patterns on the ceiling and floor. He looked over it all, looking for matches and differences, seeing how the patterns matched up.

The pattern on the floor was different to the pattern on the ceiling. His first thought was that the trick was figuring out which wall would match which pattern and then matching them, but as he kept looking, he realised that neither wall had the correct pieces to match the patterns. Having realised it wasn’t about matching the images, Jason looked at the constellations for other kinds of patterns.

Finally, his face cracked a huge grin. The constellations, he realised, were just a disguise. The stars themselves made up a numerical pattern. Looking over the walls to make sure, he spent a goodly amount of time making sure he could make the whole room fit the pattern, then stepped inside.

The moment his foot touched the floor, a stone slab started descending to seal the alcove, locking him in the room. The patterned wall then started rumbling, slowly moving towards one another with a rumbling of stone.

“Wall crush puzzle room! Wait, focus, Jason!”

He rushed to one of the walls and started sliding the panels. They were heavy but slid well, apparently well-lubricated in spite of their centuries of disuse. Having already mapped out the patterns he needed, he worked quickly as the wall pushed slowly towards him. He finished the first wall and after quickly checking over his work, moved to the other.

The walls were closing in slowly but the room was already a third smaller than when he began. Seeing that, he realised that stopping outside the room was a required part of the test. Not only would he be pushed for time if he came in not already knowing what to do, but the enclosing walls were already hiding portions of the ceiling and floor patterns.

He went to work on the second wall, practice allowing him to move faster. He slid the final panel into place with relief but the walls didn't stop moving.

"What?" he asked, looking over the walls in a panic.

"This is right, this is right!" he told the empty room as his eyes skittered across the patterns. "This is wrong!"

He madly started sliding panels while admonishing himself.

"Four comes before five, idiot! You are not getting crushed to death because you don't know how counting works!"

Having corrected the pattern, the walls stopped, the room half its original width. Jason let out a shuddering breath as the walls started retracting.

Quest: [The Fourth Trial]

- Objective complete: Successfully complete the puzzle room 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
- [Summoner's Die: Form] has been added to your inventory.

Shade appeared next to him.

"Congratulations."

"No worries," Jason said. "The whole wall-squeezing thing was a bit panic-inducing but the puzzle wasn't that hard. More of a third-person, narrative-driven-shooter puzzle than a puzzle-game puzzle. The kind where as soon as you solve it, it turns out the bad guys were following you all along and the room fills with faceless mooks to kill."

Jason looked around, hopefully.

"The last test isn't a bunch of faceless mooks pouring in here, is it?"

"No," Shade said. "Anyone can learn to fight, which is but a facet of what the Order required from its members. You have demonstrated wisdom in accepting the tools to survive, capability in crossing the city, courage in confronting your fear and intellect in solving the puzzle room."

The door at the end of the room slid upwards, revealing another stairwell.

"The final virtue to be tested is resolve," Shade explained. "Members of the Order of the Reaper would be required to operate alone for extended periods. Far from home, often living false lives, it is easy to lose focus on the mission. Only the most resolute were allowed into the Order. Proving their resolve was always the final test of the Order."

"That doesn't sound at all ominous," Jason. "Up the stairs, then?"

“Yes.”

Before moving on, Jason pulled out his new item for a look. It was a clear gemstone cut with twelve facets, with each facet having a different symbol engraved on it. His translation ability told him what the symbols meant, each one the name of a different animal.

Item: [Summoner's Die: Form] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

An eldritch tool for altering the nature of summoned creatures (weapon, wand).

- Requirements: Summoning power.
- Effect: Rolling this die while enacting an iron-rank summoning power will randomly alter the form the summon takes.
- Can be used in conjunction with [Summoner's Die: Element] and [Summoner's Die: power]. Using more than one die of the same kind will negate the effects of all dice.

“Damn,” Jason said, looking over the description. “Growth item, plus it’s a D12. Shame I don’t have a summoning power.”

He put it away and followed Shade through the room and up the stairs into a huge, circular chamber with a high ceiling. It was blank brick, except for the ceiling, where numerous holes, wide enough for a person to fall through, led up and into darkness.

“That’s an impressive ceiling,” Jason said. “I mean, all those holes can’t be great for structural integrity but there aren’t any supporting pillars in a room this big. Architects must have it easy with magic to fall back on.”

“The final test,” Shade said. “As with the first, there is no danger, only a choice. There is no puzzle, only the will to move forward. There is no obstacle; you need only the resolve to do what you must in order to go forward.”

A metal clanking echoed down through the holes in the ceiling, followed by the descent of frosted glass cylinders, suspended from chains that lowered them to the floor. One cylinder came down from each of the dozens of holes, coming to a rest on the floor. There was no light but Jason’s ability to see through darkness allowed him to see clearly. Inside each cylinder was a human-shaped silhouette.

All at once, the cylinders cracked open, a person dropping out of each, deposited alongside a cloud of frosty air. The people were unconscious, bound hand and foot with a power suppression collar around each of their necks. Most were humans, elves or celestines, but there were others scattered through as well; smoulders, runics, leonids and draconians. They were all dressed for combat, although none had weapons.

“What is this?” Jason asked.

“When the Order was testing their initiates, the initiates were forced to fight their own friends and companions to prove they were willing to do whatever the order asked of them. To represent the Order is to subordinate your own principles to what the Order requires of you.”

“Let me guess,” Jason said. “They were actually fighting a projection or some kind of facsimile. Just enough to prove they were willing, without throwing away good initiates.”

“It was as you say,” Shade told him. “When the churches attacked the Order’s final hiding place, they did not take it easily or without cost. These people are some of the prisoners that were taken from the attacking forces and imprisoned in this place. They were placed here as a new test of resolve.”

“You want me to execute these people?”

“Yes. They have been held here for centuries, trapped in a magical state where they do not age, do not think, do not feel and do not die. The companions who left them behind are no doubt mostly dead and gone. Now it is their turn. Show that you have the strength of will to put down the order’s enemies.”

Quest: [The Fifth Trial]

The invigilator of the trials has asked you to execute the Order of the Reaper’s enemies.

- Objective: Show your resolve.
- Reward: Random magic item.

“Not a chance,” Jason said.

“You would show them mercy,” Shade said, “but they had no mercy to show. They did not restrict themselves to slaughtering the Order’s membership. Most of the people living in the final fortress were servants whose only crime was a lifetime of diligence. Their families, their children. These people spared none of them.”

“Which makes them terrible people, assuming you aren’t straight-up lying to me,” Jason said. “I’m not going to execute a bunch of people on your say so.”

Jason moved to the closest person, kneeling down to examine her. She was wearing robes styled for combat like his own, but white with brown flourishes. They were dirty and stained but he could still make out the symbol of the Healer embroidered into them.

“The Healer,” he murmured to himself. That didn’t match the picture that had been painted of intolerant churches striking out in ignorance. “Revisionist history. How shocking.”

She was unconscious, her skin pale, clammy and shivering. Jason put a hand to her face and felt her cheek.

“If this is some kind of projection or double, it’s a pretty damn good one,” he said. “I’m not going to kill these people.”

“They are deserving of death.”

“Says you, who I don’t know that well.”

“It is this, or leave.”

Jason stood up, turning to face Shade.

“Then I choose leave. I’m not killing them, so open up your magic gate because I’m done. Also, I’m taking this lot with me.”

“They are not yours to take.”

“Tough.”

“You think it is your place to decide their fate?”

Jason stepped right up to Shade, face to the spot Shade’s face would have been.

“Mate, you want resolve, then here it is: get to helping, get to stopping me or get out of my bloody way. That’s your choice to make.”

“Very well,” Shade said. “You may take them.”

“Really?” Jason asked. “I was kind of expecting you to kick my arse.”

“The Order never wanted those who would follow directions blindly. The ability to make judgements in the face of inevitably shifting circumstances is one the most important traits of the Order’s membership. The resolve to decide the best course of action and follow it through, even against the Order’s own directions, was always a crucial virtue. The Order wanted thinking, intelligent agents, not blindly obedient soldiers.”

“Wait, you’re saying I passed?”

“Yes.”

Quest: [The Fifth Trial]

- Objective complete: Show your resolve 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
- [Immortal Crest] has been added to your inventory.

Jason minimised the window, ignoring it for the moment.

“I can take all of these people with me?” he asked Shade.

“All those who survive. You are not the only one to reach the final trial and there are other rooms like this.”

“If refusing to kill them is a pass, you’re going to let people kill them just to fail?”

“Killing them does not mean failure,” Shade said. “This is not a test of the willingness or unwillingness to kill. It is a test of resolve, which can be shown in many ways. The refusal to bend, even if it means giving up what you came for. A determination to perform any act in pursuit of a goal.”

“It is even possible to fail this test?” Jason asked. “I know people tend to only go halfway with things, but I have to imagine anyone who gets this far isn’t what you’d call irresolute.”

“When truly challenged, many falter when they should follow through or compromise themselves when they should hold to their principles.”

“What’s your sample size on that, mate? Didn’t you say this was a new test?”

“Would you like give up the success you have achieved and face a new trial?”

“No thanks, mate; your trials are flawed. Your order and I have irreconcilable ideals and yet here I am. It’s like this whole thing is...”

“What?” Shade asked as Jason trailed off.

“Nothing,” Jason said. “What comes next?”

Shade was silent for a long moment, Jason getting the sense of an assessing gaze from the featureless shadow.

“Next,” Shade said, “is the prize. The legacy of the Order of the Reaper.”

Chapter 172: Meanwhile, Two Weeks Ago in Greenstone...

Thalia Mercer was ill at ease. Most of the city's iron-rankers had left a few days earlier and would be gone for weeks. She had hoped, in the quiet that settled over Greenstone in their absence, to start getting through to her son. She and her husband both had made so many mistakes with him, which had almost cost them their son. The mysterious cultists and the horrific thing they implanted into Thadwick had brought home just how disastrous things had gotten and they resolved to put Thadwick onto a better path.

In their private parlour, Thalia was on a lounge with her husband, Beaufort, leaning into him.

"I'm not sure I should have let him go," she said, showing an uncertainty she would reveal to very few. Hours ago, Thadwick had left the estate for the first time since the star seed was purged from him.

"Keeping him here only would have driven him further from us," Beaufort said. "He has two bronze-rankers with him."

Thalia nodded.

"I chose Kyle and Geoffrey carefully," she said. "They're the most reliable people in our household guard. Still registered adventurers, although they are no longer active."

"They normally work the spirit coin farm, right?" Beaufort asked.

"Yes. I pulled them off it to give Thadwick the most reliable protection I could. Including from himself."

"There you are, then," Beaufort said. "They won't let him do anything too self-destructive. Do you know where he went?"

"One of his Old City brothels," Thalia said. "I had a tracker placed on him with ritual magic while he was still recovering. He doesn't know it's there."

There was a hammering on the door.

"Lord Mercer! Lady Mercer!"

It was the voice of their family butler, Crivens, in an uncharacteristic panic. Thalia and Beaufort got up and went to the door together.

"What is it?" Beaufort asked.

"My lord, my lady. A representative of the Adventure Society just arrived. She claims to have important and time-sensitive news but refuses to speak with anyone but you directly."

“Where have you put her?” Beaufort asked.

“She approached the manor discretely, my lord, even bypassing our alarms and protections. I thought it best, then to place her in the black parlour.”

“Well considered, as always, Crivens,” Beaufort said.

“Thank you, my lord.”

The black parlour was underground, a clandestine meeting place for the family’s most private meetings. The only access was from a heavily protected elevating platform that only a few family and the most trusted and requisite staff could access. Thalia and Beaufort took the platform down and found that the Adventure Society representative was no lesser personage than the Deputy Director, Genevieve Picot. The Elderly elf looked perfectly comfortable amongst the black cushions and dark wood of the black parlour, getting up to greet the pair.

“Deputy Director,” Thalia greeted as they all took seats. “I was told your business was urgent.”

“Quite so,” Genevieve said. “I won’t waste time on niceties. You are, I take it, familiar with the office of monitoring at the Adventure Society.”

“Yes,” Thalia said. “Their primary task is to monitor the tracking stones of the adventurers, in case any of them die.”

“Yes,” Genevieve said. “Roughly an hour ago, the office brought to my attention an issue with two of the stones. The adventurers linked to them weren’t dead, but the stones were no longer able to track them. Something we have seen before.”

“The five who were implanted with star seeds,” Thalia said.

“Yes,” Genevieve said. “As best we can tell, their auras have changed sufficiently that the aura imprint we have for them is no longer effective. I was distressed to discover that the two adventurers in question are no longer active, but now work for your household.”

Thalia and Beaufort shared a dread-filled glance.

“Kyle and Geoffrey,” Beaufort said.

“Yes,” Genevieve said. “Why did you guess them?”

“Because they are out with our son right now,” Thalia said.

“What about Thadwick?” Beaufort asked.

“He was never attuned to a new badge after the expedition,” Thalia said. “They aren’t tracking him, but I am.”

She took a stone from her pocket and tapped it twice. Shortly thereafter, Crivens arrived on the elevating platform.

“Crivens, get the team I have tracking Thadwick. The whole team; bring them here as quickly and as quietly as you can.”

Thalia and Beaufort probed Genevieve for more details but there was little she could tell them, beyond that it was being handled with as much discretion as possible. Both the Adventure Society Director and the interim director from the inquiry team had made very clear to the monitoring office how to handle this kind of situation.

The people who were tracking Thadwick appeared with unfortunate haste.

“We were already looking for you my lady, my lord. Several minutes ago, the tracker on Young Master Thadwick stopped working.”

Thadwick returned to the Mercer estate with his two guardians in tow. They had barely made it through the gate before Thadwick’s mother teleported to greet them. The two guards bowed their heads respectfully while a disgruntled expression crossed Thadwick’s face.

“Thadwick, dear. I do hope you found your time out relaxing.”

“It was fine. I’m going back to my room.”

“Of course,” Thalia said. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to ask.”

“I know how servants work, Mother.”

“I meant me, dear. I thought maybe we could spend some more time together. Your father, as well. As a family.”

“Whatever,” Thadwick said, walking around her.

“You go ahead, dear,” Thalia said. “I’d just like a word with your boys, here.”

Thadwick stopped and turned around.

“You want them to tell you everything I did,” he accused. “Let me save you the trouble. I went to Old City and I had some women. One, then a pair, then one again to round out the afternoon. Are you happy?”

“As long as you enjoyed it, dear. I’ll have someone from the church of the Healer swing by and deal with anything you might have picked up.”

“No,” Thadwick said. “I already paid someone.”

“I think it would be best if I got someone in, dear.”

“I don’t care what you think would be best! I told you it’s fine. Why won’t you ever trust the things I say.”

“I’m sorry, dear. If you say it’s alright, then I’ll say no more.”

“Good,” Thadwick said, then turned and stormed off. Thalia watched him go, then turned to the two bodyguards.

“So?” she asked.

“As he said, my lady. He was quite aggressive, but the owner knows to keep their mouth shut and was paid to see they remember that.”

“Very good,” Thalia said. “If anything else comes up I want to know immediately, however minor it seems.”

“Of course, milady.”

“Back to your posts, then. I want my son taken care of.”

Thalia arrived in the black parlour, where Genevieve and Beaufort were still present.

“Well?” Beaufort asked.

“That is not our son,” Thalia said.

“You think he’s been seeded again?” Beaufort asked.

“This is something else,” Thalia said. “The personality is right on but I know his aura, both with and without the seed. It was off, at a fundamental level. What came home is some kind of double he is projecting into from some other location.”

“Is that even possible?” Beaufort asked.

“It is,” Thalia said. “We can use whatever that thing is upstairs to track back to our son, but whoever is on the other end will know right away and get on the move. They can only be so far away, though, so if we have people ready to act in the city, we have a good chance of catching them.”

“If that really isn’t our son.”

“It’s not,” Thalia said with certainty. “Our son is out there somewhere and he needs us.”

“Then we have to act now and we have to do it right,” Beaufort said. “We’re not losing him again.”

Thalia nodded, her face wracked with guilt and pain. “He hadn’t even recovered from what they did to him before and they’re victimising him again. Why do they want him so much?”

“Hopefully, we can answer that when we get him back,” Genevieve said. “What about the bodyguards?”

“Their auras are definitely off but it’s subtle,” Thalia said. “My guess is they’re seeded and have something to mask their auras to appear normal. I could only tell because I know their auras and have strong enough aura senses to see through it.”

“We need to get moving on this,” Beaufort said. “With Kyle and Geoffrey compromised we can’t mobilise our own people without giving the game away. The

Kettering's have people in Old City, I'll talk to them about getting people ready to move once we trace Thad's location."

"I'll prep the people I had tracking Thadwick," Thalia said. "They have the expertise to backtrack from whatever or whoever this double is to our boy."

"I'll return to the Adventure Society," Genevieve said. "I'll update the Director and Interim Director and marshal what forces I can put together quietly. I'll coordinate with the Kettering family."

"We don't want these people realising that we're going to move on them," Beaufort said. "Thalia, as soon as our people are confident they have a way to trace Thad, we strike."

Kyle and Geoffrey were stationed outside Thadwick's room. Located in the main family section, on the top floor of one of the towers, the hallway was large and flooded with light from a ceiling largely made of glass.

The two guards seemed to sense something was wrong. Although Thalia was walking casually toward her son's room, something about the way she was carrying herself tipped them off. The result, for Kyle and Geoffrey, was horrifying.

Their bodies split apart, segmenting at the joints. Knees and elbows, wrists, ankles, shoulders; all tearing audibly apart. Both men died instantly, rictuses of pain and terror frozen on their dead faces. Their bodies were now strung together by wires, like poorly made puppets, complete with jerky movements. The guards had gone from people to monstrosities of flesh and metal.

What concerned Thalia the most was the aura coming off the two corpse puppets. Moments ago they had been living bronze rankers. Now they were horrifying abominations giving off silver-rank auras. Thalia flashed back to the expedition, with its construct monsters and bizarre cultists. That was the moment everything started falling apart with her son and the magic surged up inside her.

Thalia Mercer was a silver-rank adventurer, and far from a weak one. She might not be the equal of her friend and team mate, Danielle Geller, but she was still a powerhouse in her own right. With the might, potent, swift and onslaught essences, in terms of pure explosive power she was a match for any adventurer alive. It was certainly too much for the two gangly, awkward creatures that had moments ago been people. Under the barrage of a furious Thalia, they were soon ripped apart, their metal components just as torn to pieces as their flesh.

Thalia didn't bother to open Thadwick's door. She blasted it to splinters with a special attack and moved in, finding the facsimile of her son in what looked like a state of melting, clay that had seemed like flesh oozing off an iron skeleton. Thalia immediately called in the ritualists, yelling at them to focus as their attention was arrested by the dead flesh puppets and the iron-clay doppelganger degrading in front of them.

Thadwick had been in the ritual circle for hours, connected to his mystical double. Now he had been pulled out of it as a pair of ritualists methodically eradicated any element that could be used to track their location. All around them, other people were packing up supplies into dimensional bags, stripping the building of anything that could be used against them.

"What was that?" Timos yelled at Thadwick.

Timos had quickly come to regret going along with Thadwick's aggressive self-recruitment. Rather than a useful pawn within the aristocracy, he was a one-man disaster. Timos had been operating in Greenstone for years without so much as a sniff of detection, yet within hours Thadwick was bringing everything down on their heads. From openly approaching him to failing to immediately giving the game away, Timos was mentally berating himself for not just killing Thadwick and his bodyguards, then dumping them in a canal. If he had been thinking straight, he assured himself, he would never have risked so much on a petulant teenager.

Timos was a man who valued methodical patience, but their allies in the church of Purity were ruining everything with their haste. Despite the cult's warnings that they should wait until the monster surge, the church were insistently impatient, forced them to move forward before everything was fully in place.

Their precipitous actions left them with little margin for error, where every mistake threatened to snowball into disaster. The degree to which their activities had been uncovered even in such a provincial area as Greenstone spoke volumes. Timos was, for once, grateful he wasn't assigned to one of the more crucial regions. The troubles they would face in a city full of top-shelf adventurers made him shudder. Even then, he would happily trade a dangerous enemy for an ally like Thadwick.

"Our people have been working in plain sight for years," Timos admonished Thadwick. "Years! You can't manage more than a few hours?"

"I warned you that my mother had strong aura senses," Thadwick spat back. "You're the one who was so certain this fake would work."

"What was the last thing you saw before the connection was cut?" Timos asked.

“People coming into the room after my mother. Two of her ritualists, I think.”

Timos snarled like an animal.

“We have to move quickly,” he said. “They’ll be all over this place soon.”

“Aren’t your people eliminating the link?” Thadwick asked.

“You don’t stay hidden in this city for as long as we have by assuming our people are better than Thalia Mercer’s people.”

“My mother isn’t that impressive.”

“Yes, Thadwick, she is,” Timos said. “How you turned out this way is a complete mystery.”

“If you knew how great she was, then why did you try and deceive her?”

Timos flinched, not happy to have his own contribution to the current disaster pointed out.

“Because our methods weren’t devised by locals but bestowed on us from above,” Timos said. “Unfortunately, your pathetic little city didn’t warrant to best tools.”

Once the building had been divested of any trace of the cult and its activities, Timos led his people, including Thadwick, through an illegally-made and well-concealed hole in the floor, down to the water utility tunnels running under Old City. The tunnels had stone walkways on either side, elevated above the water channels running through the middle.

They hurried along, Timos consulting a map as they went. The dank tunnels echoed, Timos signalling a stop as they heard something. It was a sound of footsteps and whistling, coming from a person who emerged from a side tunnel and not far in front of them.. He was of middle years, with loose overalls and a laden tool belt.

“Well, hello,” he said. “You folks must be pretty lost to all wind up here, but old Frank will see you...”

Frank never got to finish his sentence, his corpse falling as Timos’ conjured spear vanished, leaving a ragged hole in Frank’s throat. Timos kicked the body off the walkway and into the water channel before hurrying on once more.

Days passed and after the initial, covert search, the city’s resources were brought fully to bear. The Adventure Society and Magic Society, along with all the noble families were recruited into the effort. The revelation about the nature of their enemy went from restricted to common knowledge, sending waves of concern through the populace. The information was released to make it clear that anyone harbouring the enemy would face the harshest retribution.

The search threw the city into chaos. The cult had been much more careful about their activities than the likes of local criminals, whose clandestine operations were less thoroughly hidden. These were the one flushed out by the search as the cult slipped quietly into the dark.

The search was not helped by lack of competent iron-rankers. Usually the rank and file of the Adventure Society, their absence due to Emir's expedition left only the dregs. They were called into action regardless, many of whom hadn't taken a contract in years. Thugs, criminals, arena fighters, most of which had been malingering at iron rank for years. They were pulled in, nonetheless.

Not every hidden cultist escaped. Adric Dorgan was not only effective in determining when the search was wasting its time on ordinary criminals, but had at least some sense of the cultist supply network. From his direction, a number of raids turned up cultists, although to little effect. When captured, the crystal stars exploded from inside them, leaving behind only uninformative scraps of shredded flesh.

As the city was scoured, a series of bandit raids took place out in the delta, killing and plundering supplies. They were made against the holdings of numerous families, mostly soft targets who relied on the threat of retribution for security. The attacks against more secure locations made it clear who the primary target of the attacks was.

Almost every raid that employed greater coordination on more difficult targets was made against Mercer family holdings. It was also plain that they had insider information, hitting weak points in security, quickly and efficiently taking only the most valuable goods.

The Mercers swiftly realised that Thadwick's knowledge of their operations, schooled into him by his father, were being used against them. They made rapid changes and, with the support of Adventure Society personnel, set a series of ambushes that ravaged the attackers. The fallen and the captured exploding into crystal stars confirmed that the cult were behind the attacks, but again there were no prisoners to interrogate.

In a small village on the outskirts of the delta, Timos and Thadwick were in the common room of an inn. Like the rest of village's inhabitants, the tavern owners were dead.

"First you were useless as an infiltrator," Time berated Thadwick. "Now your usefulness as an expert on Mercer family security is at an end because they've used what you know to turn the tables and set up traps. We've lost people any one of which are worth ten of you. So, what I need from you right now is a reason not to kill you and leave you to your family to find."

"You wouldn't," Thadwick said.

“No?” Timos asked. “I’m pretty sure that if they at least found your body, the pressure on us would lessen, if only a little.

“What do you even need to raid supplies for?” Thadwick asked. “What about those supply ships you’ve been using?”

“Are you an idiot? Look at who I’m asking. Adric Dorgan has been relentless in digging out our supply lines,” Timos said. “If it wasn’t for our local support we would be completely hamstrung, and I’m starting to suspect he knows who they are.”

“Who are they?” Thadwick asked.

“Do you seriously think I would tell you anything that could compromise us? I had you brought here in a closed carriage to make sure you didn’t find some way to reveal our location!”

“If Dorgan is the one pressuring your supplies, then kill him,” Thadwick suggested. “What do you care about some crime lord?”

“That crime lord’s daughter is the Director of the Adventure Society, you idiot. You think things are bad now? We have every silver ranker who they can motivate searching for us. You kill the Director’s father and you can be damn sure she’ll motivate the rest. So, for now, we need to supply from elsewhere. Which was your family stores because we had you. Now, you’re worthless.”

“I’ll show you worthless...”

Timos’ backhand slap across Thadwick’s face was punishingly loud.

“You’ll shut your damn mouth,” Timos said. “Like it or not, you’re one of us, now. That means you do what you’re told until we figure out if you’re even worth keeping alive. I cannot wait until your worthless city and everyone in it are dead.”

“What?” Thadwick asked.

“Oh, didn’t I mention?” Timos said with a gleeful grin. “Our astral expert, before he was stupidly killed off, determined that the next astral space we claim will be a little unusual, due to some specifics of its connection to your world.”

As he spoke, Timos moved toward Thadwick, slow and intimidating as Thadwick backed away.

“The astral space is anchored too far away to reduce your city to astral dust, sadly. The good news is the secondary wave of destruction that will scour this horrid delta, with it’s wet heat and awful insects, right along with the city and the even worse vermin that infest it.”

“My family...” Thadwick said weakly.

“Have you not been paying attention?” Timos asked. He was standing right up close to Thadwick, who had backed into the tavern bar. “You betrayed your family, Thadwick. Making you one of us instead of a wet corpse was a mistake but it’s made, now.”

“My father,” Thadwick said. “We could bring him into the fold.”

“That wouldn’t work, Thadwick. He’s not an entitled child, willing to grasp at whoever offers him the power he thinks he deserves. He will never serve the Builder, but you do, and one way or another, I’m going to get some use out of you.”

Chapter 173: Take the Loot and Go

The last set of stairs led Jason into a hallway that looped around in a ring, a huge circuit he estimated to be almost as wide as the full tower. The outer wall of the hallway was the familiar stone, while the inner wall was solid glass; a single, curved pane that looped in a giant circle. Through the glass was a library, softly lit by magical chandeliers, hanging from the ceiling. The circular space was haphazard in design, with shelves set out at strange, seemingly random angles instead of in neat rows.

Walking along the hall, Jason encountered other stairwells, much like the one he had entered through. He soon found other adventurers that had used them. His first encounter was one of the foreign adventurers he didn't know. They shared a wary nod of greeting and kept moving around the loop together. More people joined them, including, Humphrey, Beth, Valdis and Valdis' team member, Sigrid.

"Were you all told to execute a whole group of people?" Humphrey asked.

"Yeah," Jason said. "I thought I was done when I refused, but here we are."

"Same," Valdis said. "I choose who I kill and why. I'm not some blind executioner."

"I killed them all," one of the other adventurers said, his face harrowed. "It was awful, but I'll do whatever it takes. We aren't all princes and outworlders. Some of us have to fight up from nothing, even if it means soiling our hands to do it."

Jason frowned but said nothing. While he had his own struggles, there was no question that many good things had been handed to him.

There were nineteen adventurers gathered together before Shade finally appeared.

"Adventurers," Shade said. "You have all passed the trials and proven worthy of the Order's legacy. Please step through the glass."

They reached out to touch the glass wall. Many had done so previously, finding it hard and warm to the touch. Now it was thick, like molasses, yet permeable, their hands passing right through. They all stepped forward, moving into the library.

Their group followed Shade through the oddly-placed shelves to the middle of the library, where shelves gave way to tables. There were books stacked on them, collected into a series of neat, identical piles. What drew their attention, though, was the circular dais at the very centre. Resting upon it was a heavy metal rack containing a single object: a large scythe, stylised well outside of practicality as weapon or tool. The blade was made from silver and the shaft from gold, inlaid with obsidian polished to a gem-like finish.

Shade reached out to touch one of the book piles.

“Each of these collections contains the collected teachings of the Order of the Reaper,” Shade said. “How to move in silence, to walk unseen. How to pass through locked doors and trapped rooms unimpeded. How to kill. These are no ordinary books. For each volume there are two copies. One is a skill book, the other, a written guide. The guides, however, are more than simply words on a page.”

Shade picked up a book, holding it up to show a blue gem set into the cover. He touched the gem and an ephemeral image of a man appeared.

“This is the first volume of the Way of the Reaper,” the image said. “It details the first form of our order’s complete martial technique. Turn to any page and I will instruct you.”

Shade returned the book to the pile and the image disappeared.

“Each of you have proven yourselves to embody the virtues the Order once held,” Shade said. “Though the Order may be gone, its legacy can be secure through bestowing its knowledge to those who exemplify its ideals.”

One of the shadow gates rose up from the floor.

“Please,” Shade said. “Each of you may take a collection and go. The trials are complete.”

“Hold on,” one of the adventurers called out. “What about the scythe?”

“What about it?” Shade asked.

“Who gets it?”

“No one,” Shade said. “It remains here.”

“We were told that whoever passed the trials would get the scythe,” Valdis said.

“I am responsible for enacting the trials in the ways with which I have been charged,” Shade said. “I am not responsible for what you have been told by anyone else.”

“Well, I’m going to take it anyway,” another adventurer said. “Call it a memento.”

She moved forward to take the scythe, but the moment she moved over the dais, she dropped like a sack of meat, moving no further.

“The scythe is an object of death,” Shade said. “To go near it is to die.”

“So you’re saying we need to carry it out on a long stick,” Jason said.

“You are certainly welcome to try,” Shade invited.

Rather than pick up the books as directed, the adventurers formed clusters, immediately entering into a discussion about the scythe.

“There has to be a way to take it.”

“Maybe there’s a hidden, extra trial.”

“Obviously, but what would it be?”

“Maybe figuring out how to take the scythe is the trial.”

Jason, Humphrey, Valdis and Sigrid formed their own group.

“What do we think?” Valdis asked.

“I’m taking the books and leaving,” Jason said.

“You don’t want the cloud palace?” Valdis asked.

“I want the cloud palace,” Jason said. “What I don’t want is that scythe.”

Humphrey narrowed his eyes at Jason.

“You’ve figured it out.”

“Nope,” Jason denied. “I just think that what comes with getting that scythe is trouble best avoided.”

“Really?” Valdis asked. “You’ve come this far and you want to give up?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “I’m going to take the loot and go.”

“You don’t strike me as the giving-up kind,” Valdis said.

“Watch me,” Jason said. “I’m giving up on the scythe and I advise you all to do the same.”

Jason took one of the stacks of books, placed it in his inventory and walked through the obsidian portal. This drew attention as he was the first to do so, but no one moved to stop him. One less person meant less competition for the scythe.

Jason emerged from the portal in another circular chamber he estimated to be the exact size of the library. This room was empty, however, aside from the dais in the middle. ON it was an exact replica of the scythe he had already seen. The only light was right above the scythe, a plain, magical lamp that illuminated the weapon but left the rest of the room steeped in shadow. Shade appeared next to Jason, who spotted him through the perception power that allowed him to see through darkness.

“I thought that portal was meant to take me out of here,” Jason said.

“Your time here is not done,” Shade said.

“You said we were done.”

“The final trial tests the virtue of insight,” Shade said. “The ability see beyond appearances to grapple with the truth.”

“I truly want to get out of here, if that helps.”

Quest: [The Hidden Trial]

The invigilator of the trials has realised the revelation you’ve had about the true purpose of the trials.

- Objective: Reveal the true purpose of the trials and claim the scythe.
- Reward: ???.

“Decline,” Jason said to the screen. “Decline, decline, decline.”

➤ This quest cannot be declined.

“Bloody hell.”

“You have had insights about this place,” Shade said. “You tried to warn your friends away.”

“Just general suspicions,” Jason said.

“Tell me what you have realised..”

“I realise how much I want to leave,” Jason said, his hand snaking into his clothes and around the escape medallion dangling from his neck on a cord. He pressed his aura into it and it dissolved into nothing.

- You have used [Medallion of Escape].
 - Trial invigilator [Shade] has revoked your escape privileges.
 - [Medallion of Escape] does not take effect.
-

“Oh, that’s just not fair.”

“I will hear what you have to say before you leave this place.”

“Let me out of here,” Jason said. “Hear that.”

“You have seen the truth, Jason Asano. Speak it, or you will not be released from this place.”

“How is that fair?”

“If someone promised you fairness, Jason Asano, they lied.”

Jason groaned.

“Do you have some kind of mind reading powers?” he asked.

“I have merely been watching you closely, along with all the others. You have had a revelation to which you refuse to give voice.”

“And if I promise to keep not giving voice to it, can I go?”

“Say it.”

“I don’t want to say it. I don’t want the ramifications. You could kill me for it. I’d kill me for it. Killing me would be the smart move.”

“You have greater value than as a corpse.”

“I’m not looking for new employment.”

Before Shade could answer, Humphrey appeared through the archway.

“I thought this was meant to take us out,” Humphrey said.

Jason groaned again.

“You figured it out?” Jason asked him.

“Figured what out?” Humphrey asked. “I was just taking your advice and getting out.”

Jason looked at Shade. “So, everyone comes through here?”

“No,” Shade said. “I decided that you needed further motivation. Now your friend is trapped here with you, for as long as you refuse to talk.”

“That just implicates him,” Jason complained.

“Then I suggest you speak up before I bring more of your friends to this place,” Shade said.

“Jason, what’s going on?” Humphrey asked.

Jason sighed.

“It’s about what this place is for,” Jason said. “Its true purpose.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about what it took to get here,” Jason said. “Emir is an expert at finding things and even he took the better part of two years, a huge staff and a slew of hired adventurers to find this place and everything he needed to open it up. He’s a gold-ranker with exactly the right skill set and resources to get the job done and it still took more time and money than we’ve seen since becoming adventurers.”

“So?” Humphrey asked.

“So, after all that, the only people who can get in here are iron-rankers. But the grand prize, the scythe, is useless to an iron-ranker aside from what they can trade it for.”

“What are you getting at?”

“The purpose of these trials isn’t to bestow some legacy of a long-dead organisation of murderers. Think about it. Centuries of stories; legends of an ancient order of assassins and the grand treasure they left behind. Clues hidden around the world, finally pieced together at great time and cost. Why? To give some iron-ranker a pile of books and maybe an overwrought harvesting tool?”

“Then what are the trials for?”

“They’re here to create the legend,” Jason said. “If you’re telling stories about an ancient order of assassins that got wiped out, you know what you aren’t doing?”

“What?”

“Asking whether they got wiped out at all. I’m willing to bet that most of the story holds up. A coalition of churches coming together to hunt them down and root them out. But these were the world’s greatest assassins. You really think that none of them got away? Of course they did. Some of them, at least. Then they created these trials, hid away the keys to open them and started dropping rumours and stories. Just enough to linger through the centuries.”

“You think the Order of the Reaper still exists?”

“I do,” Jason said. “I’m willing to bet they operate very differently, now. Smaller numbers, different methods. My guess is that their first tenet now is secrecy.”

“This why you didn’t want us to go for the scythe,” Humphrey said. “You didn’t want us getting caught up with the Order.”

“Exactly.”

“Are they going to kill us?”

“Probably,” Jason said. “I would.”

“Then why have the hidden trial at all?”

“To catch anyone who figures it out,” Jason said. “If people leave with a pile of ancient knowledge from an order of assassins long gone, then the legend of their demise carries on. If someone figures it out, though, they want to deal with those people. Only letting in iron-rankers keeps out anyone who can really investigate this place. The scythe is bait, so some high-ranker would eventually go to the effort of getting some iron-rankers inside. The ones quick enough to figure it out they can take aside and deal with.”

➤ **Objective complete: Reveal the true purpose of the trials 1/1.**

Jason sighed.

“Sorry, Humphrey,” he said. “They brought you in because I refused to admit that I twigged to what was happening.”

“It was rather obvious that you’d realised something,” Humphrey said.

“Very good, Jason Asano,” Shade said.

“Is this the part where you kill us?”

“That would be a waste,” Shade said. “As you said, the Order operates very differently, now. It does not maintain a roster of assassins at all. Rather, we make connections. Quiet allies. A job worth doing is worth doing well, therefore to do a job well you must find someone who thinks it’s worth doing. That is what we do; find jobs that require doing and match them to the person who thinks doing them is worthwhile.”

“So, you’re talking about a volunteer network,” Jason said.

“Something like that,” Shade said. “The fall of the original Order of the Reaper was not unwarranted. The founding purpose of the Order was to do what was necessary. Over time, it became more controlling, seeking to rule from the shadows, rather than serve. The new structure was designed to place the power to act in the hands of others. To let their judgement and conscience be the guide.”

“That’s what the tests are for,” Jason said. “To find people with the principles you want in an agent.”

“Yes.”

“What if we say no?” Jason asked. “What if we don’t want to be part of your order?”

“It is not my order,” Shade said. “I am merely an administrator for this trial. There are other such tests, looking for people and taking many forms. Once this one is done, my obligations to the Order are done. As for you, you are not being invited to the Order. All that is being asked of you is that you be open to it, should the Order find a task to which you are suited.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Jason said. “Like standing at the top of a slippery slope. It’s fine, because you’re at the top. What about the other people in the trial? You’ll use them too, right?”

“If the right circumstance and person come together, then we will use anyone.”

“How does that work? A person just happens across a situation where their natural inclination will be to intervene?”

“Just so.”

“And what makes you think Humphrey and I won’t talk?”

“Your reluctance to speak even to me demonstrates that you have the wisdom to understand the repercussions of doing so. As for Humphrey Geller, he never learned about it in the first place.”

Humphrey disappeared into thin air and Jason snorted a laugh.

“That’s the duplicating magic you used for the old resolve test, right?”

“It is,” Shade said.

“So now I just go?”

“You should take the scythe with you, first.”

“Wait, I can really take the scythe?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t think you’d let me take it. Actually, that makes sense. It really rams home the idea that the Order is dead and gone. Otherwise, why would they leave the very symbol of their order to languish in some diamond-rankers collection like any old trinket.”

“Indeed.”

“What about the whole object of death thing?”

“That only applies to the replica in the room below.”

“What do I tell people about how I got the scythe?”

“Use your ingenuity.”

“That’s helpful.”

“If you cannot figure that much out, then you wouldn’t be much use to the Order.”

“I don’t much want to be.”

He wandered over to the scythe, slowing down as he approached.

“You’re sure there’s no instant death field?”

“Yes.”

“How do I know you’re not lying?”

“You don’t.”

“That’s terrific.”

“You may leave without it, if you like.”

“Just because I take this, it doesn’t mean I’m willing to be your assassin.”

“I think you’ll find that if ever the Order does contact you, Jason Asano, the circumstances will be more complicated and nuanced than a simple assassination.”

“Just Jason, is fine.”

“I would prefer to refer to you as Mr Asano.”

“Whatever rows your boat, cobber.”

With a steeling breath, Jason moved up to the scythe and grabbed it.

Item: [Scythe of the Reaper] (diamond rank, legendary)

The symbolic legacy of the Order of the Reaper (tool, scythe).

- Effect: ???
- Effect: ???
- Effect: ???
- Effect: ???
- Effect: ???

The scythe wouldn’t budge from its rack.

“Why is it stuck?” Jason asked. “I thought you said I could take it.”

“It is not affixed in place,” Shade said. “You simply lack the strength to shift its weight.”

“Huh.”

After a series of attempts that failed to so much as shift the scythe on its rack, Jason came up with something new. Standing right up to the scythe, he opened his inventory window on the other side. Then, with one hand on the scythe, he stepped back, the window following. When it touched the scythe, the weapon vanished, appearing in his inventory as an icon. Jason looked at it with satisfaction.

“Nice.”

Quest: [The Hidden Trial]

- Objective complete: Claim the scythe 1/1.
 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
 - [Reaper Token] has been added to your inventory.
-

“Okay,” Jason said wearily. “I am really ready to get out of here.”

He headed back in the direction of the archway he had come in through. He was about to step in when someone stepped out. It was Sigrid, Valdis team member.

“What are you doing here?” Jason asked, stepping back to give her space.

“I’m not sure,” Sigrid said, looking around. “Where is here?”

“She figured it out,” Shade said.

“I realised that the reason you wanted out was to avoid the attention of the Order of the Reaper that still existed.”

“Well, congratulations,” Jason said. “Shade can explain everything; I’m out. I took the scythe by the way, so you’ll have to ask Shade if he has a spare.”

“A spare?”

“Shade,” Jason said, pointing at the archway. “Does this thing actually go where I want, this time?”

“It does.”

“Great,” Jason said, patting Sigrid on the shoulder. “I’ll see you on the other side.”

Chapter 174: Making an Exit

The shadow gate took Jason from the tower at the heart of the city to one of those at the city's edge. He emerged at the base of one of the archway towers, not far from where ruins gave way to sea. He was surrounded by other adventurers, milling about, regrouping or making their way up the stairs that wound their way around the tower.

He was immediately bombarded with messages as contacts and party members came into range. His team quickly contacted him through voice chat, relieved that he had come back alive. Humphrey had already arrived, surprised that Jason hadn't appeared first, and told the team about the tests they faced.

From the crowd gathered, Shade seemed to have sent everyone to the same tower to exit. Jason quickly found Humphrey, easily identified as he stood taller than everyone but the few leonids and draconians, for a face to face conversation.

"What happened?" Humphrey asked. "I left right after you, but you're only arriving now?"

"Shade wanted a quiet chat," Jason said softly, not wanting to draw attention. Humphrey raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Did you...?"

"Yeah," Jason answered and Humphrey shook his head.

"I never should have doubted you."

"You doubted me?"

"No, now that I think about it."

Jason laughed slapping Humphrey on the shoulder.

"Let's go track down everyone else."

Clive and Neil had teamed up with Beth's team, minus Beth herself who was absent along with Jason and Humphrey. While plenty of groups were taking their last opportunity to hunt treasure, they had taken it upon themselves to look for cultists. Clive had brought along everything he could think of to track potential cultist activity, but had come up empty.

Jason and Humphrey met up with Clive and Neil, who led everyone to where Jory and Sophie had set up a comfortable space to wait out everyone else. Rather than go off in search of fresh enemies or last-minute treasure, they had picked out a nice spot by the water, strung up a camp shade and a hammock, laid down a blanket and put out a folding chair. Sophie relaxed in the hammock as Jory sat contentedly in the chair, both reading books.

Jason and Humphrey converged on the little camp, arriving just after Clive, Neil and Beth's team. The greetings were warm with relief at having passed through weeks of life-threatening danger. The feeling of having survived everything and knowing they were safe for the moment was amazing, only heightened by the bitter knowledge that not every team was so lucky. Even Sophie joined in the welcoming hugs, at least for Humphrey. Jason she gave a look up and down and a simple, "you didn't die then."

"Disappointed?" he asked.

"I'm glad you're alive," she conceded. "There'd be a bunch of legal trouble with my indenture if you died."

"That seems harsh," Neil said. "And that's coming from someone who was vaguely hoping he would at least get maimed a little."

"Oh, I'm feeling the love here," Jason said.

"You did almost kill her," Jory said. "It took me and a priest of the Healer to cleanse that curse and the poison you loaded her up with. Even then, it was a near thing."

They expanded Jory's camp space with more chairs and a refreshments table filled with sandwiches and iced tea. As they settled in, Sophie sat next to Jason on a soft rug, casually knocking her shoulder into his.

"I am glad you didn't die," she said softly, as if the reluctant sincerity of her words were a skittish animal that would run off when startled. Jason flashed her a trademark impish grin.

"While our esteemed team leaders have been trying to get themselves killed over a scythe no one apparently got their hands on," Clive said, "the rest of us were looking into the cultist problem. I've been concentrating our search around the tower, because these towers ringing the city are the anchors that bind this astral space to our world. The cultists will have to disrupt them to sever that connection, so I've been looking for traces of magical interference. The towers are fascinating in themselves but, so far as I can tell, the one here is functioning unimpeded. It could be they're working on other towers, or using some kind of astral magic we've never heard of."

"Maybe the cultists didn't want to risk sending anyone," Humphrey suggested. "Emir's people were checking auras."

"No," Jason said. "The cultists could have either sent people who didn't have star seeds or people who've had star seeds so long that the aura imprint the Magic Society has for them includes the seed."

"You think the cult has been in Greenstone long enough for that?" asked Mose.

Mose Cavendish was Beth's cousin, an elf with destructive fire and wind spells who Jason and Humphrey had shared a contract with in the past. A classic glass cannon, he had worked hard since then to earn a spot on his cousin's team.

"They've definitely been in Greenstone for a while," Neil said. "You don't operate on the scale we've seen without people taking notice. Not unless you build up very slowly and very carefully."

"The question on my mind, then," Humphrey said, "is whether Clive not finding anything is good or bad."

"Definitely bad," Jason said. "We're all about to evacuate. If I was a deeply committed cultist – and the fact that they all explode when caught suggests they are – then I wouldn't try anything with everyone here. I'd stay behind and get the job done once we're all gone. Presumably, being trapped here only lasts until the astral space is cut loose and the Builder comes along to scoop it up."

"I'm not sure I'm following this conversation," said Hudson. He was the front-liner for Beth's team, even larger than Humphrey, with a propensity for conjuring walls of earth. Jason's team was unusual in how much they knew about the Builder cult and the threat they posed, Beth's team and Jory listening with horror as Clive took the time to explain.

During the explanation Beth rejoined her team. Valdis and Keane's teams also found their way to the camp, requiring Clive to backtrack his explanations a couple of times. That proved helpful, as the repetition helped those less quick at taking in the explanations of great astral beings, astral spaces and the idea of stealing them.

Some of the foreign adventurers already knew some of it, notably Valdis and Sigrid. Even they had little understanding of the mechanisms involved, however, and were impressed as Clive elucidated the various details.

"Are you sure you're happy with your current team?" Valdis asked him, earning a swat on the arm from Sigrid.

"Right in front of his team," Sigrid said. "You are shameless. Also, he's not going to agree to leave them while they're right in front of him. You have to take him aside, where you can explain how much better we are."

Jason burst out laughing. "And you say he's shameless."

Clive finished his explanation with the assumption that the Builder cult would be targeting the astral space they were currently in.

"So, what do we do?" Valdis asked. "It was clear, going in, that the cult would be after this astral space. Did anyone devise a plan to deal with that?"

“We had no idea what we would encounter,” Jason said. “Basically, we were told to keep our eyes open and trust our judgement.”

“In our earlier discussion, before you came along,” Clive said, “we concluded that the cultists among us will likely be stay behind while the rest evacuate before the astral space closes.”

“Leaving them free to do their work once everyone else is gone,” Valdis reasoned. “Disregarding the monsters those ghost-things and the flesh creatures, anyway. Could we try taking some kind of roster? All these teams were scoping each other out before we even came. I bet we could get a full list of participants, if we asked around.”

“Wouldn’t matter,” Sigrid said. “There’s no way of knowing who died or used their escape medallions to leave. We don’t even know if Shade sent people to other archway towers to leave. This looks like everyone, but we can’t be sure.”

“I don’t see anything we can do,” Humphrey said. “We don’t have much in the way of options that I can see, and we won’t have any once we leave. Staying behind as well is not an option, either. Success would mean being trapped here forever, while failure would leave us in the Builder’s hands.”

Valdis nodded. “I don’t see any worthwhile option, either. In which case, we may as well leave. There’s nothing left for us here.”

Jason, Beth and Humphrey looked at each other and shared a nod.

“Agreed,” Beth said. Keane’s team leader, Roland, did likewise..

They joined the steady stream of people already ascending the tower, chatting as they casually made their way around the spiralling stairs. The steps were stone pegs set into the tower wall, wide enough to go two by two. The teams mixed together, relaxing and chatting together now that they were almost out. The front cluster consisted of Valdis, Sigrid, Beth, Humphrey, Jason and Keane

“You know, I actually had a chance at the scythe,” Beth said.

“Really?” Valdis asked, shooting a glance at Sigrid.

“There was an extra room for people who figured out the last puzzle,” Beth said.

“What was the hidden trial?” Valdis asked.

“Best kept to myself, thank you,” Beth told him.

“That’s what Sigrid said,” Valdis complained.

“Then you should stop asking,” Sigrid told him.

“I was too late,” Beth said. “I was the fourth one there. I didn’t see who got the scythe because they’d already left. Unless Sigrid was lying and she took it before I got there.”

“I didn’t,” Sigrid said.

“According to Shade,” Beth said, “someone figured out the hidden trial before the rest of us knew there was one, which is how they went and claimed it so quickly.”

“That definitely wasn’t Sigrid, then,” Valdis said. “I was with her when she figured it out. Jason and Humphrey, you two were already gone. You practically leaped through that shadow gate.”

“I just wanted to get out before people turned on each other over the scythe,” Jason said.

“You say that,” Valdis said, “but if I recall correctly, Humphrey was wondering if you’d figured it out right before the pair of you made yourselves scarce. You were the first two through the gate.”

“Jason, did you get the scythe?” Keane asked.

“Of course not,” Jason said.

“He’s lying,” Sophie said from behind Jason. “You can tell when he’s lying.”

“How?” Valdis asked with eager curiosity.

“He’s awake,” Sophie said. “Even his body language is manipulative.”

“That’s true,” Humphrey said with a laugh.

“I’m feeling very put upon.”

“I know your pain,” Valdis said, giving Jason’s shoulder a commiserating pat. “My team gangs up on me, too.”

“You say gang up,” Sigrid said. “Somehow he always seem to outnumber us, even though there’s just one of him.”

“I can’t help having the virile verve of ten men,” Valdis said. “It’s just the way I am.”

“It’s a blessing and a curse right?” Jason asked.

“So true,” Valdis agreed.

“We should push them off the side,” Sigrid said.

“I don’t know about your guy,” Sophie said, “but ours has a slow fall power, so it’s no good.”

They reached the top, where Shade was guiding adventurers through the shadow gate in the middle of the flat roof. As Jason approached, Shade stopped him.

“Oh, what now?” Jason asked.

“You have the Reaper’s token,” Shade said.

“How do you know that?”

“I can sense it. I am connected to it.”

“Why?” Jason asked warily.

"I am a summoned being," Shade said. "I could be described as a familiar of this place, in the same way I was once the familiar of the man who built it. Like all familiars, I am an astral entity merely inhabiting this vessel. My true nature is a shadow of the Reaper."

"Wait," Jason said. "You mean the Reaper's actual shadow? As in, park a lamp next to the guy and whooshka, there you are?"

"The Reaper has many shadows," Shade said. "I am but one of a multitude."

"So, what does this token do, exactly?" Jason asked.

"Jason, we're holding up the line," Neil called forward. "People are getting grumpy."

"Go," Shade said to Jason. "Incorporate the token into your ritual of awakening."

Looking unhappily back at the press of adventurers, Jason went through the shadow gate. On the other side, in the once-drowned village at the bottom of the lake, Gary, Rufus and Emir's staff were greeting the adventurers as they returned through the archway. They sent the iron-rankers shuffling out of the way to make room for the constant stream behind them. Overhead, the magical dome kept out the water.

Jason spotted Emir, who was standing and talking with Constance. Next to him was his granddaughter, Ketis. A number of adventurers tried to approach but were turned away by more of his staff.

"Clive, go set up the air-bubble ritual," Jason said. "I'm going to chat with Emir and then we can go see some genuine sky, instead of the fake astral space one."

"I thought the astral space was quite nice," Neil said as Jason wandered off.

"Since when is he in charge?" Sophie asked.

"I'd give him this one," Humphrey told her.

"You mean," Sophie replied in little more than a whisper, "he really did get his hands on thing?"

"Yes," Humphrey said.

"Oh, no," Neil groaned.

"He's going to be so insufferably smug," Sophie said.

"He did beat all these people," Humphrey said. "This is not inconsiderable competition."

"I'd rather Beth won," Sophie said. "Or Sigrid. Anyone with some humility, really."

"So, anyone but Valdis, really," Clive exactly.

"I think you might want to follow his advice about setting up the ritual," Humphrey said to Clive. "We may welcome a quick escape very shortly."

“Good point,” Neil said. “Say what you will about Jason, I doubt it will involve the word understated.”

They headed in the direction of the closest dome wall. In the meantime, Jason approached the invisible cordon around Emir marked only by a pair of his staff.

“Greg,” Jason greeted.

“Asano.”

“Can I see him?”

Greg turned to glance at Emir, who nodded and Jason was allowed through. This did not go unnoticed by the other adventurers.

“Welcome back,” Emir said, wearily. “I heard that the arbiter of the trials refused the scythe to everyone.”

“He handed out plenty of books,” Jason said. “You’ll have no trouble filling the gaps in the young lady’s martial education. G’day, Ketis.”

“We’ve already heard that no one got the scythe,” Ketis said.

“Indeed we have,” Emir said. “We talked to a couple of people who passed all the trials and said it wasn’t given to anyone. Rufus thought differently, though.”

“Oh?” Jason asked.

“He said that you wouldn’t let something not being possible stop you. He bet me an exquisite bottle of wine that you’d come swaggering out, say something obnoxious and produce the scythe.”

“Well, of course I’m doing that,” Jason said. “I’m not a scrub.”

Jason held his hand out and the scythe appeared, immediately dropping to the ground. The shaft landing on its end smashed cobbles from the sheer weight, then it toppled over, cracking stone again as it crashed down.

“Watch out for that one,” Jason said. “There’s a bit of heft to it.”

“Constance,” Emir said urgently. Emir’s chief of staff took out a large black sheet and laid it on the ground. Emir was barely able to lift it, straining even his gold-rank strength to hold it up long enough for Constance to slip the sheet under it. After a moment resting on the sheet, gold and silver light started sparkling over it.

“The genuine article,” Emir said breathlessly, then looked up to see Jason had already strode off, his cloak now swirling around him as he made a beeline for his team at the edge of the dome. They were ready and waiting, their private air bubble like a growth on the side of the dome. Jason stepped into the platform with the rest of his team and they floated away.

While all eyes were on Jason, Rufus and Gary had moved to join Emir.

“What did I tell you?” Rufus asked Emir. “That man cannot help showing off.”

“You have to give it to him, though,” Gary said. “He knows how to make an exit. I don’t think he’s done, either. Are you seeing that?”

From within Jason’s cloak, blue-grey light was shining, emitting from beneath his skin. As he reached his team mates, the onlookers realised that the same light was shining not just from Jason but his entire team.

Quest: [Legacy of the Reaper]

- All objectives complete.
- Quest complete.

- Reward: Racial gift transfiguration.

Jason had been ignoring the objective completions of the quest because he had never expected to complete it. It was only now that he was willing to revel in the outlandish reward. He conjured his cloak to hide the idiotic grin so wide he felt it trying to unhinge the top of his head. Looking ahead to his team he saw the light start to shine from them and he hurried to meet them.

“It feels tingly,” Sophie said.

“I know you had that quest thing but I can’t believe I can actually do this,” Neil said.

“The paper I write on this is going to be so well-received,” Clive said.

“Well,” Humphrey said, putting a hand on Jason’s shoulder. “We’ve officially arrived now. You’d better believe word of this will be spreading around.”

“Let’s just go,” Jason said. They climbed on the ritual platform Clive had prepared and slid out of the dome. Light continued to shine from them as the assembled adventurers watched them drift away.

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- Outworlder racial ability [Map] has evolved to [Tactical Map].

Ability: [Tactical Map]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Map].
- Self-updating map. Unveils as areas are explored.
- A small, semi-opaque map allows tracking of nearby allies and enemies. This is a tracking effect.

“Mini-map, not bad,” Jason said as his team members looked at their own abilities.

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- Party member [Clive Standish]'s human racial ability [Human Ambition] has evolved to [Thirst For Knowledge].
 - Party member [Neil Davone]'s elf racial ability [Life Affinity] has evolved to [Life Guard].
 - Party member [Sophie Wexler]'s celestine racial ability [Mana Integrity] has evolved to [Mana Wellspring].
 - Party member [Humphrey Geller]'s Human racial ability [Special Attack Affinity] has evolved to [Attack of the Mirage Dragon].
-

“Look at that,” Jason said. “Neil really is an elf.”

“Shut up, Asano.”

Chapter 175: Shallow Earth

The team had been eager to test out their new abilities as soon as they reached shore, but things were a little busy. While the iron-rankers were in the astral space, even more people had been awaiting their return. Many of the foreign adventurers had brought family, let alone the locals. The cloud palace had been placed offshore from a small town that had been going through what was essentially a festival for the better part of three weeks. The townsfolk were exhausted but increasingly wealthy, with towns and villages all around the lake being roped-in. A small army of very demanding visitors brought a tidal wave of money to the local economy.

Things were all the more vibrant now that a steady stream of adventurers was emerging from the lake and into the jubilant arms of family. Neil's family were present, more than happy to be keeping company with the Gellers. Humphrey's father and sister had returned to Greenstone while he was in the astral space and were waiting with his mother. Even Clive's parents had been roped in by Danielle Geller, looking very awkward next to Greenstone's most prestigious adventurer.

All she ever had was her now long-dead father, but Belinda was her sister now, coming out with a greeting hug. Jason looked at them all, a sense of isolation he hadn't felt in a long time creeping over him. In his old life, only his older sister's family had been close as he eschewed other people. He hadn't been happy, but he hadn't felt lonely, either.

He was overcome with the memory that this was not his world. His precious connections were also new connections. He had planted roots but they were still in shallow earth. Bringing his expression under control, he threw on a convincing grin and pulled out a recording stone.

"Hello family," he said brightly. "I'm back out of the lake now, job done. I won the little contest because it turns out I'm terrific, but the people up here don't know, yet, so I should probably not say that too loudly..."

Morning became afternoon became evening, Jason's team and their families making their way onto the cloud palace before word spread outside of their victory in Emir's contest. Stories of their adventures were told, delighting Humphrey's parents as much as it horrified Clive's. Clive's success in life had certainly enriched them, which to the hardworking Standish family meant a bigger eel farm. They had quite liked that their son had a nice, safe job in an office.

“You can’t keep someone with Clive’s talent cooped up,” Danielle told them. “Did you know Emir has been trying to hire him away?”

“So has Prince Valdis, from the Mirror Kingdom,” Humphrey said.

“Wait,” Clive’s mother said. “That Valdis you’ve been talking about is a prince?”

Sophie made a quiet exit, finding Jason hidden away, leaning over a balcony as he watched more adventurers emerge from the water to ebullient welcome. She leaned on the rail beside him, his gaze not moving.

“It’s not like you to miss a chance for self-aggrandisement,” she said but her voice was soft, without the usual sting.

“It’s family time,” Jason said. “Mine is so far away that gods can’t broach the distance. They’re so far away that there aren’t even gods, there.”

“Are you sure about that? You didn’t believe in magic, once, but here we are. Would it be so strange for it to be hidden from you, back on your world?”

“Knowledge told me that my world lacks the magic to support a god.”

“And you trust her, all of a sudden?”

“No, but I don’t think she’s ever lied to me,” Jason said. “She’s like me; why lie, when the facts will do it for you? She’s just better at it than I am.”

“If it makes a difference,” she said, “I think Danielle Geller is ready to adopt you.”

Jason chuckled and she pulled herself off the railing.

“Come back in,” she said. “What’s a gathering without you telling people how great you are?”

“Excuse me?” he asked, also standing up straight. “I’ll have you know that I’m incredibly humble. I challenge you to find someone more humble than me...”

The team finally snuck away to test out their new abilities, gathering in the guest hall training room. They didn’t escape entirely, with Humphrey’s mother, father and sister watching on from the behind the transparent wall of the observation room.

Compared to Danielle, her husband, Keith, was ore akin to their son; a solid and reliable counterpoint to her domineering charms. Their daughter, Henrietta, seemed to take her role of Humphrey’s older sister seriously. She made it clear that his teammates were yet to meet her approval. Even her stoic gaze had broken in incredulity, however, as Humphrey explained that the whole team got gone through simultaneous gift evolutions.

It was far from unknown for people to go through such events together, as the circumstances that pushed one person past their limits could easily affect another in the same way. Humphrey and Jason had experienced exactly that in their fight against the

hydra. For an entire team to do so was something else altogether. Despite some probing questions from Danielle and her daughter, the team had agreed to hide Jason's role as the catalyst.

There was no hiding that it had happened, though, and the team tested out their new abilities, where appropriate. Clive had been initially unhappy with his racial gift.

Ability: [Thirst For Knowledge]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Human Ambition].
- Essence abilities advance more quickly.
- Learn information through the use of skill books.

“Skill books? Skill books are for people too stupid to learn the proper way. No offence, Jason.”

“You and your skill-book prejudice,” Jason said. “There’s nothing wrong with being a utility guy. My racial gifts aren’t exactly cutting my enemies down like wheat. Think of all the mundane things you have to learn that take away from how you really want to spend your time. Now you can just skill book the unimportant stuff and spend your time where it really matters.”

“Huh,” Clive said thoughtfully. “I never that.”

“Take martial arts, for example,” Jason said. “You never took the time to learn hand-to-hand skills, but now you can skill-book them. They won’t match up to Sophie, or even me, with the time I’ve put in, but they may be the difference between life and death in a pinch.”

No one argued that Neil’s ability was anything but a boon to the team.

Ability: [Life Guard]

- Transfigured from [Elf] ability [Life Affinity].
- Effects used or received with a positive effect on life have greater effect.
- Using a shield-based essence ability on allies also bestows a heal-over-time effect.

They tested out the healing, which wasn’t especially potent but still noticeable. Where Neil’s ability restored health, Sophie’s replenished mana.

Ability: [Mana Wellspring]

- Transfigured from [Celestine] ability [Mana Integrity].
 - Ongoing mana costs for maintained abilities are reduced. Resistance to mana drain effects is increased.
 - When mana is not being consumed by an ongoing ability, mana regeneration for self and allies within your aura is significantly increased.
-

Clive's aura ability likewise increased mana regeneration and some quick testing with overlapping the auras revealed the combined effect was impressive.

"We're never going to run out of mana," Neil said as he watched his mana bar refill. Jason had shown them how to pull up indicators for mana, stamina and health.

"Speak for yourself," Humphrey said. "You may be underestimating how quickly I can burn through it. My dragon essence racial gift lets me burn mana to increase my physical and magical strength. If I use that and run through my powers one after the other, I can empty the tank very quickly.

"What about the new one?" Jason asked. "Your's is the one we've all been waiting for."

"Agreed," Neil said. "Why mirage dragon?"

"Stash is a mirage dragon," Humphrey said. A mouse poked its head out of Humphrey's chest pocket and Humphrey scratched its head.

"I kept him hidden through the trials because I didn't want to draw too much attention. Mirage dragons are rare, even for dragons, and I don't want anyone trying to kill me and take him."

"Well, let's see the new ability," Jason said.

Ability: [Attack of the Mirage Dragon]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Special Attack Affinity].
 - You are more likely to awaken special attacks than other ability types. Your special attacks have increased effect.
 - When you make special attacks, you can expend mana to create a short-lived, illusory double, replicating the attack. The illusion does not inflict damage or duplicate other effects from the attack but you can spend mana to switch-teleport with it, in the moment it is created. This is an illusion and teleport effect.
-

“What the hell kind of cheat ability is that?” Jason asked as they watched Humphrey and Sophie engage in some light sparring. Humphrey’s attacks were suited more for fighting monsters than people, which normally gave her a relatively easy time blocking or dodging them. Even just learning to use his deceptive new double attacks already made the difficulty skyrocket.

“That’s awful,” Sophie said once they were done. “The flexibility that adds to your attacks is just mad.”

“I think we can safely say who won the racial gift lottery,” Jason said, although he was quite happy with his own ability. The mini-map floating in his vision had green dots for his allies and yellow dots for other people. He hadn't encountered an enemy yet but expected them to show up as red.

Jason sighed.

“No, Clive. No, and I mean it.”

“This an incredible opportunity. All these people looking for rituals of awakening and you wouldn’t even have to do anything. I’ll do the rituals and you just have to cycle them through your party.”

Jason rubbed his temples.

“Clive, you’re not listening. Humphrey, please explain it to Clive.”

They had quietly occupied one of the guest-wing terraces, begging off their families to get some rest. The sun had gone down but the cloud palace lit up with internal illumination and they enjoyed the warm night air, reclined on a series of loungers. From below, the sounds of celebration rose up from where the adventurers had set up camp between the cloud palace and the town.

After weeks of constant danger, the sudden safety was like releasing a pressure valve. Most of them fell asleep until Clive started advocating for his plan to record every ability awakened with the reaper stones so many adventurers had received.

“Jason already drew more attention to his abilities than he probably should when we all advanced our racial abilities,” Humphrey said. “Getting people even more interested is a dangerous proposition.”

“It’s why Rufus, Gary and Farrah warned me to keep the outworlder thing under my hat,” Jason said. “What happens when someone shares your interest in my abilities, Clive, but they’re gold-rank and don’t care about my opinion? I get hauled-off in the night and you never see me again.”

“It just seems like a waste of potential,” Clive said.

“Before I came here,” Jason said, “wasting my potential was kind of my thing.”

“Sometimes you just have to accept what you get and let the rest go,” Sophie told Clive. Jason was deliberately keeping his eyes from where she languidly stretched out on the lounge, concerned they would fall out of his head.

“If you run around chasing the best possible result,” Neil told Clive, “you might miss out on the great thing you gave up to maintain the chase.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning that Jason isn’t going to bend on this and if you keep pushing, he’ll kick you out of the party until we’ve all done our awakening rituals.”

“So, you’re saying I should be happy with recording the abilities of our own team?” Clive asked, reluctance still thick in his voice.

“After that display the gift evolutions,” Neil said, “keeping Jason’s abilities to ourselves may be closing the gate after the heidel’s run off, at this point. Maybe compromise, Asano. Let Clive do the awakening rituals for our party, Cavendish’s party and maybe Prince Valdis’. It’s not like he isn’t already paying attention.”

Jason gave a groaning sigh.

“I can live with that,” he conceded.

“Great!” Clive said, erupting out of his chair. “I’ll go get things organised.”

“Hold your heidels, chief,” Jason said. “We should get ourselves sorted before we start rounding up anyone else.”

“He’s right,” Humphrey said. “If nothing else, we have some awakening stones to collect from Emir.”

“Then let’s go find him!” Clive said.

“Tomorrow,” Humphrey said firmly. “Tonight, we rest.”