

Chapter 1: Strange Business

Jason woke up naked, face down in the grass. That was not how he expected to wake up, having gone to sleep in his own bed and his own Darth Vader boxer shorts. From the feel of cool grass on his unmentionables, he had been removed from his bed and shorts both. The last thing he recalled was doing what he did most nights; playing video games until he got tired and fumbling his way into bed.

The grass he woke up on was weirdly comfortable; a dense bed of lush green softness. It wasn't like any grass he had encountered before, which was a little unusual. His father was a landscape architect, and Jason had grown up learning more about grass than he ever wanted. Mostly because it was the only escape from his mother's Japanese lessons.

Jason rolled himself over and sat up. He was feeling very odd, beyond just the circumstances. It wasn't a bad sensation, more like waking up after a really long sleep. There was the lingering sopor, but also a feeling of refreshed energy. He ran a hand over his head, only to be startled to realise his hair was missing.

"Uh..."

He felt about his head with both hands, but his head was balloon smooth. He made a quick check with his eyes and hands, realising there was no hair at all. No eyebrows, nothing on his chest, or arms, or... other places.

"I thought it was meant to look bigger when you trimmed."

He pushed himself to his feet and started assessing his environment. Casting his gaze to the sky, the sun was high and the air was warm. It was unbroken blue, the blazing orb burning away so much as the merest hint of cloud. Sunburn, more than cold, was likely to threaten his exposed extremities.

Looking around, he was boxed in between two long, tall hedges. Looking up and down the dead-straight lane, it seemed to turn at sharp right angles in either direction. The lane itself was wide and grassy, with plenty of room for unconscious sprawling. The hedge walls were meticulously trimmed.

After an unhappy glance down at his bald, naked body, he set off at random to explore. He quickly discovered he was in a hedge maze, the living walls having been cultivated to almost twice Jason's height. Jason's first thought was to climb one to get a better sense of his location, but a closer examination of the hedges changed his mind. Instead of the usual boxwood, the hedges were something very prickly, and he was very

naked. He looked up and down the path he was on, with neither way looking any better than the other.

“What the bloody hell is going on?”

As if in response to his question, something appeared in front of him. It looked like a touch screen, floating in the air, disembodied. He reached out to touch it with an experimental finger, the screen shimmering as his finger passed straight through.

“Hologram?”

He looked at the ground and the nearby hedges for some kind of projector, but as he started moving, the screen followed. There was text on the screen, which he started reading.

New Quest: [Stranger in a Strange Land]

You have awoken in a place you do not know. Explore the area to discover more.

- Objective: Explore the hedge maze 0/1.
- Reward: Simple pants.

“Huh.”

He looked around, suspiciously. He even carefully probed the pointy foliage of the hedge walls, looking for hidden cameras. Looking up at the sky, he didn't spot any camera drones. What he did notice was the moon, pale and easy to overlook in the daylight. Then he noticed another moon.

“That can't be right.”

Jason looked down, at the floating screen, then back up at the sky. Still two moons.

“Am I going nuts?”

Jason sat down on the grass, unsure what to do. He kept glancing up at the sky and the extra moon. In front of him, the screen still waited patiently.

“This is crazy. I mean, a quest? I'm not a level 1 sorcerer.”

Another screen appeared next to the first.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: normal.
- Progression to iron rank: 0% (0/4 essences)

Attributes

- [Power] (no essence): normal.
- [Speed] (no essence): normal.
- [Spirit] (no essence): normal.
- [Recovery] (no essence): normal.

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

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

Essences (0/4)

No Essence [No Attribute] (0/5)

No Essence [No Attribute] (0/5)

No Essence [No Attribute] (0/5)

No Essence [No Attribute] (0/5)

“Is this a character sheet? Am I meant to understand any of this?”

He shook his head in bewilderment.

“It could have at least gone with a game system I know.”

He looked over the screen again.

“Map,” he read, latching onto something familiar. “I know what maps are. How do I see the map?”

A new screen obligingly appeared, but as the third screen, the space in front of him was getting crowded. He absently thought it would be convenient for the other screens to close, which they immediately did.

“I’m sure that’s good.”

Things were getting harder to explain away, even ignoring the extra moon. Some kind of voice-command hologram was implausible, but not impossible. Mental command holograms were something else entirely.

“I’m becoming increasingly concerned.”

Hoping it wouldn’t work, he started experimenting. He was able to open and close any of the windows with a simple thought.

“Maybe you’re unconscious,” he reassured himself. “Maybe you have a brain tumour and you’re in a hospital somewhere. Or passed out on the floor. Hallucinating in an asylum. A nice one, with a big garden. But no hedge maze.”

He closed his eyes with a groan. “How is this the way I’m trying to comfort myself?”

He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before opening his eyes again. The screens were still there, waiting.

“Just go with it, I guess,” he told himself. “Reserve judgement until more information is available. That’s the rational approach.”

He turned his gaze back to the map floating in front of him. It looked like a map from any video game, complete with a location listing.

➤ [Zone: Vane Estate \(Hedge Maze\).](#)

Also like a video game map, it was mostly obscured. The only unveiled portion was the small section of the hedge maze he had already explored. He tried moving the map with mental commands, finding he could zoom it in and out as easily as he could open and close the disembodied screens.

Zooming all the way out he reached a world map that looked both familiar and unfamiliar. Although the details were obscured, he could make out the outline of the continents. Disturbingly, they weren’t quite the same as the ones he knew. South East Asia was a singular landmass, pushing Australia south and east where it looked to have consumed New Zealand. The Iberian and Arabian peninsulas were missing entirely, leaving Africa wholly disconnected from Europe and Asia. Sri Lanka was further south and several times larger, making for a huge land mass in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

“Well, that’s not what the world looks like. Lax cartography?”

According to the map, Jason was in south-west Africa, somewhere around inland Namibia. He looked at the rich, green hedges boxing him in. Felt the lush grass under his feet. He felt the hot, but not dry air on his skin.

“This doesn’t feel like the Kalahari Desert.”

He sighed, closing the map.

“This is some strange business.”

He pulled up his character sheet again.

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

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

“Shouldn’t my race be human? What’s an outworlder?”

Jason half expected another screen to appear, but nothing did, so he started looking down the list.

“Interface seems obvious. Quest system too, I guess. Inventory?”

A window appeared, dominated by an almost empty grid of icon slots. There were five spaces down and eight across, for a total of forty. There was also what looked like a currency counter at the bottom.

“Well, that’s certainly a classic inventory,” Jason said. “Can I really put stuff in here?”

There was one item in the inventory, occupying the first slot. It was some kind of red icon, presumably representing an actual item.

“Alright, Jason. Time to see how nuts you’ve really gone. How do I get this thing out?”

After some quick trial and error, he discovered it was as simple as plucking the icon straight out of the screen. The icon vanished and the item appeared magically in his hand. a medallion the size of his palm. It looked and felt like polished red marble with gold engravings on both sides. It was pleasantly warm to the touch. On one side the engraving was a picture of a fire bird, while the other had symbols reading ‘Authority of the World Phoenix.’

“Well, that just magically appeared out of thin air,” Jason said. “That’s definitely not possible. Wait, why can I read this? I never even learned Japanese properly.”

Jason’s father, Ken Asano, was born in Japan, but raised in Australia from a very young age. Proving there is no zealot like a convert, Ken was all about the Australian lifestyle, from pub rock to footy matches and weekend barbecues. He fell right in with the family of his wife, Cheryl, who were as Australian as he could ask for. Miners and farmers, tracing their bloodline back through bushrangers, convicts, and indigenous Australians. Ironically, Cheryl was the one fascinated with Japan, trying to engage her children with

their father's cultural heritage. Despite very strong support from her mother in law, results were mixed.

Jason tried putting the red tablet back into the inventory. His first attempt was just shoving it into the screen, which surprisingly worked. It vanished from his hands and reappeared as an icon.

"That's disconcerting."

Jason's grip on reality was feeling increasingly tenuous. The screens were definitely odd, but could conceivably, if implausibly, be the product of hidden hologram projectors. It was when they started responding to his thoughts that he started to get worried, and now he was pulling objects out of thin air. He closed the inventory and pulled up his character sheet again. Next down the ability list was the map, which he'd already looked at, then astral affinity.

Ability: [Astral Affinity]

- Increased resistance to the dimension effects and astral forces. Dimension abilities have increased effect and transcendent damage is increased.

"No idea what that means."

Only one ability remained.

Ability: [Mysterious Stranger]

- Language adaptation.
- Essence, awakening stone and skill-book absorption.
- Immunity to identification and tracking effects.

"Language adaptation? Is that how I read the weird writing on the tablet?"

He took the tablet out again.

"What is this thing?"

Item: [World-Phoenix Token] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (consumable, ???).

- Effect: ???.
- Effect: ???.
- Uses remaining: 1/1

"Question marks. That's enlightening. Do I have to pay a wizard to identify items?"

He put the tablet away, closing all the open windows except for the map.

“Alright, then,” he said, looking up and down the pathway he was on. Neither offered anything to recommend it over the other.

“It’s no yellow wood,” he told himself, “but I guess it’s time to Robert Frost this thing.” He picked a direction at random and set off.

“I really wish I had clothes on.”

Jason was walking through the maze, the map open in front of him. It was being unveiled as he walked, so his current plan was to reveal enough that he could plot a way out. He froze when he heard a rustle in the hedges.

“Um, g’day?” he called out, hands moving to nervously hide his unmentionables.

“Hello? Buenos días? Guten morgen?”

There wasn’t any response.

“Maybe it’s not morning. Guten tag?”

There still wasn’t any response.

“Yeah, Jason; that was the problem. You got the time of day wrong.”

He shrugged.

“Makes as much sense as anything else here, I guess.”

He was about to resume walking when a window appeared.

New Quest: [No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service]

For unknown reasons, your immediate area has become infested with lesser monsters.

- Objective: Discover the reason lesser monsters have infested the area 0/1.
- Reward: Simple shirt.

- Bonus Objective: Defeat ten lesser monsters 0/10.
- Reward: Simple footwear.

“Monsters? That doesn’t sound plausible.”

He was looking around suspiciously when something small came hurtling from the bottom of a hedge. His hands shot back over his privates, which left his head an exposed target. He was blinded by something latching onto his face, something sharp digging painfully into his scalp. He yanked it off with both hands, screaming as a chunk of skin went with it. He dropped to his knees, slamming the thing into the ground, over and over until it stopped struggling.

-
- You have defeated [Potent Hamster].
 - Defeat lesser monsters 1/10.
-

Jason released the creature and scuttled back, still on his hands and knees. His heart was racing, the wounds on his head throbbing. Blood was trickling down his face and he wiped it away from his eyes.

“What in the merry hell is happening? How did a hamster jump on my head?”

Jason looked over at the creature. According to the window that popped up it was some kind of hamster, but was easily as big as Jason’s head. That made it bigger than any hamster he had heard of. It was distended from being pounded into the dirt, as well as streaked with blood from Jason’s head. He crawled forward cautiously, ready to jump back. Extending a hesitant finger, he poked at it.

-
- Would you like to loot [Potent Hamster]?
-

Jason rocked back, hands clutching his bald head. His fingers found the wound and he yelp in pain.

“What the hell is going on?”

Chapter 2: Of Course Magic is a Thing

Jason read the screen again.

➤ Would you like to loot [Potent Hamster]?

“Yes?”

The body of the dead creature made a fizzing sound, like a rapid chemical reaction. The body started rapidly melting, first the flesh, then even the skeleton, dissolving into rainbow-coloured smoke. It seemed pretty until it hit Jason with a stench thick as cheese, like burned hair and rotting meat. He scrambled away to escape the rancid smell, dry heaving on all fours. Looking over as he hacked out coughs, he saw the creature’s body had vanished, as if never existing at all. He ignored the window that popped up, dropping onto his back in the soft grass.

“I hate this,” he told the sky. “I’m naked, bleeding, and have no idea where I am. I can’t think of any better explanation for what’s happening than I’ve lost my bloody mind. Worst of all, I’m going to get sunburnt in places that don’t see a lot of outdoor activity.”

He sat up with a groan, reading the screen waiting for him.

-
- [Monster Core (Lesser)] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Healing Unguent (Iron)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Lesser Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“Oh, straight into the inventory. That place that lets me make things appear and disappear. I’ve definitely gone insane.”

Now familiar with opening and closing the screens, the inventory window appeared with a simple thought. Two more of the forty grids were now occupied with little icons, while what appeared to be a currency counter had the number ten listed over one of the coin symbols.

Jason took out the item called healing unguent. It was a small, round tin, reminding Jason of the nasty rubbing medicine his nanna would put on scrapes when he was a kid. At least this tin wasn’t rusty, like the one that had been under Nanna’s laundry sink longer than Jason had been alive. Nanna was his maternal grandmother, while his father’s mother was strictly Grandmother. She was a retired otorhinolaryngologist, and had no truck with rusty tins of ointment.

He took a closer look at the tin in his hand.

Item: [Healing Unguent (Iron)] (iron rank, common)

Topical healing ointment. Inexpensive concoction ideal for superficial injuries (consumable, healing).

- Effect: Apply directly to injuries to heal. Effect reduced on bronze-rank or higher individuals.
 - Uses remaining: 5/5.
-

Unlike the tablet, the magic screens had no problem identifying the tin. Jason pulled off the lid to discover it really did look and smell like the ointment under Nanna's laundry sink. There was a sharp, medical smell that cut through even the lingering stench of the dead creature. As for the contents, it was an oily substance that looked like butterscotch sauce made from dubiously-sourced ingredients.

"How did I get ointment from a hamster? How did it come in a tin?"

With an exploratory finger he gently prodded the wound on his head.

"Ow."

The oversized hamster teeth had dug into his scalp. The blood was still running down the front and side of his head.

"Can't hurt to try, I guess. At least there's no hair to get in the way."

He took some of the ointment and smeared it carefully onto the wound, which immediately started to sting.

- You have used [Healing Unguent (iron)].
 - Uses remaining: 4/5.
-

The stinging faded away rapidly, the pain from the wound itself quickly following. Jason delicately poked the affected area, but while it was still wet with blood and ointment, he could find no trace of the injury.

"Sure," he said. "If you're going to have medicine appear out of thin air, why not make it magically potent."

Jason placed the tin back in his inventory and pulled out the other icon. What appeared in his hand was a small, red-brown gem, in the shape of a teardrop.

Item: [Monster Core (Lesser)] (iron rank, common)

The magic core of a lesser monster (crafting material, magic core).

- Effect: Common component for ritual magic and magic item creation.

“Oh, it’s for magic rituals. I’m apparently in a video game, now, so of course magic is a thing.”

Jason sighed as he put the monster core back in his inventory.

“Maybe I’ve had an aneurysm and this is just my dying brain trying to sort things out as it shuts down.”

He thought about that for a moment. His sister would be the one to find his body. She’d have her little girl in tow, coming to see Uncle Jason.

“Wow. I’m actually hoping this whole, horrible experience is real. That’s the way, Jason. Indulge the delusion.”

Jason looked at the coin counter in his inventory.

“How do I take that out?”

He tried tapping on the number.

-
- You have 10 [Lesser Spirit Coins]. How many would you like to withdraw?

“Um. One, I guess.”

A coin appeared in Jason’s hand. It was a washed-out blue colour, with a metallic sheen but feeling more like glass to the touch.

Item: [Lesser Spirit Coin] (iron rank, common)

An impure distillation of raw magic. (currency, crafting material).

- Effect: Used to fuel lesser-rank magic items or as a ritual component.

Jason peered at the figure embossed on the coin. Looking closer, it was an image of Jason himself, giving a thumbs up.

“What?”

He turned the coin over to look at the other side, which was engraved with text.

PRODUCT OF JASON

G'DAY, MATE!

He ran a hand over his face. Somehow the coin itself was more ridiculous than the fact that he pulled it out of thin air.

“I’ve definitely gone insane.”

When the slippery creature latched its teeth onto his inner thigh, Jason yelled as much out of panic as pain. He still had no pants and that was much too close to the danger zone. He grabbed the long, slippery body, gripping down hard and yanking it off his leg. He screamed again as it took a chunk of thigh with it but kept his grip and started flailing the creature into the prickly hedge.

-
- You have defeated [Flying Eel].
 - Defeat lesser monsters 9/10.
-

Jason dropped to the ground, pulled out a jar of healing unguent and started rubbing it on the wound, ignored the blood coming out of it.

“Why can an eel fly?”

He looked down at the wound, high up the inside of his thigh. The eel had taken a decent gouge out of him, so the stinging lingered as the wound slowly closed. Even so, the ability to watch an injury vanish in front of his eyes was amazing. After nine encounters with different creatures, Jason had plenty of chances to see it, going through almost three full tins of the unguent. He used a full tin from one fight alone, against something called a malicious hedgehog.

One pleasant discovery was that he didn’t have to stand in the stinking smoke that came off them after they were looted. So long as he touched the creature he could back away before accepting. Even as he was far away from the dissolving creature, the loot went straight into his inventory. The only problem was that any of the creature’s blood that got onto him would dissolve away as well, giving Jason a full dose of the stink.

Every creature Jason looted gave out one lesser monster core and exactly 10 spirit coins. Most also produced additional, often nonsensical rewards. Tins of healing ointment were mercifully common, but mostly he received animal parts. That would have been understandable enough, given that he was killing creatures, but they arrived in his inventory already cut and packaged. The bundle of spines he received from the malicious hedgehog were bound with string, while the meat of the tyrannical pheasant came neatly wrapped in deli paper. The animal parts were all listed as crafting materials, some of which seemed to be for cooking. While he did enjoy trying new food, he wasn’t quite ready to put monster meat on his plate.

While he waited for the wound to heal, he checked the map again. He had a decent-sized chunk of the hedge maze mapped out now, but it was quite large and he'd met a lot of dead ends. He plotted out his next pathway and set out again.

There was a flower growing in the middle of the pathway. Everywhere else Jason had been, there was only uniform hedges and neatly-cut grass. He watched it from a safe distance, but to all observation it was just a plant. Jason moved forward cautiously, eyes glued to the flower. He gave it as wide a berth as he could, but just when he thought he had passed without incident, the flower twitched, spraying spores all over him.

He got dizzy and fell to the ground, then felt something on his leg. A vine with a bulbous head had grown out of the ground near the flower stem, and was now winding its way around his leg. He tried to kick away, but his head was swimming and he flailed ineffectually. The vine kept growing, crawling up his body. The bulbous head of the vine opened up, clamping onto his head like a lamprey.

Jason clenched his teeth, fighting through the haze with anger. He reached down, grabbed the vine with both hands and started hauling on it. The ground under the flower bulged, soil spilling away as a grotesque shape emerged from the earth. It looked like a root vegetable, but was the size and shape of a baby. The vine was attached to its stomach like an umbilical cord, while the flower grew out of its head. Jason let go of the vine, crawling over to the main body and grabbing it in both hands. He lifted it up, then brought it down on his knee, smashing it again and again.

"People. Are. Vegetarians," he yelled through gritted teeth. Every word punctuating a strike to the knee. "Vegetables. Aren't. People-tarians!"

With a final shout he brought the creature down on his knee with all his strength. The plant monster broke apart like a potato dropped off a building and hitting concrete.

➤ You have defeated [Carnivorous Mandrake].

Quest: [No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service]

- Bonus objective complete: Defeat ten lesser monsters 10/10.
 - [Simple Footwear] has been added to your inventory.
 - Primary quest objective still available.
-

Taking the footwear out of his inventory he discovered it was a pair of sandals. Although the thick grass was pleasant underfoot, Jason still put them on. That left him standing naked except of a pair of sandals.

“I think I might hate this place.”

Chapter 3: Local Cuisine

Jason frowned at the object in his hand. The carnivorous mandrake proved to be the most generous monster thus far in terms of loot, producing not only an extra tin of the precious healing unguent, but also something new.

Item: [Trowel of the Blood Cult] (iron rank, uncommon)

A gardening implement enchanted to affect certain kinds of plant. (tool).

- Effect: Improves health of carnivorous plants.
-

The trowel looked rather sinister, made out of some kind of black metal with a red sheen. It carried the wear marks of having been used as a planting tool, but also a razor edge that was wholly unnecessary for gardening purposes.

“Blood cult?” Jason read unhappily from the item description. “Who gardens with an evil trowel? Whose hedge maze is this?”

Not having anything better, Jason kept the sharp trowel in hand, on the ready for more monsters. After checking his map again he set off, weapon in hand. Still naked aside from a pair of sandals, he was very careful about where he held it.

Jason looked at the well. It was a circle of bricks, the mortar aged and crumbling. There was a wooden bucket and crank, both weathered with age. It was the kind of rustically picturesque feature he could imagine someone putting at the centre of their hedge maze.

Quest: [Stranger in a Strange Land]

- Objective complete: Explore the hedge maze 1/1.
 - [Simple Pants] have been added to your inventory.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason gave a fist pump and took the pants out of his inventory. They were made of plain white linen, with billowy legs and a very low crotch fit, held up by a drawstring.

“It’s like a Mennonite made some hammer pants. Did I wake up in 1991 rural Pennsylvania?”

Putting aside fashion concerns, Jason slipped the pants on, walking around experimentally. They were sufficiently roomy that it didn't feel much different to walking around without them.

"I don't suppose I can get a quest for some boxer shorts?"

He waited hopefully for a few moments, but no window appeared.

"Worth a try."

After being attacked by so many creatures, Jason was a mess of blood and ointment, even if the wounds had been healed. The result was the white pants being immediately stained red and unguent-yellow.

With his nudity concern ameliorated, Jason was able to turn his thoughts to other aspects of his situation. He sat down on the edge of the well to think over his next move.

The things he was experiencing were clearly impossible, which broadly placed him in one of two situations. One, his faculties were significantly compromised and his understanding of what he was doing was massively detached from the reality. Brain trauma, hallucinogens, some kind of severe mental break. His knowledge was too shallow and his observation point too subjective to make any definitive assessment. To the best of his understanding, though, none of those options made sense. He was too lucid, too capable of critical thinking. His consciousness wasn't skipping around, glossing over the inconsistencies of a compromised mental state. That being said, his understanding of mental conditions was essentially nil, so that might be what crazy felt like from the inside.

The big point going for the mental-impairment hypothesis was that the alternative scenario required Jason's most fundamental understandings of reality to be somewhere between woefully incomplete and breathtakingly wrong.

Either way, his only real option was to get on with it. If it was all in his head, then it didn't matter what he did. Inversely, if it was real, and he ran around acting like it wasn't, the consequences could be dire. He took a deep, calming breath.

"Alright, Jason" he said, steeling himself. "What's next?"

Sooner or later he would need to find his way out of the maze, but the fact that his quest ended on reaching the well implied there was something special about it. He started by examining the wooden frame which had a simple crank and rope to lower a bucket, along with a little wooden roof to shield the mechanism from the weather. It only seemed to have worked to a degree, with the rope and bucket both looking the worse for wear. The brickwork was likewise dilapidated, with mortar crumbling at the touch. He stuck his head over the well to look down. To his surprise, iron rungs had been affixed to the inside of the well, leading into darkness below.

New Quest: [Secrets of the Well]

You have discovered a ladder descending into the well. Do you have the courage to explore the depths?

- Objective: Explore the well 0/1.
 - Reward: Awakening stone.

 - Bonus objective: Don't die 0/1.
 - Reward: Essence.
-

“Don't die? What kind of quest objective is don't die?”

He shook his head.

“Bugger that.”

- Reject quest [Secrets of the Well]?
-

Jason was about to reject the quest when he heard voices coming from somewhere close within the hedge maze.

“I tracked the aura of the mandrake that took my trowel,” a gravelly male voice said. “Someone had already killed it and my trowel was nowhere to be found.”

“Someone with those adventurers we caught?” another man asked.

“I don't care who they're with,” the first voice said. “I'm going to kill 'em, cook 'em and eat 'em.”

“I wanted to try some of that elf girl, but the mistress said we're keeping them all for the sacrifice. Bloody waste, if you ask me.”

“Nah, elves ain't good eating. Not much meat on them, and what's there is all stringy. That human girl, she's the one you want. Lean and tender.”

“I don't know, Dougall; she looked pretty tough to me. And we always have humans. I just want a little variety, is all.”

“Well, this lot is all spoken for, regardless.”

Ducked down behind the well, Jason didn't let out a breath until the voices faded into the distance. He ignored the fact that they were talking about elves in the face of a casual discussion on the pros and cons of eating people. Was that real, or just a couple of guys with a weird sense of humour?

“Cannibals?”

He gave it some consideration. Normally cannibals would be right at the top of the crazy pile, but the day Jason was having, it was at least a familiar horror. Then he considered it some more and started climbing down into the well.

“What kind of lunatic place is this?”

Jason was not happy with his options. A quest with the explicit objective of ‘don’t die’ wasn’t great, but wandering blindly through a maze with cannibals roaming about struck him as an even worse option. What was he going to do? Fight them off with their own trowel? There were two of them, and they were a lot bigger than a tyrannical pheasant. It might have been an evil monster chicken, but it still barely came up to his waist. Even then it got some savage pecks in. He didn’t have a weapon, so he had to get in behind, reach around and savagely choke the chicken with both hands.

Jason started reconsidering his choice to go down the well when only the second rung down shifted in his hand. It was set into the brickwork at the top, the shaky mortar apparently ready to give way. Then he thought about himself hanging from a butcher’s hook and kept going.

“Going down a creepy well or dodging cannibals,” he muttered unhappily. For what felt like the hundredth time he wondered where he was, what was going on and what evil prick dumped him naked, right in the middle of it. The well was quite deep, judging from the diminishing light coming from above. He kept a careful grip on the cold metal rungs as the interior of the well became dank, the sides slick and wet.

“I’m definitely getting Legionnaire’s disease.”

The light did not penetrate far down the narrow well, and Jason was soon moving entirely by feel. He descended cautiously, each foot carefully seeking out the next rung down. He would occasionally glance up at the shrinking blue circle that was all he could see of the sky, reassuring himself it was still there.

“Maybe they’re not really cannibals,” he told himself. “Maybe they’re just talking themselves up.”

Unconvinced, he kept moving down into darkness, barely able to make out his hand on the rung in front of him. He discovered he had reached the bottom when his foot met water instead of the next rung. Some experimental probing revealed it was ankle deep, enough to submerge his sandals in the icy cold. The bottom of the well was flat, but as it turned out, just as slippery as the walls. His feet slid out from under him and only his hands still gripping the rungs saved him from bashing his head against the side of the well. He ended up sprawled at the bottom of the well, dank water joining the blood and ointment in staining his new pants.

“Lovely.”

The advantage of his low perspective was that he found himself looking directly at a slightly darker circle in the wall of what was already a very dark well. He reached out tentatively and found it was a hole, large enough to crawl through. He didn't know if it was the source of the well's water or some kind of drainage tunnel.

“No,” Jason said. “I'm definitely not interested in crawling in there.”

➤ [Reject quest \[Secrets of the Well\]?](#)

“Sod off.”

Jason looked up again at the bright circle of sky, then the dark circle of the tunnel. With a groan, he started probing the pitch-black hole with his hands.

Chapter 4: Cannibals and Spelunking

Jason slowly crawled his way into the dank tunnel, a circular pipe of wet and slimy brickwork. It was wide enough to push himself along, but tight enough that he was pressed against the clammy sides. The darkness engulfed him as he moved away from what meagre light reached the bottom of the well. Edging down the tunnel, touch was the only sense with which he could navigate. With the ubiquitous smell of wet rot, he wished his nose was as useless as his eyes.

“This is not what I planned to do with my day.”

If it turned out to be a dead end, he would be forced to shimmy backwards, the tunnel far too tight to turn around.

“Admittedly, my plans for the day were fairly loose, but cannibals and spelunking aren’t things you just casually slide into the schedule.”

Talking to himself didn’t help much, but any distraction was a welcome bulwark against the encroaching claustrophobia. The gloom of the well had seemed stifling, but the dark of the tunnel was much deeper. He felt panic’s icy fingers crawl over his flesh as the tunnel closed in on him. He knew it wasn’t actually getting smaller, but his rationality seemed powerless in the cold, wet oblivion.

His unravelling nerves were reaching their limit. He was ready to start pushing his way back and risk the cannibals when his hand came down on slimy, wet wood instead of slimy, wet brick. There was still no light, so he probed with his hands. He had reached the end of the tunnel, but had no idea what kind of space it opened into. He had a feeling of open space, but in complete darkness it could well have been his imagination.

His hands felt out some kind of platform made of wooden planks. It was wet and a little slimy, although it felt reliably solid under Jason’s hands. The surface of the wood was rough, like sandpaper. Some kind of long-enduring adhesive had been used to apply sand or something similar, improving friction on the wet planks. Jason had seen something similar on bushwalking tracks. Feeling around as he crawled free of the tunnel, he felt the planks were lined up to make a walkway, a metre and a half wide.

It felt like there was enough room to stand, but even with the sand coating he didn’t trust the slick wooden path in the dark. He continued forward as he had in the tunnel, hands exploring in place of his eyes. Just a short way down the path he found a vertical metal rod sticking out the walkway, at the edge to his left. His hands traced the shaft

upwards to a hooked end, from which was hanging some kind of metal box with a loop on top.

Item: [Crude Magic Lamp] (iron rank, common)

A simple lighting device fuelled by low-level magic. (tool).

- Effect: Casts light.
 - Current charge: 00%. Requires a [Lesser Spirit Coin] to replenish.
-

Jason tried using the glowing window as a light source, but even hard up against the lamp it failed to produce so much as a murky outline. Jason fumbled about to unhook the lamp from the pole.

- You have acquired [Crude Magic Lamp].
 - Current charge: 00%. Requires a [Lesser Spirit Coin] to activate.
 - Expend 1 [Lesser Spirit Coin] Y/N?
-

“Please and thank you.”

As the lamp lit up, Jason discovered the hard way that he had been holding the front of it pointed directly into his face. He screamed as light blasted into his eyes, dropping the lamp from his hands. It clattered away as he fell back onto the wooden pathway, moaning with hands over his eyes.

“Good job, genius,” he croaked, waiting to recover. “Light a lamp right in front of your face. Real smart idea.”

He tentatively opened his eyes and saw the space around him illuminated from somewhere below. The light was largely obscured, but compared to complete darkness, even some shadowy outlines were bliss. It was at least enough to recognise that he was in a natural cavern. It didn’t have the conveniently smooth floors of a video game cave, which was presumably why someone had put in the walkway, raised on thick wooden posts. Jason was already laying on the walkway, so he rolled over to reach down and fetch the lamp from where it had fallen. The walkway was only about an arm’s length above the cave floor, so he fetched it up easily enough.

Jason pushed himself to a sitting position and examined the lamp, careful not to blind himself again. As the name suggested, the crude magic lamp was a simple affair, looking rather like a miner’s tin lamp. It had three boxy, metal sides, a glass front in a loop handle on the top. Dropping it didn’t seem to have harmed the glass at all. Inside, the light came from what looked like a round stone, glowing like a light bulb. Using the lamp to get a

better look at the cave, it was spookier than Jason would have liked, with plenty of dark crevices and ominous shadows.

“Hello?” he called out. Between the racket he had made and the light of the lamp, there was little point trying to hide from any denizens occupying the cave. The quest drove him down into the cavern, rather than back into the cannibal maze. He was hoping that meant whatever was at the end of the cave was worthwhile. A pirate ship filled with enough treasure to stop the local country club from foreclosing on the family home would be ideal. He would be willing to accept someone who doesn't eat people.

“Is anyone down here?” he asked. “If you want me to kill ten goblins in return for an uncommon spear, I'm only really equipped for light gardening.”

He thought about the evil trowel, now ready at hand in case of sudden attack.

“It could be evil gardening.”

Since the beam of the lamp lit up the cave like a lighthouse on a dark night, there was no point being stealthy. His hope was that he could bait out whatever creatures were lurking into the light. They would probably be adapted to darkness and if he could dazzle them it would at least be some advantage.

The idea of sneaking through in pitch blackness gave him the feeling that he wouldn't even know how he died. And 'don't die' was the bonus objective after all. In video games, Jason was the kind of player who could take it or leave it with secondary goals. In this one instance, his motivation levels had reached a previously unseen zenith.

He started following the walkway, taking care with his steps. The sand coating had worn away in a lot of places, leaving patches of the wood slick and frictionless, from years in the bleak, damp cavern. The cave turned out to be something of a natural tunnel, rough speaking, through which the walkway followed.

He made his way slowly and carefully until it came to an end at a brick wall, set into the side of the cave. In the middle of the wall was a hefty metal door with a big wheel set into it, like a bulkhead door on a submarine. Both door and wheel were rusty and didn't look to have been opened in some time.

“Now we're getting somewhere.”

Setting down the lamp, Jason grabbed the wheel with both hands and pulled, but it didn't budge.

“Oh, come on.”

He yanked on it harder and harder, until his feet were braced against the door as he hauled sideways with his full body weight. He felt a little give, then a little more, each

accompanied by an unwilling metal groan. Finally the wheel jerked loose and Jason could turn the reluctant mechanism with heavy jerks.

Panting from the exertion, Jason shouldered open the door. Like the wheel it resisted, and he had to shove it open in fits and starts. His shoulder grew sore as he repeatedly rammed it into the door. Finally, the door gave way with a shriek and he stumbled through the door.

Quest: [Secrets of the Well]

- Objective complete: Explore the well 1/1.
- [Awakening Stone of the Stars] has been added to your inventory.
- Bonus quest objective (don't die) still available.

“Awakening stone of the stars? Is that like magic version of those celebrity house maps?”

He went and retrieved the lamp from where he had set it down, pulling the object from his inventory. It looked kind of like a fist-sized marble, black, but containing what looked like tiny stars.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Stars] (unranked, epic)

An awakening stone that unlocks the power of the stars. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 0 unawakened essence abilities.
- You do not meet the requirements to use this item.

That seemed more complicated than Jason wanted to get to when there was a door right in front of him with the promise of (hopefully non-cannibal) civilisation. The interior was dark, so he stepped inside and started panning the light beam of the lamp. It was a room, thankfully, not just more cave. It was like a large parlour from a stately home, but after a tornado passed through. Furniture was upended, tapestries and paintings ripped down from the walls. Bookshelves had been toppled, their contents tossed around the room. There was an ornate chandelier that had crashed down from the ceiling, scattering shattered crystal across the polished floor.

Searching through the mess by the light of the lamp, there was an overturned couch in the middle of the room. Under it, Jason found a man unconscious. Heaving the couch off of him revealed that he was sprawled in the middle of an elaborate pentagram, set into

the floor in brass or copper. The man was youngish, maybe thirty, clean shaven with an olive complexion and a handsome face. To Jason's eyes he looked rather Mediterranean. The good-looking kind with the dark wavy hair. Oddly, he was wearing what looked like honest-to-goodness wizard robes.

Jason set down the lamp to examine the man. He had a strong pulse and regular breathing, but was showing early signs of extensive bruising and his body temperature felt way too high. As Jason was examining him, his eyes flickered open.

Chapter 5:

Wizard

“G’day mate,” Jason said. “Looks like you’ve had a spill. Need a hand up?”

Jason offered his hand and helped the wizard-looking man to his feet. Despite a frame as slender as Jason’s own, the wizard was surprisingly heavy. Standing unsteadily on his feet, the wizard looked around at the room in disarray, then at Jason, his expression confused.

“Who are you?” the wizard asked. “How did you get here?”

“I’m Jason, and I have no idea. I went to bed what I think was last night and woke up in some kind of alternate universe.”

The wizard narrowed his eyes as he peered at Jason.

“There’s something off about your aura,” the wizard said. “You’re not human.”

“That’s hurtful. Wait, auras are really a thing?”

“You said something about an alternate universe?” The wizard asked.

“That’s just a guess,” Jason said. “I mean, the continents are different. Could be a crazy-far, time travel thing. Do you know anything about continental drift?”

The wizard’s gaze moved to the magic circle on the floor, then back at Jason.

“It was you,” he said angrily. “You’re what went wrong with the summoning.”

“Yeah, well, at least you did summon something. Do you have any idea how wrong your summon made my night’s sleep go? One of us has a lot more to be grouchy about than the other.”

The wizard looked a combination of confused and angry, but as he was about to retort he went pale and stumbled in place.

“Crap, sorry,” Jason said, moving to support him.

“GET OFF ME!”

The wizard staggered in the direction of a heavy writing desk. It seemed to have escaped major displacement by being the heaviest piece of furniture in the room. He almost tripped, still weak from whatever happened prior to Jason’s arrival. The wizard opened a drawer, took out a small bottle and drained the contents.

“I could use a stiff drink myself, if you’re offering,” Jason said.

“It was a recovery potion, fool,” the wizard said, then winced with pain. “It seems the backlash will take more than a potion to fix.”

He gave Jason a smile that Jason did not like.

“Since I can’t recover mana right now, I’ll have to do things the old fashioned way. I’ve never tasted an outworlder before.”

“Oh no,” Jason said, shoulders slumping. “You’re one of the cannibals.”

As the wizard pulled a knife out of the drawer, Jason looked around the room. There was a set of wooden double doors that were presumably an exit, but the wizard was a lot closer than Jason. Remembering how weakly the wizard staggered over to the table, Jason took a risk and tried barrelling past him. It worked, but when he pulled on the door handles they were locked. He spun around to make back for the cave, only to find the wizard lunging at him.

Jason grabbed at the arm holding the knife. Wrestling back and forth, they tripped on a piece of the overturned furniture and fell to the floor, still struggling. The lamp was lost somewhere along the way and they battled in shadows, each trying to seize control of the weapon. Jason had a grip on the wizard’s arm, trying to keep the knife from digging into him. In spite of his small frame and apparent weakness after being knocked out, the wizard was much stronger than Jason. Taking a lesson from the small, aggressive monsters he had been fighting, Jason bit into the wizard’s hand.

The wizard yelped in surprise more than pain, but it gave Jason a chance to seize the advantage, yanking the knife from the wizard’s grip. Still scrambling on the floor, he shoved the knife out blindly and suddenly the wizard went limp. The knife was sticking out of the wizard’s throat, but the wizard was still alive, looking at Jason with disbelieving eyes. Jason snatched the knife back and blood sprayed over Jason, getting into his eyes and mouth. Recoiling, he spat out blood as he rubbed at his eyes. By the time his panicked flailing came to a halt, the wizard’s body was still.

➤ [You have defeated \[Builder Cultist\].](#)

Jason pushed himself up with bloody hands, tripped on debris and fell back over. His breath came in ragged starts as he just lay where he fell. Eventually he sat up, looking over at where the body had fallen directly into the light beam from the lamp. He pulled his legs up and hugged his knees, rocking slightly as he stared at the body.

He had no sense of how long he stayed like that, but eventually he pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. He walked over to the bloody knife and picked it up.

Item: [Seal Knife] (bronze rank, common)

A dagger with the Vane family seal on the pommel. (weapon, tool).

- Requirements: Bronze rank [Speed], bronze rank [Spirit].
- Effect: When used to imprint a wax seal on a letter, the letter will be destroyed if opened by anyone other than the addressee.

Jason stared at the bloody knife in his equally bloody hand. After a few moments there was an unusual tingling, slowly rising to become pain. He tightened his grip until the pain became too much and the dagger clattered to the floor.

-
- You do not meet the requirements to use this item.

Finally, he turned to the body. Its eyes were open, face frozen in a final expression of surprise.

The room was still and silent, Jason's eyes locked on the corpse.

"You did this," he accused it. "You did this."

He didn't sound convincing, even to himself.

Jason's mind was nothing but white noise as he stood standing over the body. When a new sound broke him out of his trance he didn't know if it had been seconds, minutes or hours. The sound came from above, a metal ventilation pipe in the ceiling. There was a hollow, echoing timbre to the sound and it took Jason a moment to recognise it as a hissing noise. It was coming from the hole.

He watched the hole, eyes unfocused and disoriented. He watched absently but his mind was still on the knife, He could feel it, even after it fell back to the floor. He could taste the hot blood spilling out of the wizard's neck. His gaze sharpened when something came out of the hole in the ceiling. It was an enormous, pitch-black snake, head barely small enough to pass through the aperture.

Jason and the snake looked at each other, frozen for a moment. Jason could see intelligence in its eyes, although he may well have been imagining it. Then the snake hissed at Jason and continued emerging from the vent shaft, body dangling down from the ceiling. Jason sprinted for the door back to the cave, snatching up the lamp as he moved.

New Quest: [Time to Run]

The familiar of the Builder cultist sensed its master's death and has come to investigate.

- Objective: Escape [Umbral Mountain Snake] 0/1.
 - Reward: Iron-rank (rare) magical dagger.
-

Jason almost stumbled as the window popped up, flailing wildly at it as he willed it closed. He bolted through the metal door, dropped his lamp and grabbed onto the wheeled handle, hauling back with adrenaline-fuelled strength. The rusty hinges groaned shut and Jason yanked on the wheel to latch the door. There was another wheel on the other side, but snakes didn't have thumbs.

Jason let out a breath he didn't realise he'd been holding and reached down to pick up the lamp. He would need to go back up the well, but he'd rather dodge cannibals than fight a giant snake. The danger at least snapped him out of the daze he was left in after killing a man. He was making his way along the pathway when he heard the grinding of metal behind him and had a horrifying thought.

What if monster snakes do have thumbs?

Running along the pathway, forgetting his previous caution turned out to be a mistake. His sandalled foot slipped on a slick section of plank and he tumbled over. He landed hard on the walkway, the sand coating scraping on his naked torso. Lamp still clutched in a death-grip, he ignoring the pain to get up and keep moving. Going as quickly as he dared, he reached the end of the walkway and ducked straight into the tunnel, dropping the lamp that would slow his crawl.

His hands and knees hammered into the hard surface of the narrow passage, shoulders and head banging against the side and top. He didn't let it slow him down, scrambling forward until he saw the dim light at the bottom of the well. Crawling out, he fumbled straight for the rungs set into the side. Hand over hand, he yanked himself upwards. Only after he was a good way up the inside of the well did he let himself pause to look down. The snake shouldn't be able to climb up, but it shouldn't have been able to open a door, either.

He was just turning back to resume climbing when he heard the hiss from below. He saw the snake emerged from the tunnel, pausing to look up at Jason before sliding more of its body into the space at the bottom of the well. Jason watched in horror as its body started climbing up and around the outside of the well like the thread of a screw. Despite

the wet and slippery surface of the well, the snake started winding its way up, as if adhered to the sides.

Jason resumed his climb, more energetic than ever. The snake was fast, but its circuitous path around the sides was long. Jason clambered up as fast as he could, but panic made him rush and more than once a foot slipped before getting proper purchase. He kept pushing upwards, every hand and foothold a step closer to the outside.

The final rung was set into the brickwork that sat above ground, but just as Jason's hand gripped it, he felt something slip around his leg. The snake was as thick as Jason's thigh and he hadn't even seen the full length of it. The weight of it prevented him from pulling himself any higher and it only got worse as the creature wrapped around his torso.

He couldn't pull himself any further up but he clenched onto the top rung. Hands clammy and quickly tiring, his fingers threatened to give out at any moment. But in the end it wasn't his fingers that crumbled. The mortar in the bricks gave out, the whole side of the well collapsing. Jason, the snake and a rain of masonry fell backwards into the dark.

Chapter 6: Potent Potable

Jason, as a rule, enjoyed waking up. He loved the brief hazy moment between dream and reality, shrouded in warm, soft bedding. Even awaking in the soft grass of the hedge maze hadn't been an unpleasant experience. It was very different from regaining consciousness at the bottom of a dark well, soaked in filthy water and entangled in the corpse of a dead snake. He ignored the screens that had popped-up while he was unconscious. They shrank away to hover inconspicuously in the periphery of his vision.

His left arm was pinned under some rubble, a chunk of fallen masonry from the well from above. He didn't feel any pain from it, which was good, then realised he didn't feel anything at all from it, which was bad. When he tried pulling it free the pain arrived in full force, his screams reverberating up through the well.

Holding his left arm as still as he could, he rolled the chunk of masonry off with his right. It wasn't insurmountably heavy, but he had to hold back more screaming with gritted teeth. He couldn't examine the freed arm properly in the dark, but it was hot and swollen to the touch. Even probing it gently with the fingers of his good hand sent ripples of pain radiating through it. He was confident it was broken and started carefully applying all the healing ointment he had left. The swelling reduced and the skin cooled, but the arm was still delicate and painful to move. The ointment didn't seem effective on the bone-deep injury it couldn't reach.

There was so much of the snake that he was laying on its dead body rather than the bottom of the well. Jerking his foot free of its coils sent fresh pain spiking through his arm. It took multiple attempts to struggle to his feet, using his good arm to yank himself upright with one of the wall rungs. Each time he achieved some precarious stability, his stomach roiled and he threw up, dropping back to his knees. Vomit spewed out in fits and starts, even as the motion drove new pain into his injured arm.

He finally made it to his feet, holding himself up, using a rung for support. He drew ragged breaths, exhausted just from the effort of standing up. For the first time since climbing down the well he was grateful for the cold walls, ignoring the wet as he pressed his back into the cool surface. His head swam, pulse pounding through it like a hammer. His stomach churned with the threat of secondary eruptions.

It wasn't the worst he'd ever felt. The worst was after eating one of his Great Aunt Marjory's casseroles, which led him to taking up residence in his parent's bathroom for ten

hours. For all her efforts to push Jason into the waiting arms of the Lord, the closest she came was food poisoning so bad it had him praying for death.

Jason looked down at the snake, its incredible length piled up at the bottom of the well. It was big enough that there wasn't anywhere for Jason to stand except on the snake itself. The largest individual piece of shattered masonry had crushed the creature's head against the bottom of the well. Either the hefty chunk or the snake itself could have killed Jason, but wild luck led to one danger handling the other.

He glanced up at the blue circle of sky, uncertain of how long he had been unconscious. He had to decide between climbing back up the well or going back through the tunnel, neither of which seemed easy with a busted arm. He put off the unpleasant choice and looked at the windows he had been ignoring.

-
- You have defeated [Umbral Mountain Snake].
 - Would you like to loot [Umbral Mountain Snake]?
-

"Sure," he said wearily, then froze. Belatedly remembered that monsters dissolved into stinking smoke when they were looted, but to his relief and surprise, that didn't happen. All he felt was the snake shift a little under his feet. He looked over the list of items he got from the snake.

-
- [Night Scale Leather] has been added to your inventory.
 - 30 [Dark Quintessence Gems] have 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.
-

Unlike every other monster Jason killed, the snake didn't turn into a stench cloud and didn't produce a monster core.

"I need to learn the rules of this place."

He took a look at the next screen.

Quest: [Time to Run]

- Hidden objective discovered: Kill [Umbral Mountain Snake] 0/1.
 - Hidden objective complete: Kill [Umbral Mountain Snake] 1/1.
 - Main objective reward increased from rare magical dagger to epic magical dagger.

 - Objective complete: Escape [Umbral Mountain Snake] 1/1.
 - [Night Fang] 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.
-

“Hidden objective? I just fell on it; that seems kind of cheap. Wait, why am I complaining? Get it together, Jason.”

He checked the last window.

Quest: [Secrets of the Well]

- Bonus objective complete: Don't die 1/1.
 - [Dark Essence] 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.
-

“Well, if you're only going to complete one quest objective, 'don't die' is a winner.”

There were new items in his inventory, but his only interest was in something that could fix his arm. Looking over the icons in his inventory, nothing stood out. Suddenly Jason remembered the wizard who drank what he called a recovery potion. He looked up at the ladder leading out of the well and realised that between his bad arm and what was probably a concussion, he was more likely to fall back down than reach the top. A return to the tunnel wasn't an appealing prospect, but at least he couldn't fall if he was already on his hand and knees.

The tunnel proved trickier than he hoped, every nudge sending agony through his cradled arm. He had to stop frequently and let the waves of pain subside before moving on. Finally he reached the wooden walkway, collapsing onto his back. There was light, the lamp laying where he had cast it aside in his mad flight from the snake.

After resting awhile he pushed himself stumbingly upright and started shambling down the walkway, lamp in hand. He moved slowly. He'd learned his lesson about the

slippery wood, but also it was the top speed he could muster. Eventually, he reached the still-open metal door.

“How did a snake get this open?”

He glanced at the wheel mechanism on either side. Part of the wheel was wet with what may have been saliva.

“Did it use its mouth? No way.”

Not sparing more than a moment on curiosity, he made his way to the desk he had seen the wizard get the potion from. It wasn't hard to find, being one of the few pieces of furniture not overturned. Jason's eyes avoided the body still on the floor as he navigated the debris of the trashed room. The drawer was still open, and inside was a small rack for vials like the one he had seen the wizard drink. Only one vial remained and Jason carefully picked it up.

Item: [Recovery Potion (bronze)] (bronze rank, rare)

Potent potable with strong healing and mana recovery effects (consumable, healing).

- Effect: Recovers health. Effect reduced on silver-rank or higher individuals.
- Uses remaining: 1/1.

The vial was quite small, about the size of a rifle cartridge. Jason pulled out the stopper and tipped it back in a gulp. It tasted remarkably like strawberry schnapps and Jason's unruly stomach settled the instant the potion arrived.

“Nice.”

The stinging sensation Jason associated with magical healing started seeping into him, especially his head and injured arm. It was worse than what he had experienced before, whether because of the nature of the injuries or the potency of the potion. It didn't bother him; compared to the pain he was already in, it was nothing more than a tickle.

-
- You have used a recovery potion, restoring health, stamina and mana.
 - Until the remnant magic fully dissipates, consuming further health, stamina or mana potions will result in toxic side-effects.
 - By using a potion above your current rank the effect is increased, but the residual magic will take longer to dissipate.

He lay on the floor taking exhausted breaths. His head was still full of cotton wool, but the constant throbbing was gone. His arm didn't seem to be broken anymore. The pain

was gone and mobility was restored, but it still felt delicate and weak. In the periphery of his vision was a trio of small icons slowly shading over. When he focused on them they grew larger for him to examine. They were all squares with a picture of a potion on each, one red, one yellow and one blue. They were mostly greyed-out, but the grey was slowly dropping off as a timer underneath each counted down, with just under ten minutes remaining.

“Cooldown timers. That’s fancy.”

He pushed himself to his feet, much easier now than back in the well.

“Alright,” he told himself. “Damaged, but operational. So what next?”

He shone the light around until he found the dead body of the wizard, walking over to look closer. There was an eerie stillness to it that only came from death.

“I’m sorry,” he told it. “I think you might have had it coming, but I didn’t want it to go that way.”

He knelt down and closed its eyes.

➤ [Would you like to loot \[Builder Cultist\]?](#)

“What’s a builder cultist?”

Chapter 7: Spoils

- Would you like to loot [Builder Cultist]?
-

The idea of rifling through the pockets of a corpse filled Jason with disgust. Would the system just loot the body like it did with monsters? Corpse-robbing was a nasty business, but Jason had no idea what kind of place he was in, or how to leave it without being eaten. He was going need every advantage he could get his hands on. He thought about the snake back in the tunnel.

“It won’t skin him, will it?”

He took a step back.

“Alright,” he said. “Loot the body.”

- > [Landemere Vane’s Key Ring] has been added to your inventory.
 - > [Robes of the Astral Verdict] have been added to your inventory.
 - > 4 [Gold Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - > 16 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - > 138 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - > 437 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - > 228 [Lesser Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“Where were you carrying all that? That’s about eight-hundred coins.”

The robes the wizard was wearing had vanished, although he turned out to be wearing a full set of clothes underneath. Jason pulled the robes back out of his inventory and held them up to examine. They were dark blue, but covered in the blood of their former owner.

Item: [Robes of the Astral Verdict] (bronze rank, rare)

Robes designed for summoning. (armour, cloth).

- Effect: Increases the damage dealt by dimension spells.
 - Effect: Summoned creatures have increased damage reduction.
 - Effect: Damage reduction against disruptive-force damage.
-

Jason wasn’t ready to wear the clothes he took from a person he killed, especially when they were still wet with his blood. He returned the robes to his inventory and started searching about for something to cover the body. There was a fallen tapestry he dug out

and laid over the corpse. Partly he felt it was the decent thing to do. Mostly, he didn't want the body out in the open while he searched the room, always at the edge of his vision. He needed to find anything he could to aid his escape from this place and its cannibalistic inhabitants.

He started by examining the magic circle in the middle of the room. It was large, around three metres across, the metal set directly into the floor. The lines were intricate and complex, like someone had started with a pentagram and gotten severely carried away. It was also damaged. Some of the metal had been pried up, other sections warped as if by great heat, although there was no indication of burning anywhere.

The circle wasn't useful to him, so he started going through the rest of the room. He starting with the big desk the potions had been in. There were no more potions, but there were a few tins of healing unguent, which he took. Unlike the plain tins he got from monsters, these tins were branded with some kind of logo.

"Greenstone Alchemy Association," Jason read from the bottom of the tin. "I guess alchemy is a thing, too. Maybe I can pick up a crafting skill."

The rest of the drawers contained piles of notes and diagrams that seemed related to the magic circle. Oddly, Jason could read the individual words despite never having seen the language before, but they didn't make any sense to him as a whole. From what he could gather they were on some set of magical principles, as arcane to him as high-end theoretical physics. During his brief stint at university he studied political science. Regular science had never appealed.

He moved on, searching through toppled bookshelves and overturned tables. There were a variety of what looked like curios and display pieces, mostly tossed to the floor and broken, but nothing useful. He picked up a few of the books, flipping through the pages. There were a lot of them scattered around the room, their bookcases knocked over or even smashed. They seemed to be written in a variety of languages, but Jason had no problems reading any of them. Each new and unfamiliar text came as easy as if he'd been reading it his whole life.

"That's a little disconcerting."

Although he could read the words, that wasn't the same as understanding it. Every book he picked up seemed to be about magic theory, making them as impenetrable as any advanced textbook from a field he knew nothing about.

Moving a large, overturned table from where it had been tossed against the wall, Jason discovered a display cabinet with a glass door. Despite the table that had crashed into it, the cabinet was wholly unaffected, the glass remaining clear and uncracked. Inside

were four books, each on their own small easel stand. Compared to the other books Jason had found, these looked more impressive, with intricately embossed leather covers.

Trying to open the cabinet, he found it was locked shut. After a few attempts to break the surprisingly sturdy glass, he remembered the key ring he had looted from the dead body. Pulling it out of his inventory he discovered it was like a dungeon keeper's key ring from an old movie; a huge array of keys dangling from a large metal hoop.

Item: [Landemere Vane's Key Ring] (normal rank, common)

The keys for various locks throughout the Vane Manor, as well as personal keys for Landemere Vane's possessions. A mixture of ordinary keys and magical keys. (tool).

- Effect: Open specific locks.

Jason looked over at the covered body laying on the floor.

"Was that your name? Landemere Vane?"

He sighed.

"Sorry I killed you, Landemere. But you tried to kill me first."

He looked away from the covered corpse and focused on the task at hand. The keyhole on the cabinet door was quite small, so he tried the more delicate looking keys until the lock clicked open.

The cabinet wasn't very large but there were only four books in the entire case, set out for display rather than efficiency. The embossed leather didn't have titles, instead bearing patterns like the magic circle on the floor. Jason took out one of the books at random.

Item: [Astral Magic II] (bronze rank, uncommon)

A magical book that can impart the knowledge of intermediate level astral magic. (consumable, skill book).

- Requirements: Bronze rank, ability to use skill books, basic ritual magic theory, intermediate ritual magic theory, basic astral magic theory.
- Effect: Imparts intermediate astral magic theory.
- You do not meet the requirements to use this item.

Jason was familiar with skill books from video games that instantly gave out spells or special abilities. He couldn't try this one because he didn't meet the sizeable list of requirements.

“Does that mean I can be a wizard if I find the right book?”

Jason started checking the remaining books. From the descriptions the four books covered two different fields of magic, with one book at basic and intermediate level for each subject. Of the four books, Jason could only use one.

Item: [Ritual Magic I] (iron rank, common)

A magical book that can impart the fundamentals of performing magic rituals. (consumable, skill book).

- Requirements: Ability to use skill books.
 - Effect: Imparts basic ritual magic theory.
 - You are able to use skill book [Ritual Magic I]. Use Y/N?
-

Reading over the description, he lingered on the requirement of being able to use skill books, which he apparently met. Remembering his character sheet he pulled it up and started looking through the listings under racial abilities.

Ability: [Mysterious Stranger]

- Language adaptation.
 - Essence, awakening stone and skill-book absorption.
 - Immunity to identification and tracking effects.
-

“Infinite language. Is that why I can read everything?”

The ability seemed to give him the power to use skill books, along with whatever essences and awakening stones were. He looked at the book in his hand. According to its description it would give him knowledge. That meant it would alter his brain, but didn't his ability to read weird languages mean it was already affected? Was it already affecting his decision making?

For the time being, he stowed the books in his inventory. He could always look at them later. There didn't seem to be anything else he could make use of, so he decided to take stock. He found an undamaged chair and table, setting them up as far from the body as he could. There were a lot of tables for one room, although it was a large room.

After sitting down, he started pulling out the items he had picked up but not looked at yet, placing them all on the table. He began with the items he looted from the snake. Mercifully, the night scale leather wasn't as drippy as the snake had been after it was skinned.

Item: [Night-Scale Leather] (bronze rank, uncommon)

The skin of an umbral mountain snake. (crafting material, leather).

- Effect: Crafting material for clothing, armour and accessories.

It was dark and matte, thick and cool to the touch. It was also surprisingly flexible. Like the snake, it was much longer than it was wide, coming out of his inventory rolled up like a traditional bolt of cloth. It was bound by a length of thick cord.

“Did I loot the string from the snake too? That’s weird.”

The snakeskin was listed as a crafting material, as was the dark quintessence, which turned out to be small black gems.

Item: [Dark Quintessence] (iron rank, common)

Manifested essence of darkness. (crafting material, essence).

- Effect: Crafting material for items with darkness attributes.

They had the look of uncut gemstones, but the shine of polished onyx. They even came with a pouch to hold them.

“This is weird.”

The rest of the items he received as quest rewards, mostly from quests he completed by accidentally braining the snake with a chunk of masonry. He thought the night fang would be crafting material like others he had taken from monsters, but it turned out to be a scary-looking dagger. It came in a sheath made of the same night-scale leather, which was also used for the dagger’s grip. It was curved in the shape of a fang, and drawn from the sheath, turned out to be made of bone. It had a wickedly sharp edge, tapering to a point.

Item: [Night Fang] (iron rank, epic)

A dagger made from the fang of an umbral mountain snake. The magic of the blade allows it to retain the power of the snake’s poison (weapon, knife).

- Effect: Inflicts [Umbral Snake Venom].
 - Effect: Attacks ignore bronze rank damage reduction and poison resistance.
 - [Umbral Snake Venom] (damage-over-time, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

The knife even came with a belt of the same leather but there were no loops for it on Jason's drawstring pants. He put it back into his inventory, along with the dark quintessence gems and the roll of snakeskin.

The remaining items were both quest rewards for exploring the well. The awakening stone of stars was a smooth, rounded stone about the size of a fist. There were tiny speckles in the stone that seemed to move as he stared at it, although the effect was slight enough that it may have been his imagination.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Stars] (unranked, epic)

An awakening stone that unlocks the power of the stars. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 0 unawakened essence abilities.
- You do not meet the requirements to use this item.

"Essence abilities," Jason read. "Is that like magic powers? If I'm going to be dealing with cannibal wizards, I could use some magic powers."

The last item was the dark essence. It was a cube about 15cm to a side, with a glossy sheen like polished jet. It seemed to be made of the same material as the dark quintessence, and given the names, he assumed they were related objects. He picked it up.

Item: [Dark Essence] (unranked, uncommon)

Manifested essence of darkness (consumable, essence).

- Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.
- Effect: Imbues 1 awakened dark essence ability and 4 unawakened dark essence abilities.
- You have absorbed 0/4 essences. Once absorbed, an essence cannot be relinquished or replaced.
- You are able to absorb [Dark Essence]. Absorb Y/N?

"Are you what I need to get those magic powers?"

Chapter 8: Dark Magic

Jason frowned at the description of the black cube in his hands.

“Dark essence abilities. Sounds a bit sinister. How does that work, exactly?”

Help: Essence Abilities

- Essence abilities are personal supernatural abilities. They come in a variety of forms, including passive abilities, special attacks and spells.
 - Compared to time-consuming and preparation-intensive ritualised magic, most essence abilities can be used spontaneously.
-

“Wait, there’s been a help function this whole time? Can you help me get out of here without getting eaten by cannibals?”

- You are able to absorb [Dark Essence]. Absorb Y/N?
-

“Oh, I see what’s going on here. You want me to accept the dark powers you provided, after following your plan got me here in the first place. Making it seem like my only way out is to use the dark magic you conveniently provided. Classic seduction of evil routine. You could have at least been a little bit subtle. I think this is the point where you remind me how bad my situation is.”

- Zone: Vane Manor (Subterranean Ritual Chamber).
-

“Is that snark? Do I have a snarky user interface? Also, I know where I am.”

He scowled.

“I have no idea where I am.”

He looked at the dark cube he was holding in his hands. Despite the slickly-smooth surface it had no sheen, not reflecting the lamp light at all. If anything, it almost seemed to be absorbing the light.

“That’s only completely ominous.”

Jason picked up the lamp and panned it around the room. The magic circle, the covered body, the double doors leading into the inevitably perilous unknown. His whole reason for searching the room was to find any advantage before he went through those doors and his gaze drifted back to the cube.

“Why not?” he said. “What’s the point of going to magic land if you don’t get a few magic powers?”

He stood up, took a couple of deep breaths, then picked up the cube.

➤ You are able to absorb [Dark Essence]. Absorb Y/N?

“What could possibly go wrong? Don’t answer that, just absorb the essence.”

The cube suddenly turned sizzling-hot in his hand and he dropped it to the floor.

“What the...?”

Dark smoke started rising up off the cube and Jason backed away.

“It’s possible I made a bad decision here.”

The smoke coming off the cube was rising up in narrow streaks, like black streamers. They twisted in the air, heading in Jason’s direction. He backed away further, but was quickly moving out of the light coming from the lamp he had left on the table. The smoke followed him into the shadows where he could no longer see it.

“Sure, just get the dark magic powers. Good choice, idiot.”

He felt the smoke reach him because of the same scalding heat he had felt from the cube. He screamed as the black steam forced its way over his face, invading his mouth, nose and eyes. At some point he passed out from the pain, his next sensation being waking up on the floor.

Sitting up, he probed his face with his hands. The sensation of pain was completely gone and nothing was sensitive to the touch. His eyes seemed fine and he realised he could see the room as if it weren’t dark at all. The colours were a little washed out, but he could clearly see into the parts of the room previously cast in shadow.

-
- You have absorbed [Dark Essence]. You have absorbed 1 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 25% (1/4 essences).

 - [Dark Essence] has bonded to your [Speed] attribute, changing your [Speed] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all dark essence abilities to increase your [Speed] attribute.

 - You have awakened the dark essence ability [Midnight Eyes]. You have awakened 1 of 5 dark essence abilities.
-

There was a mirror on one of the walls. It was huge, double the size of even full-length mirrors Jason had seen. There was a spiderweb crack coming up from the bottom, but mostly it was fine. He moved over to it, checking his face for burn marks. It was a little

hard to tell, under the encrusted blood and tunnel grime, but he appeared unmarked. His eyes weren't even bloodshot. The rest of him was just as dirty as his face, his skinny frame smeared with filth. The quest reward pants, originally white, were stained to the point that they looked like camouflage.

It was the first time he'd gotten a look at himself since arriving. He'd been imagining himself looking like an action hero, heading into act three with masculine dirt stains reflecting enemies bested and challenges overcome. Instead he just looked grubby and ragged, the skin visible under the filth pale and taut. His Japanese facial features, inherited from his father, were even sharper than usual, making his face look gaunt. His bald head and absent eyebrows made him look manic and unhinged. His skinny body wasn't flattered by all the muck on it either, looking less action-movie and more refugee-documentary.

He sighed.

"Alright, lets take a look at my shiny new magic power."

Ability: [Midnight Eyes] (Dark)

- Special ability (perception)
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): See through darkness.

"At least it isn't complicated."

He looked around the room some more, the shadows no longer hiding anything from him. It wasn't like a low-light filter, as the lamp didn't interfere with his sight at all. Its light was more like a beam that brought things into full colour, compared to the muted look of the areas covered in shadow.

"That's cool, I guess," he said. "A little disappointing for a magic power, but I guess I'm not getting fireball from a dark essence."

He looked over at the table and the round stone still where he left it. The magic stone of something-or-other would apparently give him another power, so he walked over and picked it up.

-
- You have 4 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of the Stars]. Absorb Y/N?
-

He thought about the excruciating pain that came from absorbing the essence. On the other hand, there didn't seem to be any after-effects, and he did get a magic power out of it. Before he used it, though, he made some preparations. One of the chairs he had seen scattered around the room was a deep, comfortable-looking arm chair. It was extremely heavy, but he managed to drag it out from under a fallen bookshelf and flip it back upright. It was a huge wooden affair with plush, stitched-in cushioning. He was sick of falling over in pain.

He sat in the chair, the awakening stone in his hand.

"Absorb."

Rather than turn hot and dissolve into smoke, the awakening stone grew cold before growing soft and melting in his hand like ice cream. It seeped into his hand, filling his arm with a bone deep chill that once again left him yelling out in pain. It was not on the same scale as the essence. He kept control of his faculties while frantically shaking an arm that felt like it had been plunged into ice water. Eventually the bone-deep chill receded and the pain passed, leaving him sprawled in the chair, heaving in breaths.

-
- You have awakened the dark essence ability [Cloak of Night]. You have awakened 2 of 5 dark essence abilities.
-

Jason could feel a change within himself. It was something new, yet weirdly familiar, like when he was reading a language he'd never seen before. The power was inside him, as if it had always been there, waiting to be awoken. He knew the power instinctively. It was waiting for him, eager to be used.

He stood up and moved back to the mirror before using his new power. It responded immediately, as easy and natural as lifting his hand. Dark energy suddenly engulfed his body, hiding his visage in the mirror. It wasn't disturbing at all, feeling cool and refreshing. The energy coalesced into the form of a voluminous cloak, enshrouding his body and hiding his head within a deep, impenetrable hood. The cloak seemed more like an object of living darkness than fabric, dotted with tiny points of light. They shifted and twinkled, tiny stars in the night sky of the shadowy garb.

Jason could feel the cloak, not like a piece of clothing, but like one of his limbs. He could feel its power. With a thought, the stars grew brighter to the point that they outshone the lamp. They dimmed until he couldn't even see himself in the mirror, disappearing into the shadows.

Ability: [Cloak of Night] (Dark)

- Conjunction (darkness, light, dimension).
 - Base cost: Moderate mana to conjure.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

 - Effect (iron): Conjures a magical cloak that can alter the wearer. Offers limited physical protection. Can generate light, or blend into shadows. Cloak can reduce the weight of the wearer for a low mana-per-second cost, allowing reduced falling speed and water walking. Cannot be given or taken away, although effects can be extended to others in very close proximity.
-

“Water walking,” Jason read. “Now that’s a magic power.”

He looked around the room.

“That I can’t try out right now.”

He instinctively understood how to use the weight reducing aspect of the ability and hopped lightly into the air. He went up much higher than he normally would and dropped back down much slower.

“It’s like being on the moon.”

He bounced around the room with a goofy grin on his face until he remembered the dead body.

“Not the time to be having fun,” he scolded himself.

He experimented further with the magical cloak. He could see through it as if it wasn’t there, so even with his head covered it didn’t obstruct his vision. He could make any or all of it lose physical substance, so if he wanted to grab it he could, or his hand could pass through, unobstructed.

“Nifty.”

He could make it vanish with a thought and pull it out again, which he tried several times. After the third attempt he suddenly felt woozy and had to sit down. He went back to the armchair and fell into it.

- Your mana is low.
-

“I’m out of mana already? Also, I have mana? Is there a mana bar or something?”

Two horizontal bars appeared at the periphery of his vision. One was blue, but mostly empty, while the other was orange and about two-thirds full. Next to them was a silhouette of a person that was mostly green, but the head area and the left arm were yellow.

“Alright, so the blue bar is mana, the little body is health and the yellow bar is... something?”

➤ Current stamina: 64%

“Okay, stamina. I think I’m getting a handle on this. I don’t seem to have a lot of mana, though.”

Help: Mana

- Mana is a resource required for many essence abilities. Low mana will lead to mental exhaustion.
 - Maximum mana is based on the [Spirit] attribute. Bind an essence to the [Spirit] attribute to increase maximum mana.
 - Mana recovery is based on the [Recovery] attribute. Bind an essence to the [Recovery] attribute to increase mana recovery rate.
-

Jason let out a yawn. He had gone through a lot and his time unconscious was hardly restful.

“One last thing,” he said, pulling one of the skill books out of his inventory. He walked over to the comfy chair and fell into it.

Item: [Ritual Magic I] (iron rank, common)

A magical book that can impart the fundamentals of performing magic rituals.
(consumable, skill book).

- Requirements: Ability to use skill books.
 - Effect: Imparts basic ritual magic theory.
 - You are able to use skill book [Ritual Magic I]. Use Y/N?
-

“Yes.”

The book floated out of his hand and into the air. The cover flung itself open and the writing on it started removing itself from the page, changing from black to gold as the disembodied text floated into the air. The pages started turning, faster and faster, gold text pouring into the air. Turning pages flicked over in a rush as the golden text formed a corona around the floating book. Then the flutter of pages started slowing, until the last page turned and the book fell to the ground, every page blank.

The cloud of golden text swarmed over Jason like angry fireflies, disappearing into his body as it landed on his flesh with stinging bites. His mind was bombarded with information too quickly to process, leaving it lost and adrift. The pain and disorientation finally passed, leaving him in general control of his faculties, but dizzy and confused. He had no idea if seconds or hours had passed. He was weary to the bone, limbs as heavy as his eyelids.

➤ **Your stamina has been exhausted.**

Unable to keep his head up, he slumped over in the chair, fast asleep. After what felt like no time at all, he was jolted awake by a loud hammering. His head was still hazy, and he shook it clear in time to see two men storm through the now-broken double doors. The one in the lead was holding a hammer, the one behind, a shovel.

“Uh... g'day blokes. I don't suppose there's any chance you're not cannibals?”

The pair scowled, the one with the shovel moving forward as he hoisted it menacingly. Jason scrambled to pull the curved dagger out from his inventory. He used all his knife fighting expertise, which was none, and the shovel slammed into his face.

Jason dropped the dagger, staggering back with his hands over his nose, bleeding spilling between his fingers. The shovel came down a second time and everything went black.

Chapter 9: Escape

The circumstances in which Jason regained consciousness were unpleasant for a number of reasons. He was cramped up in some kind of tight space, forced into a foetal position. His head was spinning, and there seemed to be a little man inside it, trying to pickaxe his way out. His nose was congested with what felt like a fistful of bees, and to top it off, he had a sudden urge to vomit. He lay curled up in the constricted space, throwing up on himself. As the vomiting subsided he noticed the head section of his health silhouette was now a warning orange.

“I am getting knocked out way too much.”

He then heard a male voice.

“He’s woken up.”

Jason’s eyes swam into focus, although they felt puffy and didn’t seem to open properly. He was in what looked like a dog cage, too small to stretch out his limbs. His new ability to see in the dark was intact, allowing him to make out that his cage was on a dirt floor in some kind of cellar. The roof and walls were rough timber, and there was a pervasive smell of damp earth. There were four more cages in the cellar with him, each containing a person. One had a black guy, two had white girls. The last cage was bigger than the others, with thicker bars. Inside was an enormous, impossibly hairy man.

“A Wookiee?” Jason asked deliriously.

“What’s a Wookiee?” the hairy man growled.

“Hey,” the black guy called out to him. “Did they put a collar on you?”

“Wha...?”

Jason’s thoughts refused to walk in a straight line.

“Try and focus,” the man said. “Looks like you were hit rather hard.”

Jason ran his fingers over his face, feeling the dried blood thickly caked onto it. He yelled in pain as his fingers brushed against what turned out to be his very delicate nose.

“Did they put a collar on you?” the man asked again.

Confused, Jason reached up and patted his neck.

“No,” he croaked. “Why would they put a collar on me?”

“To suppress your essence abilities. You can still use them?”

Jason nodded, which annoyed the man in his head who went on a pickaxe frenzy.

“Ow. Yeah, I can use them, but I only have two.”

“Can they get you out of that cage?”

“One lets me see in the dark and the other makes me sparkle, so probably not.”

“Sparkle?”

“I’d show you, but I think I might throw up again. Actually...”

Jason vomited again, ending in a coughing fit, after which he passed out again.

Jason swam at the edge of consciousness, hearing two people talk.

“He was in the underground ritual chamber?” a woman said. It was a controlled, elegant voice.

“Yes, milady,” a gruff male voice replied.

“You left him in quite a state.”

“Actually, milady, that’s not much worse than how we found him.”

“You didn’t put a collar on him?” she asked.

“Mr. Caruthers only procured the four, milady. For the ones we were warned about.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said the woman. “Feel how weak his aura is. I doubt he has more than two or three abilities at most. Do you really think he’s the one that killed Landemere?”

“That would be my guess, milady. He had more blood on him than wounds to produce it. He was also locked in the room with the young master’s body.”

“How could he even do it?” the woman asked. “He’s so weak.”

“It seems the young master had mostly done himself in, milady. Summoning spell gone awry, from the looks of it.”

“Is that why all those little monsters are running around?”

“It would seem so, milady.”

Quest: [No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service]

- Objective complete: Discover the reason lesser monsters have infested the area 1/1.
- [Simple Shirt] has been added to your inventory.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

Jason stifled a yelp. He had been pretending to be unconscious when a bright blue screen appeared in front of him and his whole body went tense. The pair continued talking, however, as if nothing had happened.

“So whoever this is got lucky and killed my son when he was at his most vulnerable?”

“Not that lucky, milady. He met me.”

“Just so, Dougall,” she acknowledged. “Do we know what Landemere was trying to summon?” the woman asked.

“I had a bit of a potter through his notes, milady. It was one of them entities from beyond the void.”

Jason heard the woman sigh.

“Astral beings,” she muttered unhappily. “I told that boy it would be the death of him.” She said. “We’re a nice, traditional blood cult family. This nonsense about ineffable ancients from outside reality was never going to work out. What did you do with Landemere’s body?”

“Mulch, milady.”

“You mulched my son?”

“Well, he won’t be mulched yet, milady. Composting isn’t a quick process. I can fetch him out from the pile if you like, but milord wont be happy. He was quite specific as to the dispensation of the body.”

“I don’t care what my stupid husband thinks; he married into the family. This is my manor, my family and we do things the traditional way. Goodness knows what poor Landemere will taste like after having gone in the mulch pile.”

“I’ll give him a good and proper wash before I bring him into the kitchen, milady.”

“Thank you, Dougall. Excellent work, as always. Now, do we know where this man came from?”

“No idea, milady. As you said, he’s too weak to be an adventurer and he wasn’t exactly well-equipped. He did have a good knife, though. Not sure if he took it from the young master, so I put it with the gear we took off these others.”

“You don’t think he’s with them?”

“I wouldn’t think so, milady. He wasn’t up to much.”

“Did he say anything?”

“I think he might have been about to, milady, but that was when he walked into me shovel.”

“Why did you take his shirt?”

“He didn’t have one, milady. Didn’t have the chance to ask why, on account of his walking into me shovel again. Do you want me to send him to the kitchen as well?”

“No. If he really did kill my son, I don’t want him trotting off to death with his soul intact. Put him with the others for the blood feast.”

“Yes milady, although that will be one too many.”

“I don’t think the extra blood will be a problem.”

“I was thinking about the high priest, milady. You know how he gets.”

“Yes, quite right, Dougall. Very well. Pick out one of the others you like, and keep it for yourself.”

“Very generous, milady. I’ll take the elf, if milady had no objections.”

“Are you sure, Dougall? Elves are quite stringy.”

“Derrick was keen to try one, milady. I told him, of course, but you know how young ones are.”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “They never believe you until they suffer the consequences for themselves. Just look where it got Landemere, and my daughter isn’t much better. If it wasn’t for the cult, I swear I never would have had children. Go fetch my idiot son’s body before you take the elf. I don’t want him picking up any more flavour than he already has.”

“Of course, milady.”

The pair left and Jason let out a long breath. He didn’t know who those people were, but he heard enough to know that he wanted the hell out. He manoeuvred about for leverage and tried to force the door with his legs, but it wouldn’t budge no matter how much strength he put into it.

“That’s not going to work,” the black guy told him.

“Have you got a name?” Jason asked. “I’m Jason, and just thinking of you as the black guy is making me feel racist.”

“Rufus,” the man responded.

“G’day,” Jason said. “If you’ve got a better idea, I’m all ears.”

“Afraid not,” Rufus said. “Unless you’ve got some spirit coins tucked into those pants, you won’t get it open that way.”

“Spirit coins?” Jason asked. “Sure, I’ve got some, but how will that help? I don’t think these cages are coin operated.”

“This guy’s an idiot,” one of the women said.

“Not helping,” Rufus said through gritted teeth. “Jason, you don’t happen to have a silver or gold ranked coin, do you?”

“Hang on a sec,” Jason said, checking his inventory. There were sixteen silver coins and four gold ones, all looted from Landemere Vane’s body. He took out one of the silver ones.

Item: [Silver Spirit Coin] (silver rank, common)

A distilled quantity of raw magic. (crafting material, currency).

- Effect: Used to fuel silver-rank magic items or as a ritual component.
 - Effect: Consume to briefly increase all attributes to silver rank.
-

“Oh,” Jason said. He had previously examined the lesser spirit coins, which didn’t have an option to increase attributes. He tried to remember if there was a strength attribute.

“So, I consume this to increase my attributes?” Jason said. “Consume, as in, eat?”

“Yes, Jason, it’s very easy,” Rufus said. “You just put the coin in your mouth. Once you do, you’ll only have a few moments to force open the cage.”

“So these attributes,” Jason said. “I assume one of them is strength?”

“The power attribute increases strength,” Rufus said. “The coin will increase them all, but only for a very short time.”

Jason placed the coin uncertainly on his tongue, where it dissolved, like a soluble tablet. His body was immediately flooded with a tingling sensation and he felt an immense sense of power. His senses were sharpened. Eyes, already able to see through the dark, suddenly took in everything as if seeing it for the first time. His ears picked up ambient sounds he had previously missed. He could taste the blood, sweat and dirt on the air. It only lasted a fleeting moment before the world went back to normal, suddenly seeming dull and plain.

“Uh, Jason?” Rufus asked.

“Yes, Rufus?”

“Did you use the coin?”

“I did, yes.”

“I don’t want to pressure you, but did you, perchance, forget to open the cage?”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I got distracted.”

“This is who you’re relying on to save us?” the woman’s voice spoke up again.

“Still not helping, Anisa,” Rufus told her.

Jason took out a second silver-ranked coin and put it in his mouth. This time, as the sensation of power came over him, he placed his feet against the cage door, easily bracing himself in the tight confines. His feet pushed out with the temporary surge of strength, the hinges on the cage door immediately starting to warp. He pushed harder and the door fell away just as the strength drained out of him again.

He crawled out of the cage and stood up. Waves of dizziness washed over him and he gripped the cage to stay upright. His body felt weak, even more than it had when he woke up.

“Are there side effects to those coins?” Jason asked.

“You used a coin with more power than your body could handle,” Rufus said. “It will recover. A little more slowly, having used two of them in quick succession.”

Jason looked over at the other cages, and a screen popped up.

New Quest: [Escape!]

You have been trapped in the cellar of the blood cult and you need to get away.

- Objective: Leave the grounds of Vane Estate without being caught 0/1.
- Reward: Essence.

- Optional objective: Rescue your fellow prisoners 0/4.
- Reward: Awakening stone.

“Good job,” Rufus said. “Now you need to find something to get the rest of us out. Giving us some silver coins would work, if you have more. That won’t be enough for Gary’s cage, though. You shouldn’t use more coins yourself until you’ve recovered.”

Jason pulled out the big key ring.

“I’m hoping this does the job,” he said. “Couldn’t reach the lock from inside the cage.”

“Even better,” Rufus said. “I’d rather not have to fight our way out of here suffering the after-effects of using a coin.”

Rufus pointing to the large, hairy man in the oversized cage.

“Him first,” Rufus said.

Jason went over to the big cage, getting a better look at it’s occupant. His body was size and shape of a professional wrestler and the parts not covered by his clothes were covered in fur. His head looked like a lion, complete with a glorious mane.

“So you’re Gary?” Jason asked. He crouched down and started trying keys on the lock.

“That’s right,” the big man said. His voice had a deep, growling timbre.

“I’m Jason,” he introduced himself. “You look like Ron Perlman from that old Beauty and the Beast TV show.”

“I have no idea what that means,” Gary said.

“I’d say good to meet you,” Jason said as he continued trying keys, “but the circumstances aren’t terrific.”

“Thanks for not just running off,” Gary said.

“Are you kidding? I need you lot to get me out of wherever it is we are.”

“We’re in a storage cellar,” Gary said.

“I can see that much,” Jason said. “I meant this whole place. I have no idea where we are.”

“You don’t know?” Gary asked. “Did they kidnap you?”

“Someone did,” Jason said. “I woke up in the hedge maze.”

Gary the lion-man’s voice seemed to be growly as a default.

“Look out!” Rufus called out and Jason turned to look around.

There was a doorway that seemed to lead into another section of the cellar, through which the man Dougall had returned, shovel in hand.

“Cheeky little sod,” Dougall said.

Jason tried to think quick, but his head was far from in its best state. Shoving the key ring back into his inventory, he got up from his crouch, but was hit by a dizzy spell and stumbled. The shovel came down and everything went black.

Chapter 10: The Evil Pit of Evil

Jason was jerked back into consciousness as his body choked out more vomit. His throat seared as his empty stomach tried to cast out what wasn't there, almost gagging him as it did. His head was filled with stabbing pain and when he opened his eyes everything blurred like he was underwater. The only clear thing was the little silhouette showing his health, the head now a glaring red. His thoughts skittered about like a roach, dashing out of reach as he tried to pin them down.

Slowly, he came to something approximating his senses. There was a light source somewhere up ahead, but the light it put out was blood red. Otherwise, the tunnel was dark, but his new power allowed him to see through it. He was once again in a cage, but bigger than the last. It was the same kind of heavy cage the lion-man had been in, with thick, heavy bars. Apparently they didn't want him kicking the door open again.

His cage was being taken down a wide, stone tunnel. It was more like a train tunnel than a cave, with an arched roof and flat floors. There was even a rail, like for a mining cart. His cage was on a platform, being pushed along the rail. Three more cages were being pushed the same way.

The people doing the pushing were wearing bright red robes and ugly demon masks. More of them led the way up front, carrying lanterns with stained glass that produced the ominous red light.

Jason wasn't thinking about what to do so much as desperately hoping the pain in his head would subside. He was concentrating on his breathing when a screen appeared.

Quest: [Escape!]

- Objective failed: Leave the grounds of Vane Manor without being caught.
- Quest failed.

New Quest: [The Blood Feast]

You have been captured and are set to be sacrificed by a blood cult. You need to avoid becoming a sacrifice.

- Objective: Avoid being sacrificed 0/1.
 - Reward: Essence.

 - Optional objective: Save the other designated sacrifices 0/3.
 - Reward: Awakening stone.
-

The long tunnel ended in a pair of enormous stone doors into which impressive but grotesque images had been carved, depicting some kind of cannibalistic orgy. Four cultists stepped forward, two to a door, grabbing the handles and pulling back until the doors swung ponderously open. When they did, red light flooded the tunnel, accompanied by an incredible heat and a bitter smell. It washed through the doors and over the group like a wave, carrying with it a coppery taste of blood that lay thick on tongue.

“That’s a lot of red flags,” Jason said.

A fist landed hard on the side of his cage.

“Quiet,” a harsh voice barked.

Beyond the doors was a vast, circular chamber, like a great cylinder carved straight out of solid rock. Some twenty-five metres across and at least twice as high, it was enough to boggle Jason’s mind even through his punch-drunk haze. The walls were black, like some long-dormant magma chamber, but even starting from a natural cavern it would have been a monumental labour to bring it to its current state. Flat stone slabs, carved out of the same black stone, had been inserted into the walls like pegs. They made a punishingly steep set of stairs that wound their way up to the higher parts of the chamber.

Dominating the room was a red pool of roiling, bubbling liquid, taking up almost all the floor space. It was the source of the light, along with the heat and the coppery stench of blood. The centre of the pool churned, as if on the point of boiling. The sound of thick, sloshing liquid echoed up through the chamber. The red light shone from deep within the pool, washing the whole chamber in red as if everything was coated in blood.

“That isn’t good,” Jason heard from one of the other caged people. It was Rufus, who had told him how to use the spirit coins. The lion man was there in his own big cage, along with one of the two women. The other was nowhere to be seen. One of the robed cultists bashed on the side of Rufus’ cage.

“I said quiet.”

“Or what?” the lion man grumbled. “You’ll sacrifice us in your creepy ritual pit?”

The other prisoners were also dirty and ragged, but nothing like Jason. He had no shirt, no hair, there was blood and old healing ointment crusted all over him. His face was coated in blood from his broken nose, along with puffy black eyes and flecks of vomit.

The rail that had carried the cages on platforms through the tunnel ended at the door. The cultists lifted the cages off, two people to each small cage, and four to the large ones. They carried them up the steep stairs, audibly straining at the effort. The lion-man’s cage was the most troublesome, even with four people lugging it. The stairs wound up and around the circular wall, the group pausing after a quarter turn. They had reached a

platform, set into the wall like the stairs, but much larger. It extended out well over the blood pit below.

“Leave the big one first,” one of the cultists said. “No point carrying the heaviest one all the way to the top.”

Jason recognised the voice of the woman he had heard in the cellar while pretending to be unconscious.

“Thank you, milady,” one of the cultists said gratefully. Jason recognised the voice as the shovel-carrying man she had addressed as Dougall.

The cage holding the big man was left against the wall. Dougall and one of the other cultists walked over to the edge of the platform and took up a waiting position, facing out over the pool below. The rest continued on. The stairs continued to wind upwards beyond the platform, making another quarter-turn around the room before reaching a second platform.

“Leave the other big cage,” the woman said.

“Isn’t he the one that killed the young master?” one of the cultists asked. “You don’t want to save that one for last?”

“I’m not going to make you haul that thing all the way up for my own satisfaction.”

“Thank you, milady.”

The four cultists roughly dropped Jason’s cage up against the wall. As at the first platform, two cultists took up positions at the platform’s edge while the rest of the cultists with the remaining two cages resumed the climb. Jason watched as they made another quarter-turn ascent to the next platform, which hid them from sight.

Jason took a look around. His vision was still like looking through a stranger’s glasses, but it was slowly improving. The platform he was on looked like rough-hewn obsidian, shiny and dark. He had no idea how the massive stone platform had been shoved into the wall like a six ton peg.

Examining the cage, the bars were much thicker than the last one he had been in. Looking closer, there even seemed to be faint traces of magical engravings on them. Oddly, Jason recognised them as reinforcing magic. The knowledge from the skill book was making itself known. It was an odd sensation, remembering something he had never learned. He was certain the silver spirit coin he used before wouldn’t be enough to break out, and he couldn’t reach the lock through the narrow bars to try his key ring.

Pulling out one of the gold ranked coins, he turned it over in his hand. Unlike the ones he got from looting monsters, this one was embossed with the profile of a serious looking

man on one side and some kind of crest on the other, along with the engraved word 'Greenstone'. His hope was that the gold coin would be powerful enough.

He looked up at the two people standing at the edge of the platform. He couldn't tell if they were men or women in their hooded robes, but neither were paying attention to him. Instead they were at the edge of the platform looking out. If he could escape the cage quick enough, he thought there was a chance to rush at least one of them right off the edge

He took a deep breath, focusing on the coin in his hand. He thought the silver coin had flooded him with strength, but compared to the gold, that had been a meagre trickle. It was like having a hurricane inside him and he lashed out with his feet, hoping it was enough to burst open the cage door.

Instead of opening, the door shot off its hinges like it was fired from a cannon, metal screeching as the whole front of the cage was warped. The door moved almost too fast to see, barely deflecting as it slammed into one of the cultists, sending them flipping off the edge of the platform. They didn't even scream, dead the moment the cage door crushed the top half of their body.

➤ You have defeated [Blood Cultist].

Startled, Jason crawled from the ruined front of the cage and to his feet. The other cultist reacted quickly, turning and rushing Jason. The coin's power was fading quickly and Jason threw out a fist with the lingering strength of the coin behind it. To his horror, his fist buried itself in the cultist's chest cavity. The cultist let out a gurgling sound and died, dropping off Jason's fist as the strength from the coin left him. Jason looked in horror at his own bloody fist.

➤ You have defeated [Blood Cultist].

It wasn't just his newfound strength that left him as the power of the coin faded. The strain of the coin's power left him feeling enervated, barely staying on his feet. His eyes wanted to close, his body urging him just to lay down and sleep. He was jolted back to wakefulness by a powerful, roaring voice.

"THEY'RE COMING FOR YOU!"

Jason's head snapped up and saw multiple cultists coming back down the stairs. Looking around, the pair from below were coming up as well. Peering over the edge, he spotted the door below, on the far side of the blood-red pool. He had a terrible idea.

“Magic power, you’d better work.”

As he backed up, the starlight cloak formed around his body, shrouding him in light-speckled darkness. After a steeling breath, he ran to the edge, leaping out as he urged the cloak’s power to reduce his weight. He sailed through the air, shadow cloak sweeping out behind him like a trail of stars. Floating over the bloody pool, he landed almost perfectly in front of the huge stone doors, still open.

“That went startlingly well.”

He looked up at the stairs, spotting the cultists bolting down them in pursuit. He ran through the doors and into the tunnel, then stopped.

“Just run,” he told himself. “You can’t save them, you’re terrible at everything. Just run.”

Instead of running he ducked behind one of the heavy stone doors, which the cultists had not opened fully due to their enormous weight. He pressed himself between the wall and the door and waited. The cloak dimmed, going from bright stars to melding Jason into the shadows as he admonished himself silently.

Well done, idiot. Now you’re going to be tossed into a pit of blood by cannibals and then probably eaten. Good job.

Cultists came rushing through the door, sprinting up the tunnel as fast as their bulky ceremonial robes would allow. None of them so much as glanced back at Jason’s hiding spot. Jason stayed stock still as more cultists came through as he cowered behind the door.

Chapter 11: Dashing Heroics

Jason cautiously stuck his head around the door but didn't see any more cultists. Even going back into the chamber he didn't see anyone. Whoever hadn't chased up the tunnel were most likely on the platforms above. He made his way up the stairs as quietly as he could, still no cultists in sight as he reached the first platform.

He dismissed the cloak as he approached the lion man's cage. It had the same heavy bars and large space as Jason's cage, but where Jason had been able to stretch out, the lion-man barely fit.

"Sorry," Jason said as he fished the key ring from his inventory. "I've been hit on the head a lot today, so I don't remember your name."

"Gary," the lion man said, a low, rumbling growl to his voice. "I didn't think you were coming back."

"I tried to talk myself out of it, believe me."

"Instincts of a hero," Gary said.

"I'd probably put it down to compromised judgement," Jason said. "I've been knocked out several times today."

Jason kept trying keys.

"I'm not even sure one of these will work," he said. "I was hoping to do this quietly but I still have some more coins... oh, there we go."

The lock clicked open and Gary squeezed his enormous frame through the door. Inside the cage, he had looked like a professional wrestler. Towering over Jason, it looked like he'd eaten a professional wrestler.

"Is there a key for my collar on that thing?" Gary asked. Around his neck was a thick iron choker.

"No idea," Jason said.

"Give me a look at that."

Jason handed over the key ring. It had an unhelpful abundance of keys and Gary started looking over them for what he needed. Despite his lion-like head, his hands were fairly normal, albeit huge, and hairy. While he went through them, Jason looked around. There didn't seem to be any cultists coming down the stairs or back in from the tunnel. What he did find was some kind of ceremonial bowl built into the top of the cage. Inside was a round crystal, very dark red in colour. He picked it up.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Feast] (unranked, common)

An awakening stone that unlocks the power of consumption. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
 - Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
 - You have 3 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of the Feast]. Absorb Y/N?
-

He shoved the stone into his inventory.

“None of these are for a suppression collar,” Gary said. “They got these collars especially for us, so whoever you took the keys from mustn’t have been in on it.”

“Yeah, I think he was on the outs with the family a bit,” Jason said. “He seemed to have his own thing going on. What does that collar do exactly?”

“It suppresses all essence abilities,” Gary said. “Some race powers, too, but not all of them.”

“Does it suppress you from being a huge guy who can kick the crap out of people?”

A grin Jason could only describe as predatory crossed Gary’s leonine face.

“No it doesn’t.”

Gary took the lead as they went up the stairs toward the next platform, which they reached unchallenged. Jason’s cage was empty, the bars on the front bent outwards. The dead cultist was still laying on the platform with a hole in his chest. While Gary knelt down to examine it, Jason checked the top of his cage. There was another ceremonial bowl, but it had been dislodged. Jason looked around a bit and found another awakening stone of the feast, where it had fallen to the platform when he kicked his way out of the cage. He slipped it into his inventory.

“What happened to this guy?” Gary asked.

Jason held up a still-bloody fist. Gary looked from the Jason’s hand to the corpse to the blasted-out cage.

“I think at this point,” Gary said, “they may be wishing they’d just let you go. How did you get mixed up in this, anyway?”

“Not really the time,” Jason said.

“Right. Good job, though.”

“It wasn’t a good job,” Jason said. “I killed someone.”

“What do you think they dragged us out in cages for?” Gary asked. “It wasn’t to dance for their entertainment.”

“Killing them in return doesn’t make us any better than they are.”

“Sure it does,” Gary said. “Better at killing. Look out!”

Jason turned to see three cultists coming down the stairs. Gary stepped forward to meet them, grabbing the first pair by the throat. He lifted them up, one dangling from each hand as he walked them over to the edge and dropped them into the blood pool below. As Gary walked off, Jason was left face to face with the third cultist, still on the stairs.

Jason’s eyes went wide with panic. He dropped to his knees, hands held out in supplication.

“Please don’t kill me. I don’t want to die.”

The cultist’s surprise registered even through the loose robes and mask. Jason used that moment to shove a fist right into the cultist’s crotch. A strained groaning came from behind the mask as Jason lashed out a second and third time, leaving the cultist doubled over. Jason stood up, grabbed the cultist by the robes and shoved him right off the side of the stairs.

➤ You have defeated [Blood Cultist].

“Did I just hear you begging?” Gary asked, walking back.

“It wasn’t a lie,” Jason said. “I really don’t want to die.”

Gary laughed as he led the way to the third platform, which was now unattended. Whoever had been manning it had either pursued Jason out the door or been thrown to the pit below.

Gary and Jason walked over to the cage, which contained Rufus. Jason now knew the right key to open the cages, which he used promptly. Rufus crawled out the door and stood up, giving Jason his first clear look at him. Rufus had dark skin, a bald head and was stupidly handsome. Roughed up and grimy from his ordeal, he looked like an action hero heading into act three with masculine dirt stains reflecting enemies bested and challenges overcome.

“That’s not fair,” Jason said.

“What isn’t?” Rufus asked, his voice like dark chocolate.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jason muttered. “Let’s just go.”

“Too bad I don’t have a weapon,” Rufus said, and Jason produced the evil trowel.

“It’s not much,” Jason said, “but it is suspiciously sharp.”

“I’ll take it,” Rufus said gratefully, looking it over in his hand. “It is suspiciously sharp, isn’t it.”

Gary and Rufus lead the way up, Jason pausing to snatch a third awakening stone from the top of Rufus’ cage. As they ascended the stairs, a lone cultist walked casually down to obstruct them. The cultist pulled her hood back and took off her mask, revealing long, dark hair and the face of a young woman. She pulled a short sword out from within the folds of her robes.

“I’ve got this one,” Rufus said, stepping past Gary. He brandished the trowel in the woman’s direction.

“Alicia Vane, I presume?” he said.

“I was disappointed that I wouldn’t get to cross swords with the famous Rufus Remove,” she said with a sneer. “Looks like I’m lucky after all.”

Rufus didn’t respond, instead lunging forward. What followed was a blaze of movement so fast Jason had, at best, a vague grasp of what was taking place. They bobbed and weaved, both restricted by the width of the stairs. Between them was a blur of motion, sword against trowel. Despite the inferior weapon and the lower ground, the cultist was being pushed back.

“That’s enough, Alicia,” a voice came down from above. Jason recognised it as the woman from the basement. With a look of reluctance, Alicia disengaged from her fight with Rufus and started backing up the stairs. Rufus lazily tossed the trowel into the air, where Gary smoothly snatched it and launched it out with a flick of his powerful arm. The practiced ease of the pair’s teamwork took Alicia by surprise; she failed to react before the trowel lodged itself in her throat.

“You’ll die in pain for that, you hairy brute,” the woman’s voice came fiercely down. As the woman yelled, Alicia dropped her sword, clutching at the trowel buried in her throat as she staggered and fell off the stairs.

Rufus moved forward, snatching up the dropped sword as he went. he led the way up to the final platform. The last cage, and the woman inside it, were against the wall like all the others. The platform was slightly longer than the one below, with some kind of ritual altar on the end. There were two figures standing in front of it. Rufus and Gary stepped onto the platform first, while behind them Jason pulled a gold spirit coin from his inventory and discreetly palmed it.

The final two cultists had both removed their masks and hoods. The woman seemed much younger than Jason expected for someone with adult children. To Jason’s eyes she looked to be in her early thirties, no older than her son Landemere. She was beautiful, with

the same olive skin and dark hair as her daughter. The man next to her, by contrast, was plain. In his ceremonial robes looked like a chartered accountant at a costume party.

Despite his appearance, the man quickly demonstrated his power was not to be dismissed. He threw out his arms and Rufus and Gary were both thrown back, slamming into the wall. Glowing chains emerged from the stone to wrap around their limbs, binding them in place. Jason, now the last one left, looked nervously at the now helpless pair.

“You’re still causing trouble,” the woman said to Jason. “First my son, now my daughter? They may have been worthless, but weren’t for the likes of you to kill.”

“Not a lot of pictures up on your fridge, I’m guessing.”

“SILENCE!” the man roared. “You think you can stop what I will do today? You think any of you can stop me?”

Whether due to the absurdity of the situation, the concussion or just pure adrenaline, Jason couldn’t take the man seriously. Even with the power he had just demonstrated, he just seemed like a petty little man who hated to be ignored.

“Mate,” Jason said, “I don’t know if anyone told you, but you’re very melodramatic.”

The man’s face flashed with fury.

“You will bow before the magic of Darryl Caruthers, worshipping my name as I...”

“Wait, wait, hold on,” Jason interrupted, holding up a hand. “Did you say your name was Darryl Caruthers?”

“You have heard of my greatness!”

“Sorry, mate, no. It’s just that Darryl Caruthers isn’t exactly a high priest of evil kind of name.”

“What?”

Jason gestured at the woman.

“I mean, what’s your name?”

“I am Lady Cressida Vane,” she sneered.

“See, now there’s a quality high priest name,” Jason said. “High Priestess Lady Cressida Vane. Just listen to it; you can practically hear the tyranny.”

“Stop babbling,” Darryl scolded. “This doesn’t...”

“Why didn’t they put you in charge?” Jason asked Cressida, ignoring Darryl. He gave her a sympathetic look. “They didn’t want a woman in charge, did they?”

Darryl’s face was starting to redden with anger.

“That has nothing to do with...”

“Oh, be quiet, Darryl,” Cressida spat out. “You and I both know who should be running things, but they refused to let a woman take a seat at the Red Table. If I was...”

“Stop being hysterical, Cressida,” Darryl said.

“Hysterical? I should...”

Neither had noticed Jason edging closer from the moment he started provoking them, or when he slipped the gold coin in his mouth as they turned on one another. Strength flowed through him, again, but this time joined by pinching, cramping pain. It was too soon since he used the last coin, and his body was paying the price. He fought through it and stepped between the bickering pair. They both looked at him in surprise as he shoved a hand out either side, one slamming into each of them.

The result was like firing them from a catapult. They both hurtled through the air horizontally, not even arcing down with gravity before they smashed into the sides of the chamber. The sheer force crushed them into the hard stone, from which they tumbled down, out of sight.

-
- You have defeated [Blood Cult Leader].
 - You have defeated [Blood Cult Leader].
-

Chapter 12: Sanguine Horror

“That was amazing!” Gary said, coming up to slap Jason on the back. Jason staggered forward to support himself on the altar at the end of the platform.

“The way you made them disregard you as a threat by appearing weak and harmless,” Gary praised. “Feeble and helpless, even touched in the head a little. It was masterful how impotent you came across. Even after you kept escaping from the cage they had no respect for you as a threat whatsoever.”

“Please stop complimenting me,” Jason said. The strength of the coin was gone, and the backlash of two in quick succession was enervating. His mana and stamina bars had drained to almost empty, and adrenaline was the only thing keeping him awake.

“How did you get down off that wall?” Jason asked.

“The magic died with him,” Rufus said, also approaching. “Which was lucky, because it doesn’t always work that way.”

“You’d have had a right problem getting us down,” Gary said.

“How about someone gets me out of this cage?” a female voice asked, impatiently. It wasn’t the same voice that had been dismissing him back in the cellar. That person must have been the one whose place Jason took.

Jason staggered over to the cage, swiping the stone on top into his inventory as he took the keys out. The woman inside the cage was pretty with strawberry blonde hair and a button nose. She was clearly unhappy, but that just left her looking rather adorable. Jason opened up the cage and let her out.

“Thanks for the rescue,” she said to Jason, tamping down her annoyance, before blasting it full force at Rufus and Gary.

“What the hell were you two doing? I had to get saved by a random homeless man?”

“He only seems like that,” Gary said. “It’s all a cunning ruse.”

Jason left the three of them talking while he wandered back to the altar at the edge of the platform. It was decorated with grotesque carvings that appeared to feature teeth very heavily. On top of the altar was a thick book, left open halfway through. Glancing over the text, he could only understand fragments. Having used the ritual magic skill book he took from Landemere, the knowledge it imbued him with offered some insights, but this new book was still above his head. The contents seemed to involve a more specific field of magic, operating at a higher level than the skill book allowed him to grasp.

“What have you got?” The woman asked, walking up to the altar next to him.

“Not sure,” Jason said, pushing the book in front of her. “Looks like they were trying to make something, but it’s well beyond my expertise. I only found out magic exists today. I’m Jason, by the way.”

She gave him an odd look.

“Farrah. Thanks again for the rescue.”

“No worries. I figured the best way out of wherever we are was to get you three to help me. Can you make anything out from that book?”

She turned her attention back to the pages in front of her.

“You’re right about them making something,” she said, flipping through pages.

“Something not very nice.”

“I got that much from context,” he said, waving his hand at the chamber around them, black stone reflecting blood-red light from below.

“Fair point,” Farrah laughed.

While she continued examining the book, Jason looked around some more, noticing Gary and Rufus were gone.

“Where’d the others go?” he asked.

“They went to see if those cultists you led off are coming back.” Farrah said.

“I completely forgot about them,” Jason said.

Looking around some more, he found a small white sack next to the altar. He picked it up and looked inside, seeing a white, crystalline powder. He pinched some between his fingers.

Item: [Salt] (normal, common)

Ordinary salt (crafting material).

➤ Effect: Common ingredient for use in cooking or magic rituals.

“Salt?” he said curiously.

“It’s good for making quick and easy magic circles,” Farrah explained, not looking up from the book. “A lot of ritual magicians keep some around. Me included.”

Jason dropping the sack back down next to the altar. There didn’t seem to be anything else of interest, but he noticed that Farrah had the same iron collar as Gary and Rufus.

“I don’t suppose the key to your neck thing is here somewhere,” Jason said.

“Cressida had it,” Farrah said.

Jason glanced at the wall where Cressida had crashed into it before dropping out of sight.

“Oh. Sorry I pushed her into the pit.”

“Things would have gone a lot worse if you hadn’t,” Farrah said.

Jason looked over at the stairs leading down.

“Can I ask you something about Gary?” he asked.

“What’s that?”

“Are there a lot of lion people running around, or was he cursed or something?”

Farrah looked up from the book, again giving Jason a curious gaze.

“You’ve never seen a Leonid before?”

“I’m not local,” Jason said.

“That’s coming across,” she said. “Leonids are a normal race you’d see anywhere in the world.”

“Good to know,” Jason said.

She frowned, curiously, but turned back to the book while Jason continued to look around. He peered over the edge, looking down at the red pit far below. It could have been his imagination, but the room seemed to be getting hotter. The sloshing noise of the pit below seemed louder as well. He spotted Rufus and Gary making their way back up the stairs.

“The others are coming back up,” Jason said to Farrah.

“That’s not good,” Farrah said.

“That seems rude,” Jason said.

“No,” Farrah said, “I mean I figured what the cultists were up to.”

“Bad?”

“Very bad.”

She waited for Gary and Rufus to arrive before explaining.

“No sign of the other cultists,” Gary said, “and one of the wagons was gone. I’m guessing they came back, saw their high priest splattered on the ground and decided to make a run for it.”

Quest: [The Blood Feast]

- Objective complete: Avoid being sacrificed 1/1.
 - Reward: [Blood Essence].

 - Optional objective complete: Save the other designated sacrifices 3/3.
 - Reward: [Awakening Stone of Adventure].

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason's eyes lit up at the sight of another essence, but it wasn't the time to start going over his loot and he closed the window.

"I know what they were doing here," Farrah told Gary and Rufus.

"I'd assume some kind of summoning ritual," Rufus said.

"More like trying to create something," Farrah said. "It's called a sanguine horror; an artificial creature made from alchemy, blood and things best left unmentioned."

"Sounds friendly," Gary said.

"It's an apocalypse beast," Farrah said. "A world ender. A hive mind made up of carrion leeches that rot your flesh as they drain you dry. It feeds on blood to multiply itself, growing in mass and power until there's nothing strong enough to stop it. Then it spreads and spreads until there's nothing left to consume."

"Why would anyone create something like that?" Jason asked.

"They presumably had some way to control it," Rufus said. "Use it as a weapon."

"That's a big gamble with an apocalypse beast," Farrah said. "Maybe that's possible before it gets too powerful. Until it feeds enough to grow strong it remains vulnerable."

"Still seems like way too high a chance of going wrong," Jason said.

"Speaking of which," Rufus said, "have you noticed it's getting hotter in here?"

"No," Farrah said.

"Yes," Jason said at the same time.

"It's more noticeable closer to the pool," Rufus said.

"The smell is stronger down there too," Gary said.

"They should probably be tossing us into the blood pit by now," Rufus said. "Is something going wrong because we interrupted them?"

"I think we're overlooking something," Jason said.

"What's that?" Farrah asked.

“Are we sure we interrupted them? They were going to throw the four of us into the pit, right?”

“Right,” Rufus said.

“Well,” Jason said, “how many people did we throw in?”

Farrah’s pretty brown eyes went wide.

“Oh no,” she said, turning back to the altar and started madly flipping through pages of the book.

As the others waited, a screen appeared in front of Jason.

New Quest: [The Sanguine Horror]

- *Destroy the sanguine horror before it becomes too grave a threat.*
- **Objective:** Destroy the [Sanguine Horror] 0/1.
- **Reward:** Essence.

“Oh crap,” Jason said.

Farrah snapped the book shut. It was a hefty tome and she tucked it under one arm.

“I’m pretty sure we just finished their job for them,” Farrah said.

“I don’t think they’ll appreciate it,” Rufus said.

“Are we the blood cult now?” Gary asked.

“We have to get down there and stop it while it’s still weak,” Farrah said.

“Will the book help?” Gary asked.

“Not at all,” Farrah said.

“If we have to do it, we have to do it,” Rufus said. “Failing that, we go find someone stronger to deal with it. A lot stronger.”

“Do you think Emir has arrived yet?” Gary asked.

“No,” Rufus said. “He’s weeks away at best.”

“Then we need to handle this ourselves,” Farrah said. “I don’t trust the competence of the locals.”

“This guy’s alright,” Gary said, dropping a hand on Jason’s shoulder that almost knocked him over.

“I’m not local,” Jason said.

“I’m concerned that we don’t have our abilities with these collars,” Rufus said. “You’re sure there’s nothing in the book about how to fight it?”

“No, I’m not,” Farrah snapped. “I’ve had it for about eight minutes and it’s written in a language that you haven’t even heard of. So maybe there’s something in there, but I’m not going to find it by randomly skimming through a few pages.”

“Did you check for an index?” Gary asked.

Farrah’s eyes landed on Gary like attack dogs.

“I guess there’s no time for research,” Gary said, heading for the stairs.

“Let’s go,” Rufus said, following after Gary.

Farrah watched them vanish down the steep staircase, then turned to the back of the book. Jason narrowed his eyes as he watched her.

“Are you checking for an index?”

Chapter 13: This is the Part Where We Step Back

The three former captives pounded down the stairs as Jason followed unsteadily behind. As they went down the steep staircase, the smothering heat rose up to engulf them. The air became wetter and heavier until even breathing was a chore. The copper taste of blood felt like it was coating Jason's tongue. The pool was churning loudly, as if something was thrashing just below the surface. The sound echoed loudly, especially as they neared the base of the chamber. Near the end of the stairs they stepped over the corpse of High Priest Darryl, splayed out like a discarded puppet.

Jason touched a finger to the body as they passed.

➤ [Would you like to loot \[Blood Cult Leader\]?](#)

Jason gave his mental assent as they continued down the stairs.

-
- [\[Recovery Potion \(Bronze\)\] has been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [3 \[Gold Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [11 \[Silver Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [216 \[Bronze Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [341 \[Iron Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [471 \[Lesser Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
-

Like Landemere Vane, the high priest had been holding more than a thousand coins on his person. As to where he had them stowed away, Jason could only guess.

"Does everyone here have an inventory?"

"What?" Farrah asked loudly. It was hard to hear over the wild splashing of the blood pit as they drew closer.

"Nothing," Jason said loudly.

Jason's real interest was in the recovery potion, which he took from his inventory and tipped down his throat as soon as they reached the bottom of the chamber.

Farrah saw Jason tip back the potion and threw out a hand in a warning gesture.

"Jason, don't..."

The potion was already making its way down Jason's throat.

"What?" Rufus asked, as he and Gary turned around to look.

"Jason just drank a potion," Farrah said.

"Right after using a spirit coin?" Gary asked.

“Is that bad?” Jason asked “Actually, why didn’t the potion do anything?”

The others only answered in sympathetic wincing. Moments later, his stomach was filled with cramping pains. He doubled, felt his body desperately wanting to vomit, but unable to do so.

-
- You have used a recovery potion while your body is flooded with residual magic.
 - Recovery potion has failed to take effect.
 - You have been afflicted with [Mana Toxin].
-
- [Mana Toxin] (affliction, poison, magic): You cannot regain mana. Recovery items will have no effect. You will suffer damage when using mana.
-

Jason groaned. The initial pain passed, but now his stomach felt as awful as his head.

“I should have thought to warn you when you didn’t know how to use spirit coins,” Rufus said. “I didn’t realise you had any potions. Are you alright?”

“Honestly,” Jason croaked, “it isn’t going to affect me that much. There’s only so much worse I can get.”

Rufus nodded, and they turned to the giant pool of churning red liquid, Jason very much at the back. The space near the large doors leading out was the widest area around the pool, with most of the room having only a small lip between the edge of the red liquid and the wall. When they first entered the chamber, the pool had been churning in the middle. Now the whole thing was like a pot of water threatening to boil over, splashing red liquid over the sides.

“That can’t all be blood, right?” Jason shouted over noise.

“It isn’t,” Farrah called back. “Mostly it’s an alchemical mixture, although there is a lot of blood in there. At least a dozen people’s worth. Maybe twenty.”

“Are you sure we need to fight this monster?” Gary asked. “I’d feel a lot better without this collar on my neck.”

“We all would,” Rufus said.

“I’m just saying,” Gary said. “If I’m going to fight something called an apocalypse beast, I’d rather have my powers.”

“We do what we can with what we have,” Rufus said. “Complaining about what we don’t have doesn’t help.”

“It isn’t actually called an apocalypse beast,” Farrah said. “That’s more of an informal category.”

“That’s what we need,” Gary said, “Pedantry.”

“Did you say podiatry?” Jason yelled. The churn of the blood-like pool was growing louder and louder. “Is there something wrong with your feet?”

“I said pedantry!” Gary yelled back.

“Will you both please shut up!” Rufus bellowed.

“If we let this entity go,” Farrah yelled, “it will get out and start feeding on the local animals. The more it feeds, the stronger it gets. If it eats its way through a village or a town, then it will get too strong for any of the local powers to stop it.”

“Can we even do this with our abilities sealed away?” Gary asked. “A few cultists is one thing, but a world-destroying blood monster? We have one sword between us. Going for help might not be the worst idea.”

“Real help is a long way from here,” Farrah said.

The pair looked to Rufus for the deciding vote, who turned his attention to Jason.

“You’re the reason we aren’t all monster soup right now,” Rufus shouted. “The decision is yours.”

Jason looked at the three of them looking back at him. They clearly had no idea of the magnitude to which he was out of his depth.

“What are our actual chances?” Jason yelled.

“Terrible,” Gary said.

“Not good,” Rufus said.

“Getting better,” Farrah said, pointing. They all looked and saw Cressida’s body hadn’t fallen into the pool, but onto the stone floor at the edge of the chamber. Unfortunately, it was on the far side. That portion of the floor had barely a lip of stone between the pool and the wall, but Cressida had landed lengthways along it.

“She has the key to the collars,” Farrah said. “If I can get this thing off my neck, I can blast whatever crawls out of this pit back into blood soup.”

“Not sure I’d want to walk around the edge of that pool,” Jason said. “Sometimes all your choices are bad, I guess.”

“We do it, then,” Rufus said. “Farrah, go for the key, but be careful of the pool. Ideally you’ll have it and be back before this thing emerges, but Gary and I will stall it if we have to. Jason, what kind of combat abilities do you have?”

“None,” Jason shouted “I was taken out multiple times by a guy with a shovel. I am very bad at fighting.”

“That’s fine,” Rufus shouted back. “Just stay back and try not to die.”

Farrah was already moving, putting the book on the ground and setting off around the pool, not waiting for Rufus’ to finish talking. She carefully hugged the wall, wary of the

churning blood pit. Suddenly the blood, which had been roiling like a stormy sea, went as still and serene as a sheltered pond. The roaring noise they had all been shouting over immediately fell silent.

“Here we go,” Rufus said, his voice an intrusion to the sudden quiet.

Ripples disturbed the edge of the pool, and something emerged from the blood.

“Is that a leech?” Jason asked. It was the right size and shape for a leech, but had the gaping, tooth-ringed maw of a lamprey.

“I do not want that thing crawling up my leg,” Gary said.

“I think that’s a consensus opinion,” Jason agreed.

A second leech crawled out, then a third. They came two at a time, then five, ten until they were spraying out like runoff from a storm drain. They piled on top of one another, forming squirming, writhing mass.

“We should probably attack while it’s still forming,” Rufus said to Gary. “I don’t suppose you want to go first?”

“How am I supposed to fight a pile of leeches?” Gary asked. “I don’t think the sword will work. Also, you have our only sword.”

Strips of blood-soaked cloth, long and thin like bandages, started pushing their way out of the leech pile. They wrapped themselves around the leeches, pushing the pile into shape.

“Any idea what it’s doing?” Rufus asked.

“None,” Gary said. “Jason?”

When Jason didn’t answer, they turned to look around, finding Jason was no longer there.

Gary look up the stairs and out through the door, seeing no trace of Jason.

“He’s done a runner!”

There was no time for distraction and they turned back to the monster forming in front of them. More bloody strips were emerging from the pile, pushing into what they started to recognise as a humanoid shape. It was only a crude approximation, splitting at the seams as leeches spilled out between the bandages. It shambled forward, barely in half-steps, shedding leeches as it struggled to keep balance.

“Just stay close enough to keep its attention,” Rufus said. “It doesn’t seem very fast and we just have to stall it.”

“Or I could punch it,” Gary said. “It’s a person shape, now. I know how to punch people.”

“What? No...”

Gary's fist slammed into the creature, passing straight between the red-stained bandages and burying itself in the creature's chest. It seemed to have no impact and Gary staggered back. His arm emerging from the leech monster with a sucking noise like pulling out a leg stuck in mud. It was covered in leeches, burrowing through his fur to sink teeth into flesh. He staggered about, yelling more in anger than pain as he started ripping them off. Chunks of flesh and fur went with them, clenched in rings of teeth.

The bindings around the mass slowly tightened, giving it a more discernibly humanoid shape. It grew faster and more coordinated. Frowning, Rufus tossed aside the sword and picked up the heavy book Farrah had left behind. Winding up as he lunged at the creature, he took a huge, two-handed swing.

The book slammed into the creature's torso, sending it staggering back. The bindings loosened, leeches once again spilling out of the main mass. The floor was now covered with them, crawling at Gary and Rufus, seeking out their legs.

Rufus watched with satisfaction, stepping back from the seeking leeches.

"And she said the book wouldn't help."

Rufus failed to notice the leech crawling over the book until its teeth buried themselves in his hand, causing him to yelp as the book dropped to the floor. He tore the creature off his hand, a chunk of flesh going with it. He reached down for the book, but there were leeches crawling all over it.

"Help!" he heard Farrah call out, and he looked around. Gary was still wildly ripping leeches off his now blood-soaked arm. Farrah was most of the way around the pool, but bloodied bandages, like those wrapping the leech monster, had emerged from the pool and were trying to drag her in.

Rufus looked around for where he had dropped the sword, picking it up and hurling it through the air. His confident throw was on the mark, dropping only a few feet from Farrah. She hauled back on the bandages trying to pull her into the pool, leaning hard for the sword.

The leech monster, in the mean time, had once again tightened its bindings and started walking toward Rufus. He skittered back, still faster than the creature but its speed increased with every step.

Rufus stumbled, falling onto his back with the creature still coming at him, when a bright light descended from above. Jason, starlight cloak floating around him at maximum illumination, drifted down to land between Rufus and the sanguine horror. Tucked under one arm was a small sack. Reaching into the sack, Jason grabbed a fistful of salt and

tossed it at the horror. The creature recoiled and Jason did it again, forcing the creature back again.

“I’m really glad that worked.”

“What is that?” Rufus asked, getting lightly to his feet.

“Salt,” Jason said, throwing out another handful.

“Did you use mana while suffering from mana toxin?” Gary asked, wandering over. His arm was drenched in blood and still looked to be bleeding freely, but the leeches were gone and he didn’t seem worried.

“Seemed time sensitive,” Jason said. “Oh, this hurts. I was pretty much bottomed-out on mana in the first place.

Gary looked over Jason’s cloak of stars.

“You weren’t kidding about a power that makes you sparkle.”

Suddenly an explosion of light and noise erupted from the other side of the pool. A bright stream of lava cut through the air like it was coming from a fire hose, crashing into the leech monster. Jason’s head pivoted, goggle-eyed to the source of the blast.

“Was that frigging LAVA?”

Farrah, collar now gone, was holding a glowing red hand out toward the creature. She mumbled something and a second stream of lava blasted across the chamber. The blood pit audibly sizzled as the lava seared over it, scouring moisture from the air. After two bursts of white-hot lava, the leech monster was largely destroyed, the bindings holding it together completely unravelled.

“This is the part where we step back,” Rufus said, putting a hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“*This* is the part?”

Jason could still feel the heat on his face as he staggered back behind Rufus, then back some more for good measure. He heard chanting from Farrah across the pool and looked over. There were several orbs of fire floating around her. One of the cloth strips burst from the pool to grab at her, but was intercepted by an orb, burning up on contact.

She stopped chanting and Jason heard a rumbling from the direction of what was left of the leech pile. It started to scatter, but a cascade of lava geysered out of the ground underneath it. Gary, Jason and Rufus backed off even further as lava spattered around the geyser before it dwindled and came to a stop.

Jason looked at the glowing hole left behind, jaw hanging slack. The red light from the blood pool faded and died, plunging the chamber into darkness. Only Jason’s cloak and the remnant glow of lava provided any illumination.

“We need to get every leech!” Farrah called out. “It can reconstitute itself, even from one!”

Jason looked around the floor. The main mass of leeches had been incinerated, but many leeches had spilled onto the floor as Rufus and Gary stalled it. Salt bag tucked under his arm, he started flinging handfuls at the leeches while Rufus and Gary stomped them underfoot. While the leech mass had only recoiled from the salt, individual leeches vomited blood from their tooth-ringed mouths as they dried up and died.

Eventually there was nothing left of the leeches but blood stains and ash.

➤ You have defeated [Sanguine Horror].

Quest: [The Sanguine Horror]

- Objective: Destroy the sanguine horror 1/1.
- Reward: [Sin Essence].

- Quest complete.
- 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

Jason edged forward warily. He noticed a leech that had managed to get far enough away that it was burnt to a crisp instead of being completely annihilated. He poked it with his toe.

➤ Would you like to loot [Sanguine Horror]?

Jason gave his mental assent.

-
- [Awakening Stone of the Apocalypse] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 100 [Iron Coins] have been added to your inventory.

Jason looked at the listed awakening stone. Apocalypse.

That didn't sound wildly positive.

Chapter 14: Worlds Apart

Jason sat on the bottom stair of the chamber while Farrah removed the collars from Rufus and Gary. His whole body was wracked in pain after using the last of his mana to conjure the cloak and float down from the top of the chamber.

“Explain something to me,” Jason said. “If you can do...”

He gestured at the sections of wall and floor melted by lava.

“...that, then how did they catch you in the first place?”

“Ambush,” Rufus said. “We were meant to resupply and get information from a local contact. Instead, he set us up for capture.”

“We’re going to go find him,” Gary said.

“And have a sizzling conversation,” Farrah added.

“But first,” Rufus said, “we have to get back to the Vane Estate. They still have Anisa and I’m concerned about the cultists that Jason lured away. If they left because they saw the tides turning, they’re probably heading back to the Estate.”

“You think they’ll use Anisa as a hostage?” Gary asked.

“Possibly,” Rufus said. “They might take her for leverage, or worse.”

After the collars were removed, Rufus and Gary started stretching like they’d just woken up. Farrah, in the meantime, held her hand out over the ground and chanted something quietly. It was a short chant, only a few words. When she was done, a large chest made of dark brown stone rose out of the ground. It didn’t break through the floor, instead rising up through it, like a ghost. Farrah pushed open the hinged, heavy lid and took out fresh clothes for herself, Gary and Rufus. They all started changing clothes, having no qualms stripping down to their underwear in front of Jason or each other.

Jason glanced surreptitiously at the three of them. Rufus and Farrah had the bodies of Olympic athletes; lean muscle filled with the power of coiled springs. Gary was so huge he made bodybuilders look like they were still under construction. His wild mane and leonine features completed his majestic appearance. Jason didn’t know what passed for handsome in Gary’s species, but he suspected Gary was it.

“Why am I the only one who isn’t super good-looking?”

“What?” Rufus asked, looking over as he pulled on a shirt.

Jason thought back to the beautiful Cressida Vane, standing next to the ordinary-looking high priest Darryl, and was struck by an unpleasant revelation.

“I’m the Darryl,” he said disconsolately.

“What are you talking about?” Rufus asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jason said, shoulders slumping gloomily.

“Clothes are fine,” Farrah said, “but we need to get our gear back.”

“I just hope the ones who left didn’t go back to the manor and swipe it all,” Gary said.

Watching the others change clothes reminded Jason that he had completed the quest to get a shirt. He’d forgotten because that was two cages and a shovel to the head ago. He stood up and pulled the shirt from his inventory, discovering it was plain, white T-shirt, complete with what looked like machine stitching. Holding it out in front of him, he read the text printed on the front.

I WENT TO A MAGICAL ALTERNATE UNIVERSE AND ALL I GOT WAS VAST COSMIC POWER.

Jason shook his head.

“This must be what insanity feels like.”

“What does it say?” Gary asked, moving up to examine the shirt.

“You can’t read this?” Jason asked.

“It’s not in any language I know,” Gary said.

“Probably for the best,” Jason said as he pulled on the shirt.

-
- You have equipped [Starting Gear] outfit. Outfit tab has been added to your inventory.

“Outfit tab?”

“What?” Gary asked.

“Nothing, never mind.” Jason said.

Jason checked his inventory, which now had a second screen he could access with a tab at the top labelled ‘outfits’. Jason was now used to navigating the screens with a thought and opened the new section. It showed a silhouette with various slots for equipment, most of which were empty. There was also a column to the left, empty aside from two entries. The first was listed as ‘starter gear’, the second as ‘new outfit’.

“How does that work,” he muttered to himself.

Help: Outfits.

- You can designate sets of gear as outfits, allowing you to quickly switch between them. Outfits can be modified by adding or removing items from item slots. An outfit can only be equipped so long as all items in that outfit are in the inventory or already equipped.
-

“Huh.”

He noticed the others were all watching him stare into the distance and mumble to himself.

“You alright there, Jason?” Gary asked.

“Sure,” Jason said. “Actually, now you say it...”

He'd been pushing through on a potent mix of panic and adrenaline, but now the immediate threat was gone he was starting to crash. His wooziness came back, his vision going dark and blurry. He stumbled forward, dropping to his hands and knees as his empty stomach again tried to heave out what wasn't there. The next thing Jason knew, something was being splashed over his face.

Sputtering awake, he was helped into a sitting position and a glass bottle was shoved into his hands.

“Drink it,” Farrah said. “It's just water. You can't take any potions for at least a couple of hours.”

As Jason slowly sipped at his water, he looked over the icons he could see at the edge of his vision. The health silhouette showed a warning yellow all over, with a more ominous orange on his head and mid-section. The potion cooldown icons were also present, but were completely greyed out. There was an icon for the mana toxin, with more than two hours listed under it.

While Jason was taking stock of his miserable condition, the others were recovering theirs with stamina potions from the magic chest. After drinking his, Rufus made a sour face.

“Oh, that was sickly. What happened to the other potions?”

“Gary chose the flavour,” Farrah said.

“I think it's nice,” Gary said defensively.

“Me too,” Farrah said. “Rufus only likes things when they're bitter.”

After letting him rest awhile, Gary pulled Jason easily to his feet. Jason wavered and Gary held him upright until the dizziness passed.

“Thanks,” Jason said. “I've passed out... three? Four times today? I think my brain might be bleeding.”

“We can't use potions on you any time soon,” Farrah said, “but once we get Anisa back, she can heal you.”

“What are we waiting for, then?” Jason said.

They left the chamber through the huge stone doors. Jason glanced back at the space he had hidden in behind one of them. The tunnel was surprisingly long, carved directly out of the stone.

“Who made this tunnel?” Jason asked. “It must have been a tough job.”

“Wouldn’t be that hard,” Farrah said. “Construction magic would make it a straightforward process.”

She looked up and down the extensive length of the tunnel.

“Might have taken a while, though,” she acknowledged.

They emerged from a gap that, at a distance, would have looked like a natural crevice. They were on the gentle slope of the lower portion of a mountain that tapered up to a towering height. The upper reaches were black and lifeless, while the lower portions turned to yellow stone and red earth, with patchy coverage of dry, yellow grass. There was a wagon outside the tunnel, wheels chocked to stop it rolling down the slope. It had a yoke for animals, but the harness was cut and the animals were gone.

“Did they scatter the horses so we couldn’t use the wagon?” Jason asked.

“What are horses?” Gary asked.

“You’ve never heard of horses?”

The other three shook their heads.

“Then what was pulling the wagon?” Jason asked.

“Heidels,” Gary said.

“What’s a heidel?”

“It’s a work animal, the kind you see everywhere,” Gary said. “They pull wagons, carry packs. You can ride them. I can too, but you can tell they don’t like it.”

“Maybe the name is just different,” Jason said. “Four legs, hooves?”

“Sounds right,” Farrah said.

“Long body,” Jason continued, “long head.”

“Heads,” Gary corrected.

“Heads?” Jason said. “As in more than one?”

“Yeah, two heads, scales, horns...”

“That sounds horrifying,” Jason said. “We are definitely not talking about the same animal.”

“The animal doesn’t matter if there aren’t any here,” Rufus said. “Which means we start walking.”

Jason looked down the slope, getting a panoramic view of the land below. It was a flat, dry landscape of sandy yellows and sober reds, punctuated by withered grass or spiky

scrub. Every so often, a low tree with sparse foliage would jut reluctantly up from the barren earth. The sun hammered relentlessly down over all of it, but the arid air was almost pleasant after the cloying humidity of the sacrifice chamber.

The climate bore no resemblance to the moderate warmth and lush greenery he had experienced in the hedge maze. Even the heat had felt different there, more pleasantly warm than this unforgiving desert air. He remembered looking at the world map, a warped, but not entirely different globe to the one with which he was familiar. It marked his position as being in the Kalahari Desert, which matched the terrain now before him.

They started down the slope, Gary in the lead. He was wearing loose clothing to let air flow through, along with a hood to shield him from the sun. The others were wearing more fitted clothes but didn't appear discomforted.

"They brought us here while I was unconscious, right?" Jason asked.

"That's right," Rufus said.

"How long was I knocked out for? This is very different from the place we were before."

They all turned to look him with curiosity.

"The Vane Estate was using climate magic," Farrah said. "Didn't you notice when you went there in the first place?"

"Actually, how did you get involved with all this?" Rufus asked. "Now that we have time to talk."

"Um, I think I might have been summoned," Jason said. "Not on purpose, obviously. I mean, who'd summon me? I went to bed, which was last night, as far as I know, and woke up in the middle of the Vane family hedge maze. I sort of stumbled around for a bit until I found one of the residents, and from what I gather he was trying to summon something and got me instead. He called me something that sounded specific. I don't remember what, exactly. 'Other-worlder,' maybe?"

"Outworlder?" Rufus suggested.

"Sounds right," Jason said. "Is that what the name suggests? Is this really a whole different world?"

"We've always been in this one," Rufus said. "You'd have to tell us if it's different enough from where you came from."

Jason thought about the flying eels and leech monsters, people throwing around magic chains and streams of lava. Healing potions, reading languages he'd never seen before. The magic powers he'd used for himself. All of it was impossible.

“It’s definitely different enough,” Jason said. “My world has its share of strangeness, but this is a whole different kind of strange. Some things are weirdly the same, though. Like hedge mazes, and people named Gary. I have a cousin named Gary. Not as tall as you, Gary, but almost as hairy.”

“He’s a leonid?” Gary asked.

“I think it’s a glandular thing. We don’t have leonids on my world.”

“I’m not well versed in astral magic,” Farrah said. “I’ve heard of outworlders, but it isn’t my field of expertise.”

“Alternate realities maybe,” Jason said. “Some things are the same, others different. If that’s what this is, then this world diverged from mine a very long time ago. The continents are different, but not completely. The fundamental physical laws here have some interesting addenda. My world doesn’t have magic, at all. Or a second moon. I did see a second moon, right?”

“Your world only has one moon?” Gary asked. “That’s weird.”

Chapter 15:

Outworlder

They continued walking through the stony desert. There was a rough trail to follow back to the manor, and Jason's map ability had apparently been plotting locations, even when he was unconscious. The hard ground was uneven but not too difficult to walk on.

There was a stash of water bottles in Jason's inventory, provided from Farrah's own magical storage space. The pounding heat was not helping Jason's condition and he emptied one bottle after another.

Jason was grateful they were walking over dry, hard earth instead of weren't trudging through endless sand dunes. His knowledge of African geography was limited but he'd seen a documentary about Namibia's Skeleton Coast once. From what he could remember, things got very sandy there. Of course, it could be a completely different in another world.

The others helped introduce him to their world as they marched on.

"What I don't understand," Jason said, "is why I have abilities that I never had before. Is it because my world doesn't have magic, but this one does?"

"I'm not sure," Farrah said. "I don't know much about outworlders."

"I'd never heard of them before this," Gary said, "so don't look at me."

"I've met some before," Rufus said, prompting groans from Gary and Farrah.

"What?" Rufus asked.

"Of course you have." Gary complained.

"What's wrong with that?" Rufus asked again.

"Your childhood friend is the Crown Princess of Vitesse," Farrah said.

"This again?" Rufus asked. "It's not my fault who my parents chose to socialise with."

"So, Rufus is a big deal?" Jason asked.

"No."

"Yes."

"Yes."

Rufus glared at the other two.

"I do know a little bit about outworlders," Rufus said. "They've been pulled into our world from another one through some magical accident. Usually a summoning spell that's gone awry."

"The evil cult lady's son," Jason said. "He blamed me for ruining his magic thing."

"That's how it usually works," Rufus said. "As far as I'm aware. I'm no expert."

“This happens enough that there’s a name for it?” Jason asked.

“My understanding is that it’s something that happens in high-magic worlds like ours,” Rufus said. “I really don’t know any more than that.”

“Is there a way to go back home?” Jason asked.

“I’m not sure,” Rufus said. “If there is, it probably involves magic well above our level, let alone yours.”

Jason bowed his head in disappointment.

“Jason, tell me if this sounds familiar,” Rufus said. “Do you have some kind of guide that helps you interact with our world? Something that doesn’t fit our world but does fit yours. Maybe something you’ve heard of from a legend, or a part of your world’s mythic traditions. Something that exists in your world as a story, but here has become real.”

Jason thought about the video game interface he had been experiencing. The quests, the inventory system. The map he had open at that moment, even if the others couldn’t see it.

“I think I know what you’re talking about.”

“That’s something all outworlders have,” Rufus said. “It works differently for every outworlder, but whatever magic that brought them here changes them. It gives them abilities to help them adapt and survive.”

“That’s why I can read languages I’ve never seen?”

“And speak languages you’ve never spoken,” Rufus added.

Jason frowned.

“Someone say something,” Jason said.

“You didn’t even realise it, did you?” Rufus asked.

Jason focused on the sounds, rather than the words. It wasn’t English. He didn’t know if it was more disturbing that he could speak some unknown language or that he didn’t notice he was doing it.

“I have an ability,” he said, listening to the sounds he was making. “One of the effects is called language adaptation. Does that mean I can speak any language and not even notice?”

“Most likely,” Rufus said.

“That’s why you sound like you learned the language from a skill book,” Gary said.

“I do?”

“You do,” Farrah said. “There’s a recognisably neutral accent and things sometimes come across as odd because of the difference in language structure. It’s a giveaway, if you’ve seen it enough. Colloquialisms can translate very strangely.”

“Your telling me the old lingo is hard yakka to get the noggin around?” Jason asked, leaving them looking at each other in confusion.

“It seems there’s a limit to the translation,” Rufus said. “You might want to stick to plain language.”

“Stuff that for a bag of chips,” Jason said, laughing as three brows creased in confusion.

“I’d love to know how that got translated,” he said

They continued on, answering more of Jason’s questions as they trudged through the desert. At least, Jason trudged. The others looked as comfortable as they would strolling through a park.

“Outworlders like you might have their advantages,” Farrah said, “but we natives have advantages of our own. Take Gary, here. His leonid race are stronger and faster than us, and that’s only the beginning of what leonids can do. Elves are powerful spell casters and their skill with healing magic is unparalleled.”

“I forgot there were elves” Jason said. “Some guy said he wanted to eat one.”

“That’s not good,” Gary said.

“They’re cannibals, Gary,” Farrah said. “Of course it’s not good.”

“What about dwarves?” Jason asked. “Gnomes? Non-copyrighted small people who live inside hillocks?”

“I don’t know what any of those things are,” Gary said. “Except for hillocks.”

“We have elves,” Rufus said. “Leonids like Gary, obviously. We’ll eventually be heading for a port city, so while this region is human-dominated, you’ll see all kinds of people.”

“Each of which have their own special gifts,” Farrah said. “Some are there from birth, while others only show themselves once you get essences. Humans like Rufus and I are kind of like you, in a way. Our abilities differ from person to person, based on our essences. They start out dormant and we have to figure out how to wake them up.”

“How do you do that?” Jason asked.

“You push yourself,” Rufus said. “Take yourself to the limit and beyond.”

“I wouldn’t complain too loudly,” Gary said. “Humans have their essence abilities increase faster than other races. They’re kind of annoying about it.”

“Do I get that?” Jason asked. “I’m human, right?”

“Um... I have some bad news,” Rufus said. “You’re an outworlder, now. Not a human.”

“I’m not a human?”

“Not strictly, no” Rufus said. “You might be kind of human.”

“That somehow sounds worse,” Jason said.

“I met an elf outworlder,” Rufus said. “She retained some of her race’s abilities, while others were replaced by her outworlder gifts. It’s possible you might still have some human abilities.”

“Every race gets exactly six gifts,” Farrah said. “There are ways of examining them with magic.”

“I can do that myself,” Jason said.

“You can?” Farrah asked.

“No worries,” Jason said, pulling up his list of abilities.

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

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

“I have a half-dozen already,” he said. “I think these might all be outworlder abilities. Do humans normally get astral affinity?”

“Definitely not,” Farrah said. “That’s something celestines get.”

“Celestines?” Jason said. “That’s not something we have where I’m from.”

“They’re similar to elves and humans,” Farrah said. “One of the many new kinds of people you get to meet.”

“As long as none of them try to eat me,” Jason said.

As they walked on across rocky desert landscape, the dry heat started to overwhelm Jason. His head started throbbing worse and worse until he was no longer walking in a straight line. They found a rocky outcropping to rest in the shadow of, Rufus helping Jason along.

The others fetched out bronze spirit coins while Jason sipped at his water, laying back on the warm rock.

“You don’t need water?” Jason asked Gary. The enormous leonid was covered in fur, which can’t have been pleasant in the desert heat.

“Gary’s people require a lot more exertion than the rest of us to get tired,” Rufus said. “Another one of his racial gifts.”

“Also, when you have a full set of essences, you don’t need to eat or drink anymore,” Gary said. “You can, of course, but just for pleasure.”

“To actually sustain ourselves,” Rufus said, “we need a concentrated source of raw magic.”

He held up the spirit coin he was holding.

“There are various ways to get it,” he continued, “but spirit coins are the easiest, by far.”

“You’re lucky I even had that water,” Farrah said, “because we don’t need it. I just like to be prepared.”

“If you’re using coins,” Jason said. “What about the after-effects? Using those coins knocked it right out of me.”

Rufus popped the spirit coin into his mouth.

“It’s about not going over your limit,” Rufus said. “We’re bronze-rank adventurers, so a bronze coin will sustain us without stressing our bodies.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Jason said.

“What, bronze rank?” Gary asked.

“Also, adventurer,” Jason said. “Is that where you guys hang around in a tavern until someone hires you to kill forty gnolls in a dungeon?”

“What’s a gnoll?” Gary asked.

“And why would there be forty of them in a dungeon?” Farrah added. “Are gnolls a kind of criminal?”

“There’s an organisation,” Rufus said, forestalling more unhelpful questions. “It’s called the Adventure Society. They give out jobs to people like us, mostly to deal with monsters that are threatening towns, villages or whatever.”

“But sometimes to investigate a cult full of bloodthirsty cannibals,” Gary added.

“As for bronze rank,” Rufus said, “that’s related to your essence powers. Once you have all four essences, you become iron rank, and you can work your way up from there. Bronze is one rank above iron, but you can worry about that later. Reaching iron rank will fundamentally change you. Make you powerful.”

“Not that powerful,” Farrah said. “Not straight away. You become partially resistant to attacks that don’t have any magic behind them. You live on magic instead of food and water.”

“But my world doesn’t have any magic,” Jason said. “Doesn’t that mean if I became iron rank or whatever and then go back, I’d eventually run out of coins and starve?”

“You can get by on food and water,” Farrah said. “It just takes more of it, depending on how powerful you are. Some foods are better than others. Meat, sugar, anything with magical ingredients, obviously.”

Jason was relieved. He could handle living on protein bars and cake. Was he immune to getting fat?

“We owe you for getting us out of that mess,” Rufus said. “We’ll help you find a full set of essences.”

“Well, I do have a couple of extras,” Jason said. “On top of the one I used, already.”

“Where did you get those?” Gary asked. “I thought you only arrived in this world today.”

“I did,” Jason said. “I just kind of... came across them.”

Rufus raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“You just came across them?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “You know; here and there.”

“I can do an essence ritual for you,” Farrah said. “Not before we find Anisa, of course. Who did the ritual for your first essence?”

Farrah’s suggestion prompted some of the ritual magic knowledge in Jason’s mind the skill book had put there. Remembering something he never learned in the first place was an odd sensation, like *déjà vu*. The new knowledge in his head told him that an essence ritual was required for a person to absorb an essence. Except, he knew from experience that wasn’t always true.

“I didn’t actually use a ritual,” Jason said. “I just kind of absorbed it. I think it was part of the same power that lets me speak all the languages.”

“What was that like?” Gary asked. “Just straight-up absorbing it?”

“Strenuous,” Jason said. “I passed out.”

“Can I watch when you do the next one?” Farrah asked. She was looking at Jason like a scientist with a lab rat.

“It wouldn’t hurt to have someone watching out for you,” Rufus said. “We at least owe you that much.”

“I haven’t even decided what I want to do,” Jason said. “I’ve been too busy trying to not die.”

“What’s to think about?” Gary asked. “Who doesn’t want power?”

“Hey look,” Farrah said, pointing out ahead of them. “I can see it.”

As they crested a rise they could see, in the distance, a strange patch of green in the middle of the desert.

“Let’s pick up the pace,” Rufus said.

“I don’t think I can,” Jason said. Under the harsh desert sun he was sweating buckets, his skin tingling with the promise of sunburn.

“Farrah, get him another bottle of water,” Rufus said. “Gary, are you alright to carry him?”

“Wait, carry me?” Jason said. “That doesn’t sound very dignified.”

The others turned to look at him and he looked down at himself. The filthy skin and clothes; the stains from blood, muck and sweat. The ridiculous shirt. Then there was the smell that all the sweating had turned from bad to egregious.

“Never mind,” he said.

Chapter 16: Rescue Party

Rufus, Farrah and Gary were racing across the desert, feet pounding into the dry earth. Rufus had told Jason they would be running at a sustainable pace. Their unflagging momentum confirmed his words, but they were moving at a pace that, in Jason's world, would be the equal of world class sprinters.

Jason had little time to think about such things as they stormed over the rough ground at ten metres a second. He was draped over Gary's back like a cloak, legs flailing as he desperately clenched his arms around the tree trunk Gary used as a neck. Any concerns over dignity quickly went out the window. His only objective became not getting thrown off.

The edge of the estate grounds was startlingly apparent; a green line of grass and trees cutting across the barren browns and yellows of the desert. Like stepping into a different world, a single step took them from scorched air and unyielding earth to cool grass and a welcoming breeze.

They slowed down and stopped just across the line. Rufus and Farrah crouched, hands on knees, panting heavily while Jason poured off Gary's back to form a puddle on the ground. He groaned miserably as Gary looked down at him.

"You've built up quite a sweat for a guy who didn't do any running," Gary chuckled. Despite all his fur, body mass and having carried Jason, he wasn't even breathing heavily like Rufus and Farrah. He looked as comfortable as if he'd been lounging at a pool, rather than sprinting through the desert. Jason, sweating enough for both of them, raised his head to retort.

"Brshrglkrk."

He didn't care that his mouth was too dry for vowels, only regretting the energy he had expended to lift his head. He was happy to let it drop back onto the soft grass.

Farrah once again pulled her magic chest out of the ground. Retrieving a handful of potion vials, she handed one each to Rufus and Gary.

"Stamina potions," she said.

"I'm fine," Gary said as Rufus knocked his back without hesitation.

"I think he needs one more than any of us," Farrah said, looking at Jason. "Too bad, really."

"He has water," Rufus said.

Jason pushed his unwilling body into a sitting position and pulled a bottle from his inventory. He started chugging it thirstily.

“Life is hard, outworlder,” Rufus said without sympathy. “And you, my friend, are soft. If you want to get by in this world, you’ll need to toughen up.”

Jason struggled to his feet.

“How did you all handle the desert so well?” Jason asked. “I was being carried and it broke me. I think I got sunburn through my clothes.”

“How much do you know about the four attributes?” Rufus asked.

“I remember that there are attributes,” Jason said. “Now that you say it. There’s the strength one and... some others.”

“One of the others is recovery,” Farrah said. “Our recovery attributes are all in the upper range of bronze tier, so our bodies replenish themselves as fast as the desert can take it out of us.”

“Unless we push ourselves too hard,” Rufus said. Jason unhappily compared himself to Rufus, whose glistening sweat and unconscious poise made him look like a model for an athletics calendar. Jason, by contrast, looked like a rag someone had just used to clean up a spill.

Replenished somewhat by the water and the rest, Jason took a look at the startling border between desert and garden. It was a straight line, like a border between worlds. A single step went from scorched, desert earth to springtime in an English country garden. Looking along the border, Jason spotted pillars placed periodically along the edge, white stone columns with magic symbols carved into the surface.

“Are those things making it like this in the middle of the desert?” Jason asked.

“They’re only part of it,” Farrah said. “It takes a large and sophisticated system to make something like this work.” She handed out spirit coins to Gary and Rufus. All three popped them into their mouths.

“What now?” Gary asked.

“Now we get to the manor house,” Rufus said. “We find Anisa and kill everyone else.”

“I like this plan,” Gary said. Grey light started sparkling around him, growing thicker until it formed a set of metal armour, encasing his entire body. It was thick and heavy, made from dark steel plates held together with large bolts. Engraved into the surface were runes that looked to have been carved out with a blade, rough but radiating strength. Where the engravings dug into the dark metal, red forge light shone from within.

“That’s impressive,” Jason said. “Isn’t it hot in there?”

“Heat I can handle,” Gary said. After seeing him sprint through the desert like he was jogging on the beach, Jason believed it.

Rufus held out a hand, around which motes of golden light were gathering. The light coalesced into a sword in Rufus’ hand, an elegant scimitar that seemed as much a work of art as a weapon. The hilt was a vibrant red gold, as was the edge of the blade. The bulk of the blade was yellow gold that shone like the sun, with red gold inscriptions running down its graceful curve.

After Gary and Rufus called their impressive equipment, Jason looked over at Farrah.

“All the stuff I conjure is made of rock,” Farrah said. “I’m not carrying that lot around.”

“I’d conjure up my cloak,” Jason said, “but even if I had the mana, I think it’d kill me.”

“What can that cloak ability do?” Rufus asked.

“It gets bright or dark,” Jason said unenthusiastically. “It can also make me lighter, so I can jump from high places.”

Suddenly he perked up.

“Oh, and it lets me walk on water,” he said. “I haven’t tried that yet, though.”

“I have some magic boots that let me do that,” Rufus said, then frowned. “At least I did, until they were taken from me. We’ll get our equipment back after we’ve freed Anisa.”

Before sending away the stone chest, Farrah took out two belts with heavy pouches. One was grey, which she handed over to Gary, the other red, which she kept for herself.

“What are those?” Jason asked. He watched Farrah loop her belt into her clothes, while Gary tied it around the outside of his armour. The heavy metal suit barely seemed to impede him.

“Summoning materials,” Farrah said.

“Summoning?” Jason asked.

“You’ll see soon enough,” Rufus said. “Let’s not tarry more than we have to.”

They set off through the grounds. The outer areas were manicured woodlands, shaded gravel trails making their way through artfully placed trees and shrubbery. Somewhere he could hear the babbling of a stream.

“This is nice,” Jason said, looking around.

“Indulgent,” Rufus criticised. “They should be working with the surroundings instead of against them. The cost of building and maintaining all this in the middle of the desert is beyond extravagant.”

“I know what you’re talking about,” Gary said. “There’s a desert city not too far from where I grew up. It has a subterranean river, and half the city is built underground around

it. They use the natural landscape to their advantage. Hardly any core infrastructure requires magical upkeep.”

“Is that Zartos you’re talking about?” Rufus asked.

“Wait, did you just say Zardo?” Jason asked.

“No, Zartos,” Rufus said. “Is Zardo a place in your world?”

“No, Zardo is…” Jason searched for the best way to describe it. “Let’s just say it’s for the best you didn’t say Zardo.”

“Have you been to Zartos, Rufus?” Gary asked.

“No, my brother told me about it,” Rufus said. “He said it was definitely worth seeing.”

“Knowing your brother,” Farrah said, “he probably meant the women.”

“He’s not that bad,” Rufus said, prompting looks from Gary and Farrah. “He’s not.”

“Zartos has a large celestine community,” Gary said. “But I suppose your brother didn’t tell you about that.”

“He may have mentioned it,” Rufus said evasively. “In passing.”

“Celestines,” Jason said. “That’s another one of the races in this world, right?”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “Like elves they’re famous for being attractive to human sensibilities.”

“We only have humans in my world,” Jason said. “The idea of meeting whole new races is exciting.”

He slapped Gary on the back, which was currently encased in metal.

“But you’ll always be my first, Gary,” Jason said.

“I like your attitude,” Gary said. “Humans have something of a bad reputation when it comes to other races.”

“I can believe it,” Jason said. “My world only has humans and we’re still awful to one another. My Dad’s parents came from a different country from where I grew up, so I look different from most of the people I know. People in my own country look at me like I’m a foreigner. Even the people who do look like me call me a banana.”

“A banana?” Farrah asked.

“Yellow on the outside, white on the inside,” Jason said. “My Mum’s name is Cheryl; why can’t I listen to Pat Benetar without people turning it into a thing.”

The other three looked at each other, shaking their heads.

“I don’t think any of us know what that means,” Farrah said.

“Probably for the best,” Jason said.

The cultivated woodlands were small, soon giving way to gardens of colourful flowers. The pathway continued out from the woods weaving its way through the garden beds.

Beyond lay the manor house, which Jason hadn't seen from the outside before. Like the grounds, it was very much in the vein of a sprawling English country house. Three storeys of old stone and dozens of windows, in the old money style.

"I think that's the hedge maze over there," Jason said, pointing as they made their way through the garden. "I woke up in there with no idea of where I was or what was going on."

"That's where they found you?" Gary asked.

"It would be nice if it was that simple," Jason said.

"Quiet," Rufus ordered. "We could meet enemies at any point. We have no idea how many were left behind or if the others came back from the sacrifice chamber."

"Are you sure I should be going with you?" Jason asked. "I'm not exactly an asset if combat breaks out."

"You want to stay by yourself?" Rufus asked.

"Uh, no. Now that I think about it."

"Then shut up."

They moved out from among the flowerbeds and onto the lawn in front of the manor.

"Seems quiet," Rufus said.

"Use our summons now?" Farrah asked.

"We go quiet as we can until we find Anisa," Rufus said. "We don't want someone deciding to make her a hostage."

Suddenly glass shattered as a person crashed through a second storey window. He landed hard on the ground, but immediately scrambled up and into a sprint. He was taken aback to find the four people looking at him, but didn't pause as he kept running.

"You think you can run from me?" a woman's voice roared from the broken window, prompting a laugh from Gary.

"I don't think we have to worry about someone taking her hostage," he said.

Three spheres of bright light erupted from the broken window, spinning around each other as they pursued the fleeing man. He was bleeding from the broken glass and limping from the fall, but still moving faster than Jason could have managed. It still wasn't enough to escape the accelerating spheres of light, flashing white and gold as they unerringly pursued him.

When they caught up, the spheres started spinning around the man, firing beams of light into his body. He let out a painful cry with every beam that lanced into his flesh, but he kept moving in the drive to escape. The orbs tenaciously followed his every movement,

firing over and over until he dropped. His screams gave way to dead silence. The spheres vanished.

The group looked back to the broken window, in which a pretty blonde woman was now standing. She stepped out into the air, light glowing under her feet as she delicately drifted to the ground. She started walking across the lawn to meet them.

“Didn’t you all say she was the healer?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” Rufus said.

“This lady here,” Jason said. “The one with the death orbs.”

“That’s her,” Farrah said.

“Suddenly I’m less enthused about subjecting myself to her ministrations.”

Anisa was slender, almost frail-looking, with platinum-blond hair and pale skin. She was wearing a practical outfit of fitted pants and top, all in spotless white. Sturdy-looking cloth covered her from neck to boots, with thicker panels over vital areas. There was a belt, also white, with many small pouches and a sword at her hip. Even her boots were white, without so much as a blemishing smear of dirt. Her hair was cinched severely back into a ponytail, revealing ears that gently tapered to a point. She walked with lithe grace and absolute confidence, nodding her head in greeting.

“You got free as well,” she said, as if expecting no less. “Why is there a vagrant following you around?”

Chapter 17: A Conservative Pillage

“Aren’t you the person that tried to get us out of the cages but got hit upside the head?” Anisa asked, giving Jason a second glance.

“That’s me,” Jason said.

Jason recognised Anisa’s voice from where they had all been locked up in cages. He recalled she hadn’t thought much of him, even then. She looked him over, her expression suggesting her opinion hadn’t improved.

“He’s lucky you were there,” she said to the others. “I hope you didn’t let him slow you down.”

“Actually, he rescued us,” Rufus said.

“I find that hard to believe,” Anisa said.

“It was something to see,” Gary said. “He’s taken a few too many blows to the head, though. We’ve been dumping potions into him, but only a couple of hours in the desert left him a wreck. Any chance you could throw a healing spell his way?”

Anisa turned her gaze back to Jason. With a reluctant grimace, she held a hand out in front of his face and recited a short chant.

“Let the life that has withered return to full bloom.”

“I think ‘withered’ might be a bit harsh,” Jason said.

A soft light started shining from under his skin. The perpetual ache in his head turned sharp, the now-familiar sense of magic healing, although the spell was far gentler than the potions he had consumed.

➤ You have been affected by [Regenerate]. Your health will be restored over time.

An icon appeared in his vision relaying the remaining duration of the spell. The injury indicator in Jason’s vision was still yellow and orange, but over the half-minute duration of the spell, the health silhouette all cooled to a healthy green. His head had long been an overfilled balloon threatening to burst, until the healing magic deflated it to his great relief. He fell into a sitting position on the grass, letting out a long, satisfied breath.

“Thank you so much,” he said, letting himself fall back, arms splayed out. “I’m suddenly very sleepy. I don’t think being unconscious is actually very restful.”

“You can sleep after we’ve cleared this place out,” Rufus said, moving to stand over Jason. He held out a hand, which Jason gripped reluctantly, letting Rufus pull him to his feet.

“You found our gear, then,” Gary said, looking at Anisa. Rufus, Farrah and Gary had changed clothes, but were still various degrees of sweaty and dirty, while Anisa wasn’t just geared-up but also clean. Jason looked the worst of the lot. His shirt was sweaty and smeared with trail dust, while his pants could only be described as wretched.

“They have a store room in the cellar complex under the manor,” Anisa said. “Most of our equipment was there, but they’d already taken some of it away. Including the dimensional bags, which is why I didn’t bring it with me.”

“Let’s start there, then,” Rufus said. “They didn’t take my boots, did they?”

“Your boots are still there,” Anisa said, prompting relief on Rufus’ face.

“Summoning time?” Gary asked.

“Go ahead,” Rufus said.

“No,” Anisa countermanded. “Your summons are both too destructive. My church is seizing this estate, so I won’t let you destroy it.”

“Let the summons search the grounds,” Rufus said. “If that doesn’t flush out any hiding cultists, nothing will.”

“They’ll ruin the grounds,” Anisa said.

“Priestess,” Rufus said to Anisa, “You brought this contract to us, so I’m willing to accommodate you, but only to a degree. After what we’ve already gone through, I am not going to compromise the capabilities of this team to save your church from hiring a landscape gardener. Is that understood?”

Anisa’s face was a picture of unwillingness, but she nodded acquiescence.

“My dad’s a landscape architect,” Jason said. “I don’t think we could get him out here, though.”

“Alright,” Gary said. “We’ll just whip out the old summons and then pillage the manor.”

“You will not,” Anisa commanded.

“Come on, Rufus,” Gary said, not bothering to appeal to the elf. “What’s the point of being an adventurer if we can’t do a little looting?”

Rufus frowned.

“Any personal possessions you find, you can take,” Rufus said. “Anything that is part of the manor stays where it is. That’s furniture, decorations, art, whatever. And no unnecessary damage.”

He waving a finger between Gary and Farrah.

"This means you two," he said.

Anisa still looked like she had a mouthful of lemon, but didn't protest further.

"Fine," Gary said. "It'll be a conservative pillage."

"Not helping," Rufus said through clenched teeth. "Gary, Farrah, you're staying out here. Use your summons to flush out any loose cultists."

"But the loot," Gary said.

"Maybe think about that next time you open your big mouth," Rufus said.

"My mouth was closed," Farrah complained, drawing a scolding look from Rufus.

"Fine," she said.

"Just find any cultists still on the ground and pick up any who make a run for it," Rufus said. "Anisa and I will sweep the manor, so you may get some people running out."

"What about my gear?" Gary asked.

"You can collect it once the place is clear. Do you really need your hammer now that the collar is off?"

Gary held up a fist, now encased in metal by the gauntlet of his armour.

"No," he acknowledged reluctantly.

Gary's chagrin seemed to mollify Anisa somewhat. Gary stepped away from the group and untied from his belt the pouch Farrah had given him earlier. Opening a small flap that served as a nozzle, he started pouring a grey powder from the pouch onto the ground in a circle.

"Are those iron filings?" Jason asked.

"They are," Farrah said. "Summons are a little more involved than most essence abilities and require something to act as a medium. Salt circles are the most common, but plenty use other things. For Gary's ability, it's iron filings."

She patted the pouch on her own waist.

"For me it's obsidian powder. We keep a good supply of both in my magic chest."

Gary finished pouring out the iron filings into a circle and returned the pouch to his belt. Then he crouched down and held his hand out, which startled Jason by spontaneously bursting into flame. Unconcerned, Gary reached out and touched the circle. The iron where his finger touched almost immediately turned red and started to melt, smoke coming off the ground where the grass met the burning iron. The flame spread like burning a fuse, making its way around the circle.

Once it was a complete ring of glowing metal, complex magical patterns started appearing inside the circle. From those patterns something rose up as if emerging from the

ground, but the ground remained unbroken. It was a humanoid figure, crudely hewn from ugly black iron. With it came a strong smell of ozone.

It was huge, around three metres tall. It looked ungainly and menacing, like something hammered together from leftover slabs of pig iron. In between the joints, the glow of molten metal could be seen shining from within. The head was flat and blank. The centre of the torso looked to be two separate pieces of metal pushed together, the edges ridged like interlocking teeth. As he watched, its torso opened like a hideous mouth, revealing a pool of molten metal inside, radiating heat over the group before closing shut again.

“Impressed?” Gary asked Jason, having already cheered up.

“Very,” Jason said. “What is it?”

“It’s a foundry golem,” Gary said proudly. A droplet of molten metal dripped from it, sizzling as it hit the ground.

“I do understand why Anisa doesn’t want it in the house,” Jason said.

“You too?” Gary asked sadly.

Anisa was giving Jason an unhappy glare.

“You,” she said, making it sound like a swear word, “may address me as Priestess.”

Jason didn’t care for being talked to like he was something scraped off the bottom of a boot.

“Well you,” he said with an insolent grin, “may address me as Rakishly Handsome Jason.”

“Excuse me?” Anisa said, barely believing what she just heard.

“You’re excused,” Jason said pompously, as he looked away. “Just don’t let it happen again.”

Anisa’s eyes went wide and Rufus stepped into her path as she took an angry step forward.

“Jason, you should probably stick with Gary and Farrah,” Rufus said.

Farrah took her turn to summon a creature. She poured out her own circle next to the ring of scorched earth that had been Gary’s. Farrah’s process was the same, right down to the powder melting into a red-hot ring. Instead of a golem like Gary, Farrah’s summon was a pile of black and red magma with arms.

“Lava that can punch you with a fist bigger than my head,” Jason said. “Why does she get that when I get to see in the dark.”

“Well,” Gary said, “what essence did you use?”

“The dark essence.”

“Well, hers came from the volcano essence, so there you go.”

“There’s a volcano essence? That definitely sounds better than mine.”

“That depends,” Gary said. “Farrah’s not great when it comes to sneaking.”

“That’s because she has volcano powers,” Jason said. “Everyone else has to do the sneaking.”

Gary considered for a moment.

“That’s a pretty good point,” he acknowledged.

Rufus and Anisa made for the house as Gary and Farrah set out though the grounds.

“I can’t believe they made us wait outside,” Gary said. As they walked, the two monstrous figures ranged ahead. Both emanated searing heat, so Gary and Farrah didn’t keep them close.

“I can believe they made you wait outside,” Farrah told Gary.

“Maybe we’ll catch some cultists,” Jason said.

“That’d be nice,” Gary said.

“How long do these summons last?” Jason asked.

“Depends on your power level,” Farrah said. “A few hours for me and Gary.”

It was around an hour later that Rufus came out to find them. He looked down the row of scorched archways cutting a straight line through the hedge maze.

“You said flush them out,” Gary said defensively.

“You were unspecific as to how,” Farrah added.

“Well,” Jason said, “he did point at you and say, ‘no unnecessary damage, this means you.’”

“Whose side are you on?” Gary asked.

“Justice.”

Farrah snorted a laugh.

“Did you actually find anyone?” she asked.

“There was one guy in some kind of storeroom,” Gary said.

“Did you get anything out of him?” Rufus asked.

“The storeroom kind of burned down with him in it,” Gary said.

Rufus shook his head.

“We found a carriage shed with a missing carriage,” Jason said. “It looked like they left in a hurry. Seems like someone raided the valuables and made a run for it, not even stopping to pick up the stuff they dropped.”

“Cowards,” Gary said.

“They can’t be cowards,” Jason said. “They would have needed those horrifying monsters to pull the carriage.”

“Monsters?” Rufus asked.

“They’re not monsters,” Gary said. “Heidels are just normal animals.”

Jason had his first encounter with a heidel when they found the stables. They were the size and shape of a horse, but with scales in instead of hair and two heads, each of which had a horn sticking out of the forehead. To Jason’s eyes it looked like someone had put two unicorns and a lizard in a teleporting machine and they came out blended together.

“They’re horrifying.”

“If you think they’re bad,” Farrah said, “you’re in for it when you see an actual monster.”

“What did you find?” Gary asked Rufus.

“We found a few people squirreled away. After those cultists came back, the lord of the manor cleared out the vault and they all took off, leaving the staff behind.”

“Wasn’t the lord that high priest guy?” Gary asked.

“Apparently not,” Farrah said.

“What did you do with the cultists you caught?” Jason asked.

“We questioned them and then we killed them,” Rufus said, matter-of-factly.

“You just executed prisoners?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Farrah asked.

Jason ran a hand over his face, the energy draining out of him.

“Oh, damn it.”

Chapter 18:

One of Us

With their sweep through the manor house, the group completed their mission. The cultists were dead or running and they found plenty of documentation pointing them to the main cult.

“So, these people were only a local branch?” Jason asked as he rifled through a closet.

“That’s right,” Rufus said, opening a chest of drawers. “It’s called the Red Table. They’re only weak in remote areas like this. Core membership takes higher-ranked adventurers than us to deal with.”

They decided to remain at the manor overnight before leaving. Jason was able to explore and was surprised at what he found. Rather than the medieval technology he was expecting, magic had been used to replicate amenities from indoor plumbing to lighting to refrigerators. The horrors found in the cannibals’ kitchen were the stuff of nightmares.

Jason was looking for clothes to replace the filthy rags his current outfit had become. The local fashion was big on loose fits, letting airflow combat the desert heat. That made it easy to find something in his size.

He put together something suitable and took a hot shower, the water flow and temperature controlled by a pair of crystals. Stepping out feeling refreshed, he put on some of the new clothes. The top was lightweight and breathable, fully covering the arms and with a wrap-around hood to shield the head and face from the sun. Gary had worn something similar for their previous trek across the desert. The rest of the outfit was some loose pants and practical desert boots. Underneath were the silkiest pair of boxer shorts he had ever encountered.

He hesitated before using purloined underwear, but he decided not to go commando when they headed back into the desert. He wondered if he had killed the person whose clothes he now wore. As for his old clothes, only the t-shirt was salvageable. The pants and sandals were beyond saving and got thrown away.

-
- You no longer own items belonging to the [Starting Gear] outfit. [Starting Gear] outfit has been removed from the outfit tab of your inventory.
-

Remembering the outfit tab, Jason played around with it, creating several outfits from the clothes he had collected. His snake tooth dagger had been retrieved along with the gear from the rest of the group, so it joined the default ensemble, along with the snakeskin belt

and sheath. He put together a few extra outfits, creating more sets for them. Conveniently, items in the outfit tab didn't take up space in his main inventory slots.

The most interesting part was when he changed outfits. Switching gear-sets shrouded his body in dark mist for a brief moment, during which the old gear was returned to the inventory and the new gear appeared directly on his person. He switched rapidly back and forth between outfits to try it out. The dark smoke lightly tingled his skin.

Night time found Jason laying in a bed, staring at the ceiling. He was exhausted after the strangest and most dangerous day of his entire life, but his mind refused to retreat into sleep. Shoving off the covers, he opened his inventory to throw on one of his new outfits.

The group had claimed bedrooms in a row on the top floor. A shared balcony connected all the rooms, each accessible through French doors. Jason opened his set of doors and wandered out. He rested his hands on the balustrade and looked up at the sky. In a massive field of stars, a pair of moons shone bright, one half moon and one crescent.

"I really am in a different world."

"You're just figuring that out?" Rufus' voice came from behind.

Jason turned to see Rufus emerging from his own room. He walked over and joined Jason in leaning on the balustrade.

"Couldn't sleep either?" Jason asked.

"I'm on watch," Rufus said. "We don't think the cultists will come back, but they've surprised us before. We're rotating turns through the night."

"Didn't want me to take a turn?" Jason asked.

"Honestly? No."

Jason chuckled.

"Good call."

He turned his gaze back to the sky.

"So why aren't you sleeping?" Rufus asked. "I would have thought you'd be out the moment you hit the sheets."

"Everything that happened today just keeps running through my head," Jason said. "I was concussed for most of it, so it feels like it wasn't me, somehow. But it was me. It was my hands I washed the blood from."

"You were impressive today," Rufus said. "We'd be dead if it wasn't for you."

"It didn't feel impressive," Jason said. "It felt like a perpetual state of desperation and panic. I think all the blows to the head may have helped, strangely enough. My head hurt like hell, but I was too punch drunk to really think about what was happening. Otherwise I would have freaked out and hidden under a table."

“I don’t believe that,” Rufus said. “I’ve seen a lot of adventurers. Most you can teach, but some will never have what it takes. Others…”

He patted Jason in the shoulder

“... others take to it like it’s what they were born for. You’ve got the stuff, Jason.”

Jason sighed.

“It doesn’t feel like I’ve got the stuff,” Jason said. “Not the stuff you’re talking about, anyway. When I first woke up here, I had no idea of what was happening or where I was. I didn’t think any of this was real. The best explanation was that I’d gone mad and it was all in my head.”

“You thought I was imaginary?” Rufus asked.

“By the time I met you,” Jason said, “I was past stopping to contemplate. I was too busy scrambling from one deadly situation to the next.”

“You certainly arrived in rough circumstances.”

“Impossible circumstances, from my perspective,” Jason said. “Everything in this place is impossible. Where I come from, there’s no magic, no elves. Definitely no awesome lion-men named Gary. Monsters are just myths and metaphors. Stories we tell ourselves about the dark corners of our own nature.”

“But now you believe it? That all this is real?”

Jason nodded.

“Anisa gave me pause, but yeah.”

“Anisa?”

“A haughty, elf girl in tight leather that doesn’t hide how much she dislikes me? That’s exactly the kind of thing my brain would throw out.”

Rufus gave Jason a sideways look.

“Don’t look at me like you don’t have hang-ups,” Jason said.

“I didn’t say a thing.”

“Sure, mate. But I get it. She’s real. It’s all real. This experience has been too long and too coherent, even with the concussion. Any explanation that makes sense in my world doesn’t fit. At least, none that I know of. Hallucinations, madness, dreams. The ability to muster even a little bit of logical detachment implies that they aren’t the answer.”

Jason sighed again.

“If nothing else,” he continued, “there’s just too much going on for me to have come up with all of it. I don’t have the imagination to have thought up all this. I mean, broad strokes, maybe, but not all the little details.”

“Well,” Rufus said, “now that you’ve accepted it, what comes next?”

“I have no idea,” Jason laughed. “If I’m really here, then I guess I start looking for a way home.”

“You don’t seem too enthusiastic about that.”

“I didn’t leave a lot behind,” Jason said. “I kind of made a mess of my life.”

“A fresh beginning, then,” Rufus said. “You can start by becoming an adventurer, like us.”

Jason looked over at Rufus.

“I’m not sure that’s what I want,” Jason said. “This, today, is what you do, right?”

“It normally goes better,” Rufus said. “Not so dangerous. Although it’s a dangerous life; I won’t lie.”

“It’s not the danger that worries me,” Jason said. “Well, it is, but that isn’t what’s keeping me awake.”

“It was the first time you’ve killed someone?” Rufus asked softly.

Jason nodded.

“This time yesterday,” Jason said, “I hadn’t been in a fight in ten years. I don’t remember what it was about. Some nonsense that seemed important when I was thirteen. A child’s fight, for a child’s reasons. But I killed people today. I can tell myself they were evil, but that doesn’t matter. I can say I was defending myself, but I manipulated people in order to bring about their deaths.”

Jason shook his head.

“That isn’t the even worst part,” he said. “That came later, when I was laying in bed. A stranger’s bed, maybe even someone I killed. That was when I realised I had to count to remember how many people I murdered today.”

Jason fell quiet and they stood in silence, looking out into the dark for some time.

“I’m guessing your world is a safe one,” Rufus said after contemplating Jason’s words.

“Not all of it,” Jason said. “But my part, yeah.”

“That’s good,” Rufus said. “But you have to accept that you’re not there any more. This world can be hard, and life can be cheap. You said it doesn’t matter that the ones you killed were evil, but you’re wrong. You think we were the first people on their chopping block? You saw what was in that kitchen. There’s a larder downstairs with a cell to keep people in, and it wasn’t a new cell, either. They’ve been doing this for a long time. If we hadn’t stopped them, they’d have killed us too, and plenty more after. I don’t know what justice is like in your world, but in this one, it sometimes comes down to people like us dealing with people like them.”

"I'm not sure I can be that hard," Jason said.

"I saw you today," Rufus said. "You can be."

"And if I don't want to be?"

Rufus nodded.

"That's a choice only you can make. I don't know what kind of person you were before, but this is a chance to leave that person behind. To become whoever you choose to be. That's a rare chance. Just remember that every choice has its consequences. Even if you choose to do nothing."

Rufus looked over at Jason, then back out at the night sky.

"I'm an adventurer," Rufus said. "Being an adventurer can open every door, give you everything you ever wanted. Power, money, respect. Travel the world, see amazing things. Nine days out of ten, being an adventurer is the best thing you could possibly be. But on that tenth day, that's the one where you earn all the others. Where you make the hard choices, where you walk through fire so no-one else has to."

Rufus turned to Jason, giving him a weary smile.

"Has it made me callous?" Rufus asked. "Yes it has. Has it cost me sleep? Absolutely. But there's a whole lot of people sleeping safe and happy tonight because of me and people like me. You can be one of those safe and happy people if you want. Never making the hard choices; never doing the things that need to be done. But think about what happened to you today. You stood up in a horrifying situation and you took control. The safe and happy people don't get to do that. When fate comes for them, they need people like me to stand in its way. That's fine; it's what I'm here for. But if you want to control your own fate instead of people like me doing it for you, then you have to become one of us."

Rufus took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

"I'm not going to lie" he continued. "If you become an adventurer like we are, this won't be the last night of sleep you lose."

"Is it worth it?" Jason asked.

"Only you can answer that. You saved lives, today, mine included, but you had to stain your hands doing it. If you got to remake those choices, would you do it all again?"

"I don't know."

Rufus pushed himself off the balustrade.

"Give it some thought," he said. "When you can answer that question, maybe you'll know what to do. I'm going to patrol around a little. You've got a lot to think about."

He walked off, but Jason called out to him before he disappeared back into the manor.

“Rufus.”

“Yeah?”

“If I decide to become an adventurer, what do I need to do?”

“We can teach you,” he said, “but you start by absorbing more essences. Before everything else, adventurers are strong.”

Chapter 19: I Want a Lava Cannon

“I’m not sure I’m comfortable doing it with everyone watching,” Jason said.

It was a clear-skied morning, but the magic affecting the manor’s climate dulled the scathing desert heat to a pleasant warmth. Jason, Rufus, Gary and Farrah had gathered on a terrace, sitting out on some patio furniture. Most of them were gathered around a picnic table in chairs, but Gary was too big for the chairs and went to pick up a low bench.

“But you said I could watch,” Farrah said to Jason.

“Actually, you asked,” Rufus said, “but he didn’t answer either way.”

“I want to watch too,” Gary said. He picked up the bench, which turned out to have been affixed to the tiled terrace. Some of the tiles came loose along with the bench. Gary looked at the damage and shrugged.

“Can you please stop destroying the place?” Rufus asked. “Anisa is prickly enough at the best of times.”

“Compared to what we did to the hedge maze, this is nothing,” Gary said.

“And you somehow think that makes it better?” Rufus asked.

Gary walked back to the group and dropped the bench loudly. The legs were uneven after having been torn from the ground, but Gary was happy enough and plonked himself down. The bench loudly scraped the terrace under his weight as Rufus wearily shook his head.

“I’m part of the Magic Society,” Farrah said to Gary. “My interest in seeing Jason use an essence is academic. What would you get out of it?”

“What else am I going to do?” Gary asked. “Help Anisa organise documents? No thanks.”

“That probably wouldn’t go well for anyone,” Farrah acknowledged.

The missing member of the group, Anisa, was in the manor’s main study. They had managed to dig out various letters and other records linking the occupants to the blood cult in other regions. Before they left the manor behind, she was gathering it together for use as evidence.

“You might as well stick around,” Jason said. “I don’t want anything happening to me if I pass out again. Don’t anticipate a great show of dignity.”

“I’m still a little surprised you got your hands on so many essences,” Rufus said. “You did say you only arrived in our world yesterday, right?”

“It was a busy day,” Jason said.

"You're not wrong there," Gary said.

"Should I be doing this on an empty stomach?" Jason asked. "I'm hungry, but I don't trust any of the food here. All the kitchen had was every nightmare I'm ever going to have again."

"Sorry," Farrah said, "but we didn't pack food."

"Right, you all eat money, which definitely isn't weird. I do have some tyrannical pheasant meat. Maybe we could roast it with your fire powers."

"I love tyrannical pheasant," Gary said. "How did you stop it from dissolving with the rest of the monster? Do you know monster harvesting magic?"

"There's a magic for that? It's an ability I have."

"Makes sense," Rufus said. "Outworlders all have different abilities, but they're usually all focused around giving them the tools to survive."

Farrah nodded.

"Looting abilities are rare, and valuable, but far from unique," she said.

"If you have enough essences to make a full set, you can get to iron rank," Rufus said. "Then you can just eat some coins as well."

"A full set of essences is four, right?" Jason asked. "I've only got two more, plus the one I already used. I don't suppose you have another one on you?"

"Three is enough," Farrah said. "I keep forgetting that you really don't know anything. Once you use your third essence, a fourth one manifests itself on the spot. They're called confluence essences, because they're a result of the three essences you already have. In my case, I used the fire, earth and power essences, which gave me the volcano essence."

"Confluence essences only manifest after three essences are used," Rufus added. "You can't find a volcano essence anywhere. Even when essences manifest near a volcano, you'll usually get essences like fire and earth."

"Is that where essences come from?" Jason asked. "They just appear randomly?"

"That's right," Farrah said. "Your world may not have any magic, but this one has it in abundance. To the point where it just starts manifesting all over the place."

"Most magic manifestations are monsters," Rufus explained. "They just appear, hopefully in the wilderness, but the magic they're made of isn't stable. Eventually they break down and dissolve back into magic. Killing them just makes it faster."

"Just say you killed something that wasn't a monster but an animal," Jason said. "A giant snake, for example. That wouldn't dissolve into a stinky cloud?"

“Exactly. Monsters frequently aren’t a problem when they first manifest, but as they get closer to breaking down they become highly aggressive. The bulk of our job as adventurers is hunting them down before they reach that stage.”

“It isn’t just going places and killing everyone you find?” Jason asked.

“No,” Rufus said. “I’m not sure I’d have the stomach for that. I definitely wouldn’t care to work with those that did.”

“How long do monsters last before they go berserk?” Jason asked.

“Depends on the rank of the monster,” Farrah said. “Lesser monsters only last a week or two. They start so close to breaking down that they’re aggressive from the moment they appear, but they aren’t really a threat. An old woman with a broom can handle them. Iron rank monsters last about a month, getting aggressive in the final week or so. It goes up from there, but this is a low magic region so mostly you’ll see iron rank with a smattering of bronze.”

“Monsters have ranks, then?” Jason asked. “Do they use essences too?”

“No,” Rufus said. “It just means they exist within a certain power threshold. Whether an essence user or a monster, each rank has a suppressive effect on lower ranks. We’re all bronze rank. If you were to fight any of us, your iron-rank abilities would have much less effect.”

“You can overcome that briefly by boosting your attributes with spirit coins,” Farrah added. “That only works to a degree, though, and not for very long. You have to pick your moment, because it will leave you weaker once the strength fades.”

“I know all about that,” Jason said.

“There are other manifestations of magic,” Rufus said. “They’re not alive, which makes them more stable and they stick around until you use them.”

“Essences,” Jason said.

“That’s the most powerful manifestation,” Rufus said. “Also the rarest. Then there’s quintessence, which is kind of like chunks of essence.”

“Could you get a pile of it and use that as an essence?” Jason asked.

“Afraid not,” Rufus said.

“People have been trying to make that work for years,” Farrah said. “There’s always some crackpot who claims to have figured it out, but it isn’t possible.”

“Quintessence is still useful, though,” Rufus said.

“It may not be as powerful as an essence,” Farrah said, “but it gets used a lot more. Ritual magic, alchemy, weapon forging.”

"I make weapons and armour," Gary said. "I go through quintessence by the pile. Literally, piles of it."

"We found a magic supply storeroom yesterday," Farrah said. "They took all the good stuff when they left, but there was quite a lot of iron-rank quintessence left behind."

"Nice," Gary said.

"The last manifestation of magic is awakening stones," Rufus said. "Mostly they're used to awaken essence abilities, but they can be used in various kinds of magic as well."

"Like the thing they were trying to sacrifice us to," Jason said. He took out four red crystals from his inventory, laying them on the table in a row.

"We all had one of these in some kind of ritual bowl, wired into our cages," he said.

Rufus picked one up.

"I wonder what kind of stone they are," he mused.

"Awakening stones of the feast," Jason said. "All four are the same."

"They're pretty common," Farrah said.

"I had one manifest in my kitchen when I was a kid," Gary said, "right into a pot of soup. My dad said that's why the soup tasted funny, but I think he was just bad at making soup."

"They can be useful with the right essences," Rufus said. "They're common, so there's no telling what kind of ability it can give you. They'll be related to the concept of a feast, but that can manifest in any of hundreds of powers."

"Thousands," Farrah said. "The more rare an awakening stone is, the more specific the powers."

"So, rare stones are better?" Jason asked.

"Not necessarily," Rufus said. "A common as muck awakening stone can give you any ability the rarest could. It just has a much higher pool of potential powers. Rare stones don't give out better abilities, just more specific ones. So if you want a specific kind of ability, that's when you need to find yourself the right flavour of rare stone."

"There aren't any guarantees, though," Farrah said. "Even the rarest stone might not give you what you want. You should always remember, though, that the biggest determinate of what ability you get is the essence it comes from."

"I have this blood essence," Jason said, pulling a red cube from his inventory. The slick surface looked like it was wet with blood, but it was dry and warm to the touch.

"Hardly surprising that you found a blood essence around here," Rufus said.

"Blood is a fantastic essence," Gary said enthusiastically. "You might get a health-drain power if you use all those feast stones. Then you can be your own healer."

“Maybe,” Farrah said. “It could be almost anything with common stones, but blood, plus feast? The chances are decent.”

“Self-healing would be useful,” Rufus said, “given how hard it can be to get a healer on your team. We’ve struggled with that ourselves.”

“What about Anisa?” Jason asked.

“Anisa is a temporary addition,” Rufus said. “It’s usually just the three of us.”

“Self-healing is very common with the blood essence,” Farrah said. “Don’t expect much in the way of powerful attacks, though,” Farrah warned. “Blood essence abilities tend to be more insidious. Bleeding, poison, that kind of thing.”

“No lava cannon?” Jason asked.

“Sadly no,” Farrah said with a chuckle.

“But I want a lava cannon.”

Chapter 20: By the Power of Grayskull

“You probably want your essence abilities to be more well-rounded than Farrah’s,” Gary said.

“Hey,” Farrah complained.

“In terms of raw power, Farrah is easily the strongest of us,” Rufus said. “But that focus comes at the cost of versatility.”

“She’s great at blowing things up,” Gary said.

“It’s true,” Farrah said. “I am good at blowing things up.”

“Which, admittedly, solves the bulk of our problems,” Rufus said. “But when overwhelming, barely-contained annihilation isn’t the answer, it leaves her somewhat at a loss.”

“Power is always the answer,” Farrah said.

“Mass destruction sounds pretty good to me,” Jason said, “but it doesn’t seem like the blood essence would give me that. Should I use it, or hold out for something better?”

“That’s up to you,” Rufus said. “It’s best to consider what other essences you’ll have.”

“Well, I’ve already used the dark essence,” Jason said.

“That could work,” Farrah said. “A sneaky assassin type. A bit of poison here, exsanguination there.”

“Just make sure you avoid the death essence,” Rufus said, the others nodding in agreement.

“Death essence?” Jason asked.

“The death essence has some powerful abilities,” Gary said, “but they come with big drawbacks. Very few essences have side-effects, but death can produce some nasty ones.”

“Remember how we explained about confluence essences?” Rufus asked.

“That’s your buy three, get one free deal on essences, right?” Jason said.

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “More or less. Some confluence essences are produced by a wide variety of combinations. The death essence has a nasty habit of producing the confluence essence undeath. There are many combinations that produce it, almost all of which involve the death essence.”

“Take the blood essence you have here, for example,” Farrah said. “Add in a death essence and pretty much anything else and the undeath essence will pop right out.”

“Undeath is bad,” Gary said.

“The abilities in the undeath essence have a nasty habit of turning you into some kind of unliving monstrosity,” Rufus said.

“If it came along with the blood essence,” Farrah said, “you’d almost certainly get an ability that turns you into a vampire.”

“Vampires are a thing?” Jason asked.

“They are,” Rufus said, “and they’re bad. For one thing, they can’t sustain themselves with spirit coins or even regular food anymore.”

“They drink blood,” Jason said.

“They do,” Rufus confirmed. “Imagine having vast magical powers and an unquenchable thirst for blood.”

“Not a combination good for public safety,” Jason said.

Rufus nodded.

“People with the undeath essence almost always awaken a power that changes them like that,” he said. “Such powers are very strong, but they all bring with them unnatural appetites.”

“If that wasn’t enough,” Farrah added, “they can often turn normal people into monsters like them. Not with the essence powers of the original, but dangerous enough.”

“Vampires turning other people into vampires,” Jason said. “Can’t beat the classics.”

“Even if the undeath essence doesn’t turn you into a monster,” Farrah added, “it tends to give out less than palatable abilities.”

“You already said the blood essence has life-draining powers,” Jason said. “Less palatable than that?”

“Yes,” Gary growled. “No one will mind if you drain some health out of a guy that stabbed you. As long as you don’t drink his blood to do it, anyway. When you raid the local cemetery, though? No one wants their dead family members shambling into town as part of your undead army.”

“And that’s one of the lesser evils,” Farrah said. “We actually all met fighting a zombie plague,” Farrah said.

“A proper zombie plague?” Jason asked. “Zombies turning other people into zombies, the whole deal?”

“The whole deal,” Gary said. “Entire towns were burned out just to contain it. Bad business.”

“None of us want to see something like that again,” Farrah said. “If you get the undeath essence we’ll kill you ourselves.”

Jason looked at the expression on the faces of the others and saw they weren't joking.

"Avoiding the death essence then," he said.

"On top of everything else," Rufus said, "the Adventure Society has a list of restricted essences that pose an inherent threat to ordinary people."

"The death essence sitting at the top of that list," Gary said.

"Mostly it's combinations of essences," Rufus explained, "since the confluence essence is usually the bad one. The death essence is on the list by itself, through, because it always seems to go wrong. You need to pay attention to the restricted essences. It's impossible to get membership in the Adventure Society if you have one of them."

"And I want to be a member of this Adventure Society?" Jason asked.

"You do," Rufus said emphatically.

"Well," Jason said, "I don't have a death essence, but I'm a little wary of the one I do have."

Jason took a second cube from his inventory. This one looked like white jade flecked with gold.

Item: [Sin Essence] (unranked, legendary)

Manifested essence of transgression (consumable, essence).

- Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.
- Effect: Imbues 1 awakened sin essence ability and 4 unawakened sin essence abilities.
- You have absorbed 1/4 essences. Once absorbed, an essence cannot be relinquished or replaced.
- You are able to absorb [Sin Essence]. Absorb Y/N?

"May I?" Farrah asked, reaching for the essence. Jason nodded and she picked it up, turning it over in her hands.

"Pretty," she said. "I don't recognise it."

"It's a sin essence," Jason said.

"Are you sure?" Farrah asked, examining the white and gold cube. "It looks more like the holy type."

Rufus looked at Jason with a thoughtful expression.

"You have an ability to identify items, don't you?" he asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It’s one of my outworlder things.”

“I’ve seen it before from other outworlders,” Rufus said.

Farrah placed the cube back on the table.

“I’ve never heard of the sin essence before,” she said. “It must be one of the really rare ones. I would have thought a sin essence would be all dark colours.”

“You have a problem with dark colours?” the midnight-skinned Rufus asked.

“I knew a guy with the sin essence,” Gary said. “Back when I was growing up there was this priest in my home town who had it.”

“A priest had the sin essence?” Farrah said. “Who was he a priest of?”

“God of Justice,” Gary said.

“Seems a little odd,” Rufus said. “What kind of powers did he have?”

“I was just a kid and it was a long time ago,” Gary said. “He was bit of a hard man, the way those Justice guys can be. I seem to recall a lot of smiting going on.”

“I could get behind some smiting,” Jason said. “Hold up; you guys have gods here?”

“Of course,” Gary said. “You don’t have gods in your world?”

“We have religions,” Jason said.

“Isn’t that the same thing?” Gary asked.

“No,” Jason said. “No it is not. Do your gods turn up and do things? Where people can see them?”

“Of course they do,” Farrah said. “Anisa’s a priestess. We’ve seen her god show up in person. Spend some time in the worship square of any good sized city. You’ll see one sooner or later.”

“That must forestall a lot of theological debate,” Jason said.

“If you decide to use that sin essence,” Gary said, “you might not want to tell Anisa about it.”

“Why not?” Jason asked.

“She’s a priestess of the God of Purity,” Farrah explained.

“That’s not good,” Jason said.

“You have a problem with purity?” Gary asked.

“In my world, you have to keep an eye on the ones who talk about purity all the time. Leave them be and they start rounding people up into camps, getting all enthusiastic about purging the unclean.”

“That does sound like something Anisa would get behind,” Farrah said. “Her church has this idea that the essences we use change who we are, so they only like the ones they see as holy or pure. They say other essences taint the soul.”

“You say that like you think she’s wrong,” Jason said.

“She is,” Rufus said. “Essence abilities aren’t inherently good or bad. Like a sword they can be used to oppress or protect. The accountability isn’t with the tool, but the one wielding it. The only people who advocate that essences guide our actions, instead of the other way around, are religious zealots and people looking to abdicate the responsibility for their actions.”

It was clear Rufus was speaking from experience, and not a good one.

“Didn’t you all just finish explaining that I need to be careful of essences changing me?” Jason asked.

“That was a warning about rare and extreme cases,” Rufus said. “That’s what the restricted list is for. But people try and claim that extends to all essences, when it simply doesn’t.”

“Not that Anisa would agree,” Farrah said.

“Anisa is wrong,” Rufus said.

“I’m going to pull out the restricted list,” Farrah said, getting up. “See if the sin essence is on it before Jason decides what he’s going to do.”

“Good idea,” Rufus said.

Farrah caused her stone storage chest to rise out of the ground. It rose up through the terrace without breaking through the tiles, like it wasn’t truly substantial until it had completely emerged.

She took out a stone tablet from inside the chest. It looked to be made of swirling blue and white marble, with script written across it in what looked like actual gold. Farrah touched a finger to the script and it started shifting about, the text changing in front of their eyes.

“What is that?” Jason asked.

“This is called a living document,” Farrah said. “It stores large amounts of information and is connected to a central record. When the central record is updated, the information in the tablet changes. This one has the full list of every essence and essence combination known to the Magic Society.”

“Is that different to the Adventure Society you mentioned?”

“Yes, but we can explain all that once we get back to civilisation,” Rufus said.

“The tablet is lot more expensive than a paper copy of the list,” Farrah said, “but it’s smaller and doesn’t have to be replaced when the list is updated.”

“Does it get updated a lot?” Jason asked.

“There are all kinds of essences,” Farrah explained as she kept her eyes on the shifting text of the tablet. “Many of them are extremely rare. Most people go for tried and tested combinations, but there’s always someone trying new things. Ah, here we are.”

She found what she was looking for in the tablet and the text stopped changing about.

“We can look up an essence and see what combinations are known for it, as well as any restricted combinations,” Farrah said. “Looks like your sin essence is in the rarest category. There really aren’t a lot of them going around.”

“Is it restricted?” Jason asked.

“Not by itself,” Farrah said. “Not a big list of known combinations. Looks like there is one restricted combination. Never heard of the succubus essence before. Probably because it takes two insanely rare essences.”

“What about the essences Jason has?” Rufus asked.

“Hold on. Dark, blood and sin, right?”

“That’s what I have,” Jason said.

“It’s actually here,” Farrah said. “It produces the doom essence, another one I’ve never heard of. Not restricted, so good news.”

“Did you say the doom essence?” Jason said.

“I did,” Farrah said, putting away the tablet. “Sounds imposing, right?”

“Is that something I really want to run around with?” Jason asked.

“Of course you do,” Gary said. “Who’s going to mess with the guy with the doom essence?”

“Did it say what kind of abilities it produces?” Rufus asked.

“Affliction specialist is what’s listed,” she said.

“Affliction specialist?” Jason asked. “Is that like a ‘death by a thousand cuts’ kind of thing?”

“Yeah,” Gary said. “Ongoing damage, debuffs.”

“Did you just say debuffs?” Jason asked.

“Yeah that’s where...”

“I know what debuffs are,” Jason said. “I’m just wondering how directly my ability translated that word.”

“So what do you think?” Rufus asked. “Afflictions are an uncommon specialty, and the exact opposite of what Farrah does. Her damage powers are immediate and explosive, but she exhausts herself quickly. An affliction specialist is weaker in short fights but unparalleled in drawn-out conflict.”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I don’t know what’s good.”

“I say go for it,” Farrah said. “There aren’t a lot of affliction specialists, which will put you in demand.”

“You’ll get called out for all the big fights, too,” Gary said. “When it comes to the really tough monsters you want staying power. In a battle like that, someone who burns through all their mana like Farrah is just trashy.”

“Hey!”

Jason looked at Rufus.

“What do you think I should do?”

Rufus gathered his thoughts for a moment before answering.

“Affliction specialists usually don’t have abilities that will hit hard and fast. That gives them a harder time with what most people consider the easy fights,” Rufus said. “As a trade-off, they become more and more dangerous the longer a fight goes on. They have endurance. An enemy others will exhaust themselves fighting, an affliction specialist can fight multiples of at once. It isn’t an easy path, though. It requires good judgement to avoid losing a fight before you really get going.”

“There’s also the intimidation factor,” Gary said. “Smart people don’t mess with affliction specialists. Poisons, curses, setting your insides on fire. Even if you kill them, you might be a dead man walking. No one wants that kind of enemy.”

“There is certainly a social factor,” Rufus said. “Affliction masters scare people.”

“Should I do it, then?” Jason asked. “Use these essences I have?”

“My advice would be yes, you should,” Rufus said. “It doesn’t matter if the easy fights aren’t quite as easy. The hard fights are what matter. You’re going to need skills to make it work, which you don’t have right now. But I can teach you.”

“Now there’s an offer not to refuse,” Gary said.

“Agreed,” Farrah said. “Rufus’ family runs one of the most exclusive prep academies for adventurers in the world. Kings go to that school. If he’s willing to teach you, let him.”

“We all owe you, Jason,” Rufus said. “If it weren’t for you, we’d be dead right now, and we aren’t going to forget that. So we’ll do our best to help you find your feet as an adventurer. Maybe you can eventually discover a way home.”

“Thanks,” Jason said, “although I wouldn’t have gotten out of there without you either. If I’d just ran out of that chamber I’d be in the middle of the desert. No water, no idea where I was or where to go. Even if the cultists hadn’t chased me down, I’d have died out there anyway.”

“I don’t know about that,” Gary said. “You seem to have a way of turning situations around.”

“I think turning the sun around is a bit beyond me,” Jason said.

He placed a hand on the blood essence sitting on the table.

“Alright,” he said. “I guess we should do this before Anisa comes out.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” Farrah said. “I left her buried in documents in the study. I think she’s going to read every piece of paper in the whole manor to make sure she doesn’t miss anything.”

“That’s good,” Jason said, “because I have an awakening stone that seems a little questionable as well.”

Jason picked up his two essences and stood up. Jason was concerned about passing out again, so he led them off the terrace and onto the grass where they all sat on the lawn.

“So how does this work?” Farrah asked.

“I just kind of do it,” Jason said. “I want to try something this time, though.”

He held up the blood essence in his hands.

“Fabulous secret powers were revealed to me when I held aloft my magic cube...”

He raised the cube above his head with one hand.

“What in the world are you doing?” Farrah asked.

“I told you, I’m trying something,” Jason said. “I didn’t expect it to work, but it wouldn’t be the least plausible thing I’ve seen in the last day.”

Jason lowered his arm back down.

“I’m starting to suspect that it isn’t just that you’re an outworlder,” Rufus said. “I think you might be strange in any world.”

Chapter 21: I Have the Power

When Jason used the dark essence it had turned into smoke, painfully invading his body until he passed out. The blood essence instead melted over his hand, becoming a viscous liquid that crawled up his arm and started coating his torso as it seeped through his pores and into his skin. It savagely burned its way into his flesh, leaving him sprawled on the ground as he fought to endure the pain. Gritting his teeth, he barely managed to stave off unconsciousness. By the time the pain subsided he was on all fours, rapidly panting. His clothes were wet with perspiration.

-
- You have absorbed [Blood Essence]. You have absorbed 2 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 50% (2/4 essences).
 - [Blood Essence] has bonded to your [Power] attribute, changing your [Power] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all blood essence abilities to increase your [Power] attribute.
 - You have awakened the blood essence ability [Blood Harvest]. You have awakened 1 of 5 blood essence abilities.
-

“That was interesting,” Farrah said, voice clinical. “Functionally it appears similar to how a confluence essence is absorbed, although the strain on the subject is clearly increased. Too many unanswered questions for one subject. I wish I had more of you.”

“The subject has a name,” Jason groaned painfully.

“I wonder if the type of essence affects the process,” Farrah mused. “You said you passed out last time, yes? Perhaps subjects adapt with each event.”

“The first one was definitely worse,” Jason said. “Not that this one was a lot of fun. I’m still going to need a moment.”

“What’s your new ability?” Gary asked. “You should be able to feel it, right?”

As Gary suggested, the new power had engraved itself into Jason, making itself a part of him.

Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Iron: Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.
-

“Looks like it’s for healing up after a fight,” Jason said.

“Sounds like a good one,” Gary said. “Abilities with restrictions are usually more powerful. Especially if it makes them hard to use in the middle of a fight.”

“Who doesn’t love a balanced ability,” Jason said.

“A healing ability, too,” Gary said. “That’s especially good when you don’t have a healer with you. We go through a lot of potions.”

“Yes we do,” Farrah agreed.

“But you have a healer,” Jason said.

“Anisa isn’t a permanent part of the team, remember?” Rufus said. “This contract is for her church. They asked us to take her along, give her some field experience. Seemed like a good deal for both sides.”

“Seemed?” Jason asked.

“She can be a little judgemental,” Farrah said.

“A lot judgemental,” Gary said.

“Also cold,” Farrah said.

“Weren’t you just calling me ‘the subject’ a minute ago?” Jason asked.

“Don’t talk behind her back,” Rufus scolded. “If you can’t say it to her face, then don’t say it.”

“Now you’re being judgemental,” Gary said.

“Gary...”

“Should I use my other essence next?” Jason asked. “Or should I use some of these awakening stones to get more abilities?”

“Essences first,” Farrah said. “Your abilities are based on the essence and stone you got them from, obviously, but also on the essences and abilities you already have. Using all your essences first means your abilities will better complement one another.”

“If you awaken too many abilities before you have all your essences,” Rufus said, “your abilities will lack focus. There will be more random powers that don’t work as well together.”

“Synergy,” Jason said. “Makes sense. Another essence it is. Not quite back in shape for the next one, though. I might just lay here for a little bit.”

Jason lay back on the grass while he recovered his strength. He took the chance to ask the others where they were going once they left the manor. They told him about a city on the coast, the only city in the entire desert region.

“Alright,” Jason said, sitting up. “I think I’m good to go again.”

He sat cross-legged on the grass, the sin essence in his hands.

➤ You are able to absorb [Sin Essence]. Absorb Y/N?

The white and gold cube started to shrink as motes of light emerged from it to float around Jason. By the time the entire cube vanished, the lights swirling around Jason had become a bright corona.

“Are you sure that’s a sin essence?” Gary asked, only to be shushed by Farrah.

The lights began sinking into Jason’s skin, a feeling of internal pressure building as they filled his body. More of the lights pushed their way inside and discomfort became pain as he felt like someone was trying to inflate him. Eventually the sensation passed, the pressure giving way to relief. It felt like finally taking a wee after needing one really badly.

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

“That one wasn’t so bad,” Jason said. “I think I’m getting used to it.”

“Good,” Rufus said, “because you need to do it again.”

As if to punctuate Rufus’s words, three shimmering, incorporeal cubes emerged from Jason’s torso and started spinning around him in the air. The cubes were images of the essences he had absorbed, plainly lacking in substance. The images converged in front of Jason, interposing themselves over one another. Once the three cubes merged into one,

the result was a new cube, swirling with light and shadow. The patterns shifted like thick oils mixed together.

-
- The confluence of your essences has produced the [Doom Essence]. This is a confluence essence that you may claim or reject. If you choose not to claim this confluence essence it will not be available to you again.

“It’s like a yin-yang lava lamp,” Jason said. “What happens if I don’t take it?” Jason asked.

“Then I slap you over the back of the head,” Gary said.

“If you refuse your confluence essence,” Rufus said, “you can only replace it with a normal essence. I promise you that is not the way to go. Only the clergy reject the confluence essence, because their gods give them divine versions of regular essences.”

Jason nodded, reaching out with both hands to grab the essence. The immaterial image become solid the moment Jason touched it. Light and shadow started streaming out, wreathing Jason in a strange mix of light and darkness. It then moved in on Jason, sinking into his body. Compared to the previous essences it was uncomfortable at worst.

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

Once the essence was completely subsumed into Jason, a light started emerging from within his body. It was a strange, grey light, washing out the colours of everything it touched, from the grass to the adventurers sitting around him. They were unconcerned, Rufus smiling broadly while Farrah laughed and Gary clapped enthusiastically.

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

Jason leapt to his feet. He felt like he'd just been stabbed with a huge adrenaline needle, bursting with energy. He laughed out loud, looking down at his own arms. The light was shining right through his skin.

"This feels amazing!"

The others also got to their feet.

"I feel like I need to go climb a mountain or something," Jason said. He was too caught up in the sensation of power surging through him to notice the others giving him sympathetic looks.

"Yeah, well," Gary said, "just give it a moment."

"What for?" Jason asked. "Why are you all backing away?"

The light started to diminish, drawing back inside Jason's body. As it did he experienced a rising nausea, the sensation growing and growing as he resisted the urge to throw up. He collapsed to his hands and knees, vomit spraying out of him. Red-brown pus started oozing from his pores, staining his clothes and coating his skin in oily filth. He kept vomiting and vomiting, bloody tears pouring from his eyes.

Finally, he fell unconscious, dropping into a pool of his own body fluids. A terrifying stench was coming off of him and the others backed even further away. Even in unconsciousness, pus and vomit fought their way free of his body. The others looked on until it finally subsided.

"That was a lot," Gary said.

"I've done a lot of essence rituals," Farrah said, "but I've never seen anyone purge that many impurities before."

"What do you think he's been eating?" Gary asked.

"He's from another world, so there's no telling," Farrah said.

"Do you think we should have told him about this part?" Rufus asked.

"Not at all," Gary said. "Did you see the look on his face? Completely worth it."

"I kind of feel bad, though," Rufus said.

"It isn't like it would have been any different if he knew," Farrah said. "We all went through it."

"And he's an outworlder," Gary said. "He didn't absorb his essences the same way we did. We couldn't be sure this would happen."

"Probably should have told him to strip down first, though," Farrah said. "There'll be no getting the stink out of those clothes."

"Gary," Rufus said, "at least go drag him out of his own filth."

"You can do it, if you want," Gary said. "I'm not going over there."

“Farrah?” Rufus asked, but she shook her head.

“If you’re so concerned,” Farrah said, “then you go move him.”

Rufus looked over at Jason, splayed out in the stinking puddle.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

Chapter 22: Apocalypse Stone

"I need a shower," Jason said.

"You just had a shower," Rufus said.

"I need another shower. The stink won't go away."

"Oh, we're aware," Farrah said.

After waking up Jason had been fed a stamina potion and pointed in the direction of one of the manor's bathrooms. After washing away the gunk that had oozed out of the very pores of his skin, he had changed into fresh clothes.

"What was that stuff all over me?" Jason asked.

"We told you," Farrah said. "Reaching iron rank made your body advance closer to a state of perfection, which included purging your body of impurities."

"There is no way I was that impure."

"It did seem like a lot," Gary said, wrinkling his nose. "Maybe he should have another shower."

"He still has awakening stones to use," Rufus said, "and I want us out of here and on the trail by noon."

Jason frowned as Rufus took out a pocket watch to look at.

"You have noon in this world?"

They explained timekeeping in their world to Jason as they went back outside. To his surprise, it seemed exactly the same as in his own. He couldn't be sure how close their hours, minutes and seconds hewed to the ones he knew without a clock from his own world, but they were at least close.

"It's weird they're the same," Gary said.

"Suspiciously weird," Jason said.

"What about the calendar?" Jason asked. "Is that the same too?"

The local calendar, as it turned out, was similar, but not the same. Although not as close as the time. There were twelve months of thirty days, divided up into early, mid and late stages of each season. There were five additional days that didn't count as days of the month, for the solstices, the equinoxes and the new year, which was at the beginning of spring.

"It still seems strange that we keep time the exact same way across two worlds," Jason said.

“Well, maybe someone from your world came here,” Gary said, “saw how we do it and took it back to yours.”

“Or someone brought our system here,” Jason said.

“Nah, that doesn’t sound right,” Gary said.

“Are you saying your world’s better than mine?” Jason asked.

“We have magic,” Gary said.

“We have internet porn,” Jason said.

“Will you two please stop?” Rufus asked. “Gary, go check on Anisa. Tell her she needs to finish up in the next couple of hours.”

Rufus, Farrah and Jason went back outside, the others giving Jason and his lingering smell some distance.

“Did something happen to you?” Jason asked the others.

“Like what?” Rufus asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jason said. “I’m getting a weird vibe from the two of you. From Gary as well. It feels... I’m not sure how to describe it. Dangerous, maybe?”

Rufus laughed.

“That feeling is our auras,” Rufus said. “Now that you’re iron rank, you can sense them. We’re both bronze rank, and not that far off silver, so we’re a lot more powerful than you. That’s the danger you’re sensing. You’ll soon learn to differentiate strength, and tell a monster from an essence user from a regular person.”

“So it’s like a warning,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Farrah said, “but it isn’t completely reliable. Some monsters can hide their auras. People can too, if they have an aura power.”

They arrived back on the lawn outside, staying upwind of where all the Jason goo was still laying in a puddle.

“You’ve already used an awakening stone, right?” Rufus asked. “Was it much different to using an essence?”

“It was easier,” Jason said. “You need a ritual for those as well, right?”

“You do,” Farrah said. “Well, not you, apparently, but everyone else. How many stones do you have?”

“Six,” Jason said.

“Good thing you can just use them, then,” Rufus said. “Going through a half-dozen rituals would take hours.”

“Wouldn’t be that bad,” Farrah said. “I’ve done a bunch of them, so I can knock them out fast.”

They sat down on the soft grass and Jason took out his awakening stones, laying them out in a row.

“Where did you get all these?” Farrah asked.

“The feast stones were on those cages they had us in.”

“In those ritual bowls wired into the top?” Farrah asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I snagged them up as we went.”

“Sometimes awakening stones get used as part of a large-scale ritual,” Farrah explained. “Even essences, sometimes.”

“They did make an apocalypse monster,” Rufus said.

“Could that thing have really wiped out the world?” Jason said. “Not to say it wasn’t scary, but it didn’t seem up to the task of global annihilation.”

“They would have had to feed it for a long time before it became a genuine threat,” Farrah said. “They people probably intended to keep it somewhere isolated and supply it with a steady stream of victims. Killing it as soon as it emerged was like smashing an egg before it could hatch into a dangerous animal.”

“Even if we hadn’t,” Rufus said, “there are people far stronger than us that could deal with it. Even if it became truly powerful, there are diamond-rank adventurers out there.”

“Is that the highest rank?” Jason asked.

“It is,” Rufus said, “but you don’t see them very often.”

“Or at all, if you’re most people,” Farrah said. “I’ve only met one because of Mr. Fancy Britches, here.”

“I don’t wear britches,” Rufus said.

“Rufus’ grandfather is diamond rank,” Farrah said. “He’s chancellor of the academy his family operates.”

“Diamond rank essence users are the peak of mortal power,” Rufus explained. “The Adventure Society likes to keep two or three in the biggest cities, in case a diamond rank monster shows up. That rarely happens, though, so they largely go unseen. When you’re that powerful, the idea of a higher authority is laughable. Mostly, diamond rank adventurers are mysterious figures pursuing goals known only to them.”

“And there aren’t that many diamond-rankers in any case,” Farrah said. “The only reason they exist in the numbers they do is because they live so long.”

“They live longer?” Jason asked.

“All essence users age slower,” Rufus said. “At iron rank you wouldn’t notice the difference, but bronze rankers can live well past a hundred. Silvers can double that; reach

silver rank young enough and you'll look young for decades. Gold rankers live for centuries, and I'm not even sure diamond rankers can die of old age."

"They're immortal?" Jason asked.

"It's a rumour," Rufus said, "but a persistent one. There's kind of an unwritten rule that diamond rankers don't tell the rest of us the limits of their abilities."

"So, am I going to get super old now?" Jason asked.

"Keep raising your rank, and yes," Rufus said.

"Wow, that's actually quite the bombshell," Jason said.

"What's a bombshell?" Farrah asked.

"It's a weapon that causes a great big explosion. Imagine shooting Farrah at people."

"We kind of do that already," Rufus said.

"So how do I raise my rank?" Jason asked. "I want some of that sweet immortality action."

"How about we walk before we run," Rufus said. "You can't even properly progress toward bronze rank until you awaken every essence ability you have. That's all twenty. The first step is using those awakening stones."

Jason nodded, picked up the first stone and took a deep breath.

"Here we go."

The stone melted in his hand, sinking into his skin with little fanfare.

-
- You have awakened the blood essence ability [Leech Bite]. You have awakened 2 of 5 blood essence abilities.
-

"That's it?" Farrah asked.

Jason's stomach made a large rumbling sound.

"I was pretty hungry already," he said. "I think the stone of the feast made it worse."

"You're an essence user now," Rufus said. "Eat a spirit coin."

Jason took an iron-rank coin from his inventory. It had the metal-grey colour of iron but was actually made of crystal. Hesitantly he placed it into his mouth, where it immediately dissolved with an intense fizzing sensation. It tasted like he'd touched his tongue to a battery, tangy and energetic. He felt power flood through his body, washing away the hunger of moments before. Rufus and Farrah laughed as they watched his expressions, wide-eyed and panting.

"What's wrong with him?" Gary asked. He had left the manor through the terrace doors and approached to sit with them on the lawn.

"He just ate his first spirit coin," Rufus said, causing Gary to chortle.

Jason shook his head to clear it.

"I don't think I've ever been this awake," he said.

Rufus picked up another awakening stone and handed it to him. Jason nodded and took it. He went through the remaining awakening stones of the feast in quick succession.

- You have awakened the blood essence ability [Feast of Blood]. You have awakened 3 of 5 blood essence abilities.
 - You have awakened the sin essence ability [Feast of Absolution]. You have awakened 2 of 5 sin essence abilities.
 - You have awakened the sin essence ability [Sin Eater]. You have awakened 3 of 5 sin essence abilities.
-

Jason had abilities before he reached iron rank, but now he could feel them within himself much more clearly. They were like hunting dogs, waiting to be unleashed at his command. Even without the descriptions Jason clearly understood the abilities he had just awoken. Two came from the blood essence and were different ways of draining health. The other two came from the sin essence, letting him resist afflictions on himself or remove afflictions from others.

"My abilities feel incomplete," Jason said. "Like a puzzle where I don't have all the pieces."

"There's a scale," Farrah said. "At one end of the scale is people whose abilities are individually strong. Those people don't tend to feel what you're feeling, because their powers might work together, but aren't reliant on one another."

"Those kind of abilities are strong, but simple," Rufus said. "Farrah's abilities are like that."

"Of course, simple doesn't mean bad," Farrah, said. "Straightforward power is the usually most effective solution to a problem. It's when you try to get complicated that things go wrong."

"According to people with simple powers," Gary said.

Farrah stuck her tongue out at Gary.

"At the other end of the scale," Rufus said, "are abilities that underwhelm in isolation, but used together become very dangerous. Affliction specialists tend to fall at that end of the scale, so expect your powers to feel awkward until you get the full set."

"Doesn't that dagger of yours poison people?" Gary said.

Jason's dagger had been stored away along with the gear of his new companions. He had gotten it back at the same time Rufus reclaimed a pair of ostentatious blue boots. Despite the garish colour, he was demonstrably quite fond of them.

"You can rely on your dagger for an extra source of afflictions until you've awakened all your powers," Gary said.

"Speaking of which," Rufus said, "you have two more awakening stones to get through before we leave."

Jason nodded, picking up the next stone. Unlike the awakening stones of the feast, his next awakening stone was higher rated.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Adventure] (unranked, rare)

An awakening stone filled with the spirit of adventure. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.

"With awakening stones," Jason said, "you said rarity doesn't make stones better, right?"

"No, just more specialised," Farrah said. "And harder to find, obviously. All stones have some amount of focus, but there's no telling exactly what they'll give you. Those feast stones, for example, could have given you anything from mana-draining special attacks to conjuring food to summoning flesh-eating fish. People like to have some control, so stones with desirable specialties tend to be the most expensive."

She patted Rufus on the knee.

"Although when you come from a big important family like Rufus here, they ship you high-rarity stones by the crate."

"There are no guarantees when it comes to awakening powers, though," Rufus said. "Not even with the rarest of stones. What kind of awakening stone is that one?" Rufus asked.

"Awakening stone of adventure," Jason said.

"Really?" Farrah said, surprised.

"Those highly sought-after," Rufus said. "As a mid-rarity stone it's hard to pin down what it will give out, but it's almost always a useful utility power."

"Just having a bunch of destructive combat powers makes you less useful to a team," Gary said. "Even Farrah knows that. A few good utility powers can really help you when it comes to getting jobs, since lots of teams will be happy to have you along."

“Here we go, then,” Jason said as the stone melted into his hand. His whole forearm went numb, and for a moment he could see right through it before it returned to normal.

“That was weird.”

-
- You have awakened the dark essence ability [Path of Shadows]. You have awakened 3 of 5 dark essence abilities.

Ability: [Path of Shadows] (Dark)

- Special ability (teleport)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Teleport using shadows as a portal. You must be able to see the destination shadow.

“Teleport between shadows,” Jason said with a laugh. “Now that’s a proper magic power.”

He looked around for a shadow to try it out on, then stopped.

“Aside from this weird springtime estate thing here,” Jason said, “We’re in the middle of the desert, right?”

“That’s right,” Rufus said.

“I don’t recall seeing a lot of shadowy nooks in the barren desert wasteland,” Jason said.

“It is a lot of open country,” Rufus acknowledged.

A little disheartened, Jason turned to his final awakening stone.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Apocalypse] (unranked, legendary)

An awakening stone containing a seed of annihilation. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.

- You have 10 unawakened essence abilities.
- You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of the Apocalypse]. Absorb Y/N?

“I’m a little wary of this one,” Jason said.

“What kind of stone is it?” Farrah asked.

“It’s, uh... an awakening stone,” Jason said.

“Of what?” Farrah asked.

“Of... well... the apocalypse.”

Gary erupted into laughter, falling back on the grass. Rufus raised an eyebrow while Farrah’s eyes went wide.

“Really?” Rufus asked over the top of Gary’s laughter.

“Should I actually use it?” Jason asked.

“I’m not sure,” Rufus said. “I’ve never actually heard of that one before. It does sound like trouble.”

“You should consider selling it,” Farrah said. “An awakening stone like that would get you enough to buy all the awakening stones you’re going to need.”

“Don’t you dare!” Gary yelled, sitting back up. “You’re going to use that stone!”

“Gary,” Rufus said, “He needs to be careful with his choices. We don’t know what kind of ability that stone could produce.”

“A powerful one,” Gary said. “Jason, you need to grab all the power you can.”

“He’s already using a rare essence combination,” Rufus said. “What if that stone unlocks some power that gets his combination on the restricted list?”

“You know they’re lenient on people who discover new things,” Gary said. “They can’t blame him if even they didn’t know.”

“It’s an awakening stone of apocalypse,” Rufus said, “that’s a pretty big hint.”

“It doesn’t matter either way,” Farrah cut in. “Look.”

Jason’s arm was blood red from where the awakening stone had sunken into it, before returning to a normal colour.

“That was rash,” Rufus said.

“Before everything else, adventurers are strong,” Jason said. “Your words. These abilities I’ve been getting are fine, but I saw Farrah spray lava like it was shooting out of a hose. I want that kind of power.”

“Yeah you do,” Gary said.

“Not helping, Gary,” Rufus said.

“No, Rufus,” Gary said. “He’s right. He needs all the power he can get, and you know it.”

“There’s no point arguing about what’s done,” Farrah said. “Jason, you might as well tell us what power you got.”

Chapter 23: I May Have Made a Huge Mistake

“Uh oh,” Jason said.

“Uh oh?” Farrah repeated. “What power did you get exactly?”

“I may have made a huge mistake,” Jason said.

“Where was that sensibility a minute ago?” Rufus asked. “What were you thinking?”

“He was thinking,” Gary said, “that if you don’t want to be a pawn of fate, you need the strength to kick fate square in the beans.”

“Actually, that’s pretty close,” Jason said, nodding at Gary who grinned back.

“Would you please just tell us what the power was?” Farrah asked.

“It’s a familiar power,” Jason said. “That’s like a magical companion that follows you around, right?”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “What kind of familiar do you get from an awakening stone of the apocalypse?”

“Funny story...” Jason said weakly.

An hour later, Jason was drawing a complex magical diagram in chalk on the floor of one of the manor’s many rooms. They had taken out the furniture and the rugs, leaving a smooth, polished floor. Jason had been working on the diagram for some time, guided by the ritual magic knowledge inserted into his head as well as Farrah’s expertise. He stopped drawing for a moment to take some powder from a nearby pouch on the floor. He sprinkled a pinch over the part of the circle he had just drawn, most of which started glowing. He rubbed out the parts that didn’t glow and redrew them.

The powder was ground-down monster cores from lesser monsters. Jason had several but they were all intact, so the powder had been provided by Farrah. She was guiding him through his first magical ritual.

“Putting together a magic circle isn’t as simple as knowing the right design,” Farrah explained. Any time she wasn’t pointing out something specific she was lecturing. “If it were that easy I could just carry around a bunch of boards with different magic circles on them. Every time you draw a magic diagram you need to adjust for the ambient magic conditions. A weak source of congealed magic like the core of a lesser monster is a perfect way to check your work.”

“There’s a ritual room under the manor with a permanent circle,” Jason said.

“That must have been expensive,” Farrah said. “You have to design the whole room around something like that to regulate the ambient magic. Did we loot that room?”

“Wasn’t much in there,” Gary said. “The most valuable stuff was set behind the walls and into the floor, so Anisa wouldn’t let us touch it. It was all pretty trashed, anyway.”

Jason got to his feet.

“I’m done,” he said. “So, am I able to do a magic ritual like this because I already have essence magic?”

“You really don’t know anything about magic,” Farrah said.

“Was that not clear at any point?” Jason asked.

“Alright,” Farrah said. “You understand essence magic already. Simple, instinctive, usually doesn’t cost anything but your own internal reserves. External magic is the opposite. Complicated, requires extensive training...”

“Or a skill book,” Jason said.

“...or a skill book,” Farrah acknowledged through gritted teeth. “If you’re satisfied with quick and dirty knowledge.”

“Don’t knock quick and dirty,” Gary said. “All my favourite things are better quick and dirty. Or slow and dirty.”

Farrah shot Gary a look as Rufus shook his head.

“Ritual magic,” Farrah continued, “relies on external sources of magic. That’s ambient magic, plus more concentrated sources, like quintessence or spirit coins.”

Scattered all through the magic diagram Jason had drawn were small piles of blood quintessence, looking like uncut rubies. There were also stacks of iron-rank spirit coins. There were a few other materials, but the largest requirement by far was the blood quintessence.

Fortunately for Jason, and rather unsurprisingly, the manor’s magical supply room had more blood quintessence than anything else. The lord of the manor had taken all the bronze-rank materials when he fled, but most of the iron-rank materials were left behind. It was more than enough for Jason’s ritual.

“External magic doesn’t require you to have an essence,” Farrah explained. “There are people who make careers out of learning a specialised slice of external magic.”

“Like plumbers,” Gary said. “They know the magic to set up running water in a building. That shower you like so much.”

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “They know just enough to do a specific job. Most of those people don’t have essences and lack the proper grounding in theory. The fundamental theory is the same, whether you specialise in rituals like me, magical craftsmanship like Gary, or something like alchemy. Same basis, different applications.”

“What about you?” Jason asked Rufus.

"I'm good at stabbing."

"Rufus doesn't know external magic," Farrah said. "His obsession is swordsmanship."

"Your skill book gave you the minimum to be considered a proper ritual magician," Farrah told Jason. "The bare minimum. That's how you awakened a familiar summoning power."

"You can only awaken that kind of essence ability if you already understand ritual magic," Gary said. "That's why me and Farrah have summoning powers and Rufus doesn't."

"You've seen Gary and myself call up short-lived monsters," Farrah said. "Rituals that are also essence powers tend to be..."

"Quick and dirty," Gary said with a grin.

"Please stop," Farrah said.

"I remember when you summoned those things," Jason said. "You just kind of knocked out a circle and out they came."

"Summoning a familiar is a more elaborate ritual," Farrah said. "Unlike a regular summoning, you should only need it each time you go up a rank. Unless your familiar gets killed, in which case you'll have to summon it back."

"Not everyone summons their familiar," Rufus said.

"That's true," Farrah said. "Some familiar powers act like a call, and a creature that has an affinity to that call will come and form a bond with the person. Less costly than summoning, but if that kind of familiar dies, you can't just summon it again. You need to find a whole new creature to be your familiar, which may or may not be like the one you lost."

"Let's get this thing going," Rufus said. "You don't want Anisa to walk in on us."

"You definitely don't," Gary said.

Jason stood in front of the diagram. He could feel the power inside him aching to trigger the ritual. He knew the incantation; he had since the moment he used the stone. He held a hand out over the magic diagram. In his other hand was a knife. He hesitantly cut the palm of his outstretched hand, letting blood drop into the circle as he chanted.

"Let this mortal blood beckon the all-devouring power of the final threshold. Answer the call and claim the offering. Heed my command and bring forth the avatar of life's annihilation."

"Oh, using that stone was a terrific idea," Rufus said.

"Shush," Farrah told him.

Red liquid started oozing out of the floor where Jason's blood had fallen. Dark, thick and viscous, it spread out over the entirety of the magic diagram, obscuring the lines and only stopping when it reached the edges.

"Does that remind anyone else of something we saw recently?" Gary asked.

Jason felt a prickling sensation spreading throughout his body. It became sharper and sharper, turning into pain as it focused on points on his arms, legs and chest. He gritted his teeth, but yelled out as blood burst out of a dozen pain points, spraying over the circle.

Rufus moved to intervene, but Farrah grabbed his arm.

"Interfering now would be more dangerous than letting it happen," she said. Rufus turned a frustrated face to look at her, but stepped back on seeing her resolute expression.

Blood sprayed out of Jason like a fountain, ripping right through his clothes. He staggered, struggling to stay upright as the blood kept spurting out of him. As the blood mixed with the pooled liquid on the floor, the obscured lines of the diagram underneath started to light up, shining red light through the liquid. The other three looked at each other as the room was filled with the same red light that had suffused the ritual chamber they escaped together.

Jason stumbled as the blood finally stopped pouring out of his body. He was pale and sweaty, swaying as he struggled to avoid toppling over, but remained on his feet. His eyes were locked on the glowing red pool in front of him.

Rufus and Gary flinched as a leech with a horrifying ring of lamprey teeth emerged from the pool, mirroring the scenario of the day before.

"Isn't that...?"

Ability: [Familiar: Sanguine Horror] (Blood)

- Ritual (familiar, summon)
- Cost: Extreme mana, extreme stamina, extreme health.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Summon a [Sanguine Horror] to serve as a familiar.

A second leech crawled up through the red liquid, then a third and fourth as their rate of appearance accelerated. Soon leeches were tumbling out until they formed a waist high pile on the floor. Unlike their experience the previous day, no bloodied rags appeared to push the pile into a humanoid shape. The pile remaining as a pile.

The red pool started slowly soaking into the floor, which absorbed it as if it were disappearing down a drain. Jason's blood, the circle he drew and all the magical materials within it, vanishing into the floor as if they had never existed. Jason watched the process with eyes foggy, standing unsteadily.

"That's not going to drip downstairs, is it?" Gary asked.

"No," Farrah said. "Its all being drawn back through the astral channel created by the summoning."

"It'd be funny if Jason summoned another outworlder."

"That'd be fantastic," Farrah said. "The paper I could write on that would be the talk of the Magic Society."

As the final traces of the blood pool drained away into nothingness, Jason collapsed to the floor.

"He really does pass out a lot," Gary said. "And he really goes through clothes. Wait, is that thing going to eat him?"

The mound of leeches was undulating its way toward Jason's unconscious body. It wasn't far, but the pile moved slowly.

"It's his familiar," Farrah said. "It's not going to eat him."

They watched the slow-moving pile undulate closer to Jason's unconscious form.

"Are you sure?" Gary asked.

The pile crawled over Jason's limp body, seeking out the wounds where the blood had sprayed out. The leeches started disappearing as they buried themselves into the wounds.

"Uh, I'm pretty sure," Farrah said.

"Are they crawling inside him?" Gary asked.

"It's a summoned familiar," Farrah said. "A summoned familiar can temporarily disperse its body and place its spirit inside the summoner."

"Does it usually look that disturbing?" Gary asked.

"You're the one who wanted this," Rufus said. "Farrah, what do we do with him?"

"Well," she said uncertainly, "he should be fine."

"He's covered in wounds," Gary said. "With leeches crawling into them."

"They won't hurt him," Farrah said. "They're not even really crawling inside him. Look closely and you'll see they're actually merging into his blood. See how they're kind of melting as they push their way in."

"I think that might be worse." Gary said. "I mean, melted leech can't be something you want in your blood, right?"

“He’ll be fine,” Farrah said. “Probably. Every familiar gives different benefits when it subsumes itself into the summoner,” she said. “They can merge themselves into the hair, the skin, even the aura. If I remember rightly, the ones who enter the blood usually induce rapid healing. So really, he should be better than fine.”

They watched as the last of the leeches vanished in Jason’s blood. The three adventurers stood over Jason, laying unconscious and undignified on the floor.

“Is he healing?” Gary asked.

“I can’t tell,” Rufus said. “There’s blood over all the wounds.”

“Well, wipe some off,” Gary said.

“You’re the one who wanted him to use that stone,” Rufus said. “You wipe some off.”

“I have fur,” Gary said. “I don’t want to get blood in it.”

“Since when has that been a concern?” Rufus asked.

“It’s a new thing,” Gary said. “I’m growing as a person, and I think you should support that. By being the one who wipes the blood off.”

Farrah shook her head, pulling a handkerchief out of her pocket.

“You two are children,” she said, wiping carefully at a blood patches on Jason’s arm. Underneath was clear, unbroken skin.

“See?” she said to the others. “I told you he’d be fine. I had total confidence.”

Jason regained consciousness while being rattled around in the back of a wagon. He was on a blanket but it barely softened the hard wood he was laying on. It was an open wagon, giving him a wide view of the rocky desert as he looked blearily around. In the wagon with him were Farrah and Anisa, while Gary was on a seat at the front holding reins. Rufus wasn’t in the wagon, instead riding alongside. He was in the saddle on one of the two-headed horse-lizards called heidels, leading a string of them all tied together.

“Why would you bring those horrifying things?” Jason called out to him.

“You’re hardly in a position to talk,” Rufus called back with a laugh.

Jason could feel the blood monster flowing though his veins. It was unnerving, but he couldn’t help but grin at the sensation of power.

“How are you feeling?” Farrah asked.

“Tired,” Jason said, “but strong.”

“Are you still not going to tell me what happened to him?” Anisa asked Farrah, not even looking at Jason.

“Him is right here,” Jason said, “and you could ask him yourself.”

Anisa turned her gaze to Jason.

“Then what happened to you?” she asked.

“I said you could ask,” Jason said. “Didn’t say I’d tell you.”

Gary burst out laughing from the front, Farrah stifling a chortle behind her hand.

Anisa schooled her fury into a look of blank disdain and turned away, staring out at the desert horizon.

Chapter 24: Astral Space

“So how long are we going to be trekking through the desert?” Jason asked. “I’m not saying there isn’t a stark beauty to it, but I’d like to go someplace where even the sunshine isn’t actively trying to kill me.”

They’d left the manor at noon while Jason was still unconscious after his summoning ritual. By the time they stopped for the evening Jason was feeling battered by half a day of riding the wagon over rocky desert terrain. They camped in tents taken from Farrah’s magic chest and set off again in the morning.

The wagon’s progress along the little-used trail was slow but steady, only pausing occasionally to water the heidels from a barrel in the wagon. The creatures could handle the arid conditions well enough, but couldn’t forego water entirely. There were a dozen of them between Rufus’ string and the four pulling the wagon. Rufus had insisted on taking them over Anisa’s objection, refusing to leave them to starve in the stables of the abandoned manor.

They had taken a wagon because the lord of the manor had taken the more comfortable carriages when he fled, only leaving a few uncovered wagons behind. After waking up in the back one, Jason had joined Gary on the driver’s bench so he could take in the landscape. Luckily Jason’s slight build required little room, as Gary’s huge frame occupied most of it.

“It kind of looks like parts of my homeland,” Jason said. “We call it the outback.”

“Out back of what?” Gary asked.

“Out back of everything,” Jason said.

“We’ll reach a village this afternoon,” Gary said. “Not sure how long we’ll stay. The guy that set us up lives there.”

“We’re going to pay him a little visit,” Farrah said.

“After that, we’re about two days from the river valley. From there, it’ll be a nice boat ride down to the coast. That’ll take a couple of days and bring us right into the city.”

“I’d like to take a couple of days with the prick that served us up to those cannibals,” Farrah said.

“We should be leaving that man to my church,” Anisa said. “His betrayal to my god was greater than his betrayal to you.”

“No one was going to eat your god,” Farrah said. “We’re going to peel this prick like an apple.”

“You have apples in this world?” Jason asked brightly. “I love apples.”

“Me too,” Gary said brightly.

“Remember not to kill him,” Rufus called over from where he was riding alongside the wagon. “He has questions to answer.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Farrah said. “I’m going to take it nice and slow.”

“Is the heat getting to me?” Jason asked, “or is that mountain green?”

The hills and mountains they had seen were largely barren, with a few scraggly trees at best. The trail was leading them in the direction of a dark green mountain. On the lower reaches it was largely plant life, more verdant than elsewhere in the desert. Toward the peak it was bare stone, which was also a deep green colour.

“Green marble is a regional specialty,” Farrah explained. “They export a lot of it through the city on the coast, which is where we’re going. They even named the city Greenstone.”

“There’s a village on the other side of the mountain,” Gary said. “That’s where we’re heading now.”

“The village is based around quarrying,” Farrah said. “We’ll see more traffic from here on as they cart the stone to the river and boat it down to the coast.”

The trail improved as it curved around the base of the mountain. It became wider and smoother, making the wagon ride less bumpy. As they made their way around the mountain Jason spotted rapidly increasing signs of life. The occasional patches of yellow grass became thicker, with more of the rare, scrubby trees.

They passed several quarry faces before the village came into sight. The trail had become a proper road at that point and their wagon become one of many. Jason noticed magic was being combined with manual labour, resulting in a more modern operation than he would have expected. There were even huge slabs of stone floating over the ground, along mine-cart style rails that glowed with magic.

When the village itself came into view, Jason was agog. From high on the mountain water sprayed out from a hole in the mountain itself, catching the light in a gorgeous waterfall that spilled hundreds of metres to a pool below. The pool fed a wide channel, stretching the better part of a kilometre into a small lake. There was a village built up around the shore of the lake. The lake was ringed with green, rich grass and some kind of palm tree. The village buildings were nestled amidst the lush greenery, buildings of stone, white plaster and occasionally vibrant green marble.

“You could make some real tourist money here,” Jason said.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” Farrah said. She had got up on her knees behind Jason and Gary to look out.

Jason’s gaze drifted up to the waterfall spraying out of the mountain.

“Aren’t they worried about digging into the water source?” he asked.

“Almost every oasis in this desert has a magical water source,” Gary said. “They could tear this mountain down to the ground and the water would just fall from the sky.”

“How does that work?” Jason asked.

“There’s an astral space connected to this desert,” Farrah said. “I’m assuming you have no idea what that is.”

“From the name, I’d guess some kind of interdimensional pocket,” Jason said.

“Um, yeah, actually,” Farrah said. “It’s connected to various places around the desert and produces a bunch of water, therefore, oases.”

“That sounds awesome,” Jason said. “Wonder if I could get up there for a closer look.”

“Astral spaces are actually pretty common,” Farrah said, “but normally they’re sealed off and you need magic to track one down and break in. Being naturally open like this is rare, especially with so many apertures. The river we’ll be going down comes out of the biggest one.”

“You can’t just constantly introduce new water,” Jason said. “Even if it takes a long time, it’ll eventually start messing with the climate.”

“No,” Farrah said, “the water coming out of the astral space has a high level of magic. When too much accumulates it turns into water quintessence. When it forms, it condenses huge quantities of magically-imbued water into a little crystal.”

“Is the crystal super-heavy?” Jason asked.

“No,” Farrah said. “Why would it be?”

“Conservation of mass,” Jason said. “Or energy, or something. Physics isn’t my thing.”

Gary and Farrah glanced at each other and shrugged. They were quickly getting used to not knowing what Jason was talking about.

Farrah pointed out boats on the small lake that looked like fishing boats.

“Those are all people scouring the bottom of the lake for it,” she explained. “As forms of quintessence go, water is a common one. It’s one of the most useful, though.”

“Especially in the desert,” Gary added. “Being able to find it reliably means there’s real money to be made.”

“Yeah,” Farrah agreed. “There’s whole villages along the coast dedicated to hunting up water quintessence that forms after the river water washes out to sea. Funnily enough, this desert is one of the best sources of water quintessence in the world.”

The wagon was drawing closer to the village. They passed by what looked to be a staging area for exporting the marble before reaching the village itself. Rufus separated himself from the group to find somewhere to stable the string of heidels for the night. An inn would have livery room enough for the ones pulling the wagons, but not the extras ones as well.

The village was made up of a single, circular street running around the entirety of the lake, paved in tan-coloured brick. It looked like sandstone, but for all Jason knew, it could be some weird magic rock. It was close enough to yellow that if it didn’t loop in a circle he’d expect to find a shady fake wizard at the end.

“Or a real one,” he said to himself. “I wonder if I count?”

There were buildings on either side of the ring-road, the ones fronting onto the lake being larger and nicer. The smaller buildings were made from the same brick as the road. The larger ones were coated in a white plaster, with green marble embellishments.

The buildings were pleasantly placed among the trees and bushes growing around the lake. It was a stark contrast desert, with its dry dirt and spiky scrub. The smaller buildings had their own appeal, with an inviting homeliness to them. The street was busy with people, but more than broad enough that neither wagons nor pedestrians were inconvenienced. Looking around, everyone seemed happy.

Gary pulled the wagon to a halt in front of an inn and everyone climbed off. After hours of riding the wagon over bumpy ground, Jason’s body was creaky and sore. He took in a luxurious breath, heavy with moisture from the lake. Compared to the dust and heat of the open desert, it was like drinking in nectar.

“Think I might walk off the stiffness of bumping along in this wagon,” Jason said. “This is my first piece of civilisation not full of cannibals. Hopefully.”

“They’re not cannibals that we know of,” Farrah said with a laugh.

“Good,” Jason said. “I think I’ll have a look around.”

“Sounds good,” Gary said. “I’m going to get us some rooms and get these heidels unhitched.”

“Then Anisa and I will go track down our little friend,” Farrah said. “Don’t want him spotting us and running off.”

Anisa nodded her assent.

“Will he still be in town after selling you out?” Jason asked.

“Should be,” Farrah said. “He wasn’t expecting us to ever come back.”

“Do you need any money?” Gary asked Jason.

“I have some gold spirit coins left,” Jason said. “The rest are lower ranked, but I have a lot of them. Will that be enough?”

Gary and Farrah started laughing, even Anisa had an amused look on her face.

“Jason,” Gary said, “A gold spirit coin would buy the nicest building in this village, and I doubt there’s enough currency in it to give you the change. Unless you’re buying magic items or bulk trade goods, most people use lesser spirit coins, iron-rank at the most.”

“What’s the exchange rate between coins?” Jason asked. “Actually, I’ll figure it out myself. That’s part of the fun in coming to a new place, right?”

“That’s the spirit,” Gary said.

Chapter 25: Blasphemy is Kind of My Thing

After handling the string of heidels, Rufus made his way into the village. He knew from their previous visit that the inns were all clustered together, so he had no concerns about finding the rest of the group. The sky was turning a rich blue, with orange and gold encroaching as twilight came over the desert. Along the ring road of the village, magic lamps were lighting up and some kind of night market was setting up. He came into the village along with a good many quarry workers who had finished up as they lost the light. Moving amongst the gathering people, he saw a familiar face.

“Jason?”

“Oh, g’day, Rufus,” Jason said with a wave. He was behind a stall selling skewered meat, helping what Rufus assumed was the stall owner to fry meat.

“What are you doing?” Rufus asked.

“Dan here is teaching me to cook... what was it called again?”

“Bruschard,” Dan said.

“It’s a giant worm!” Jason said. “Luckily I tried it before I found that out.”

“You seem to be adjusting well,” Rufus said.

“Yeah, no worries,” Jason said. “You go get your revenge, or whatever. I’m good here. Gary picked the inn on the end with the big livery, by the way. There’s a sign with a little house and a cart on it.”

“Thanks,” Rufus said.

“Now,” Jason said, turning back to Dan. “Give me those sauce ingredients again. I haven’t heard of any of them, so I’ll have to write them all down. Which means I’m going to need some paper...”

Hours previously, Jason was happily meandering around the circle road, frequently pausing to take in the village. He’d stop and talk with villagers who proved more than ready for a conversation. They were proud of their village and rightly so, Jason was happy to acknowledge. The colourful houses looked inviting, everywhere was lush with greenery, so removed from the desert around it. The air was fresh, cool and clean. Jason thought back to Gary’s claim about a gold coin buying whole buildings and found himself tempted.

He came across something that looked like a covered bus stop, but instead of a timetable there was a bulletin board with various pieces of paper pinned to it. Looking over them he saw they were all descriptions of monsters, along with when and where they were

last seen. He asked a passer-by about it and, true to form for the village, she was happy to explain. According to the villager, Doris, any time someone discovered a monster around the village they would write down the details and put it up on the board. Every month some adventurers would pass through and clear out all the monsters on the board.

Doris was surprised at Jason's lack of knowledge about something so basic. As he had done a number of times that afternoon he explained that he had recently come from an isolated area with little knowledge of the outside world. It was more-or-less true.

Jason himself was as interesting to the locals as they were to him, as visitors were mostly the same selection of stone traders. Adventurers didn't often appear outside of the monthly patrol, and by all accounts were a surly bunch. Roaming the remote villages was apparently a punishment duty, so their visit wasn't often friendly.

A group of higher-ranked adventurers passing through was the talk of the village. Jason was travelling with them, but wasn't an adventurer himself, making him more approachable. This was the perfect combination for villagers looking for gossip. Jason obliged with harrowing tales of blood cults and ritual sacrifice.

The locals showed Jason the best place to get a drink and where to avoid because it was full of drunken quarry workers. He met people who made a career out of diving the lake for water quintessence, the village mayor and the man in charge of guarding the waterfall. People were allowed to go up for a look, but there were guards at all hours to keep people out of the astral space aperture that was the water's source.

When the sun started to set, Jason watched the sky turn into red gold from the bridge over the channel that flowed from the waterfall into the village lake. He knew from the locals that there would be a night market and he slowly wandered in that direction. One of the earliest booths to set up was a man frying skewers of meat. The smell of the meat and the sauce he had on them was incredibly enticing.

"That smells amazing," Jason said. "I have to try one. I'm Jason, by the way."

"Dan," the man introduced himself.

Gary blearily stumbled downstairs, his huge feet thundering on the wooden steps. Downstairs was a common area with a number of tables and a bar that saw use in the evenings. Gary wandered into an adjoining courtyard with more tables, sitting with Anisa, Rufus and Farrah at theirs.

"Jason not up?" Gary asked.

"I tried his room, but no answer," Rufus said.

"Heavy sleeper?" Farrah said.

“He was knocked out how many times in two days?” Gary said. “He probably needs it.”

A serving girl walked up to their table.

“Are you looking for your friend?” she asked. “He’s in the kitchen.”

“What’s he doing in the kitchen?” Farrah asked.

“Performing miracles!” Jason announced, walking into the courtyard. He was carrying a huge tray in front of him with four plates. He sat it down on the table, distributing the plates and attendant cutlery.

“Turns out they have tamarind, and some kind of little onion,” Jason said, “so I made son-in-law eggs. No idea why they’re called that, by the way. Or what kind of animal these eggs are from. Delicious, though.”

The dish was eggs that had been boiled then deep-fried, served in halves with a sauce, fried onions and generous garnish. Jason handed the tray off to the serving girl before taking a place at the table.

“I had to play trial and error with some of the other ingredients,” he confessed, “but it worked out pretty well. Martha is an absolute treat.”

“Martha?” Farrah asked.

“These are fantastic,” Gary mumbled around a forkful of egg.

“Martha’s the landlady,” Jason said.

“You really seem to have settled in,” Rufus said.

Jason nodded, but didn’t speak with his mouth full.

“These are good,” Farrah said between bites.

“I’m quite satisfied sustaining myself with spirit coins,” Anisa said.

“Great,” Gary said, yanking her plate in front of himself.

“The way I look at things,” Jason said to Rufus, gesturing with an impaled egg, “is that coming here is like a fresh start. I can do the things I regretted never doing. I’m only twenty-three but I’ve been pretty efficient about squandering my opportunities.”

“There’s a surprise,” Anisa said flatly.

“Apparently being mean isn’t impure,” Jason said, prompting Anisa to jump to her feet.

“You dare blaspheme?”

“Frequently,” Jason said with a laugh. “It’s kind of my thing.”

“I think cooking might be your thing,” Gary said around another mouthful of eggs.

“I can have more than one thing.”

Anisa was clearly about to erupt, but Rufus forestalled her.

“Anisa,” he said firmly. “If you’re not having breakfast, then go get ready to start out.”

“I’m already prepared,” she said stiffly.

“Then take a walk,” Rufus said.

Anisa glowered at Jason but walked away without speaking further. Rufus turned a weary gaze on Jason.

“Is there any chance you could maybe not poke at her so much?” Rufus asked.

“Honestly?” Jason said. “Probably not.”

Gary snorted a laugh.

“Could you at least try?” Rufus asked. “We both know she’s never going to bend, so I need you to be the bigger person. For the unity of the team.”

Jason sighed.

“I guess I have been a bit childish,” Jason said. “Alright, I’ll do my best. Fair warning, though; my best may not be that good. She just gets under my skin, you know?”

“Oh, we know,” Farrah said.

“I’m amazed she doesn’t bump into things,” Jason said, “always looking down her nose like that.”

“Think of it this way,” Rufus said. “You were just talking about getting a fresh start. Try and see this as an opportunity to be a better person.”

Jason thought it over.

“I like it,” he said. “I can be the person I choose to be, without all the baggage of my old life.”

“And if you find your way back to that life?” Farrah asked.

“Then I’ll return better than I left,” Jason said.

“That’s admirable,” Rufus said, then popped his fork into his mouth. “These really are good.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Farrah told him. “You’re not Gary.”

“Was that a compliment or an insult?” Gary asked.

“So how did your roaring rampage of revenge go?” Jason asked. “You did say you weren’t going to kill him, right? Farrah seemed a bit keen on torturing him, though.”

“We didn’t find him, but we have a trail to follow,” Rufus said. “We’ll track him down, ask our questions, then hand him over to Anisa’s church.”

“Assuming we can run him down at all,” Farrah said. “Seems our boy left town in a hurry yesterday morning.”

“You think the people who ran from the manor warned him?” Jason asked.

“Most likely,” Farrah said. “We’ll do some digging around town today, see what we can find. If we come up dry, we’ll move on and leave it to Anisa’s church.”

“Well, you should start with Old Murph down at the general store,” Jason said. “He knows all the village secrets.”

“Jason,” Farrah asked, “was the world you were summoned from this village?”

“What?” Jason asked. “I met him last night.”

“So, will you be coming with us?” Rufus asked Jason.

“I’ve had quite enough blood-cult shenanigans, thank you very much, and want no part of whatever you do to that man. I found a guy who’ll take me to the top of the waterfall. Apparently there’s a mountain path that leads all the way up.”

“Surely they wouldn’t let you go into the astral space,” Farrah said.

“Sadly no,” Jason said. “They keep a guard up there to make sure no one mucks about with it. They’ll let you get right up close for a look, though. I was going to invite you, but you’ve got your whole revenge thing going on.”

“I bet the view is good up there,” Gary said. “I kind of want to go with you.”

“Focus, Gary,” Rufus said.

“If the guy’s gone, he’s gone,” Gary said. “If we’re handing him over to Anisa’s church anyway, just let them deal with it.”

“No,” Rufus said. “I have questions that need answering. We’re going after him.”

Rufus skewered his fork into another halved egg.

“After breakfast.”

Chapter 26:

Waterfall

Jason was only an occasional bushwalker, so as he climbed the steep mountain trail, he appreciated his new iron-rank attributes. He hadn't become a sculpture of perfection like Farrah and Rufus, but it was still a solid step up.

Jason's guide on the waterfall track was a man of late-middle years named Hiram. Hiram's job was to watch over the aperture that was the source of the waterfall. Jason had met him the night before, with Hiram agreeing to take Jason along when he started his shift in the morning.

Hiram was shorter than Jason, who was not tall, but with a barrel chest and limbs of thick, ropy muscle. He guessed the shorter man outweighed him by a good margin, and that compact power didn't go to waste. He was hauling a backpack half his own size up the mountain, yet barely seemed to notice the weight.

Moisture from the huge waterfall scattered over the mountainside. Farrah had told him that the water had a strong power of vitality, allowing the mountain's thick tree cover to grow up, even under the desert sun. The dense canopy gave the trail blessed shade, but the heat still made its presence felt. The heat of the desert and the moisture from the waterfall made the air thick and heavy, almost a chore to breathe. Jason reflected that this small patch of desert felt more like a jungle.

There were regular stopping points along the trail, with benches to pause and rest. Hiram didn't seem to need them, but didn't begrudge Jason. Each resting spot was placed close to where the tree line met the waterfall, where the air was cooler and anyone resting could look out over the village. With every stop on the ascent, each being higher than the last, the view became more and more magnificent. Jason grew up in a little tourist town and knew the kind of money a place like this could make. He suspected his new world didn't see a lot of tourism.

"The flesh-eating monsters wouldn't help."

"What's that?" Hiram asked.

"Nothing," Jason said. "Best get going again, I guess."

The roar of the waterfall grew louder as they closed in on the point where it erupted from the side of the mountain. The trees became smaller and thinner as they approached the upper tree line.

"Getting close, now," Hiram said loudly over the noise of rushing water. "These trees are around the same height as the fall, so only the closest ones see a lot of moisture."

The sound of the waterfall grew to a cacophony where they had to shout to hear each other. The final stretch of the trail was actually a cave that led into the mountain. There was a wooden walkway with grit glued on for purchase and a magic lamp to light the way. Jason was unpleasantly reminded of the cavern he had navigated below the Vane estate hedge maze.

It was the first time he had seen wood used in construction since arriving in the village. Even the doors were made of woven reeds, suggesting the village didn't have much of a crime problem.

Once they entered the cave, the thundering sound of the waterfall was amplified in echo, making even shouts a futile effort. The cave was filled with wet air and they moved forward carefully. Hiram had the respect for the slippery boards that Jason had learned the hard way.

When lit up by lamplight on glistening stone walls, the cave was actually quite pretty, with much of the stone being marbled green. Compared to the humid exterior, cold, clean air blew over them from the tunnel. Jason enjoyed the refreshing feeling as they made their way toward the light he could see at the far end.

As they closed on the end of the tunnel, a cool mist started wafting towards them. They reached the end of the tunnel and stepped out into a stone chamber. The first thing he noticed was the light, blue and shimmering, glinting off the mist. It gave the whole chamber the feel of being underwater.

The chamber looked like it had once been a natural cavern, later carved into more practical dimensions. The ceiling was untouched from the original cave, but the floor had been worked flat, with grooves cut into it for traction in the wet.

The chamber's most arresting feature was the back wall, which wasn't a wall at all. A torrent of water, blasted in one side of the room and out the other, through a tunnel taller and deeper than the chamber itself. The whole chamber looked oddly like a subway station, with the rushing water in place of a train.

There was a fence of vertical bars in front of the water, like a safety rail going floor to ceiling. There was a gate in the middle of the fence, although Jason could imagine no reason to go through it. The water looked like it would rip off any limb someone was foolish enough to shove into it.

Velocity kept the water on course instead of spilling into the room; gravity wouldn't win out until the water escaped the mountain. More than a little spray still escaped, filling the chamber with wet mist. It left the walls and floor slick with water, quickly making Jason and Hiram the same.

The water was also the source of the blue light. Either there were powerful magic lamps behind it, or the water had its own luminescence. Jason would have asked Hiram, but any attempt to talk would be futile over the sound of water.

Hiram went to the side of the chamber, where Jason noticed a glazed window set into the wall. Through the window was a second chamber, cut deeper into the mountain. Inside, a young man in a comfortable chair was giving them a wave.

There was a metal door along from the window, which Hiram opened and led Jason through. Beyond was a small antechamber, barely big enough to hold both men. A lamp was set firmly into the wall for light, next to another metal door, but Hiram didn't open it. With a door between them and the main chamber, the din from the water was greatly reduced. Jason noticed that there seemed to be some kind of seal around the door to keep the moisture out.

"Just wait a moment," Hiram said.

Jason looked about the tiny room, but there wasn't much to see. He did spot neat arrays of fingernail-sized holes in the floor and ceiling. As he was looking at them, hot, dry air blasted from them like a giant blow dryer.

"Close your eyes," Hiram shouted over the rushing air. "The air will dry them out."

Jason did as instructed, waiting around half a minute as the air dried out his clothes and hair.

"It draws the dry desert air from the other side of the mountain," Hiram explained, "with a little bit of magic to help it dry faster."

When the air stopped, they were both nice and dry. Hiram opened the next door and took them inside. There was a comfortable-looking chair in front of the window, a number of cupboards, and an overstuffed bookshelf.

"Morning, boss," the young man said. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Jason," Hiram said, dropping the backpack with a loud thud. "He's passing through with a group of adventurers and wanted to see the aperture. Jason, this is Griff."

"Travelling with adventurers," Griff said enviously. "That must be exciting."

"It has its moments," Jason said.

They exchanged greetings and Griff made to leave.

"Any idea when Duggan will be back, boss?" he asked. "I'm really looking forward to sleeping during the night time again."

"His wife is still on the mend," Hiram said. "Probably another month."

Griff's shoulders slumped.

"Make it to the end of the week and I'll switch with you," Hiram said.

“Thanks, boss.”

Griff gave a weary smile and left. Jason looked out through the window as Hiram unloaded his backpack, stowing its contents in the cupboards.

“Ready for a closer look?” Hiram asked when he was done.

Jason grinned and Hiram led them back out. Leaving didn’t trigger the drying mechanism again.

“It’s set to go off when the outer door is opened first,” Hiram explained.

Back out in the loud, wet chamber, they walked carefully over wet stone to reach the fence. They both grabbed a hold of the wet bars, which Jason noticed were engraved with magic symbols.

Being close to the torrent, water sprayed over them both, but Jason didn’t mind. There was a feeling of refreshment that was more than just cool water on a hot morning. He felt like a child running under a lawn sprinkler on a hot day. Farrah had told him there was magic in the water. Was it the cause of the strange reminiscence, or was he just homesick in a strange land?

He craned his head to try and see the actual source of the water, but it came from somewhere deeper in the mountain where he couldn’t see. As there was no way to talk over the noise, Hiram grabbed his shoulder to get his attention. Hiram pointed in the direction the water was flowing and Jason spotted a tunnel on their side of the fence. It ran alongside the water, through which Jason could see daylight. He nodded at Hiram and they started off in that direction.

The tunnel went all the way to the outside of the mountain, where the water broke free to tumble down through the air. There was a chest high railing to keep people from falling off. The view was breathtaking. Below them was the pool where the waterfall landed and the channel flowing into the village lake. Beyond that, the vast expanse of the desert.

Jason was taking in the view when he noticed the noise of the water seemed to be dimming. At first he thought it was his imagination, but then he saw Hiram looking at the water stream with a confused expression. They watched the avalanche of water rapidly diminish, as if someone was turning off a giant tap. The flow dropped down to nothing, leaving an empty tunnel carved out by the water as smooth as machine-made pipe.

“Is that meant to happen?” Jason asked, in the sudden silence.

“No, it isn’t,” Hiram said, concern plain on his face.

“Has it ever done this before?” Jason asked.

“No, it hasn’t,” Hiram said.

“Should we tell someone?”

“It’s a waterfall, son. I’m pretty sure everyone noticed.”

Hiram went over to the room, ignoring the blast of warm air to rush inside, still wet. He came back out with a large key, unlocked the gate and dropped down into the curved floor of the water tunnel. Jason hesitated a moment before following. Hiram glanced at Jason, but didn’t comment.

Jason immediately spotted the aperture, some twenty metres down the pipe. It was a huge circle with a surface that shimmered with the same blue light the water had produced. Through the circle he could make out what looked like a rainforest, but the distortion of the circle made it blurry and indistinct.

“Is that sky?” Jason asked. “Is there a whole world through there?”

“Never actually been through to see,” Hiram said.

A large shape crawled into view through the aperture. It lumbered through the aperture and into the tunnel, like passing through a sheet of water. It had the body and head of a shark, but instead of skin it had a plated shell in hues of dark purple and red. Emerging from its sides were eight crab legs and a huge pair of pincers. The creature was three metres long and the pincers were bigger than Jason’s head.

“Do you see a lot of those?” Jason asked.

“No,” Hiram said. “That’s new.”

New Quest: [Waterfall Monster]

A monster has unexpectedly emerged from the local astral space. It has already entered the blind aggression stage and will attack anyone it encounters. Defeat it before it causes any harm.

- Objective: Defeat the [Shab] 0/1.
- Reward: Quintessence.

“I don’t suppose you know what that thing is?” Hiram asked, drawing the knife on his belt.

“I think it’s called a shab,” Jason said.

Jason drew the snake tooth dagger at his own waist.

“You any good with that?” Hiram asked.

“No,” Jason said. “No I’m not.”

Chapter 27

Water, Fall

"It's pretty slow," Jason said. "If we get back behind the fence, is it strong enough to hold it?"

"Not sure," Hiram said. "It's mostly to keep out people. The magic is just to stop the water from ruining it, not make it any stronger."

"I guess we fight, then," Jason said reluctantly.

"I guess so," Hiram said, equally lacking in enthusiasm.

The creature was moving up the tunnel, but at a lethargic pace. Its crab legs were better suited to sideways movement than forwards, so it was shuffling side to side as it approached. The back and forth motion was hampered by the curved sides of the pipe-like tunnel.

"You have any essences?" Jason asked. "Is that what I've been feeling in your aura, there?"

"One," Hiram said. "You're an adventurer? I thought the people with you were the adventurers."

"They are," Jason said. "I have the essences, but they're very new."

"You can try them out here then," Hiram said. "I guess you're in luck." Hiram said, causing Jason to chuckle.

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Jason said. "How lucky I am to be here."

The creature continued moving closer, its legs tapping on the stone as it slowly zigzagged up the tunnel.

"Any idea on how we should do it?" Jason asked.

"I have a might essence," Hiram said. "It makes me strong. If I tie up those pincers, think you can get around them and kill it?"

Jason looked at the creature. His knife wouldn't do much to the hard shell, but was just right for digging into the segmented joints.

"Yeah, I think I can do that."

Hiram looked at the knife in his hand and shoved it back into its sheath before striding down the tunnel. Jason followed behind, his own knife at the ready.

As they drew closer, one of the pincers shot out and Hiram caught it in one hand. The stocky man and the creature struggled back and forth, but Hiram didn't employ his second hand. He waited for the second pincer and grabbed that one too.

Hiram stood with hands over his head, a pincer gripped in each one. His arms swayed like branches in a storm, but his body was the tree's unmoving trunk.

Seeing Hiram and the monster in a stand-off, Jason knew it was time to act. The sides of the round tunnel curved up, wet and smooth. Closest to flat was the middle of the tunnel, which was unfortunately full of monster.

Jason had two options for getting behind it. One was trying to slip past on the outside, risking the slippery walls. The other, more terrifying option was to crawl underneath the monster's body. Its crab legs emerged from either side of the body, leaving the a large open space underneath.

He ruled out crawling under the monster because it would involve crawling under a monster. Instead he rushed forward, trying to half-slide along the pipe to get past the creature's legs.

He failed immediately. His feet slipped out from under him and he slid down into the creature's legs. It raised one of them, which Jason realised tapered into a point as it came down and stabbed into him.

Jason cried out with pain, but he still held a death-grip on his dagger. He slid the blade across the monster's leg, skittering over the hard shell until it found a vulnerable joint. The knife slotted right in between the plates of shell and he sliced the edge across the cartilage.

As the dagger cut into flesh, he used one of his abilities. He felt power surge out from deep inside his body, electric and exhilarating. It passed through his arm and into the dagger, filling the weapon with magic.

Ability: [Leech Bite] (Blood)

- Special attack (melee, drain, wounding, blood)
 - Cost: Low stamina.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts or refreshes the [Bleeding] condition. Drains a small amount of health and stamina when refreshing the [Bleeding] condition.

 - [Bleeding] (affliction, wounding, blood): Deals ongoing damage by causing or increasing blood loss. As a wounding effect, this condition absorbs and negates an amount of incoming healing, after which this affliction immediately ends.
-

As Jason yanked the knife free, blood sprayed out of the joint. The monster raised its leg sharply, pulling it free of Jason while releasing a high-pitched, alien shriek. Along with Jason's power, the magic of his snake-tooth dagger did its own work.

> Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Shab].

Jason scrambled to escape its legs as one of them rose up, poised to stab him again. He found himself directly underneath the creature, laying on his back. In front of him was the creature's underbelly, which turned out to be fleshy and unprotected by shell. Jason called up the power within him again, raking the vulnerable underside with his dagger.

Ability: [Punish] (Sin)

- Special attack (melee, curse)
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage and the [Sin] affliction.

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Blood and other fluids splashed over Jason from long wound, leaving him spluttering salty fluid as he shimmied on his back out behind the creature. The monster itself went wild at the wound to its underside, breaking its pincers out of Hiram's grip and flailing about with more high-pitched shrieking.

One of the monster's legs impaled one of Jason's by accident as the creature thrashed about. It didn't seem to notice, yanking its leg back out again. Jason turned himself over and crawled painfully away, still spitting out monster juice.

After getting free of the maddened monster, Jason looked back to see Hiram doing his best to hold the creature's attention, both arms wrapped around one of the pincers. Without getting up Jason held a hand out toward the creature and chanted out a spell.

"Your fate is to suffer."

There was no visible effect, but Jason felt the power surge out of him to enact itself upon the creature.

Ability: [Inexorable Doom] (Doom)

- Spell (curse)
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Periodically applies an additional instance of each stacking curse, disease, poison or unholy affliction the target is suffering from. This is a curse effect. This effect cannot be cleansed while any other curse or any disease, poison or unholy affliction is in effect.
-

Jason forced himself to his feet, ignoring the pain from his stabbed leg and abdomen as he limped further from the creature.

“Hiram!” Jason yelled past the creature. “Let it go and back off. It’ll die on its own.”

On the long wagon ride through the desert, Jason had spent hours going over his abilities, discussing with the others how to use them. Except Anisa, who refused to help him use his ‘unclean powers.’ The time spent strategising proved its worth now as he knew to withdraw and let the afflictions to do their work. It was obvious when considering things calmly beforehand, but in the heat of the moment he may well have kept attacking, putting himself and Hiram at unnecessary risk.

Jason’s first special attack had inflicted the bleeding affliction. This was effectively a powerful anticoagulant, making blood loss all the worse. The second special attack inflicted a curse called sin that increased any necrotic damage that was suffered. The dagger inflicted a necrotic poison, which was amplified by the curse. Finally, Jason’s spell would continually stack up both the poison and curse, increasing their effect. The result of all this was an exponentially escalating necrosis that would inevitably overcome the creature. All they had to do was wait.

Jason and Hiram backed off while the monster between them thrashed about. Dark fluids started oozing from its joints as it staggered forward toward Hiram, but soon it collapsed, the dying flesh in its legs unable to hold the creature’s weight. The pincer’s lifted up weakly in a last gesture of defiance before falling still.

-
- You have defeated [Shab].

➤
Quest: [Waterfall Monster]

- Objective complete: Defeat shab 1/1.
 - 50 [Water Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason was happy with how his abilities worked out, although he had one major concern. He was reliant on necrotic damage for his abilities to take full effect and his only current source of that damage was not his abilities, but his magic dagger. The others assured him that he would get such a power, but until then he would be reliant on an external tool.

Hiram and Jason cautiously approached the creature from either side. Jason had two painful wounds and he could see an injury on Hiram's arm. Hiram stood over the creature, cradling his bleeding arm.

"What did you do to it?" Hiram asked.

The monster was oozing black fluid from under its shell, which gave off a horrifying stench.

"I wasn't confident about cracking that shell," Jason said, "so I killed it from the inside out."

Jason held hand over the creature and chanted a spell.

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

Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Iron: Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.
-

Dark red light rose up from within the creature. Jason's aura sense told him it was the monster's remnant life force made visible. It siphoned up into Jason's hand, draining away from the dead monster. As it did, Jason felt the sting of healing flesh as his wounds closed over. His body was reinvigorated as his stamina and mana were replenished. As he

consumed the red light, the flesh inside the shell withered, the shell itself growing brittle and crumbling. By the time the red light was fully devoured, the monster was little more than a withered husk.

Hiram had been looking askance at Jason as he recited sinister spells and drained the residual life force from the monster.

“Did you just say you were harvesting death?” Hiram asked.

“It’s just the incantation for a spell,” Jason said.

“You sound like an evil farmer.”

“You didn’t even see my evil trowel.”

Jason pulled a rag and a bottle of water from his inventory, cleaning his dagger before slipping it back into its sheath. He then tapped a finger on the gutted shell of the monster.

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

“You might want to stand back for this,” Jason said. “There’s going to be a smell.”

“Worse than the one that’s there already?” Hiram asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It’s worse.”

They backed off and Jason gave his mental assent to loot the body. What was left of the monster rapidly dissolved into rainbow coloured smoke before vanishing.

Tragically, Jason had forgotten the monster fluids that had splattered onto him while he was underneath it. They too dissolved, the rainbow smoke coming from his nose and mouth where the fluids had splashed into them. He fell to the ground, heaving his breakfast onto the base of the tunnel.

“You alright?” Hiram asked.

Eventually Jason gave a coughing nod.

-
- [\[Monster Core \(Iron Rank\)\] has been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [\[Shell-Skin Potion\] has been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [10 \[Iron Rank Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
-

“Not worth it.”

Jason took a tin of healing unguent from his inventory and handed it over to Hiram.

“You know what that is?” Jason asked.

Hiram pulled the lid off the tin, sniffing at the contents. He nodded and immediately started rubbing ointment into his bloody arm.

“Boss!”

Griff called out from the other side of the fence.

"I came back when I couldn't see or hear the waterfall. What happened?"

"No idea," Hiram said, still rubbing ointment on his arm. "I imagine people are coming up here to check on things, but I'm not sure what they'll accomplish. I think we might need to bring in those adventurers of yours, Jason."

"I was thinking the same thing," Jason said, without turning to face the others. His gaze was focused on where the tunnel went deeper into the mountain.

"Is it just me," he asked, "or is the aperture more blue than it was before?"

Hiram followed Jason's gaze down the tunnel. The blue shimmer of the aperture was definitely brighter than it had been before.

"I think," Hiram said, "It might be time to get out of..."

He was cut off by a wall of water erupting through the aperture and down on top of them. It smashed them together in a tangle of arms and legs. Together they were blasted down the tunnel and hurled into the air, hundreds of metres above the ground.

Chapter 28: How Did You All Fit in There?

Water crashed into Jason like a derailed train, ploughing him straight into Hiram and blasting them both out the end of the tunnel. Sensations came faster than he could process; pain, wet, disorientation. He couldn't breathe, or even tell which way was up.

Jason and Hiram had clutched onto each other reflexively, their limbs tangled together. Landscape blurred past as they span through the air, tumbling like the now-resumed waterfall. Jason's first coherent thought was Hiram slipping away and he reasserted his grip. Darkness emerged from Jason, enveloping both men.

-
- Extending the weight-reducing function of [Cloak of Night] increases the cost from low mana-per-second to moderate mana-per-second.
-

Their downward plunge was reduced to a drift, floating out and away from the waterfall. Their wild spinning was arrested, and they were able to orient themselves as they descended. Jason was grateful that his cloak could be conjured at a thought. If it had required an incantation like a spell, he doubted he would have been able to get the words out. Only now they were free of the water and gently drifting could they even speak intelligibly.

"What in the Gods' merry garden is going on?" Hiram asked, voice tinged with panic. He was half-hugging Jason from the side,

"The first thing you should know," Jason said, "is to not let go."

Hiram lurched as he looked down, almost letting go.

"What did I just say?" Jason asked.

"We're in the sky!"

"Awesome, right?" Jason said.

"ARE YOU INSANE?"

"That was right in my ear!"

Jason started laughing madly as they drifted down to the ground.

"This is fantastic," he said.

"You're crazy!"

Between the force with which they were ejected from the mountain and the lightness of their reduced weight, they had drifted some way from the mountain before they lightly touched down. They landed close to the channel leading from the pool under the mountain

to the village lake. Hiram immediately fell to the grass and hugged the ground, tension escaping his body in sobbing laughs.

Jason took a look around. They were about halfway between the mountain and the village, in an expanse of shin-high grass. The channel ran dead-straight through the grass from the base of the waterfall to the village. He could see people heading for the mountain trail he and Hiram had taken earlier. None of them seemed to have noticed his and Hiram's descent.

On the other side of the channel were a bunch of children who had been looking up at the absent waterfall until they spotted Jason and Hiram fall from the sky. Jason gave them a wave. He then looked back up at the mountain and saw how far he had just fallen. A grin spread across his face.

"If this is the adventuring life," he mused, "I think I want some more."

"You're a crazy person," Hiram said, getting unsteadily to his feet. He looked uncertainly at Jason, still shrouded in the cloak of stars. Under the desert sun, the void black stood out more than the starlight.

"Hiram," Jason said, still looking up at the mountain. "Are they what I think they are?"

Hiram followed Jason's line of sight to the top of the waterfall. He spotted objects being tossed out the same way he and Hiram had been, at least a dozen of them.

"People?" Hiram asked. They were distant and hard to make out as they fell.

"Those aren't people," Jason said.

As they fell from the sky, the objects grew larger in their vision. Horror crossed Hiram's face as he recognised the shape of the creatures.

"More of those things!" Hiram said with horror.

"Don't be too worried," Jason said. "A shab is a half-shark, half crab. Neither of which have wings."

The large creatures lacked Jason's weight-reducing power and fell well short of the distance Jason and Hiram had reached. The first one hit the ground with a sickening crunch, with others soon following. Jason counted seventeen by the time they finished falling, most of which died on impact. Those that fell either side of the water channel hit the ground and didn't get up. Of the six that landed in the water, two struck the surface at a bad angle. Hitting water flat from that height was as good as hitting solid concrete, with similar results. The other four survived, but were clearly injured as they staggered out of the water.

New Quest: [Protect the Village]

A number of shabs have emerged from the astral space. Intercept them before they wreak havoc in the village.

- Objective: Defeat [Shab] 0/4.
 - Reward: Iron-rank (uncommon) magic bracelet.
-

One of the monsters had emerged on Jason and Hiram's side of the channel, the others on the far side. They all looked about, disoriented, then made a straight line for the village. The sideways walk of the creatures wasn't a breakneck pace, but was at least faster than what Jason had seen from the one in the tunnel.

"What do you think, Hiram?" Jason asked.

Hiram's face was stern as he stared at the creature on their side of the channel. It looked to have at least two broken legs and the shell around its body was cracked and oozing.

"I think I can take one," he said. "If it's injured. But what about those kids on the other side?"

"I'll get the kids away," Jason said. "Then I'll deal with the other shabs."

"Are you up for that?" Hiram asked.

"I guess I'll have to be," Jason said, flashing Hiram a grin. "Don't worry; I've still got a gimmick or two."

Jason started sprinting toward the channel. It was a natural waterway, thirty or so metres across. Jason leapt off the short embankment, landing on the gently flowing surface of the water as if it were solid ground. He laughed with delight as he sprinted over the surface to the other side. He ducked down briefly as one of the dead shabs floated past, long enough to brush his fingers over its shell.

-
- This monster corpse is unclaimed.
 - Would you like to loot [Shab]?
-

Jason kept moving as he looted the body, rainbow smoke rising behind him.

- 1 [Monster Core (Iron Rank)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Water Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason recalled an odd potion he had looted from the first shab. After climbing onto the grass on the opposite embankment he pulled it out of his inventory.

Item: [Shell-Skin Potion] (iron rank, uncommon)

- *Potion that increases the hardness of skin at the cost of agility* (consumable, natural).
 - Effect: Skin is hardened against physical attack and [Speed] attribute is decreased for 10 minutes.
 - Uses remaining: 1/1.
-

The kids, five of them, came running up to Jason with the fearlessness of children.

“Are those things monsters?” they asked.

“Yes,” Jason told them. “You need to run back to the village.”

“Are you going to fight them?”

“Yes. You need to run back to the village.”

“Can we watch?”

Jason sighed, and dropped down to one knee.

“Look, everyone,” he told them. “I have an important mission for you. I need you to go back to the village and warn everyone about the monsters.”

He took five iron-rank spirit coins from his inventory, holding them in front of the children.

“This is a very important job,” he told them solemnly, “and I need some brave junior adventurers to help me. Do you think you can help?”

Jason smiled at the five eagerly nodding heads, handing them each a coin.

“Hurry up now,” he told them. “Warn everyone, fast as you can!”

As the kids sprinted away, Jason turned to look at the three shabs that were scurrying alongside the channel in his direction. They had emerged from the water much closer to the mountain than where Jason had landed, placing him comfortably between them and the village.

“Why didn’t you stay in the water?” he wondered. “Did getting belted down here by water give you a complex?”

Their sideways crabwalk was faster than they could manage moving forwards, but their injuries were slowing them down. Jason looked at the potion in his hand, which would slow him down as well. He wasn’t skilled enough that the extra agility would do him any good, so he drank it.

-
- You have used a defence potion, hardening your skin and reducing your [Speed] attribute.
 - Until the remnant magic fully dissipates, consuming further defence potions will result in toxic side-effects.
-

He could feel his skin tightening, like he'd left it too long in the dryer. It felt like old leather as he flexed, restrictive but tough. He looked at the approaching creatures, wondering about the range of his spell. He could feel his abilities instinctively, realising that anything he could clearly see was a viable target. He fixed his gaze on each monster, chanting a spell for each.

"Your fate is to suffer."

The inexorable doom spell would add more and more of any stacking effect on the victim. The shabs didn't have any on them yet, but Jason would change that as soon as they caught up with him. He drew his dagger, he ran the blade across the back of his forearm, but it didn't draw blood.

"Huh."

He realised he should have done it before drinking the potion. He gripped the blade tightly in his fist and yanked it out, this time managing to a shallow cut on his palm.

- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Outworlder].
 - You have resisted [Umbral Snake Venom].
 - [Umbral Snake Venom] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

Jason, swore, having forgotten that his dagger was poisonous. Luckily, it didn't take effect. There was now an icon representing the resistant buff next to his mana and stamina bars.

"Not that I want to complain, but why didn't the poison work?"

Combat Log

- >You have been afflicted with iron-rank poison [Umbral Snake Venom].
 - Ability [Sin Eater] gives you increased resistance to all afflictions.
 - You have resisted [Umbral Snake Venom].
 - Resisting an affliction has triggered ability [Sin Eater], granting you an instance of [Resistant].
-

Sin eater was one of the abilities Jason had awakened from a feast stone. Most of his planning and discussion involved his active abilities, while this passive power went largely

overlooked. The sluggish pace of the injured shabs meant they were still some distance from him, so he had time to pull up the description.

Ability: [Sin Eater] (Sin)

- Special ability (holy)
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Increased resistance to afflictions. Gain an instance of [Resistant] each time you resist an affliction or cleanse an affliction using essence abilities.

- [Resistant] (boon, holy, stacking): Resistance to afflictions is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to negate instances of [Vulnerable] on a 1:1 basis.

“Not bad,” he said. “It’s a holy power, too. From the sin essence, no less.”

Jason glanced down at his hand, which had a line of blood but the wound had closed. The healing his familiar provided couldn’t swiftly regenerate the kind of impaling wounds he took from the shab, although thinking back, it may not have been pure adrenaline that kept him moving. A little cut on the hand, though, it made short work of.

“Oh, come on.”

He put his dagger in hand and yanked it free again, reopening the wound.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Outworlder].
 - You have resisted [Umbral Snake Venom].
 - [Umbral Snake Venom] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].

“I’m liking this ability,” he said as the number two appeared on the resistant icon.

He held his hand out, wounded palm pointed at the ground. Leeches started pouring out like water from the world’s most terrifying shower. By the time the pile was finished, the total volume of leeches was more than his entire body.

“How did you all fit in there?”

The pile had no way to respond. Jason intrinsically understood the nature of the familiar and knew there wasn’t anything like telepathic communication. He would have to command them verbally, although he wasn’t sure how that worked.

“Do leeches have ears?”

The pile said nothing.

“We’ll have to work out a system.”

Chapter 29: That's What Adventurers Do

The shabs were finally drawing close.

"Din-dins, Leechy," Jason told the pile, which started undulating slowly in the direction of the shabs. "I've got to come up with a better name."

The approaching shabs hadn't regrouped after their fall from the sky, so were coming at Jason individually. The first one gave up its side-shuffling as it spotted Jason, turning its shark head to face him. He had time to really take a look at the creature. A shark in a purple and red shell, with legs halfway between a spider and a crab. Above the mouth full of jagged teeth it had tiny crayfish eyes; black orbs waving back and forth on short stalks.

"You certainly are creepy."

As the first shab approached, it seemed to lock onto the leech pile in its path. It lunged with both pincers, which dug into the pile with little effect. Instead, the pile slithered over the pincers and up the arms, which it started shaking to get them off. Some were tossed away, others crawling over the shell in search of the gaps hiding vulnerable flesh. The remaining pile made for the creature's legs, crawling up and all over it. Some leeches were squished between sections of shell, but more and more found something soft to sink their teeth into and the monster started shrieking.

-
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Shab].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Shab].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Shab].
 - [Bleeding] already in effect, [Bleeding] is refreshed.
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Shab].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Shab].
-

The notifications came thick and fast as every leech that found purchase started delivering the same bleed effect Jason used, plus two different kinds of poison.

-
- [Leech Toxin] (affliction, poison, blood, stacking): When [Bleeding] is negated, an instance of [Leech Toxin] on the target is consumed to reapply [Bleeding]. Additional instances can be accumulated.
-

On top of inflicting damage through blood loss, the strength of the bleeding affliction was that it soaked up healing, negating its effect. The leech toxin would reapply the bleed, requiring even more healing to eliminate it. He didn't think the shab had any rapid healing ability, but it would be useful against monsters with the power to regenerate. So long as

enough of the leech toxin was applied, it would refresh the bleed over and over, leaving any healing stopped cold.

The other poison the leech inflicted was much the same as Jason's dagger.

- [Necrotoxin] (affliction, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Unlike Jason, the leeches didn't require an external source of necrotic damage. They were a tiny army of ambulatory poison daggers.

Jason was going to move in on it, but the shab was already in bad shape. He felt a little pointless compared to his familiar. His inexorable doom spell was already on the shabs, but compared to what the leeches were doing, his spell adding a few more afflictions was barely relevant.

The second shab was drawing close and Jason went forward to meet it. He tried to move around the pincers to get his knife into one of the leg joints, but met with immediate difficulty. When not restricted by a tunnel, a shab could easily skitter sideways to keep its savage mouth pointed right at its prey. The defensive potion slowing Jason down didn't help.

A pincer came at Jason. He avoided it clamping down on him, but took a glancing blow to the head. His skin might have been hardened by a potion, but it still rang his bell, sending him stumbling back. He glanced over at the first shab, which was woozily staggering back and forth, covered in leeches.

"I think my familiar might be stronger than me," Jason said. "Good job, Leechy; see if you can't catch that next one."

Leeches started dropping off the stricken shab, and Jason continued to square off with his own monster. Realising there was no going around the pincers, he tried a new tack, moving straight in.

A pincer shot out to grab him and he raised his left arm, letting the pincer have it. The sharp pincer broke through even his toughened skin, applying crushing force to his arm and trying to drag it into its mouth.

For the price of letting the pincer grab his empty-handed left arm, his knife-wielding right was free to strike. With Jason's arm in its grip, the pincer was no longer jerking about. Jason slammed the point of his dagger into the joint of the pincer.

- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Shab].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Shab].
-

The creature shrieked, releasing Jason's arm. He stumbled back, the dagger sliding free of the creature. The shab lashed out with its other pincer and Jason gave up the injured arm again. Whether from the previous injury or the rage of the monster, the pincer clamping down was much more agonising. He screamed at the pain, but fighting through it, savagely stabbed with his knife, again finding the joint of the pincer. It was the monster's turn to shriek as it once again released Jason's arm.

➤ **Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Shab].**

Jason stumbled away from the shab, his left arm hanging limp and dripping blood. Unlike his familiar, Jason couldn't pile-on the afflictions rapidly, but now all he needed was time. The inexorable doom spell would live up to its name, escalating the curse and the poison until the monster was overcome.

So long as he could stay out of the creature's reach, its defeat was inevitable, but Jason wasn't done. The shab might be quick side-to-side, but just by jogging backward Jason created distance. Then he stopped, held up his good arm and chanted a spell.

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

-
- **Ability: [Feast of Blood] (Blood)**
- **Spell (drain, blood)**
 - **Cost: Moderate mana.**
 - **Cooldown: 30 seconds.**
 - **Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)**
 - **Effect (iron): Drain health and stamina. Only affects targets with bleeding wounds or who are suffering from the [Bleeding] affliction.**
-

Red life force shone out of the shab. Some of it started streaming out from the wounds Jason had inflicted and into his waiting hand. Jason felt the healing sting in his wounded arm, but the life force drained was limited. Unlike his blood harvest spell, feast of blood didn't take all the life force, but he could use it on living enemies. Jason's arm was still far from healed, but at least now he could move it a little.

The shab let out an ear-piercing shriek, driven to madness by the effect of Jason's spell. The red glow retracted back into the shab, which seemed frantic at Jason plucking away its life force. It scrambled madly, but was not physiologically designed for pursuit. If anything, its panicked movement was slowing it down. Jason was easily keeping out of reach as his afflictions slowly overtook it.

-
- You have defeated [Shab].
 - Defeat [Shab] 1/4.
-

Jason glanced at the shab the leeches had left behind. It was an emptied-out shell, collapsed on the ground. He looked around for where the leeches had moved to intercept the third shab. Spotting them, he slapped an exasperated hand over his face. The third shab had apparently seen what the sanguine horror did to the first one and was trying to avoid it.

The leeches moved slowly, but the shab was apparently unwilling to take its eyes off the leeches long enough to crabwalk away. The result was two monsters shuffling around in an awkward circle.

“When I said ‘see if you can’t catch it,’ I didn’t actually mean for you to not catch it!”

Jason couldn’t get past his own shab to intervene, being forced to wait out the ridiculous display.

- Defeat [Shab] 1/3.
-

The number of shabs he needed to kill dropped by one. Looking back over the channel, he saw a bloody and weary Hiram standing over a fallen shab.

“Good for you, mate.”

Jason’s own shab finally collapsed and he was able to corral the last one into the sanguine horror, which made short work of it.

Quest: [Protect the Village]

- Objective complete: Defeat [Shab] 3/3
 - [Oasis Bracelet] has been added to your inventory.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason had noticed that his quests were a lot less lucrative than killing cultists, at least in terms of spirit coins. There was the other item, but he could check that later. On the far side of the channel, Hiram was bloodied but triumphant, standing with one foot on a dead shab. He waved broadly at Jason, who waved back.

Using his blood harvest spell, Jason drained the remnant life force from the three shabs, healing himself back into pristine condition. He ran a hand over the bloody, but fully intact arm that had not long ago been badly mangled.

“Not bad. Not bad at all.”

He looted the shabs, reabsorbed the sanguine horror and made his way back across the channel. When he got there, he tried to loot Hiram’s shab.

➤ This monster kill was not yours. You are unable to loot this monster.

“Hey Hiram,” Jason said. “Can I loot this corpse?”

“Sure,” Hiram said.

Jason tried again.

-
- [Monster Core (Iron Rank)] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Water Essence] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason raised his eyebrows at the loot message. From his adventuring companions Jason had gotten the impression that essences were fairly rare, in spite of his own experiences. He took the essence out of his inventory, a shimmering blue cube reminiscent of the aperture. He held it out to Hiram.

“Is that what I think it is?” Hiram asked.

“Water essence,” Jason confirmed.

“I can’t take that,” Hiram said. “Do you know what they’re worth?”

Jason looked at Hiram, then down at the shab. He pointed toward the mountain.

“The monster came from over there,” Jason said.

He pointed in the opposite direction.

“The village is over there.”

He pointed at the ground.

“You stood here, right in between them.”

He shoved the cube into Hiram’s chest.

As Hiram stared disbelievingly at the cube in his hands, Jason took out another object he looted from the shab. It was a monster core, which he had seen before, but this one was iron rank, compared to the lesser ranked ones already in his possession. It was teardrop-shaped, like a lesser core, but slightly larger and a more vibrant red.

Item: [Monster Core (Iron)] (iron rank, common)

The magic core of an iron rank monster (crafting material, magic core).

- Effect: Common component for ritual magic and magic item creation. Can be absorbed directly to advance essence abilities.
 - You are able to absorb [Monster Core (Iron)]. Absorb Y/N?
-

Jason's eyes went wide when he saw it could advance his essence abilities. He was tempted to try it immediately, but decided to ask Rufus and Farrah first. He didn't want to wind up with any strange side effects.

Hiram and Jason sat down on the grass for a well-earned rest. Hiram's eyes didn't shift from the essence in his hands.

"I can probably help you out with an essence ritual for that," Jason said. Essence rituals were one of the most fundamental magical practices and the knowledge Jason got from the skill book was more than sufficient to perform one.

"No thanks," Hiram said. "I'm saving this for when my granddaughter is old enough. An essence makes you an important person in a village, which is why I'm in charge of watching over the aperture."

"How old do you have to be to use an essence?" Jason asked, earning a strange look from Hiram.

"I'm from a very isolated area," Jason said. "We don't really know anything about magic there. I'm just starting to learn this stuff for myself."

"Must be pretty damn isolated," Hiram said. "If you try and absorb an essence too young, there are problems. Never seen it myself, but I've heard it's bad. There's a simple test to see if your body's ready. It's usually at around sixteen or seventeen, but it can go a year or two either way."

"Thanks," Jason said. "I still have a lot to learn."

"Well, I owe you," Hiram said, getting to his feet. "So does the village. I don't want to think about what would have happened if four of those things got in there."

Jason likewise stood up.

"I'm sure it would have been fine," he said. "If they made it to the village my adventurer friends would have seen it and stepped in. That's what adventurers do, right?"

"That's right," Hiram said, putting a hand on Jason's shoulder. "That's what adventurers do."

Chapter 30: Closing the Door Too Hard

In the garden courtyard of the inn, Jason was sitting comfortably in the late afternoon shade, looking down at a single leech on the ground.

“So you’ve got it, right?” he asked. “Left for yes, right for no. That’s my left and right, so your right and left. You have that?”

The leech moved to the left.

“Okay, that’s a yes. Unless you don’t have it right and you were trying to say no.”

The leech wobbled side to side.

“Yeah, I’m confused too. I can’t seem to help overcomplicating things. Alright, let’s just assume you’ve got it. That fine by you?”

The leech moved left.

“Great. So, do you have a name?”

The leech moved right.

“No name, okay. Would you like me to give you one?”

The leech moved left.

“That’s good,” Jason said. “I don’t want to keep calling you Leechy. That’d be like Gary calling me Humany. Or Outworldery, I guess. Not being human anymore is bit of a blow.”

“Who are you talking to?” Gary asked, walking into the courtyard.

“I’m trying to come up with a name for my familiar,” Jason said.

“How do you know it doesn’t have one already?” Farrah said, following Gary into the courtyard.

“I asked,” Jason said.

“And it answered?” Gary asked.

“We have a system,” Jason said. “Where have you all been? There was some excitement here.”

“We found out the guy had a cabin in the desert,” Farrah said. “There’s a cave where he’d go searching for earth quintessence. We thought that might be where he’d holed up.”

From inside the inn Jason heard the door slam open. He got up and went into the common room to look, seeing Martha the landlady, doing the same. What they saw was a fuming Rufus stomp loudly up the stairs, followed by the sound of another slamming door.

“How did he get that reed door to slam so loud?” Jason wondered aloud. “They’re really light.”

“A heady combination of finesse and rage,” Farrah said.

“I take it the guy wasn’t in his cabin, then,” Jason said.

“Oh, he was there,” Farrah said. “Anisa killed him before he could get a word out.”

Jason winced.

“I guess she was serious about the guy being her church’s to deal with,” Jason said.

“Why was Rufus so set on talking to the guy anyway?”

“We can sit down for that,” Gary said, “but I could really use a drink first.”

“Just use a spirit coin,” Farrah said.

“We can do better than that,” Jason said. “Martha, could we get some of that fruit punch?”

“Anything for you, sweetie.”

“What is it with you and the people in this village?” Farrah asked as they walked back into the courtyard and sat down at a picnic table. “I could swear I heard people talking about you when we came back into town.”

“It’s the dashing good looks,” Jason said.

Farrah and Gary shared a look.

“Hey...” Jason said sadly. He knelt down and held his hand out for the leech to crawl onto, then lifted it up to rest on his shoulder.

“Are you sure you want to put that there?” Gary asked. “I don’t think I’d want those teeth that close to my ear.”

“He won’t hurt me,” Jason said. “He’s my little guy. I think he’s a guy; I think I read that leeches can switch it around.”

“You are a strange man,” Farrah said.

Martha came in with a huge jug filled with juice and large chunks of ice. Her nephew, Harold, followed with a trio of glasses, getting a swat from Martha when he goggled at the leech on Jason’s shoulder.

“Thanks, Martha,” Jason said, filling each of the glasses. One was even a Gary-sized mug with a big handle.

After the landlady and her nephew left, Jason asked again about Rufus.

“The area we come from,” Farrah said, “has a higher density of magic than this region, so the monsters there are stronger, on average. In this region, iron-rank monsters are the norm, with a good smattering of bronze-rank. Silvers can show up, but only very occasionally.”

“But where we come from,” Gary added, “you get more silver rank monsters than anything. You see as many golds as you do bronze, and sometimes even diamond rank monsters. And if iron ranks do appear, there’s always about forty of the pricks.”

He chugged half of his giant glass at a go, topping it off from the jug.

“You’re from one of those big cities?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” Gary said. “Vitesse.”

“The City of Flowers,” Farrah added.

“That’s weird,” Jason said. “There’s a language in my world where Vitesse means speed.”

“Not how it works in our city,” Gary said.

“Vitesse is as leisurely as any place you’ll find,” Farrah explained. “Culture, cuisine. Lots of money floating around, even at the low end. A labourer in Vitesse can make as much as a craftsman here.”

“Not a good craftsman,” Gary said, “but still..”

“What does any of this have to do with Rufus being angry?” Jason asked.

“Well,” Gary said, “around here an iron rank adventurer can wander about in relative safety. If some monsters show up then an iron rank adventurer can go after them on their own, or with a small team.”

“But around Vitesse,” Farrah said, “that’s just asking for death. Even bronze rankers go out with a silver ranked escort. Coming here was our big chance to strike out on our own.”

“Prove ourselves,” Gary said.

“And then you went and got captured,” Jason said. “Rufus is in charge, so he blames himself.”

“Exactly,” Farrah said, “but you don’t understand the level of pressure on him. His family operates the Remore Academy, which is a big deal everywhere, not just Vitesse.”

“Let me guess,” Jason said. “Rufus is the living paragon of this academy’s teaching methods, so when he fails it’s a black mark on his family’s reputation.”

“His family isn’t like that,” Gary said. “They understand better than most that failure is a valuable lesson. Rufus is the one putting pressure on himself.”

“More than anything, he blames himself for putting us in danger,” Farrah said. “He takes responsibility seriously and he thinks he let us down.”

“The reason he was obsessed with catching the guy,” Farrah said, “was so he could find out what he did wrong. Rufus works harder than anyone to avoid making a mistake once, let alone twice. In his eyes, Anisa took away his chance to understand what he did

wrong. As far as Rufus is concerned, what Anisa did was the same as putting the team in danger.”

“Is anyone else getting a shady feeling from Anisa?” Jason asked. “Like she’s quietly on the shonk?”

“I think that’s going a bit far,” Gary said.

“Probably,” Jason said. “I’m definitely biased, but think about it. She brought this job to you from her church, right? Then the guy supposedly working for her church sets you up?”

“The shonk?” Farrah asked.

“Anisa was in a cage like the rest of us,” Gary said.

“Sure,” Jason said, “but she didn’t go to the ritual chamber, did she? Who’s to say that if I hadn’t shown up there wouldn’t be some other excuse to leave her behind. Then she breaks out all by herself?”

“So did you.”

“They underestimated me backwards and forwards,” Jason said, “and even then I was lucky. Do you think a blood cult is going to underestimate a priestess of purity?”

“She had a collar like the rest of us,” Gary said. “They might have thought she couldn’t do anything.”

“Sure,” Jason said. “But did you notice that her escape took just long enough that if she rushed to save us she would have been tragically late?”

“That’s thin,” Farrah said.

“So we busted ourselves out,” Jason continued, “leaving you free to find and question the guy who might have answers. Except he gets silenced before you even start with the questions.”

“I’m not convinced,” Farrah said. “You’re jumping a lot of gaps there.”

“I’m not saying anything definitive,” Jason said. “Like I said; I know I’m biased enough to not see things objectively. But a lot of things are coming up funky on the smell test, so maybe keep your eyes open.”

“Always do,” Gary said.

“You were blind-sided and handed over to a blood cult,” Jason said.

“This is really good,” Farrah said after emptying her glass of fruit punch, veering off topic.

“I know, right?” Jason said, refilling her glass. “I’ll have to ask what’s in it. Most of the local ingredients I’ve never even heard of. Bought a notebook last night at the market to jot down recipes.”

They heard the front door of the inn slam open.

“That door’s going to get ruined,” Jason said.

Anisa strode out into the courtyard, storming up to Jason.

“Why is everyone talking about you like you’re the town hero?” she asked. Her face filled with fury when she spotted the leech on Jason’s shoulder.

“What is that thing?”

“That’s Colin,” Jason said. “I’ve decided to call him Colin. And his friends. Team Colin.”

Anisa’s hand flashed towards it, her bronze-rank reflexes too fast for Jason to react. Not too fast for Gary, however, who clamped her wrist in his huge, hairy hand. Anisa glared at Gary as she tugged at her arm, but his grip didn’t budge.

“Not happening,” Gary said.

“That thing is obviously evil,” Anisa said.

“It doesn’t matter what it is,” Rufus’ said, striding into the courtyard. While the others turned to look, Jason pulled a knife and pricked his finger, letting Colin the apocalypse leech melt back into his bloodstream. He’d bought a small, sharp knife for the purpose after accidentally poisoning himself with the snake-tooth dagger. Looking up after putting the knife away he saw Anisa and Rufus squaring off.

“You knew he had that thing,” Anisa accused.

“I did,” Rufus said calmly.

“He’s tainted,” she said. “We need to burn him.”

“You don’t get a say in what we do anymore, Anisa. Especially when it comes to killing people. You’re out.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This was always a temporary collaboration,” Rufus said. “The collaboration ends here.”

“Over him?” she asked, gesturing at Jason.

“No, Anisa, over you,” Rufus said. “You decide for yourself when to listen and when to do whatever you like. You’re willing to place even your slightest ideal over the wellbeing of this team and that is unacceptable. The most important thing in a team is trust, and I don’t trust you.”

“Humans,” Anisa said, spitting out the word like a curse. “You’re all filth.”

She turned, marched away, and they heard the door slam as she departed the inn. Rufus was stewing on the spot, Jason, Farrah and Gary sharing wary looks.

“I think we may be paying for a new door,” Gary said.

Chapter 31: Taming the Beast

“Mr. Mayor,” Rufus said, “are you certain you don’t want us to investigate the astral space?”

“We considered it,” the mayor said, “but we are only one of many places with an aperture leading to that astral space. We have no idea if the other locations are having similar issues and the cost of a mistake could be critical.”

“I respect your prudence, Mr. Mayor,” Rufus said. “As promised, I’ll deliver your letters to the Adventure Society and the Magic Society when we reach Greenstone.”

“Thank you.”

The mayor was meeting them at the inn as they were ready to go. They were travelling on foot as Anisa had claimed the wagon and its animals for her church, which Rufus didn’t bother to argue. Hiram was standing alongside the mayor.

“Farewell, adventurers,” the mayor said, “and thanks again to you, Jason. I don’t like to think what would happen if those creatures had entered the village.”

“No worries, Greg,” Jason said, shaking the mayor’s hand, then Hiram’s.

“If there’s anything I can ever do for you,” Hiram said.

“Well, if you find another essence...” Jason said. “I looted all those monsters and you got the only one.”

“Stuff that,” Hiram, said. “If I find another essence I’m keeping it. I have more than one grandchild, you know.”

Jason laughed.

“You’ll have to introduce me next time I come through,” he said.

“That shouldn’t take long,” Farrah said. “The Adventure Society uses patrol contracts as punishment and...”

She placed a hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“...this one has a mouth on him.”

“Hey,” Jason said, mock hurt on his face.

They set out along the road on foot. Jason didn’t mind so much, since the wagon hadn’t been a comfortable ride over the hard desert ground. On their walk out of the village it seemed like everyone gave them a friendly wave or a few words of farewell.

“We’ve been here two days,” Farrah muttered.

“Not my fault you weren’t here when monsters started raining from the sky,” Jason said.

They set out along the south trail normally used by quarry transports, leaving the lush village behind for the dry wastes of the desert. Jason was much more comfortable than the last time they endured the arid waste. The reward he received from his quest to protect the village was exactly what he needed.

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

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

- Effect: Keeps the wearer cool and refreshed. Bracelet energy is consumed at a varying rate according to climate.
 - Effect: Reduces incoming fire and heat damage. This rapidly consumes bracelet energy.
 - Effect: Consume a water quintessence gem to completely refill bracelet energy.
-

The bracelet was a cord looped with small round stones. When he first touched a sapphire-like water quintessence gem to one of the stones it had vanished. All the stones had turned from a sandy yellow to vibrant blue, and would slowly turn back as the magic of the gem was used up.

Under the refreshing effect of the bracelet, Jason was happily making his way alongside the others. Now he wasn't preoccupied with cursing the sun, he had a greater appreciation of the barren desert. It wasn't that different to parts of central Australia.

They were on an unsealed road, compacted to a hard surface by the scorching sun and heavy wagonloads of quarried stone. Wagons full of green marble rolled along the road in the same direction they were headed, while wagonloads of food came the other way.

"Did you really name your familiar Colin?" Gary asked as they walked.

"Yeah, I told you that," Jason said.

"You should have given it a more intimidating name, like 'Devourer' or something."

"Gary," Jason said, "it's a bloodthirsty apocalypse monster. It's intimidating enough."

Farrah, Gary and Jason chatted away as they walked. Rufus was still withdrawn after his confrontation with Anisa.

"It's a little strange to be so comfortable in such an inhospitable environment," Jason said.

“It gets much worse closer to the coast,” Farrah said. “At least here you can see some grass, the occasional tree. There, it’s just endless, lifeless sand. Dry and dead, like the sun scorched all the life out of it.”

“That’s cheery,” Jason said.

“We won’t need to trudge through that,” Gary said. “We’re heading south now until we hit the river, then we’ll take a boat west to the coast.”

They encountered a wagon that had been carrying fresh fruit to the village when it threw a wheel. While Gary and Farrah fixed the wagon, Jason and Rufus helped pick up the spilled fruit. Gary used one of his forge essence powers to repair the wheel. Jason was startled as Farrah used superhuman strength to lift the wagon so Gary could slip the wheel back onto the axle. Gary at least looked like he had overpowering strength. Seeing the same kind of power from Farrah was startlingly incongruous.

“What’s wrong with you?” Farrah asked Jason.

“I thought you were some kind of spell caster,” Jason said. “What’s with that strength?”

“I have some spells,” Farrah said, “but humans have an affinity for special attacks. I spend most of my time up close and personal. The spells just give me a little flexibility.”

“I don’t have any spells at all,” Rufus said. “Farrah having as many as she does is unusual.”

The wagon fixed, the grateful teamster left them walking away eating some kind of juicy melon. Jason, Rufus and Farrah had a slice each, while Gary ate the rest of the melon. Afterward, Rufus seemed a little less broody than he had for most of the day.

“Where are they getting fresh fruit in the desert?” Jason asked.

“You’ll get to see for yourself soon enough,” Rufus told him.

As they travelled, Jason took Rufus aside.

“I have kind of a delicate question,” Jason said softly.

“What’s that?” Rufus asked.

“Well,” Jason hesitated, “being iron rank does things to your body, right?”

“That’s right.”

“I just... I haven’t needed the toilet in four days. I had a sneaky wee back in the hedge maze, but since then, nothing.”

Rufus erupted into laughter, drawing the attention of the others.

“Really?” Jason asked.

“That’s normal,” Rufus said. “Your body doesn’t waste anything anymore; it can burn almost anything for fuel. I heard about a man that had to live on tree bark for a month.”

“That’s a myth,” Farrah.

“No, I know a guy who met the guy who did that,” Gary said.

“Of course you believe it,” Farrah said. “Mr. ‘I don’t need to check what’s in the box.’”

“Again, with this? How was I meant to know Vivienne would betray us?” Gary asked.

“Because it was really obvious,” Farrah said. “And we told you she would.”

“We did tell you,” Rufus agreed.

“You two have no sense of romance,” Gary said.

Late in the afternoon they came across a town, enclosed in massive walls made of tan-coloured, desert stone. It was laid out in a square with large gates in every wall. Inside was a town mostly built of the same bland bricks as the walls. The town’s layout was based around a huge central square, with wide, straight roads leading from the town gates right into it. The square was a bustle of activity, covered in wagons hauling the local green stone.

“This is the main distribution point for all the green marble in this region,” Farrah explained. “There are villages like the one we stayed in all through the region. From here it all gets taken south and shipped downriver on barges.”

“I figured there were more when they told me the name of the village was North East Quarry Village Four,” Jason said.

“No wonder they all just called it the Village,” Gary said.

“What’s with the huge walls?” Jason asked. The walls surrounding the town were at least seven metres high and almost three metres thick.

“That’s for the monster surge,” Rufus said.

“What’s a monster surge?” Jason asked.

“Every ten years,” Rufus explained, “there’s a massive increase in the spawn rate of monsters. All across the world, all at the same time. Whole villages evacuate to fortified towns like his one, which is why most of this town is actually empty. So long as there isn’t anyone left in the villages, the monsters largely leave them alone.”

“So how long has it been since the last monster surge?” Jason asked.

“Eleven years.” Rufus said.

“It’s never exactly ten years,” Farrah said. “It’s been as little as eight or as many as thirteen. The last few have all come pretty late.”

They didn’t need to find an inn to stay the night. Most of the town was composed of transient shelters that villagers used during the surges, which were available to anyone passing through. Mostly that meant teamsters hauling stone one way or food the other. Rufus led them to register in the square, where they were provided basic accommodation

without cost. After they found the simple stone cottage to which they had been assigned, Rufus approached Jason.

“There’s still a few hours of light,” Rufus said. “Come with me for a little bit.”

Rufus led them in silence. They went to the edge of town and up one of many sets of stairs, arriving on the top of the west wall. There he stopped to look out at the horizon, Jason stopping beside him.

“So you’ve fought your first proper monster,” Rufus said.

“The shabs were certainly rougher than the potent hamster,” Jason said.

Rufus turned his head to glance at Jason.

“Your power to identify things extends to monsters?”

“Just their names,” Jason told him.

Rufus looked back out at the desert landscape.

“It’s time you learned how to advance your abilities,” he said.

“Actually, that reminds me,” Jason said. “I have a bunch of monster cores. Apparently they can raise abilities up.”

Rufus’ head snapped sideways.

“You didn’t use any, did you?”

“No, I was waiting to ask you,” Jason said. “I thought there might be side effects. After that reaction, I’m assuming there are.”

Rufus let out a breath.

“I’m glad. I should have thought to tell you, but I forgot you had an ability to loot monsters. You’re lucky; it’s a rare power.”

“It’s not just me that can do that, then?”

“No, but it’s a highly coveted ability. I’m starting to get envious,” Rufus said.

“Don’t humans have their abilities go up faster than everyone else?” Jason asked.

“Everyone else including me, since I’m not human. Which still seems harsh.”

“Being human does have its perks,” Rufus acknowledged.

“Rub it in, why don’t you?” Jason asked. “How about you tell me how to raise my abilities so I can start catching up to you three.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Rufus said. “There are two ways to raise your abilities. One is to use monster cores. Every core increases your abilities a little, but only a little. It takes hundreds of iron-rank cores to reach bronze rank, and that’s for humans. For everyone else, it takes even more. It takes iron-rank cores when you’re iron rank, bronze when you’re bronze, and so forth. But you should never, ever use this method.”

“Do you turn into a monster or something?”

“No,” Rufus said. “I said there were two ways of raising your abilities. Every time you use a monster core to raise your abilities, it makes the other method a little less effective. The impact is minimal, at first, but every core you use eats into your potential. If you used cores to get to where I am, the top end of bronze rank, then cores would be the only thing that works anymore. And bronze rank isn’t that high.”

“Couldn’t you just hunt up more monsters for cores?” Jason asked.

“You could,” Rufus said, “and some do. In the city we’re going to, Greenstone, almost everyone uses cores. So long as you have the money to buy them you can reach bronze rank without ever facing a monster. But every rank requires more and more cores. By the time you reach silver rank, things slow right down as the costs go up significantly. Most core users don’t make it to gold.”

“If people know this, why would anyone use cores?” Jason asked.

“Because it’s easy and you can buy the cores instead of risking your own neck.” Rufus said. “Most aristocratic families only have a few truly powerful adventurers, while the rest use cores. Do you have aristocracy in your world?”

“Sure,” Jason said. “We’re slowly phasing it out in favour of wealth-based oligarchy, but it’s still around.”

“Uh, alright.”

“So, what’s so bad about the second method that people would use these cores?”

“Because it requires danger and hard work.”

“I bet it isn’t the danger that stops them,” Jason said. “It’s the hard work, right?”

“Probably,” Rufus said with a chuckle. “The other path to developing your abilities, the real way, has three elements.”

Rufus raised three fingers, counting them off as he explained.

“The first element is training. You have to practice pushing your body to its limits, and not just the physical ones. You have to strain against the boundaries of what your four attributes are capable of. Exhaust yourself, body and mind. Pushing yourself to the limits prepares you to go beyond them.”

“So... exercise?”

“Yes, but not just physical exercise. You have to train the mind, as well. Perception is part of your spiritual strength, and we will teach you how to exercise it.”

“How?”

“Observation training, which is a practical skill as well as a good training technique. Memory games, puzzles. Anything that tests the mind can work.”

“That actually sounds a little fun.”

“That’s good,” Rufus said. “Training, done right, will leave you feeling satisfied and empowered. The second element is also about pushing yourself, but in a much more dangerous way.”

“Fighting monsters?” Jason guessed.

“Fighting monsters,” Rufus said. “To truly break through your limits, you must truly push up against them. Only with genuine danger can you go further and do more than you ever thought possible.”

“That’s simple enough to understand, if mildly terrifying. What’s the third part?” Jason asked.

“Meditation,” Rufus said.

“Meditation? As in... just sitting there?”

“Yes,” Rufus said. “Meditation is crucial. The other two elements are about breaking through your own limits. Meditation is about consolidating that gain. It’s where you take the fleeting moments in which you were better than you’ve ever been before, and making that your new normal.”

“Is there a mantra, or something?” Jason asked.

“The key is concentrating on the magic flowing inside you. You can feel it, right?”

“I can,” Jason said.

“It feels unruly, doesn’t it? Like some wild creature inside you.”

“Yeah, it kind of does,” Jason said. “Using an ability feels like throwing out a piece of meat for it to run out and devour.”

“That’s the sensation after you reach a new rank,” Rufus said. “You’ll slowly bring that beast under your control as your abilities grow. Then you’ll reach a new rank and have a new beast to contend with, more powerful than the last.”

“How does that work with core users?” Jason asked.

“For them it’s like feeding the beast drugged meat to make it compliant. The beast still has its strength, but the owner can’t make use of it properly.”

“So core users aren’t just hampering their future, but also making themselves kind of crappy in the present.”

“That’s exactly what they’re doing,” Rufus said.

Rufus directed Jason to sit cross-legged, looking out over the landscape. He spent the remaining daylight guiding Jason through his first meditation, until the sunset lit up the sky with orange and gold. Jason opened his eyes to watch.

“You know,” Jason said, “I think I’m starting to like it here.”

That night, as he lay in the small bed in their assigned accommodation, Jason checked his character screen.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: Iron.
- Progression to bronze rank: 0% (0/4 essences complete)

Attributes

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

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

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

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (3/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 0] 04%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 0] 02%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 0] 00%.

Blood [Power] (4/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 0] 01%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 0] 01%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 0] 01%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 0] 01%.

Sin [Recovery] (3/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron 0] 01%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 0] 00%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 0] 02%.

Doom [Spirit] (1/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 0] 01%.
-

Looking over his abilities he saw they had barely increased. Some he hadn't even used yet.

"I have to try out that shadow teleport."

Chapter 32: Minster Hunting For Beginners

An hour after they left the walled town, Rufus stopped. He took a piece of paper from his pocket, looked it over, then turned his gaze to the desert landscape around them.

"This is it," he said and walked off, leaving the road behind.

"What's going on?" Gary asked as they followed, and Rufus handed him the paper. Gary glanced over it.

"Nice," he said, handing the paper to Jason. It was a monster notification, with details and directions. Jason had seen something similar back in the waterfall village, but there was apparently a noticeboard for them in every town and village.

"Did you take this from the town we just went through?" Jason asked.

"That's right," Rufus said.

"Are you allowed to just take them?" Jason asked.

The location was listed by landmarks that Jason spotted by looking around their current location. A series of distinctively shaped rocky outcroppings.

"You can make copies," Gary said. "When you kill the monster you mark the copy and it gets rid of the original. Then you just have to report next time you're at an Adventure Society branch."

"What if someone just makes a copy and destroys it without killing the monster?" Jason asked.

"Why would anyone do that?" Gary asked.

"Because people are terrible," Jason said.

"Is that what you think?" Farrah asked. "I'm starting to worry about your world."

"Really?" Jason asked. "Because when I came to your world people kept trying to eat and/or kill me."

"He has a point," Gary said.

"To make proper copies you need an Adventure Society badge," Rufus said. "The Society can use that to track down who made the copy."

"The badge also tracks the monsters you've killed," Farrah said.

"And they can use it to find your body when you die," Gary said.

"Very comforting," Jason said. "So why are we going after this monster?"

"We're not," Rufus said. "You are."

"I am?"

"You are," Rufus said.

New Quest: [Adventure Notice: Giant Desert Maw Spider]

Local townsfolk have spotted a monster in the area that matches the description of a giant desert maw spider. Slay the creature before it becomes aggressive and starts attacking travellers.

- Objective: Defeat [Giant Desert Maw Spider] 0/1.
 - Reward: Quintessence.
-

Jason took another look at the sheet of paper, which named the same monster as the quest.

“Giant desert maw spider,” he read. “How giant are we talking?”

“About Gary’s size,” Rufus said. “The size isn’t what you need to watch out for, though.”

“They have a huge mouth full of the nastiest teeth you’ve ever seen,” Farrah said. “It has a barbed tongue that will whip out, grab your limbs and try to drag them into that mouth.”

“Sounds delightful, but why are we doing this?”

“I haven’t seen you fight yet,” Rufus said. “I need to see what kind of level you’re at.”

“I can save you some time there,” Jason said. “My level is low. Very, very low.”

“You say that,” Rufus said, “but it could just be modesty.”

Jason cast his blood harvest spell and the remnant life force of the dead monster flowed into him, healing his wounds. The spell was strong, but not enough to completely recover his injuries. His wounds had closed but he felt carved up like a smallgoods platter. He tapped a finger on the remains.

-
- Would you like to loot [Giant Desert Maw Spider]?
-

He limped in the direction of the adventurers as the monster dissolved into rainbow smoke behind him.

-
- 10 [Spider Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.
-

The others had been watching Jason’s fight from a distance. His clothes were in bloody tatters, his body painted red.

“So,” Rufus said as Jason drew close. “Not being modest, then.”

Quest: [Monster Notice: Giant Desert Maw Spider]

- Objective complete: Defeat [Giant Desert Maw Spider] 1/1.
 - 10 [Earth Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

"I'm running out of intact clothes," Jason said.

"You do seem to go through them," Gary said.

Farrah drew her stone chest from the ground and took out a bottle of clear liquid with a glass stopper.

"It's called crystal wash," Farrah said, pushing the bottle into Jason's hands. "Strip down and then pour this over your head. I don't have a lot, so be appreciative."

Jason stripped down to his underwear.

"All the way," Farrah said.

Jason pulled off the silk boxer shorts he had taken from the Vane manor. Past caring, he didn't even glance over to see if the others were looking at his naked body. There was enough blood on him anyway that it was effectively body paint. He pulled out the stopper and tipped it over his head. A clear, viscous liquid poured out and rapidly started spreading itself over him, thinning as it worked its way down. It excised the blood and filth from his body, cleaning it with an intimate thoroughness. An odd expression crossed his face as it cleared out the hard-to-reach nooks and crannies. He could smell a fresh fragrance coming off his body as the liquid evaporated into nothingness, its job done. He felt cleaner than he ever had in his life.

"It's perfumed?" he asked.

"No, crystal wash is completely odourless and clears off everything," Farrah said. "If there's any stink left behind, that's just you."

Gary walked over and sniffed at Jason.

"Why do you smell like flowers?"

The other two crowded around Jason and started smelling him.

"Still naked," Jason said, boxed in by the trio.

"We've seen Rufus naked," Farrah said. "No one cares about your scrawny body."

"Hey..." Rufus and Jason said together.

"You do smell like flowers," Farrah said. "What's up with that?"

"I think it might be an outworlder thing," Rufus said. "I knew an outworlder who smelled quite similar."

“Did you now?” Gary asked.

“Did someone have a little outworlder fling?” Farrah asked.

“Still naked,” Jason said.

“It wasn’t like that,” Rufus said. “I was young and she barely even looked at me.”

“WILL EVERYONE BACK OFF SO I CAN PUT ON SOME CLOTHES?”

“We’re right here,” Gary said. “You don’t have to shout.”

“If you had that bottle of cleaning stuff the whole time...”

“Crystal wash,” Farrah said.

“Right,” Jason said. “If you had the whole time, why didn’t you give me some after I purged all those toxins?”

“Purging your toxins is like a rite of passage,” she said.

“So you didn’t use any when you went through it?”

“Absolutely not,” Farrah said, unconvincingly.

“She had a whole case of bottles on hand,” Gary said.

“If you didn’t learn the value of crystal wash, then you wouldn’t appreciate it,” Farrah said.

“Meaning you thought it was funny that I smelled so bad,” Jason said.

“It was pretty funny,” Gary said. “I’ve never seen that much sludge come out of a person. It’s like you were keeping extra in your storage space.”

They passed through another village near the middle of the day. Its astral space aperture was small, producing only a large pond. It had a quarrying operation, but much smaller than the waterfall village.

“Are apertures the only water sources around here?” Jason asked.

“No,” Rufus said, “but more of the green stone appears around the apertures. The bigger the aperture, the higher grade stone you’ll find.”

They only stopped long enough for Rufus to select another notice from the village’s adventure board.

“We’re on track to reach the river by nightfall,” Rufus said. “We have time for another one. Hand me a blank sheet from that box.”

Jason spotted the box of blank paper under the noticeboard, taking out a single sheet and handing it to Rufus. Rufus took a bronze medallion out of his pocket and touched it to the notice on the board. The medallion started glowing faintly until he touched it to the blank sheet Jason had retrieved. The glow faded and text started appearing on the paper, matching that of the notice.

“This is the Adventure Society badge,” Rufus explained. “You’ll get your own when you join.”

“I would have thought you got enough from the last monster,” Jason said. “Wasn’t I underwhelming enough?”

“There are always more lessons to be learned,” Rufus said, handing over the paper.

New Quest: [Monster Notice: Lesser Earth Elemental]

Local townsfolk have spotted a monster in the area that matches the description of a lesser earth elemental. Slay the creature before it becomes aggressive and starts attacking travellers.

- Objective: Defeat [Lesser Earth Elemental] 0/1.
- Reward: Crafting material.

“Earth elemental,” Jason read. “That’s like a pile of rocks and dirt that roams around and punches people?”

“That’s the one,” Gary said. “They have those in your world?”

“Just stories,” Jason said. “So let me guess. I fight the thing and find out my abilities don’t work on it because you can’t poison or bleed out a pile of rocks. I get the snot kicked out of me, you step in to save me and I learn an important lesson about failure and picking your battles. Is that more or less the idea?”

“I think he’s got your number, Rufus,” Gary chortled.

“Um, yes,” Rufus said, reaching to take the paper back. “It’s fine; you don’t have to do it.”

“No, I’m doing it,” Jason said, keeping the paper. He marched off in the direction of the village gate.

“I know you want to teach him to be a proper adventurer,” Farrah said to Rufus, “but I don’t think he’s like the spoiled rich kids at your family’s school.”

“That’s becoming clear,” Rufus said.

The earth elemental looked like a snowman made of packed earth and sand, but with thick arms instead of frail sticks. It was only around two thirds of Jason’s height, throwing off dust and dirt as it slowly moved. Jason rammed his dagger into its head.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Lesser Earth Elemental].
 - [Lesser Earth Elemental] has no motive spirit and is immune to curses.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - [Lesser Earth Elemental] is does not have living tissue and is impervious to necrotic damage.
 - Additional necrotic damage from special attack [Punish] does not take effect.
-

As expected, Jason's abilities had no effect. What he hadn't anticipated was that even the hole from the knife closed up as soon as he pulled it out. He stabbed it again and again, being struck in turn by the elemental's crude, heavy arms. The elemental showed no signs of waning. For every chunk of earth he dislodged with his knife, more entered the hole to fill it

Desperate, Jason crouched down and wrapped his arms around the elemental, gripping it tightly as he heaved back with all the might he could muster. His strength may have paled in comparison to Gary, but it was still improved over what it had been just a few days ago. With a wild roar of effort he strained to raise his legs, staggering, but successfully standing up.

The creature was lifted completely off the ground. He staggered as he leaned back for balance, but managed to stay upright under the weight. He clenched the monster with one and a half arms, stabbing at it with as much force as just his forearm would allow. It wasn't powerful but he kept stabbing, with the repetition of a sewing machine. As he did, the creature brought its crude limbs down on Jason's shoulders and back. He tucked his head in, shielding it as best he could.

Dirt crumbled away under Jason's knife as he struggled to stay upright under the creature's weight and the pounding blows it rained down on him. He stumbled, almost collapsing, but more and more of the creature crumbled away in larger and larger chunks. Jason's breathing was a death rattle as earthen fists hammered force through his back and into his lungs. His arms burned as they barely kept the creature in their air, his shoulders beaten until they felt like pulp. Finally, the creature crumbled away all at once, spilling though Jason's arms in clumps.

-
- You have defeated [Lesser earth Elemental].

Quest: [Adventure Notice: Lesser Earth Elemental]

- Objective complete: Defeat [Lesser Earth Elemental] 1/1.
 - 10 portions of [Pure-Heart Sand] have been added to your inventory.
 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason collapsed onto all fours, air escaping in hacking coughs that spat droplets of blood onto the ground. The others all ran up.

“I’ll get you a potion,” Farrah said, but Jason held up a hand to stop her, then put it back down so he wouldn’t fall.

“No,” he croaked. “Familiar... heals.”

“It heals slowly,” Rufus said.

Jason turned to look at him, slowly pushing himself to his feet. He staggered, legs almost giving out again, but he stabilised, defiant. His breathing slowly lost its wheeze, each breath no longer agony. He crouched down and ran his fingers through the dirt.

- Would you like to loot [Lesser Earth Elemental]?
-

He walked up to Rufus as the dirt behind him dissolved into smoke with a sizzling hiss.

- [Monster Core (Iron Rank)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Earth Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“If the familiar heals me, that ability gets better, faster, right?”

Jason’s voice was still raw and gravelly.

“Yeah,” Rufus said.

Jason nodded and started a stumbling walk back in the direction of the main road. Gary followed behind Jason as the other two looked at each other.

“What was all that about?” Farrah asked.

“Jason has a lot of lessons to learn,” Rufus said. “This was him pointing out that I do too.”

“Like what?” Farrah asked.

“Like determination. That being in a losing position doesn’t mean you lose, so long as you’re willing to pay the price of victory. In that sacrifice chamber, Jason was the weakest of all of us, collars or no. But he was the one who kept beating the odds.”

“He had some luck on his side,” Farrah said.

“My grandfather says the great adventurers are the ones who turn luck into fortune. And adventurers don’t come much greater than him, so he’d know.”

Farrah shook her head.

“The whole thing smells of male posturing, to me,” she said. “Why can’t you have a conversation, like normal people?”

“You may be right,” Rufus acknowledged, “but I think some things we can only show with our effort.”

Farrah made a distasteful groan.

“Little boys and their posturing.”

Jason was sorely meandering back toward the road when Gary caught up at a jog.

“How did you know to get it off the ground?” Gary asked.

“There’s a myth from my world,” Jason said hoarsely. “There was a guy who was invincible while he was touching the ground, so the guy who killed him did it by lifting him into the air. I thought maybe the elemental was healing itself by taking in more earth from the ground, so it seemed worth a try.”

“You know,” Gary said, “once we train you up a bit, you might actually be good at this.”

Chapter 33: Mistrun River

Back on the road, Rufus explained the local geography to Jason as they travelled. Inland, to the east was the inland veldt; a flat, sprawling scrubland. The desert they were passing through was similar to parts of the Australian outback, and it sounded like the veldt was as well.

“Is everywhere in your homeland a dry, desolate waste?” Gary asked.

“They call it the sunburnt country,” Jason said. “It’s very big, and the central region is very dry. Most of the population lives on the coast.”

“This place is the same,” Rufus said. “The western region here, which runs along the coast, is a place of contradictions. Most of it is lifeless desert; great dunes that seem to go on forever. But right in the middle is a vast river delta, where dead sand gives way to fertile soil. The delta is full of life and heavily populated. The city of Greenstone is on the coast, at the midpoint of the delta.”

“You seem to know this place pretty well,” Jason said, “given that you’re not actually from here.”

“Rufus likes to over-prepare,” Gary said. “He was studying everything about this place for weeks before we left.”

“Better too much preparation than not enough,” Rufus said.

As they followed the rough trade road they eventually spotted some green in the distance.

“We’re getting close to the river,” Farrah said.

The green grew wider in their vision until it covered the horizon. As they moved closer to it, the hard, red earth underfoot gave way to softer, brown dirt. The sporadic, yellow wasteland grass became thicker, even showing hints of green. The packed earth of the road became too soft for the heavy wagons that used it and had been paved over with rough desert brick. The grass became denser until it carpeted each side of the road, with a haze hanging over it that bore the promise of water.

“There’s magic in that haze,” Farrah said. “It comes from the river, bringing the water magic that makes all this growth possible in the desert.”

Dirt gave way to rich, dark soil. The road took them between orchards burgeoning with brightly-coloured fruit and fields of tall crops. The haze thickened to a cool mist in defiance of the burning sun, moisture like sparkling diamonds in the air. Drifting through

the fruit-laden trees, the mist created an ethereal fairy playground. A hidden Shangri-La within the unforgiving desert.

“Welcome to Verdant Fields,” Rufus said. “The name really says it all. The farms here and on the other side of the river feed every town and village in the central region.”

They started passing pickers in the trees and farmhands in the fields, shielded from the sun by the ubiquitous mist. Much of the heat still got through, but without the parching dryness that made the desert air so unforgiving.

Jason and the others followed the road through the rich farmlands before they finally approaching a wide river. There was a town covering the near-side bank, shrouded in fog rolling of the water. The town bustled as they made their way down wide streets built expressly for the passage of wagons.

“There’s always work for anyone who wants it in a town like this,” Gary said.

The riverside was a mess of docks and warehouses, teeming with people. Boats and barges came in and out, wagons were loaded and unloaded. Magic lamps were in heavy use to cut through the fog, even with hours of daylight left. Jason noticed magic being used in an oddly workman-like fashion, powering cranes or propelling watercraft. He saw rivermen and dockworkers drawing runes that glowed as they took effect. There were two bridges that arched away into the mist on thick columns, high enough that boats could sail comfortably underneath. The fog hid the far bank from sight.

A busy dockmaster promised them passage downriver in the morning on the condition that they showed up on time. The organised chaos of the docks waited for no-one, even fancy adventurers. They found lodgings for the night; a hostel for teamsters with no more amenities than a barrel of water. A roomful of unhappy wagoners discovered that Gary was a snorer.

The next day they were on a barge heading down river. Jason was surprised to realise that most of the watercraft were built not from wood or metal, but green stone. Farrah explained that the local stone had a strong water affinity, making it easy to craft a magic-driven boat from.

Rufus did his best to stay out of the crew’s way, while Gary happily helped out. His overwhelming strength was a more than welcome addition. Farrah took the time to show Jason how the magic propulsion pushed the barge along. There was a dedicated member of the crew whose sole job was to manage the magic. He was happy to find someone taking an interest, letting Jason and Farrah see the various ways magic was used throughout the ship.

Jason was impressed with the nuance with which magic was integrated into the barge, obviously the result of lengthy design iteration. Like other examples of magic he had seen, from lighting to indoor plumbing, it raised his estimation of the world's technology level. It seemed this world's reliance on magic placed it on a completely different technological track to his own.

"Boating engineer is a profession that uses little bits from various kinds of magic," Farrah explained. "They don't really understand anything outside of their job. They're professionals with skill, but a very narrow focus. As adventurers, we're better off with more breadth than depth when it comes to magic. We never know what we'll come across."

As the barge sailed downriver it left Verdant Fields behind. The mist coming from the river was thicker or thinner in various places as they sailed through, the surrounding terrain reflecting its life-giving power. When it was thin, the desert came right up to the river banks. Where it was thick, the river was bounded with life. It might be a patch of wet forest, or a long, gorgeous valley of lush green.

"This is where they grow Mistrun tea," Rufus said as they passed through the valley. "One of the finest teas in the world. Costs a lot, back home."

Mistrun was the name of the river they were sailing down, unimaginatively named for its signature mist. According to Rufus, the source of the river was the largest water aperture in the desert.

"It's not a natural river?" Jason asked.

"It depends on what you think of as natural," Rufus said. "There's an oasis with the aperture at the bottom of a lake. All this water flows from there."

The most exciting point of the journey came when the river reached a deep gorge. The river should have spilled into the gorge, but instead flowed into a humungous aqueduct that spanned over the lengthy gap. A hundred metres wide and three hundred metres across, the aqueduct carried the river and those who sailed it over the gorge to continue along on the far side. The entire aqueduct was built entirely from green marble.

"This is crazy," Jason said as they crossed over. Even at a hundred metres wide, the aqueduct was thinner than the river. This noticeably sped up the flow of the river and the speed of their barge. Jason looked out at the gorge, but they weren't close to the edge and he couldn't see much over the raised lip of the aqueduct. All that was visible was an unnerving expanse of sky.

"Sky River Gorge," Gary said enthusiastically. "I tried to get them to go closer to the side so we could look over, but they said no."

“How deep is this gorge?” Jason asked. “The pillars holding this thing up must be huge.”

“Interestingly,” Rufus said, “this aqueduct has no structural support other than the two ends.”

“That doesn’t sound safe,” Jason said.

“Rufus, I think you were wrong,” Gary said. “You did make too much preparation.”

“You do kind of sound like a tour guide,” Jason said.

“What’s a tour guide?” Rufus asked.

“Someone who gets paid to stand near interesting things to tell people about them,” Jason explained

Farrah laughed.

“Rufus, I think you missed your calling,” she said.

“What’s wrong with teaching people about interesting places?” Rufus asked. “It sounds like a noble vocation. If there was one here, for example, they could point out that no one knows who built this aqueduct.”

Gary groaned.

“Why would you learn that?” he asked. “How does it help us with missions?”

“You carry on, Rufus,” Jason said. “I’d like to hear it.”

“Thank you,” Rufus said. “The aqueduct was already here when people first moved to this region, some three and a half centuries ago. At least, that’s when it was permanently settled. There is some evidence of people being in this region before, but no historical record of who or when.”

“Except for that old order of assassins,” Gary said.

“Yes, Gary,” Rufus said. “Except for that old order of assassins we very specifically aren’t meant to be talking about yet.”

“Sorry.”

They sailed downriver all day and into the night. Come morning, the predawn light started casting out the dark, revealing four figures sitting perfectly still. Atop the blocks of stone stacked on the barge, Jason and the three adventures were seated in a circle. Eyes closed, they slowly breathed in and out the moist river air. Rufus had stopped guiding Jason’s meditation, leaving him to find his own way forward.

-
- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 0 (100%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has advanced to Iron 1 (00%).
-

Jason threw up his hands, letting out a triumphant whoop.

Rufus opened his eyes to look at the laughing Jason.

“You seem pleased with yourself,” he said.

“One of my abilities went up,” Jason said happily. “Just like you said it would. Makes sense that it was my vision power, since I’m always looking at things.”

“You’re certain it improved?” Farrah asked. “The strength of your abilities is a nebulous thing, and self-deception is easy.”

“No worries there,” Jason said. “One of my outworlder powers lets me track the progress of my abilities.”

“Really?” Farrah said, fascinated. “That sounds like something the Magic Society would be interested in. When we get to the city you should let me examine you with some of their specialised implements.”

“Uh, no thanks,” Jason said. “I have a strict ‘no specialised implements’ policy.”

He noticed their surrounding had changed in the time the group was meditating. They had been passing through the desolate sand dunes of the western region when night fell, but now they were surrounded by wetlands. The morning light was still dim, but Jason’s now slightly advanced power to see in the dark made everything clear. He could see a couple of villages in the distance, paddy farmers and herds of some large lizard the size of a cow. The docile creatures seemed perfectly happy wallowing in shallow water. Above everything was the familiar magical haze.

“The Mistrun Delta,” Rufus said. “We should reach the city by late morning or early afternoon.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Jason said. “You three are kind of a big deal there, right?”

The three adventurers all answered at once.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Rufus glared at the other two.

“Rufus is the big name,” Gary said. “We’re just an afterthought.”

“What’s your concern?” Rufus asked, still shooting Gary a look.

“I was thinking that if I rock up to town with you lot,” Jason said, “I’ll be operating under expectations that I’m unlikely to meet.”

“He has a point,” Farrah said. “If he arrives under your wing then people will be expecting some kind of highly-trained expert. Not the kind of pressure a freshly-minted adventurer needs to be working under.”

“Pressure’s good,” Gary said. “Makes you strong.”

“In moderation,” Farrah said. “This time last week he didn’t know magic existed, let alone adventurers.”

“She’s right,” Rufus said. “Also, from the moment I arrived the aristocratic families were trying to foist their scions onto me for training. They’ll realise I’m training Jason sooner or later, but later is definitely better.”

“That settles it, then,” Jason said, getting to his feet, the others following suit. “I’ll get off early and we can meet up in the city.”

“Good,” Rufus said. “Find the Adventure Society and register; we’ll find you from there. There are plenty of towns and villages here in the delta. You can disembark somewhere closer to the city.”

“Actually,” Jason said, “I was thinking of having a look around, and there’s no time like the present.”

He ran and leapt into the air, the starlight cloak manifesting around him. He landed on the surface of the river, turned around and gave the adventurers a goodbye wave.

“See you in a few days!”

Chapter 34: Waving the Flag For Secular Morality

As best as Jason could tell, the delta was a mixture of natural wetlands and farmland that made the most of the ample water supply. There was a much greater abundance of trees compared to the desert, but they were mangroves or narrow palms; far from enough to sustain a lumber industry.

Jason wandered along paved roads that were set atop artificial embankments that divided the delta up into segments. Lush shrubbery and staggered brickwork ran down the sides to work against erosion, while small bridges allowed water and the occasional dinghy to float between sections. The roads themselves were the lifeblood of trade between towns and villages.

The care and time that had gone into the ways the farmland and artificial embankments fit into the natural ecosystem were clearly the product of many years. Jason thought back to what Rufus said about the Vane Estate and how it wastefully violated the existing environment. The delta was the exact opposite; a sustainable arrangement that balanced industry and nature.

The first town Jason arrived at was a farming community. Wandering into town, he experienced a strange confluence of familiar elements. Between the wide main street, the desert stone buildings and the surrounding terrain, it was like someone recreated a town from the American old west in South-East Asia, using North-African materials. Stone storefronts lined a main street where he half-expected old-timey piano music to come drifting through the swinging saloon doors.

Jason was actually able to find a saloon, although with disappointingly ordinary doors. They didn't swing and, wood being a rarity, were made from woven reeds. It was fronted by plenty of windows, none of which had glass, allowing light and air flow inside freely. Walking in, he saw quite a few people eating at scattered tables, as well as a long bar. A short breakfast menu was chalked onto a board, most of which was fried things he didn't recognise the name of.

After a pleasant breakfast of rice porridge with nuts and dried fruit, Jason left to meander down the main street. He wanted to look around, and also needed directions to the city. The people were olive-skinned with dark hair, which was normal for the other places Jason had seen. Only Rufus, with his chocolate complexion and Farrah, with her light skin and pixie features had been different amongst the humans Jason had met. As for the aggressively Aryan Anisa, he had no other elves for comparison.

There were a number of people going about their business in the main street, on foot or using carts and wagons. There were plenty of heidels, either yoked to wagons or tied to hitching posts. Like the wagons Jason had seen before, the carts and wagons here used bamboo for their construction, with a few wooden parts to supplement, like the wheel rims.

As he made his way down the street he came across two people standing in the middle of it, talking loudly. It was a young man and a middle-aged woman halfway yelling at one another.

“If you can’t wait until the healer comes through at the end of the month,” the man said, “then take him to the city.”

“That’s what I want to do,” the woman said “but money’s tight, now. Ratlings ate half our crop and we can’t afford a healer in the city.”

“No more loans,” the man said sharply, then his face softened. “I sympathise with your position, but monster attacks are a part of life. Look, I’ll ask my father about extending your terms, but that’s the best I can do.”

The woman was about to keep pressing her case when they turned to Jason who had walked right up to them.

“G’day,” Jason said. “I, and pretty much everyone couldn’t help but overhear. If you’d like, I can give it a go.”

“Give what a go?” the man asked.

“Someone’s crook, yeah? I might be able to sort him out.”

“You’re a healer?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Jason said. “I can’t heal injuries, but I might be able to knock-off a disease. I’m heading for the city to sign up as an adventurer, and one of my abilities deals with disease. Full disclosure; I haven’t actually tried it out, yet, but I can give it a go.”

“You’re an adventurer?” The woman asked.

“Prospective adventurer,” Jason corrected. “I’m Jason.”

“We can’t afford to pay you,” the woman said. “Monsters tore up our fields, ruined most of our crop.”

“That’s rough,” Jason said. “But no worries; this one’s on the house.”

“Does that mean free?”

“Sure does,” Jason said. “I can’t promise results, though. I’ve never tried this ability before, but I’ll do my best.”

“This sounds shady,” the man said. “Listen to the way he talks. Look at him. He’s clearly not from anywhere near here, and he doesn’t have any eyebrows. Are you going to trust a man with no eyebrows?”

"I don't have a lot of choices," the woman said.

She moved to a nearby cart, Jason and the other man following. The inside of the cart had been filled with bedding, to give as soft a ride as possible to the sick old man laying in it. His skin was clammy and pale, beaded with sweat.

"You shouldn't have brought him here," the healthy man said.

"Makes it convenient for me, though," Jason said. "G'day, old bloke. I'm Jason."

The old man tried to speak, but only managed a wracking cough.

"No worries, mate," Jason said. "You just hold on a bit."

Jason held his hand out over the old man and chanted a spell.

"Feed me your sins."

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability circumvents any resistance or immunity to cleanse effects. This ability cannot be used on self.

The blood-red glow of life force light emerged from the old man's body. It was far less potent than what he had seen from monsters, even dead ones, wavering as if ready to collapse. Inside the red light were flashes of unhealthy green, like algae in a stagnant pool. There were other colours, although not as prominent; a dirty white and a bleak, pale purple. Jason's aura sense could feel them tainting the life force. The unhealthy colours immediately started moving, rising up and out of the red glow to be absorbed by Jason's waiting hand.

-
- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Green Mud Fever] from [Human].
 - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Arthritis] from [Human].
 - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Osteoporosis] from [Human].

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

 - Cleansing afflictions has triggered [Sin Eater]. You have gained an instance of [Resistant] for each instance of affliction cleansed.
-

“I can cure arthritis? Is osteoporosis actually a disease?”

The glow of the old man’s life force was still unsteady, but clearly more vibrant after Jason’s efforts. The other colours were gone, leaving only vibrant red. As the spell faded, the glow retracted into the old man’s body.

“There we go,” Jason said. The old man pushed himself down to the end of the cart to get out.

“Dad, don’t push yourself,” the woman said.

“Don’t worry,” the old man said in a croaky voice. “It’s like a fresh breeze has blown through me.

Weak, but smiling he got himself out of the cart with his daughter’s help, then shook Jason’s hand. It was a hard, calloused hand, reminding Jason of his great uncle who worked mines his whole life.

“No worries, mate,” Jason said.

Although his spell only took moments, it attracted the attention of several people, and a short time later Jason found himself inundated with requests for healing. Soon after, a man wearing a badge pinned to his shirt arrived to see what the commotion was. This turned out to be the solitary town constable, who helped Jason get things in order.

“Alright,” the constable said to the growing crowd. “I’m going to take this man over to my office, where he has agreed to heal everyone that turns up for the rest of the day, just like when a regular healer shows up. So go home, bring in your sick. He says he can get to everyone, but he can’t heal injuries, only sickness.”

“Also poisons and curses,” Jason told the constable.

“And if anyone got bit by something venomous,” the constable continued, “you can go ahead and bring them in too.”

The crowd didn’t disperse until the constable took Jason inside his small office, where he took a bottle of juice from a magic cooler box and poured them a glass each.

“You sure you’re good for everyone?” the constable asked.

“No worries,” Jason said. “I could do this all day.”

“You will,” the constable said. “Half of them we’ll be turning away, though. I may have said you don’t do injuries, but they’ll bring them in regardless. You from one of the churches?”

“Definitely not,” Jason said.

“Then why are you helping all these folk for nothing?”

“Well,” Jason said, “since the gods are apparently real, here, I feel like I should be waving the flag for secular morality.”

“Friend, the gods are real everywhere.”

“That’s what people keep telling me.”

Chapter 35: Greenstone

“Anything?” Rufus asked as Gary walked in. They were renting a three-bedroom suite for their stay in Greenstone. Rufus and Farrah had been waiting for Jason in the sprawling lounge with the huge glass windows overlooking the ocean. The doors to the balcony outside were open to let in the sea breeze.

“Nothing,” Gary said. They had been checking daily to see if Jason had registered with the Adventure Society.

“It’s been a week,” Farrah said. “Do you think it’s time to make some discrete inquiries?”

“Not yet,” Rufus said. “Remember, everything is new to him. He’s probably just taking his time to look around.”

Jason was riding on a wagon along the embankment roads of the delta. The wagon was filled with crates containing all kinds of plants, only a few of which were fruits and vegetables. Jason was riding shotgun next to the driver, a man in his mid-twenties. The driver reached back, grabbing a plant with a celery-like stalk. With one hand on the reins, he snapped the stalk in half with the other, a practised gesture. He offered one half to Jason.

“Not medicinal, this one,” the driver said. “I just picked some up because I like it.”

The driver, Jory, was technically an adventurer, although he was the first to admit he rarely went on adventures. His true calling was alchemy, the brewing of potions and elixirs. He went out to the towns and villages looking for materials he couldn’t find in the local markets.

“Or at a price I can afford in the local markets anyway,” he’d cheerfully explained.

Jory had found Jason in a village, swamped by people looking for healing. It was something Jason had gotten used to as he slowly closed in on the city, through eight towns and villages in as many days. Jory had offered him a ride for the final leg of the journey.

Jason was never shy about filling a silence, but that was far from necessary with Jory, who talked so much he kept having to wet his mouth from a canteen, even in the humid delta air. He started telling Jason about his alchemy lab in Old City.

“Old City?” Jason asked.

"You really must be new to the region. Greenstone is split into two sections. Old City is the original city of Greenstone, situated on the original harbour. The other part of Greenstone is the Island. Originally it was meant to be a massive breakwater when the ports of what is now Old City were expanded. Somewhere along the way, they turned it into a haven for all the rich people to leave the rest of us behind."

"Alchemy doesn't rake in the money?" Jason asked.

"Not the way I do it," Jory said.

"So, they made an island, and called it the Island?" Jason asked.

"Unimaginative, right?" Jory asked. "You do want to live there if you can afford it, though. It is very nice. Old City is where the money is made, but the Island is where the money goes."

Jory explained that adventurers could afford to live on the island, so long as they were actively working. Most of them had been born rich anyway, which was how they got their essences in the first place. Jory's own family lived there, but he himself lived in Old City. Everything he earned was sunk back into his alchemy research.

"Most alchemists drive their work forward by pushing the boundaries of what alchemy can achieve at its strongest," Jory said. "The most elaborate techniques, the rarest and most expensive materials. I go the exact opposite way, trying to make things cheaper and simpler. If I can make alchemical products affordable to everyone, not only can it help a huge number of people, but it will open up huge new markets."

Jason had seen for himself that medicine in this world was essentially just whoever had the healing magic. Both ritual magic and alchemy had ways to heal, but the cost and expertise required placed both out of the reach for most people.

Most healing was done through the church of the Healer. From what he'd been told, their god supplied the essences and awakening stones that gave them their healing abilities. They could be sought out for a fee, but also sent people around the delta to heal people at more reasonable prices. It sounded good, but Jason had seen firsthand that there was always more demand for such services than supply. Jory hoped to rectify that with easy and affordable medicines.

"That's a noble goal," Jason said. "How's it going?"

"Reasonably well," Jory said. "The advantage of researching cheap and plentiful materials is that they're cheap and plentiful. I've even started a clinic out of my laboratory, selling some of my early successes. It helps pay for my research, although the margins are thin to keep it affordable. That was the whole point, after all."

"Maybe you should talk to the church of healing," Jason said. "They might be willing to fund your research."

"I had the same thought," Jory said. "As it turns out, they see who gets healed and who doesn't as theirs to choose. The poor, in their uneducated ignorance, don't get the chances the wealthy do to understand the glory of the gods. As such, they need suffering to wash clean their souls."

"That sounds familiar," Jason said, shaking his head. "You get that kind of thing where I come from, too."

Moving closer to the city, the embankment roads that crisscrossed the delta gave way to flat ground. All vegetation had been dug out or cut down, leaving a wide-open space in front of the city wall. The wall itself was red-yellow stone, a dozen metres high. Roads leading from all around the delta led up to the high gates.

"Those are some big walls."

"There are only a few secure towns in the delta," Jory said. "Most of the population comes into the city during monster surges."

"This clear space is to see the monsters coming?" Jason asked.

"That's right. It's a lot of work to keep land this fertile clear. Back in the day, they used to try and spoil the ground, stop anything from growing."

"I wouldn't think that would be hard," Jason said. "I mean, magic is a thing, right?"

"That might work somewhere else," Jory said, "but not here. There's an inherent magic to all the water coming down the Mistrun River. It has a strong life vitality, so you can't stop the growth here. The best you can do is beat it back. After a surge, they let it go until the next one is due. They've been keeping it clear for more than a year now. The last few surges have all taken longer than expected to arrive."

"Aren't longer gaps good?" Jason asked.

"Yes and no," Jory said. "Think about the logistical costs of a surge. Whole populations shift, herds have to be culled and moved. Being in a state of readiness for years at a time is expensive."

"I can imagine," Jason said.

"Haven't you seen it for yourself? You would have been, what? Ten, twelve when the last surge hit?"

"They don't have monster surges where I come from," Jason said. "They don't have monsters at all."

"They don't have monsters?" Jory asked. "Where are you from, exactly?"

“I was living in a city called Melbourne,” Jason said. “A long, long way from here. Very lean on monster activity.”

“It must have an absurdly low magic density,” Jory said. “Even compared to here, and that’s saying something.”

“Oh, there’s definitely less magic there,” Jason said. “We’re pretty isolated from anywhere with real magic.”

“How did you get here, then?”

“Not entirely sure,” Jason said. “Some kind of magical accident out in the desert reached out and dragged me right out of my bed.”

“Must have been some accident. I have heard about long-distance teleport experiments with shaky results.”

“It was something like that,” Jason said. “I was lucky enough to run into some adventurers who helped me get my bearings.”

“Not to mention a full set of essences,” Jory said.

Jory was iron rank, like Jason. He could sense the essences in Jason’s aura as easily as Jason could sense his. Jason was still new to aura sensing, but he was getting a handle on it. Ordinary people were faint, barely detectable, while those with essences were much clearer. Most villages had one or two people with an essence, while anyone who had reached iron rank with a full set radiated out like a beacon.

Monsters had an aura strength similar to those of an essence user, but their auras had a different feel to them. Rufus, Farrah and Gary had powerful, bronze-rank auras, but Jason had only caught glimpses. They could all suppress their auras, hiding them from Jason’s senses. Farrah had told him that higher-ranked essences users were expected to contain their auras.

“I kind of stumbled into those essences,” Jason said. “They came quick, but they didn’t come easy.”

They joined a queue of wagons at one of the city gates. The line moved quickly, the guards barely glancing at the contents of his wagon.

“You’re not carrying anything restricted are you, Jory?” a guard asked.

“Just the usual, Hugh,” Jory said, then turned to Jason. “You’re not restricted, are you?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Jason said.

“You have a good day, Jory,” the guard said. “I’ll bring my mother to the clinic, now you’re back. Her leg again.”

“Always welcome, Hugh.”

Jory drove the wagon through the gate and into the city proper. Most of Old City was built from the same red and yellow stone Jason had seen in the desert, although many buildings were painted in colourful whites and greens. They were mostly one or two levels high, but three wasn't uncommon. Over the rooftops, he could see the occasional building that jutted five, six or even seven storeys high. The streets were teeming with people, even right in front of the gate. The air was filled with voices and the smell of spice.

"What's that I'm smelling?" Jason asked as Jory let the wagon confidently into the street, people flowing around it like water.

"It's called chittle," Jory said. "It's cheap, strong and grows all over the delta, so the street vendors all use it. It can take some getting used to."

"No, it smells good," Jason said. "I'll have to do some wandering around."

They reached Jory's combination home, alchemy lab and medical clinic; a large, three-story building. A sign above the door proclaimed it as the Broad Street Clinic. Although the street was crowded, the building was given a wide berth as two people brazenly vandalised the front of the building in the middle of the day. Rather than hooligans, however, they were wearing bright white robes hemmed with blue, yellow and green. They both had ceramic pots of red paint and were writing the word 'HERETIC' across the door. There was a small crowd of passers-by who had stopped to watch the show.

"Ah, dammit," Jory said wearily, pulling the wagon to a halt.

"Who are they?" Jason asked.

"They're from the church of the Healer," Jory said.

The two men spotted him on the wagon, putting down their pots and brushed to march over and confront him.

"So the heretic is back," one of them said. They were both young, around eighteen or nineteen.

"Is this really necessary?" Jory asked, still atop the wagon.

Jason could sense from their auras that both men were essence users. Iron rank, like Jory and himself.

One of the two opened his mouth for a sneering remark but was pre-empted by Jason.

"Who are these pricks?" Jason asked loudly as he hopped down off the wagon. Walking around the two men, he picked up one each of the pots and brushes they had put down when Jory arrived. Jory and the two men watched him, unsure of what he was doing.

"Who are you?" one of the men asked.

"I asked first," Jason said. "Is it a local custom to write what we think of people with paint? I'm not sure I can fit 'self-important turd nugget' on your robes. Do you have a smaller brush?"

Still sitting on his wagon, Jory groaned, running a hand across his face. The two men turned red with fury, lunging at Jason. He threw the contents of the pot over the first one and threw a fist at the other. The paint landed but the punch did not. A short time later Jason was curled up on the ground. He could have tried using abilities, but he knew both men were iron rank. He was afraid pulling out powers would be like pulling a knife in a bar fight, escalating things to the point of genuine danger. The clean one was satisfied with having laid Jason out with a punch, but the one splattered with paint was still getting kicks in.

"Come on," the other one said. "We came to send a message, and the message is sent."

The painted man gave Jason a final kick, picked up the other pot of paint and tipped it over Jason.

"Now it's sent," he said, and the two started walking off. The crowd of onlookers hurriedly parted to let them through, but the pair stopped when a voice called out to them.

"Hey!" Jason called out. The pair turned to see Jason, barely back on his feet, doubled over, but flashing them a bloody-toothed smile.

"You guys kicked the crap out of me pretty good," Jason groaned. "I don't suppose you can point me to a church of the healer?"

The man covered in paint lit up with fury, his face almost matching the red paint splashed on him. Sprinting back with thundering steps, he brought a fist down on Jason's head. Barely able to stand, Jason's only defence was a bloody-toothed grin. The fist came down and he crumbled, out cold before he hit the ground.

Chapter 36:

The Island

Jason regained consciousness on a cushioned table, like an examination table in a doctor's office. He'd been stripped down to his boxer shorts and his skin was covered in healing unguent.

"I think I'm weirdly getting used to this."

"To getting knocked out?" Jory asked. He was at a sink, washing out empty potion vials and placing them on a drying rack.

"It's been a rough couple of weeks," Jason said.

"Two acolytes of the god of healing, beating someone unconscious, though," Jory said. "That's unusual."

"Not for me," Jason said. "It's mostly been cultists, but generally religious figures of one stripe or another."

Jason groaned as he shoved his legs off the table, pushing himself up to a sitting position. He looked around what he assumed was the inside of Jory's clinic, which was surprisingly similar to a medical exam room from his own world. Tiles and cabinets; clean, white surfaces. There was a plain chair next to the exam table, with his clothes folded neatly on it, along with a towel.

"Is that for me?" he asked.

"I put the ointment on you," Jory said. "You can wipe it off yourself. You know, goading those two into kicking the snot out of you was the single dumbest thing I've ever seen. But what really impressed me was that you immediately topped it by standing up and doing it again. They weren't mucking about that second time, either. The one you dumped paint on kicked you square in the head."

"I don't remember that," Jason said.

"It was kind of a passing shot as they left," Jory said. "I think you were already out."

"Harsh," Jason said. "I've been knocked out a lot this last week."

"I believe you," Jory told him. "You owe me for the healing potion I tipped down your throat, by the way. And two tins of healing ointment I used for the bruising."

"No worries," Jason said. "That's actually why it wasn't a stupid thing to do."

Jory placed the last potion vial on a drying rack.

"This I want to hear," he said, turning around to face Jason.

"Well, if someone beats you up, there's healing potions," Jason said.

"If you have the money," Jory said.

“Valid point,” Jason acknowledged, “but in my case I do. Which means I can take a beating and the repercussions don’t last so long.”

“I don’t know about the rest of it,” Jory said, “but I will admit you can take a beating.”

“If you stay quiet when you wished you’d said something,” Jason said, “that regret builds up. Starts eating you from the inside, and there’s no potion for that.”

“Sure there is,” Jory said. “It’s called liquor. Another alchemist friend of mine has a distillery not too far from here.”

“That’s not a cure,” Jason said. “That’s setting yourself on fire to ward off the cold.”

“I’m not sure you’re the guy I’m going to for advice about consequences,” Jory said.

“Probably for the best,” Jason said with a laugh. “Are you going to catch any blowback because I took those blokes on?”

“It’ll be fine,” Jory said. “I’m a member of the Adventure Society and the Alchemist Association. They’re only low-level acolytes making trouble, so there’s only so far they’ll take things. If you’d actually given them a beating instead of the other way around, though, their higher-ups might have gotten involved. I don’t have the influence to push back against that. I’m just glad you weren’t stupid enough to use your essence abilities.”

“I figured it was bar fight rules,” Jason said. “It’s all fun and games until someone pulls a knife.”

“I’ve never been in a bar fight,” Jory said.

“Me either,” Jason admitted. “I just heard that somewhere.”

Jory shook his head.

“You’re a crazy person,” he said.

“The odds are pretty good, yeah.”

“Luckily, they got to stomp you into the ground, which should make them feel like they’ve accomplished something. Hopefully, they won’t be back for a while.”

“That’s why you didn’t step in to help me?”

“Help you? I almost stepped in to help them.”

Jason chuckled.

“Lovely. Those two both had iron-rank auras. Were they part of the Adventure Society?”

“Maybe,” Jory said. “The Adventure Society doesn’t put restrictions against membership in any other legitimate organisation.”

“Religions count as legitimate?” Jason asked.

“What is wrong with your head?” Jory asked.

“The bit on the front is too handsome,” Jason said. “I don’t suppose you could point me in the direction of the Adventure Society? I came here to sign up, after all.”

Jason wandered through the streets of Old City, stopping every now and again to buy something from a street stall.

-
- Food [Chittle Kebab] has inflicted [Food Poisoning] on you.
 - You have resisted [Food Poisoning].
 - [Food Poisoning] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

“Food poisoning?”

Combat Log

- You have been afflicted with normal-rank poison [Food Poisoning].
 - Iron rank gives you increased resistance to normal-rank afflictions.
 - Ability [Sin Eater] gives you increased resistance to all afflictions.
 - You have resisted [Food poisoning].
 - Resisting an affliction has triggered ability [Sin Eater], granting you an instance of [Resistant].
-

“Sin eater. I’m really starting to like this ability.”

Jason looked at the food in his hand, then at the resistant buff icon, then back at the kebab.

“You are pretty tasty.”

His gaze drifted back to the resistant buff.

“Why not? It’s kind of like training the power.”

He bit into the kebab again.

-
- Special attack [Chittle Kebab] has inflicted [Food Poisoning] on you.
 - You have resisted [Food poisoning].
 - [Food Poisoning] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

There was now the number two next to his resistance buff indicator.

“Loving this power.”

Eventually, he passed through a busy warehouse district that gave way to the city ports and he caught sight of the water. After the desolation of the desert, even the dark green lushness of the delta didn’t compare to a grand stretch of cerulean. It was not the

open sea, however, as there was a far shore some two kilometres distant, making it seem more like a lake.

The ports were a bustle of activity, forcing him to step carefully or get run down by a wagon. He finally reached a bridge that reached up and over the water in a gentle arc. Constructed entirely from green marble, it exuded wealth compared to the sandy yellow stone of Old City.

There were three lanes across the bridge, managed by an inspection point with armed guards, high metal gates and a large guard station. These guards wore the same uniform as the ones at the city gate, but he could see at a glance these were more fastidious in their duties. There were eight of them, and Jason could feel from their auras that some had essences. Only one had a full set of essences, the one who looked to be in charge.

Passage to the Island was clearly more regimented than that to Old City. Of the three lanes, the two smaller ones were for goods and service transport to and from the Island. They were intensely busy, with rigorous inspections slowing progress. The wider third lane was for a privileged class, with space to spare. Most of the traffic was wealthy-looking carriages, which caught Jason's attention by not being drawn by animals. Their wheels had the glow of engraved magical symbols.

Jory had been kind enough to explain the basics to Jason. Travel to the Island was restricted without a valid reason for entry. Trade and work permits would get someone into the trade lanes. Aristocrats, adventurers and residents were free to come and go using the wide lane. Members of the various guilds, societies and associations headquartered on the Island were likewise free to enter. Anyone else with valid business on the Island could buy a permit for entry for one day's entry, daylight hours only. What constituted valid business was at the discretion of the guards, who were town constables under the city's ruler, Duke Greenstone.

A day's entry to the Island cost an iron-rank spirit coin. Fortunately, anyone willing to pay up had access to the privilege lane. Jason had been around enough to get a handle on the currency, of which the lesser spirit coin was the basic unit. It was a full hundred lesser coins to one iron-rank coin, after which denominations went up in multiples of ten. It was ten iron to the bronze, ten bronze to the silver and so on, all the way up to diamond. The gold-rank coins in Jason's possession were each worth a hundred thousand lesser coins.

At the entry gate, Jason didn't have to queue for long. There were long lines for the trade lane, where every person and vehicle was thoroughly checked. In the privileged

lane, most of the carriages were waved straight through, while others went through after simply showing a permit. Most of the people in front of Jason were given permits after a short chat with the guard and handing over a coin. Jason noticed each person needing to touch their thumb to a stone the guard took from his pocket.

The bored, but still-diligent guard looked Jason up and down.

“Reason for permit application?”

“Applying to the Adventure Society,” Jason said.

The constable looked Jason over again, then nodded.

“Wait here.”

He went to exchange a quiet word with the one Jason pegged as being in charge.

That man looked Jason over and gave a brief nod to the guard, who came back.

“Looks like you’re all good. Just hand over your coin and put your thumb on the tracking stone.”

“Tracking stone?” Jason asked.

The guard raised a suspicious eyebrow.

“You don’t know what a tracking stone is?”

The officer in charge wandered over.

“Is there a problem?” he asked.

“This guy doesn’t know what a tracking stone is,” the guard said.

“Where are you from?” the officer asked Jason.

“Casselton Beach, originally,” Jason said. “It’s a small town, a long way from any real magic. Melbourne, the last couple of years, but I doubt you’ve heard of it. I’ve come a long way, and there’s still a lot I don’t know.”

The officer looked Jason over for a few moments, then fished a stone from his pocket. The palm-sized, glassy object looked similar to an awakening stone, except faceted instead of smooth. It had a dark blue-green colouration.

“This is a tracking stone,” the officer said. “This lets us find you, wherever you are on the Island.”

Jason had an ability that prevented him from being tracked. He couldn’t be sure if that would have an affect on the stone, and he decided to not mention it.

“If you make us come looking,” the guard continued, “it won’t be us coming for you, understand?”

“It’ll be someone much worse,” Jason said.

“Smart,” the officer said. “Smart is good.”

“I think your bar for smart might be a little low,” Jason said.

“Too smart is maybe not so good,” the officer said. “If you want to stay on the Island past sunset, find lodgings. That’ll qualify you for a temporary residence permit. Find good lodgings and they’ll register it for you, instead of making you come back and do it yourself.”

“Thanks,” Jason said. He handed over his coin and pressed his thumb to the stone. Either the stone was stronger than his ability, or the stone gave no warning that it couldn’t track him. Shortly after, Jason was through the gate and walking across the bridge.

The main thoroughfare was for carriages, with those on foot like Jason following a path at the edge of the bridge. That was fine by Jason as the rising arc of the bridge gave him an increasingly good view of the city.

Back the way he had come was the yellow sprawl of Old City. Below the bridge, the sun reflected off the deep blue water, busy with water traffic. The Old City shoreline was a massive port, the full length of the city. The ships were large, crammed into docks that seemed strangely high. He wondered if that was something to do with what two moons did to the tides.

There were three other bridges like the one Jason was on. Engineering marvels that spanned kilometres of water, they were the equal of anything from his own world.

Ahead was the Island, seeming opulent even at a distance. Compared to the clustered Old City, it indulged in the luxury of space. Where the Old City ports were occupied with large trade ships, the Island’s widely spaced marinas were occupied entirely by what looked like pleasure craft. Many of them didn’t have sails, presumably being propelled by magic.

The marina buildings all looked like yacht clubs, and beyond that were large houses with expansive grounds. Trees and grass abounded, and the streets he could see were wide and sealed. The buildings were all combinations of green marble and variously coloured tiles.

Eagerly heading along the bridge, Jason got a better look at the wide boulevard at the end of the bridge. Colourful plant beds separated carriageways and footpaths. Trees lined the streets, shading them with a leafy canopy.

The inspection station at the end of the bridge was just a small booth with no gates. The security was fastidious with those entering the Island, while disinterested in those leaving. The security guard looked a lot more relaxed, in his middle years with thinning hair and a paunch his uniform did not flatter. He came out of the booth, giving Jason a friendly smile as he checked his permit.

Although the guard looked casual, he took his time to check the permit thoroughly. As he did, Jason took a deep satisfying breath. The air was clean and fresh, without the wet

mugginess of the delta, the dry aridity of the desert or the crowded scents battling it out in Old City.

“I think I’m going to enjoy wealth inequality.”

Chapter 37: A Good Adventurer and a Great One

After leaving the walls of the city on the back of a heidel, Rufus rode at a casual pace along the embankment roads that divided up the delta. They were busy with traffic, mostly carts and wagons shuttling back and forth from the city. He could have urged his mount to move faster, instead enjoying a leisurely ride that took him to the gates of the Geller family estate. A thick, high wall marked the boundary, spanning off in both directions. The estate beyond was so vast that monsters were as likely to manifest inside the walls as out.

Approaching the open gate, he was let in by a pair of guards who took his mount. Rufus could sense the iron-rank auras of both men. That might have been normal in his home city, but locally was the exception. To his knowledge, only the Duke of Greenstone's household guard used iron rank essence users for basic troops. Knowing the Geller family, he expected these guards were family members on some kind of punishment detail or being taught the value of diligence.

At the guards' direction, he started walking up the wide, gravel-covered thoroughfare. The main house could be seen in the distance, a series of low buildings whose design seemed more interested in fitting the surroundings than lording over them. Rufus nodded to himself, finding it very much to his taste.

The grounds on both sides of the central approach were bursting with life. Palm trees, tall shrubbery, and bamboo stands. Paths disappeared through vine-covered archways and behind flowering bushes. The promise of canopy shade and the sound of trickling water enticed strollers to explore.

Rufus continued up the central path toward the manor house. Moving closer he saw the low buildings were interconnected with open walkways of wood, stone, and bamboo. As he arrived in front of the foremost building, someone emerged to meet him. A beautiful woman with dark olive skin and black hair, she looked around thirty, which Rufus knew to be twenty years shy of the reality. The age-defying power of her silver-rank essences kept her looks just as they were when he first met her as a boy.

"Lady Geller," Rufus greeted.

"Little Rufus Remore," Danielle said with a smile. "I didn't think you would still be so adorable."

Rufus cleared his throat awkwardly and Danielle laughed.

"You know, Mr Remore," she said, "many of our family's young ladies are arriving ahead of the monster surge. Perhaps if I set up a little soiree..."

“Thank you, Lady Geller, but I have quite enough to be going on with, without romantic entanglements complicating my affairs.”

“Oh? The young men would be there too.”

“Gracious,” he said, “but my answer remains the same.”

“Such a shame,” she said.

“I’d like to compliment you on your home,” Rufus said. “It makes one want to wander off and explore.”

“Then shall we?” Danielle asked with an inviting gesture. “I imagine we can discuss the reason for your visit just as well amongst the gardens.”

“I would very much like that,” Rufus said.

Danielle picked a path under an archway overgrown with flowering vines, leading him deeper into the grounds. Rufus soon discovered them to be every part the equal of their promise.

“Your estate grounds truly are a joy to experience,” Rufus said.

“Thank you. My family came here as the region was first being settled. The walls of our estate are older than the walls of Old City. Last I heard, we even have a member of that generation still around somewhere.”

“Oh?”

“She reached diamond rank a couple of centuries ago. Not so good at keeping in touch, though. You know what diamond-rankers are like.”

“Agelessness engenders an unusual perspective, I imagine,” Rufus said.

Danielle smiled.

“Let us hope we both go far enough to see for ourselves,” she said. “What brings you out here today, Mr Remore?”

“Seeing the ancestral home of the Geller family isn’t reason enough?” Rufus asked. “I’m a little surprised to find you in residence.”

“We call most of our bronze and silver-rankers home when a monster surge is imminent,” Danielle said. “The family has placed me in charge of defending the estate, this time, and my husband and daughter will be back sometime in the next few months. Really, though, I’m back to overlook my son’s final training.”

“You really train all of your family members here?” Rufus asked.

“We do,” Danielle said. “Our facilities might not be the Remore Academy, but we’re proud of it, nonetheless.”

“And rightly so, by all accounts,” Rufus said. “I have heard my grandfather express his respect on more than one occasion.”

“High praise indeed,” Danielle said.

“If I may ask,” Rufus said, “why here? I know this is where your family first rose up as a power, but now you’re established in major cities around the world. Why send people born in high magic areas to train here?”

“We send everyone to train here,” she said. “Those high magic areas are just the problem. Before you came here, did you ever go out on an expedition without at least a silver-ranker to watch your back?”

“No,” Rufus said darkly, “which led to a recent mistake on my part. Overconfidence led to insufficient caution. It almost cost my people everything.”

“That is precisely the reason we still use this place,” Danielle said. “The low magical density makes the monsters weaker. The dangers smaller; the consequences, less severe. Not to say there aren’t real dangers, but we can send out our iron-rankers to face them alone. No-one to rely on but themselves and each other.”

“You let them make their mistakes when those mistakes are less likely to kill them,” Rufus said.

“Exactly.”

“In light of my own hard-learned lesson,” Rufus said, “I cannot see that as anything but an excellent practice. There may be a lesson for the way my own family does things.”

“That’s very flattering,” Danielle said. “You really are a Remore, aren’t you? You’re all obsessed with improving your academy’s training methods.”

“Speaking of training,” Rufus said, “that is the reason I’ve come today. I’ve heard that your family’s training facility includes a mirage chamber. I was hoping to borrow it from time to time during my stay here.”

Danielle gave him an apologetic smile.

“Indeed we do have one,” she said. “Sadly, as much as I would like to accommodate you, I cannot. As I mentioned, the local magical density is quite low. We can only operate our mirage chamber at a bronze-rank level for limited periods, and I can’t take that valuable training time away from my own family.”

“Actually, it isn’t for me,” Rufus said. “I’ve found a person in rather desperate need of training and have taken it upon myself to give him a rush-course.”

She gave him a sideways glance, eyebrows arched.

“From what I hear,” she said, “every aristocratic family in the Greenstone has been asking you to guide their young hopefuls. Including ours. I have to wonder how someone managed to catch your eye.”

Rufus let out a self-deprecating laugh.

“I mentioned my mistake,” he said. “It would have gotten me killed if not for a rather unusual man.”

Rufus shook his head.

“I grew up surrounded by adventurers. I was raised not just to be one of them, but to be so good I could teach others. Everyone around me, as long as I can remember, told me I was going to be a great adventurer. It got to the point that I never even doubted it. The only exception was my grandfather. He said you never learn who you are when everything goes right. It’s in your darkest hour that you understand what it is to be an adventurer.”

They stopped walking at the edge of a pond, Rufus looking down at his own reflection.

“In my darkest hour,” Rufus continued, “I met a man who had never even heard of the Adventure Society. One essence, no combat abilities. He didn’t even know how to use spirit coins. But when all seemed lost, he showed me, like my grandfather said, what it means to be an adventurer. That when all your training and powers fail you, you have to find something inside yourself you never knew was there. Then you can do things you never thought possible. It’s the difference between a good adventurer and a great one.”

“That’s a valuable lesson,” Danielle said. “It seems your time here wasn’t wasted.”

“It hasn’t been,” Rufus said. “Having received such a valuable lesson, I want to impart what I know, in turn.”

“Well,” Danielle said, “If what you are looking for is some time in our mirage chamber running at iron rank, I can accommodate you. I would appreciate a little reciprocity, however.”

“Oh?”

“I mentioned my son and his final training. The time has come for him to join the Adventure Society, and I’d like you to do his field assessment. I’m sure the Society would be happy to accommodate.”

“I won’t show your boy any favouritism, if that’s what you’re looking for,” Rufus said.

Danielle laughed.

“Oh, I’d hardly need you for that,” she said.

“You’re not suggesting the Adventure Society is subject to corruption?” Rufus asked.

“You have to realise, Mr Remore, this isn’t Vitesse. The Adventure Society is a major force in Greenstone, but the isolation means the local branch is more reliant on local powers. Compromises must be made.”

Dark clouds appeared in Rufus’ expression.

“The neutrality of the Adventure Society is one of its central tenets,” he said.

"I agree," Danielle said. "However, if the core branches want to export their values to remote branches like Greenstone, they need to export sufficient resources along with them. Ideals are well and good in the heart of a kingdom, Mr Remore, but here we are more-often overlooked than not. In the provinces, we all have to deal with the realities."

Rufus looked rather dumbstruck.

"I'm not sure what to say to that."

"There's nothing to be said, Mr Remore. Welcome to the wilderness."

"Surely it can't be that bad," Rufus said.

"Oh, it's not," Danielle said. "Especially with the new branch director. She worked her way up from the bottom, so she knows what it is to fight through the influence of families like mine. Remarkable woman actually, but there is no getting around the fact that the Adventure Society here is reliant on local powers."

"Is that why the adventurer standards are so low here?" Rufus asked.

"That's precisely the reason," Danielle said. "Exceptions have a way of being made for those whose capabilities are not the equal of their connections. Eventually, standards just declined in general. That is why I want my son assessed to your standards, Mr Remore. He doesn't need help; he needs to be challenged."

"Then I would be happy to assist you," Rufus said. "Challenge, I can do."

Jason was standing at the edge of the bridge, having just arrived on the Island. The security guard handed back Jason's permit after checking it.

"Everything's in order, sir," the man said. "First time on the Island?"

"It is," Jason said. "I don't suppose you could point out the quickest way to the Adventure Society?"

The guard gestured down the boulevard that followed straight out from the bridge.

"Head up this way and you'll find the transit terminal. Big building; you can't miss it. That'll get you where you need to go."

"Thanks, mate."

Jason started walking up the street, past houses with gardens and grounds secured behind green brick walls and artfully wrought metal gates.

"Transit terminal," Jason muttered to himself as he walked along the street. "Do they have magic trams or something?"

Soon Jason came to some kind of local shopping district dominated by eateries and boutique stores. Jason wanted to stop and chase some of the enticing smells, but it was

already afternoon. First, he needed to find the Adventure Society, then somewhere to stay before sundown so he could stay on the Island.

The shopping area was dominated by a large building with a sign declaring it the NORTH MARINA TRANSIT TERMINAL. He went inside, finding it to be set out like a train station. He found a large sign that showed the routes; a pair of loop lines going in opposite directions.

According to the map, Jason could reach the Adventure Society from platform B. There didn't seem to be any place to buy tickets, so Jason took the stairwell marked for platform B, descending to a below-ground level. The stairwell was long, around two storeys worth of switchback stairs before coming out on a platform.

It immediately reminded him of a subway platform in layout. The floor walls and ceiling were combinations of green stone and tile mosaic, with cool, clean light coming from magical stones fixed into the ceiling. There were benches around the walls with people sitting patiently, while others stood.

The difference from a subway station was that in front of the tunnel was a glass wall, with water behind it like an aquarium. Three circular metal frames in the glass wall had doors that looked like airlocks. Moving closer to take a look, he saw the tunnel extended beyond both sides of the platform, like a subway tunnel. On the other side of the tunnel, he could see another glass wall with the same three doors, with another platform beyond that.

The lights illuminating the platform started dimming in a gentle strobe. It was apparently some kind of signal; the other people at the platform started getting up from benches and moving toward the glass wall. Shortly thereafter, a bullet-shaped capsule floated down the tunnel and affixed itself to the wall with clamps that gripping the three metal circles and pressed tightly into the doors. With a hiss of air, the doors slid open and people came out. The people on the platform then boarded, Jason among them.

The interior of the capsule was more like a bus than a subway car, with pairs of seats on each side. The seats were soft and plush, more like a luxury coach than cheap public transport. Jason found a window seat and watched the tunnel go past as the capsule took off. The ride had a floaty feel to it and Jason couldn't stop himself from grinning like an idiot.

"Submarine subways," he murmured to himself, shaking his head in disbelief. "I love magical cities."

The tunnel outside his window was decorated in tile mosaic and lit with different coloured lights. It seemed to be telling some kind of myth, with monsters and heroes

locked in epic battle. He became so engrossed in the images going past that he was disappointed to arrive at his destination.

The Adventure Society terminal was two stops from where he started and turned out to be one of several buildings in the extensive Adventure Society campus. Jason followed a sign labelled ADMINISTRATION out of the building onto what looked like a prestigious old university, all stone buildings and sprawling grounds. Jason took what he guessed was the right path and only had to ask directions once before finding the administration building.

He found himself in a large lobby fully appointed in wood, from the various sets of double doors to the three separate stairways. In terms of construction materials, Jason had seen plenty of mudbrick, stone, tile, bamboo, even reeds. The sudden preponderance of wood was a sufficiently stark contrast to make clear the importance of the building.

It was a vast space which fortunately contained what looked like a reception desk, at which Jason presented himself. Behind the desk was what looked like the same paunchy, balding bridge guard who had given him directions. Only the clothes were different, the guard uniform replaced with a more civilian-looking outfit. It had a prominently-stitched emblem of a sword and rod crossed over a shield. Jason had seen that emblem several times since arriving, recognising it from Rufus' Adventure Society badge.

The uniform had a loose fit Jason had seen on most of the locals, although the man's hefty midsection rather minimised the looseness. Jason noted there was a pencil tucked atop of one of the man's ears.

"Do you have a brother?" Jason asked.

"Just come over the bridge, sir?"

"I did."

"That was my brother, Bertram, sir. I'm Albert, but feel free to just call me Bert."

"No worries, Bert. Is this where I apply to join the Adventure Society?"

"Certainly is, sir," Albert said brightly. "I can get you started right away if you'd like."

"That'd be great," Jason said.

He pulled out a form and sat it on the desk, then started fishing through drawers.

"Not looking for a pencil, are you?" Jason asked.

"I am, sir. Had it around here somewhere..."

Jason tapped his own ear and a look of grateful revelation came over Albert's face as he plucked the pencil from its resting spot.

"Thank you, sir," Albert said. "How about we start with a name?"

"Jason Asano."

Instead of writing it down, Albert gave Jason a curious look.

“Do you know an adventurer named Gareth Xandier?”

“Gareth Xandier?” Jason asked. “Wait, do you mean Gary? Big, leonid bloke.”

“Yes,” Albert said. “The good-looking one.”

“I knew it,” Jason said, shaking his head in disgust.

“I’m sorry?” Albert asked.

“Never mind,” Jason said. “Why do you ask about Gary?”

“He’s been coming in and asking after you for the last couple of days,” Albert said. “Is it alright to tell him you’ve registered?”

“Sure,” Jason said, “although I’d rather tell him myself. Do you know where he’s staying?”

Chapter 38: Just Another Adventurer

The guild district was the region of the Island that contained the Adventure Society campus, along with many other guilds and societies. Occupying the north-west region of the island, the guild district also contained the bulk of the Island's visitor accommodations. Staying on the Island was a relatively expensive prospect, but with price came quality. Rufus, Farrah and Gary had secured a three-room suite in Sailor's Watch, an inn at the very edge of the island, with exceptional ocean views.

Having returned from the Geller Estate, Rufus ran into Farrah outside their lodgings as she returned from her own business.

"How did it go?" Farrah asked.

"Well enough," Rufus said. "Now we just need Jason to finally arrive."

Farrah sniffed at the smell of fresh baking wafting out of the inn.

"Smells good," she said. "Should be just about time to get some supper."

"It should," Rufus agreed, and they went inside.

Walking in, they headed in the direction of the dining room. There was a doorway leading directly to the kitchen, from which they heard a familiar voice.

"Now, it's equal parts sugar and water, then flavour to discretion, and I do mean discretion. You don't want the flavour of the syrup to overpower the cake. Once the syrup is soaking in, there's no getting it back out again. Unless you can extricate the syrup with magic, somehow. I need to get my hands on a cooking magic skill book."

Farrah snickered at the exasperation suddenly on Rufus' face.

"Jason?" Rufus called out.

"Rufus! Excuse me for a moment, ladies."

Jason wandered out of the kitchen wearing an apron marked with flour.

"G'day," he greeted them. "Nice little place you've found. A bit exxy, but I picked up a decent bit of coin during our misadventures at the Vane Estate. Fighting cannibals is lucrative. I forgot to loot that woman, Cressida, though. Probably missed out on a good bit of coin, there."

"I still have your share from looting the manor," Farrah said. "They filched all the really good stuff before running off, but they left enough behind to be worth splitting up."

"Oh, nice," Jason said.

"What took you so long?" Rufus asked.

"I took the scenic route through the delta," Jason said. "I had a good time."

"There was some talk about someone roaming around healing people," Farrah said.

"Did you hear about that?"

"How did you hear about it?" Jason asked.

"What we heard was that he was doing it for free," Farrah said. "The church of the healer wasn't happy. Did you see the guy?"

Jason looked about shiftily.

"Um... yep."

"Seriously?" Rufus asked. "It was you?"

"I have that cleansing power," Jason said.

"What happened to splitting up to prevent drawing attention?" Rufus asked.

"What did you want me to say? 'Sorry, Miss, but while it may seem that healing your father's horrifying illness would cost me nothing, someone might notice.'"

"Surely there's a middle ground between doing nothing and walking the earth, healing the sick and lame," Rufus said.

"And where do I draw the line?" Jason asked. "Should it be where people aren't sick enough, or where they aren't impoverished enough?"

"He does have a point," Farrah said. "Who looks at the poor and sick and tells them they aren't poor and sick enough?"

"The church of the healer, from what I've heard," Jason said darkly.

"I've seen this kind of thing before," Farrah said. "The Healer likes to give his worshippers the freedom to make the right choices on their own. The church of the healer is really important in isolated areas like this, though, and more than one church leader has been known to go a bit power mad."

"The god's real, right?" Jason asked. "Doesn't he step in?"

"I've heard they do, if they take it too far," Rufus said. "You always hear stories about churches who lose their way. I've never seen it reach the stage where their god intervenes."

"I have," Farrah said. "Rufus is a big city boy, but it normally happens places like this, where there's less to keep them in check."

"Did you at least go to the Adventure Society before getting to the kitchen?" Rufus asked Jason.

"Yeah, I did the paperwork," Jason said. "I have some kind of assessment tomorrow."

"That's just to clear you of things like restricted essences," Farrah said.

“Once that’s done you’ll need to go through a field assessment,” Rufus said, “Which they do at the start of each month. The next one is in nine days, but you can take yours the following month.”

“What’s wrong with this month?” Jason asked.

“You won’t be ready this month,” Rufus said. “Training you up to an acceptable standard by the end of next month will be rushed enough. Nine days from now, you wouldn’t come close to passing.”

“You don’t know for sure,” Jason said.

“I’m administering that field assessment myself,” Rufus said. “So I can speak with an amount of confidence.”

“You’re doing it?” Jason said. “Fair enough, then. Having you assess me wouldn’t exactly be ethical. Conflict of interest and all that. Well, I’ll see you at dinner; I have to get back to my cake.”

Rufus and Farrah watched Jason retreat into the kitchen.

“He thinks he’d fail because of ethics?” Farrah asked.

“He’ll figure it out once the training starts,” Rufus said.

The guild district was different from the north marina district in which Jason had first arrived on the island. Rather than the large private residences, it was occupied by various organisations, with smaller permanent residences serving the people that worked for them. Other than that, there was a large number of storefronts that seemed to be extensions of the various societies and associations headquartered around them.

Two sprawling campuses dominated the guild district. One was the Adventure Society, and the other was an organisation called the Magic Society. Jason knew Farrah was a member, but only had a vague idea of what they did. From what he could gather, they were something between a magic university and a magic utility company.

By size and centrality, the Forge Society and the Alchemist Association were clearly second to the Adventure and Magic Societies, but still occupied impressive chunks of real estate. Other organisations in the district ranged from occupying large buildings to being clustered into one space with other groups. Some were trade organisations, while others were adventuring guilds; private organisations of adventurers banded together for varying purposes.

Rufus had warned Jason against joining any of the local adventuring guilds. According to Rufus, they were all small-time affairs that took more from their members

than they offered, although Jason wasn't entirely convinced. He'd learned enough about Rufus' background to realise Rufus looked down from a very great height.

Arriving at the Adventure Society's administration building, Jason was shown through to a waiting room. There was one other occupant, a young man Jason estimated to be in his mid-to-late teens. He had the usual olive skin and dark hair of the local population, at least the human part of it. The young man was handsome, tall and broad-shouldered. If that wasn't bad enough, there was a puppy in his lap receiving a scratch on the tummy.

"G'day, mate," Jason said, sitting down next to him. "I like your dog."

"His name is Stash," the young man said. "Mine is Humphrey, Humphrey Geller."

"Jason Asano," Jason said, shaking Humphrey's offered hand. "Nice to meet you, Humphrey. Stash is an unusual name."

"It's short for Velitraxistaasch," Humphrey said. "He likes 'Stash,' though."

"Velitraxistaasch?" Jason said. "What is he, a shape-changed dragon or something?" Humphrey's eyes went wide.

"How did you...?"

"Wait, he actually is?"

Jason burst out laughing, then reached over to scratch the puppy's tummy.

"Who's a good little dragon? You are, yes you are. Good boy."

The puppy transformed into a canary, flying out of Humphrey's lap to settle on his head, where it twittered away merrily.

"That's impressive," Jason said. "I take it he's still a baby dragon."

"Yes," Humphrey said. "Our mothers arranged him becoming my familiar. Or me becoming his person, depending on how you look at it."

"Your mum knows dragons," Jason said. "I guess mine does too, although it's more of a metaphor. Great Aunt Margaret doesn't literally breathe fire."

Humphrey laughed.

"You're here to be assessed for the Adventure Society, I take it?" he asked.

"Yeah, I did all the paperwork yesterday," Jason said. "Any idea of what to expect?"

"They'll just check to make sure you don't have any restricted abilities. There'll be an official from the Adventure Society, of course, but they're only there to oversee things. The actual checking will be done by a priest from the church of knowledge. Don't try to slip anything past them, because there isn't any point."

"Because a god's involved?"

"Exactly. Then there'll be someone from the Magic Society to record your essences. They'll imply you have to let them record all your individual abilities, but you actually don't.

I'm told that the trick is to let them know that you know you don't have to and then do it anyway. Getting on the good side of the Magic Society is always a good idea."

"Thanks for the advice."

"If you've awakened any of your racial gifts, though, keep those to yourself," Humphrey advised. "They're very big on those at the Magic Society and you can trade the details in exchange for favours down the line."

Jason recalled Farrah telling him that humans all had dormant racial gifts that awakened unique powers based on their essences. He assumed the same advice would hold true for his outworlder abilities. More so, if anything.

"Good to know," Jason said. "Much appreciated, mate."

"I hope you don't mind me saying," Humphrey said, "but your manner of speech is a little unusual. Are you using a translation power?"

"I am," Jason said. "I'm not local; I just arrived in town yesterday."

"Where do you hail from, originally?" Humphrey asked.

"Australia."

"Never heard of it," Humphrey said. "Best not tell Mother or she'll harangue my geography tutor. Does everyone there shave their eyebrows?"

"I didn't shave them," Jason said. "I lost them."

"How do you lose your eyebrows?" Humphrey asked.

"It's been an odd couple of weeks.," Jason said.

A door opened and the canary on Humphrey's head morphed back into a puppy, its front paws dangling over his forehead. Humphrey lifted it down as a man entered the room. He was wearing what Jason had come to recognise as local business attire, quite different from the equivalent in his own world. The local fashions all went for loose, hanging designs that were more practical for the hot climate.

"Young master Geller," the man said to Humphrey, not so much as glancing at Jason. "This is, of course, a formality for you, but the formalities must be observed."

"I'm just another adventurer," Humphrey said, getting to his feet. "I only expect the same treatment you would give anyone."

"Of course," the man lied transparently. "This way, please."

Left alone in the waiting room, Jason absently tapped his feet.

"I need to do some clothes shopping," he said to himself. All his current outfits had been looted, and most of them hadn't travelled well.

"Rufus dresses nicely," he mused. "Maybe he knows a place."

Humphrey wasn't gone long before coming back with Stash, still a puppy, tucked under one arm. Humphrey looked rather disconcerted and was a full shade redder than when he left.

"You alright?" Jason asked.

"The priest," Humphrey said breathlessly. "She was a priestess."

"Pretty?" Jason guessed.

"Oh, gods, yes," Humphrey said. "I'm sure I made an idiot of myself."

"You don't have to worry," Jason said, scratching Stash behind the ear. "You've got this little guy."

"She did seem to like him."

"Of course she did."

"I didn't know what to say."

"I'm sure it was fine."

"I didn't even get her name."

"No worries," Jason said, slapping Humphrey on the shoulder. "I'll get her name; you hang about in the lobby for a few minutes and we'll grab an early lunch. Sound good?"

"You'd do that for me?"

"Mate, I'm going in there anyway. It's not exactly out of my way."

Jason sent the still-flustered Humphrey back in the direction of the main lobby.

Shortly after, the man who had come for Humphrey then came out to get Jason.

"Mr Asano?" he asked, all smiles.

"That's right."

"Do you know Young master Geller well?"

"We just met here."

Friendliness sank from the man's face like a torpedo had struck it.

"Oh," the man said flatly. "Well, come on, then. We haven't got all day."

The man marched off, not bothering to look if Jason was following.

"Wow."

Jason trailed the man through a small antechamber, then into another room where two people were waiting. The woman was wearing flowing robes of blue and white, with a sigil of a book sewn prominently into them.

He saw what had gotten Humphrey so bothered as she was quite pretty, although still with the rounded edges of youth. She was around Humphrey's age, maybe sixteen or seventeen, and Jason guessed Humphrey would have to move quick or in a couple of years, he'd have a small army of rivals.

Jason hadn't seen any evidence of cosmetics in this world, but he was beginning to suspect essences were taking up the slack. Except for himself and the blood priest, Darryl, every essence user he'd seen ranged from moderately good-looking to stupidly attractive.

The man next to the priestess was in his mid-thirties, also in a robe. Where the priestess' garment draped down her body with grace and elegance, his looked like a sack held in place with a rope belt. He had stubble, not the sexy kind, and his hair was an unruly mess. Even then, Jason recognised the handsome bone structure underneath. He looked like the hapless man who gets a make-over from the love interest in act two.

The third person was the man who led Jason in. He looked to be around thirty, with the generic handsomeness of a guy who had a supporting role on a teen drama a few years ago, but didn't break out and is really bitter about going back to his catering job.

"So you'll be the Adventure Society guy," Jason said to him. He had the aura of a bronze ranker, although not as strong as Rufus, Gary and Farrah. They were all near the top end of bronze, where he felt more like Anisa, who had only recently moved past iron rank.

"And you must be the priestess," he greeted the young woman. "Jason Asano, lovely to meet you. May I have your name, or do I just call you 'your worship,' or something. The last priestess I met was bit of a stickler. She did like to keep things formal, but mostly she just didn't like me."

She shook Jason's hand with a laugh. Jason mused over a handshake being common across worlds when it wasn't even universal to his own.

"My Name is Gabrielle Pellin," she introduced herself, "and I'm just an acolyte, not a full priestess. You can call me Gabrielle."

"Is it alright just to have an acolyte?" Jason asked. "What if I'm really good at hiding how evil I am?"

"It is unusual," Gabrielle said, "but my Lady directed me specifically to be here today."

"Your Lady?"

"The goddess, Knowledge."

"Is that her actual name? Knowledge? I suppose it would be weird if she was called Beryl or something. Especially if your name was Beryl. It'd make church service confusing, although, I imagine quite flattering, as well."

He turned to the last person as the other three looked at him strangely.

"You must be from the Magic Society," Jason said. "Not sure what they do, yet, but they seem very important, so well done, there. Jason Asano; nice to meet you, mate."

“Er, I’m Russell,” the man said, warily shaking Jason’s hand. “You don’t know what the Magic Society does?”

“I’m not local,” Jason said.

He noted that the priestess, Gabrielle, was holding what looked like a crystal ball, while Russell had a clipboard.

“So how do we do this, then?” Jason asked. “She waves the thing at me and you write down what she sees?”

“That’s more-or-less the process,” Russell said.

“Great,” Jason said. “Fair warning, my essences might come across as a bit sinister, but they weren’t on the restricted list. Not when I checked, anyway.”

“You don’t know what the Magic Society does,” Russell said, “but you know enough to check the restricted list?”

“It’s been an odd couple of weeks,” Jason said. “I’m picking things up as I go.”

“Can we please get started?” the man from the Adventure Society asked, impatiently.

“Yes, sorry,” Gabrielle said. She held up the crystal orb in front of Jason. She frowned at it, giving it a small shake.

“Miss Pellin?” Russell prompted.

“It seems Mr Asano is impervious to the aura reader,” Gabrielle said.

“Just call me Jason. Don’t worry, I’m not evil. I’ll cop to naughty, but that’s as far as it goes. Of course, that’s what an evil guy would say, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure that’s what anyone would say,” Gabrielle told him. “I think you might be a rather unusual man.”

“No,” Jason said. “Common as muck, me.”

“That I believe,” the Adventure Society official said.

Gabrielle tilted her head as if distractedly listen to something.

“After we’re done here,” Russell said to Jason, “could I convince you to discuss the power that shields you from the aura reader?”

“Got lunch plans, sorry.”

“Sorry,” Gabrielle said, refocusing on the group. “The essences were dark, blood, sin and doom.”

The other two turned to look at Jason.

“What?” he asked. “I said I’m not evil, although that could be part of my cunning ruse. Still, not on the restricted list, yeah? It’s not like I can make zombies or something. Kind of played out, where I come from, zombies. Same with vampires. Not as many werewolves, but they haven’t been done well in a while. Probably need the moon essence if I was going

to make werewolves, though. My friend Rufus has the moon essence, but he's more of the swordsman type."

"Would you please stop talking for five seconds," the Adventure Society official said.

"Sorry about that... whatever your name is, I didn't catch it. Is this your only job, or do you do catering on the side?"

"What? Shut up. Russell, record this idiot's essences so we can get him out of here."

"Just a moment," Russell said. He was looking over a blue and white marble tablet of a kind Jason had seen before. Farrah had checked an identical one when they were looking up Jason's essences.

"Here we are," Russell said. "Dark, blood, sin and doom. Affliction specialist, no restriction. You're all good to go, Mr Asano."

"Thanks, mate."

"Very well," the official said, writing on his own clipboard. "You're cleared for field testing. Should you successfully complete field testing, you will be allowed to take up membership with the Adventure Society, with all privileges and responsibilities that entails. Field testing takes place at the start of every month and you can sign up at the administration desk."

"There is the matter of registering your individual essence abilities," Russell said.

"I'm going to give that one a miss, sorry mate," Jason said. "I would, but I have a friend waiting outside. Lovely to meet you Russell, Gabrielle..."

He turned to the official.

"...guy."

"How did you know my name was Guy?" the official asked.

"Seriously? I'm on a roll, today. Bye, all."

Jason sauntered out of the room.

"What an unusual man," Russell said.

"I thought he was fun," Gabrielle said.

"I thought he was on drugs," Guy said. The other two looked at him, then nodded.

"That would make sense," Russell said.

"Will that be a problem for his membership?" Gabrielle asked.

"No," Guy said. "If we banned that kind of thing, we'd have to kick out half the alchemists."

Chapter 39: Training

“As you hopefully recall,” Rufus said, “there are three elements to improving your abilities.”

“I’m pretty sure the middle step was to eat a delicious sandwich,” Jason said.

“Could you take this at least a little seriously?” Rufus asked.

“I’m about to learn magic kung fu, so... probably not.”

Jason had rented a suite room on the same floor as the others, right across the hall. It was smaller, or more accurately, less large. Being on the other side of the building, it didn't have the same ocean view, and he spent much of his time in their suite. They were having iced tea out on the balcony, overlooking the ocean.

“There’s nothing wrong with having some fun along the way,” Gary said. “As long as the work gets done, why be so serious about everything?”

“He says that sipping ice tea on a balcony,” Farrah said. “He turns into a slave driver once the training starts.”

“Even I think it’s a bit much,” Rufus said.

“No you don’t,” Gary said.

“No,” Rufus said with a malicious grin. “I don’t.”

“What’s kung fu?” Farrah asked. “I don’t think your ability translated it.”

“It means a skill developed through discipline and hard work,” Jason said. “Anything can be kung fu if you're diligent about it.”

“Actually,” Rufus said, “that’s a good attitude.”

“See?” Gary said. “You’re not at Very Serious Academy now, Rufus. Hard work is easier to get through if you find a way to enjoy it.”

“Gary may have fun,” Farrah said, “but you probably won’t. Don’t get carried away, Gary.”

“When do I ever get carried away?” Gary asked.

“Remember Angelina?” Rufus asked.

“Are you ever going to let that go?” Gary said. “How was I meant to know she was evil?”

“The first time we met her she tried to sell us poison,” Farrah said. “We were in a church. And not one of the bad ones.”

“I think we should keep our attention on the task at hand,” Rufus said. “Tomorrow we'll do everything together, just for the first day. After that. we'll split up. You won't be able

to keep up with us when we're pushing ourselves. Gary will be in charge of your basic physical training, I'll be working on your combat skills, and Farrah will help you with mental training and meditation."

"We had to go out so you could get more clothes today," Gary said, "but normally we'll begin bright and early. For the first week, I'm just going to run you until you can't run anymore."

"I figured it would be something like that," Jason said. "I was thinking we could run over the bridge and into the Old City."

Gary looked over at Rufus, who shrugged.

"Works for me," Gary said. "Doesn't really matter where you run to, as long as you run."

All four of them ran from their lodgings to the bridge in the early light. They weren't the only ones out, with others also running on the Island's wide, well-paved streets.

"Adventurers?" Jason asked.

"Those are the good ones," Rufus said. "As with most things, the best results come through diligent effort."

"On the other hand," Farrah said, "If you use magic cores to advance, you get to sleep in."

"Don't tempt him into bad habits," Rufus scolded.

There was very little early-hours traffic on the Island, although some tradesfolk were making their way with carts and wagons. These, like expensive carriages Jason had seen, were propelled by magic rather than pulled by animals.

"Not allowed to have drawn vehicles on the island," Rufus explained. "Makes it more expensive for working people, but they make up for it in prices. On the Island you'll pay twice, maybe three times the price you would for the same thing in Old City."

At the bridge, they had to show their access permits. Jason had taken lodging at the same inn as the other three, which earned him a temporary residence permit for the Island. The guard checking their permits turned out to be a familiar face.

"Bertram, right?" Jason said.

"You can call me Bert," Bertram said. "You meet my brother at the Adventure Society?"

"He helped me with my adventurer registration."

Crossing the bridge, the streets of Old City were considerably busier. The four stood out, weaving through teamsters and merchants as they maintained a running pace.

By the time they reached their destination, Jason was exhausted. He leaned against a wall, dragging in heaving breaths. The others looked up at the sign over the door.

“Broadstreet Clinic,” Rufus read out loud. “Shouldn’t Broad Street be two words?”

“One word,” Jason said. “It’s the actual name of the street.”

“It’s called Broadstreet Street?” Gary asked.

“Broadstreet Esplanade,” Jason said. “How am I telling you this? You’ve all spent much more time in this city than me.”

“We don’t spend a lot of time in Old City,” Farrah said. “The Island is just nicer.”

“You know someone here?” Rufus asked, nodding at the clinic doors.

“Met him on my way into the city,” Jason said. Having recovered his breath a little, he stumbled in through the doors, the others following after. Inside was a waiting room crowded with people and a reception desk with a young woman sitting behind it. Jason leaned onto the desk, using it to keep himself upright.

“Sir, if you require emergency treatment...”

“I’m Jason Asano,” Jason panted out.

“Ah, right,” the woman said. “Are you alright?”

“I will be.”

The alchemist Jason had entered the city with, Jory, emerged from the back room. He was leading an elderly lady who was carrying a small bag.

“Now, only take the medicine right before bed,” Jory said.

“So I should take it with dinner?” the lady asked.

“No, you’ll pass out at the table. Right before bed. Seriously, right before you climb into bed.”

“So, when I sit down for my evening wine...”

“No, right before bed.”

“Would it be easier if I took it during the day?” she asked.

“I’m just going to take that, for a moment,” Jory said, retrieving the small bag from the lady.

Jory spotted the bedraggled Jason, giving him an odd look as he passed, leading the woman to a middle-aged man quietly waiting in one of the seats. Jason couldn’t hear them talk, although he did hear the man say something about dinner as Jory’s arm, held rigidly at his side, clenched into a fist. Soon after, the pair were on their way and Jory came over to Jason.

“You showed up, then,” Jory said.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “These are my friends, by the way. Gary, Farrah, Rufus. Meet Jory.”

“This is a medical clinic?” Gary asked. “Just alchemy?”

“So far,” Jory said. “I met Jason the other day and he offered to help out.”

Jory led Jason into a back room, then started bringing patients in, one after the other. For each one, Jason chanted out his spell.

“Feed me your sins.”

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.
- Current rank: Iron 1 (19%)

- Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons, holy afflictions and unholy afflictions from a single ally or enemy. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability circumvents any resistance or immunity to cleanse effects. This ability cannot be used on self.

Jason used his feast of absolution power to remove their diseases, along with a few other toxins like alcohol, which registered to his ability as a poison.

“That’s a good cleansing ability,” Gary observed between patients. “Good way to practice it, too. It really gives you stamina back?”

“Mana too,” Jason said. “Can’t use it on myself, though.”

“I knew there had to be a pretty rough restriction, with a power that good,” Gary said.

“I’m surprised people aren’t a bit more wary, with an incantation like that,” Rufus said.

“These people don’t care what you chant,” Jory said. “If there’s free healing going, they’ll cheer you on as you praise the god of woe.”

With each patient, Jason’s mana and stamina were replenished, until he was back at full strength.

“You alright?” Gary asked. “You look a lot better, but a bit down.”

“It’s just...”

Jason sighed.

“My world doesn’t have magic. We don’t have a way to get rid of some of the diseases I’ve just casually taken away from people today. I cured a dozen people of cancer. Do you know what cancer does to a person?”

“Er, no,” Gary said.

“Exactly. I think about what I could do if I took this power home with me.”

“You’ll get there,” Gary said. “Maybe it’ll take a while, but you’ll get there.”

“You think?” Jason asked.

“When you have some time, go over to the temple district,” Gary said. “Maybe the goddess Knowledge will help you. She probably won’t straight-up tell you how to get home, but she might put you on the right path.”

“You think?”

“Probably,” Gary said. “She makes you work for it, but guiding people to knowledge is kind of her whole purpose for being.”

“Not today, though,” Rufus said. “Today is for training. You’re ready to get back to running, right?”

“If we’re done here,” Jason said.

“You are,” Jory said. “We’ve run out of sick people. There’ll be more tomorrow, once word starts getting around you’re doing this for free.”

“Not a problem,” Gary said. “I’ll be dragging him along every morning.”

Rufus and an exhausted Jason were standing on a training field on the Adventure Society campus. At least Rufus was standing, with Jason sprawled out on the grass. Farrah was nearby, leaning against a tree as she read a book. There were other people around, sparring or practising martial arts forms. Gary had wandered off and was sparring against a pair of locals.

“I don’t suppose there’s a bunch of sick people around?” Jason asked, too weary to stand.

“Afraid not,” Rufus said.

“Should I eat a spirit coin?” Jason asked.

“No,” Rufus said, “Replenishing yourself is good when you need to keep pushing, but you also need to let your body restore itself naturally. Your recovery attribute needs training, just as much as your speed, power and spirit.”

“I don’t feel like I’m ready to learn martial arts right now,” Jason said.

“You’re not,” Rufus said. “Actual technique you can pick up from a skill book.”

“I can?” Jason asked, raising his head. “Great. Let’s do that.”

“Not yet. At my family’s academy...”

“Drink,” Jason said.

“What?”

“I’ve come up with a drinking game,” Jason said. “Every time you say ‘my family’s academy,’ everyone has to take a drink.”

Farrah burst out laughing.

“Is this the ‘fun’ you were talking about?” Rufus asked, disapproval wrinkling his brow.

“Sorry,” Jason said as he got to his feet. He dropped to a half-crouch, hands on his knees. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Good,” Rufus said. “It means you’ve been pushing yourself hard enough. At my family’s academy...”

Rufus glared at Farrah, who was looking innocently off into the distance.

“...we have been refining methods of combat training for centuries, including training with skill books.”

“Isn’t the whole point of skill books to just use them and you’re good?” Jason asked.

“It isn’t that simple,” Rufus said. “For a practice that is knowledge-based, that is more-or-less true.”

“No, it isn’t,” Farrah chimed in. “Knowing isn’t the same as understanding. You’ve used a ritual magic skill book, but knowing practical applications isn’t the same as grasping the theory.”

“There’s a similar issue with physical skills,” Rufus said, “but even more exaggerated. The mind might know what to do, but the body still has to learn. First, I will teach you to be receptive to the skills you will learn. How to stand, how to move.”

“A solid house needs a solid foundation,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Rufus said happily. “I’m glad you understand. Learning to fight through skill books is ultimately faster than training from nothing because you save yourself years of repetition to ingrain the skills. There is a danger, however, of not fully comprehending the techniques. By preparing well before using a skill book, then consolidating well after, you avoid developing flaws in your skillset.”

“Plus, I imagine there’s quite a gap between learning technique and learning to fight,” Jason said.

“It’s good you realise that,” Rufus said. “It’s the first thing we have to beat out of skill book users at my family’s academy.”

Rufus pressed his lips thinly together as he heard a snort of choked off laughter. Flashing a glare at Farrah, he let out a weary sigh.

“Stand up straight,” he said to Jason. “We begin with footwork.”

Jason had joined Farrah in reclining against a tree. Gary was still sparring against all comers, currently going one against three. Rufus had sat down to meditate.

"You did well with Rufus' training," Farrah told Jason. "I was amazed you didn't complain when he just had you taking funny steps the whole time."

"I'm not sure how my translation ability will handle the term 'kung-fu movies,' but we have these stories in my world. About learning to fight. You always start with what seems weird and pointless, but ends up being the most important of fundamentals. There's usually a life lesson in there somewhere, as well."

"Rufus is going to hate teaching you. You are nothing like the students at his academy."

"Is his school actually that big deal?" Jason asked.

"It really is," Farrah said. "Kings and Queens have studied there. Some of the best adventurers in the world, too."

"Did you and Gary train there?"

Farrah laughed.

"Definitely not. Our origins are a bit too humble for that. We all met on the job."

"Right," Jason said. "the zombies."

"We worked together well, and I think Rufus' grandfather quietly pushed things along. Rufus puts more pressure on himself than anyone else does, and I think his grandfather was hoping we would lighten him up."

"How's that going?" Jason asked.

"You should have seen Rufus when we first met," she said. "He was like a string, constantly pulled taut. It was only so long until he was going to snap."

She looked around, with a smile.

"Coming out here has been good for him," she said. "Getting away from everything."

"He blames himself for you getting captured, though," Jason said.

"Mistakes are inevitable," Farrah said, "but it was good they happened so far from home. He doesn't have to feel like people are looking over his shoulder as he makes them."

Farrah was wearing the loose, draped clothes in the local style, including a long, coat-robe that made her look a bit like a Jedi. She reached into it and pulled out an awakening stone that she tossed casually to Jason. It was like dark glass, shining with a faint radiance of moonlight. It was cool in his hand.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Omens] (unranked, epic)

- *An awakening stone containing the power of destiny.* (consumable, awakening stone).
- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.

- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
 - You have 9 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Omens]. Absorb Y/N?
-

“What’s this for?” Jason asked.

“We haven’t forgotten that you saved us back in that ritual chamber,” Farrah said.

“We’ve each gotten you a gift, something to help you start your adventuring life.”

“You saved me too. Even if I’d gotten away, I probably would have died in that desert.”

“Maybe, but saving us took courage and heroics. Saving you took a basic sense of direction. Use the stone; it wasn’t easy to find.”

“High rarity stones tend to be more specialised, right?” Jason said.

“That’s right.”

“This one is epic. What are you expecting me to get?”

“With luck, an aura ability, although maybe not. That was the rarest stone I could get my hands on that is known for aura powers. Every good adventurer should have a perception power and an aura ability, and the perception power you already have. Once you have an aura ability you can learn to control your aura.”

“And that’s important?”

“Very. Anyone who hits bronze rank and can’t manage their aura is a second rate adventurer, and you can’t do that without an aura ability.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” Jason said. The stone sank into his hand.

- You have awakened the sin essence ability [Hegemony]. You have awakened 4 of 5 sin essence abilities.
-

Chapter 40: Eyebeams and the Ethics of Adventuring

After finding out Jory had an unused courtyard behind his clinic, Rufus moved the daily training there. It was really just a walled-in dirt yard, but was sufficient for their needs. The day would begin with Gary, who would run with Jason to Jory's clinic. After replenishing his stamina by draining the sickness from Jory's patients, Jason was ready for more physical training.

The approach to physical training was startling in its familiarity. Farrah had left a set of barbells from her magical chest in Jory's yard, covered with a tarp. Gary would alternate between strength training with weights and more agility-based training, leading Jason through all kinds of flexibility exercises.

While instructing Jason, the normally relaxed Gary became a harsh task-master, brooking not even the slightest amount of slack. As he watched Jason's form during push-ups, sit-ups or lunges, he would lecture on the importance of training.

"When your speed attribute reaches bronze," Gary said, "you will be faster than you ever were before. If you don't know how to use that speed, that agility, those reflexes, then you will die to someone that does."

Sometimes Gary would take Jason out of the clinic's yard and into streets and alleys of Old City. He taught what Jason was startled to recognise as parkour. Climbing, roof running, acrobatics; in spite of his huge body, Gary was astoundingly proficient.

Jason voiced concern, given the generally busy state of Old City and his own lack of expertise. Gary insisted on a learn-by-doing approach, telling Jason what he did wrong as he did it. Jason voiced them again after he fell from a rooftop and had to pay for the crushed contents of a fruit cart.

"Sorry about that Herbert," Jason said as he handed over the coins.

"I look at it this way," the balding, paunchy fruit seller said. "I just sold a full cartload of fruit and it's barely daylight. And please; call me Bert."

"I'm not sure this is working out," Jason told Gary.

"You don't just start off good at difficult things," Gary said. "You have to begin at bad and work your way up."

"That I get," Jason said. "I'm just not sure about the methodology. Maybe I should try somewhere less crowded until I'm better?"

"The ability to move with speed and confidence, always aware of your surroundings is essential to an adventurer," Gary said. "Sometimes you have to run, sometimes you

have to chase. You rarely get to choose when or where. You must always be ready always aware. Whatever you're doing, wherever you're doing it."

Once Gary was done with him, Jason would replenish himself again with clinic patients. On the first day, Jason noticed Jory giving him a wary look.

"What?" Jason asked.

"I know you're helping people and all," Jory said, "but you're literally feeding on the misery of others."

"You want me to stop coming in?" Jason asked.

"Gods, no," Jory said.

"Alright then," Jason said. "I don't suppose you want to help me stitch a body together from dismembered corpses and animate it with lightning?"

"That would be disturbing," Jory said, "if you didn't so obviously know nothing about actual necromancy."

Word of Jason's free healing started getting around, so there were always people waiting each time he arrived. By the time he cleared out the patients, Rufus would arrive for more training.

The training with Rufus was the most tedious part of Jason's day. Footwork and balance, footwork and balance. Sometimes it was moving around with a forced gait, feeling awkward and inefficient. Other times it was balancing in strange stances on pegs Jory let Rufus hammer into the dirt yard. Whenever Jason's form was wrong, Rufus would sweep his legs out from under him, or kick him from what he was balancing on.

"You're breaking your body line. Anyone with even rudimentary skills would put you on the ground in a moment."

"It feels awkward to move like that," Jason said.

"That is because you don't walk, run, stand, lean or sit properly. When it stops feeling awkward, you will be ready to use a skill book."

"So, I could just lie and we move onto the skill book?" Jason asked.

Rufus' leg swept Jason's out from under him with such force that Jason went horizontal in the air, followed by a savage downward chop smashing him into the ground. Rufus stood over him as Jason curled up in the dirt, choking and coughing.

"There will be a test," Rufus said.

In the afternoons, Farrah would take over. This was the part of his training regimen Jason enjoyed the most. Gary and Rufus' instruction was classic montage material, while Farrah's training was something altogether different.

The spirit attribute, Jason learned, governed not just magic strength, but also perception. Farrah subjected Jason to an array of unusual, but often interesting and fun exercises. They would play memory games with cards, or she would make him taste-test things while blindfolded.

“I have no idea what you just put in my mouth,” Jason said, “but you need to tell me what it was. I want to try baking it in a pie.”

Some perception exercises trained practical observation and memory skills. One of the most common was watching people go past Jory’s clinic, with Jason memorising everything he could as fast as he could. He would then close his eyes as Farrah tested him. Other times she would have him read from the Magic Society’s monster records, collected on a magical tablet. She gave him only a short time to read, testing his comprehension afterwards.

The second aspect of Farrah’s training was meditation. Jason and his siblings had been spoon-fed meditation techniques by their mother, and while Jason had long-ago rejected them, it at least gave him a grounding to work with. Those techniques were quite different to what Farrah taught him, but there was enough commonality to pick things up quickly. She soon stopped guiding him, leaving him to take it up in his own time.

The final part of Farrah’s training was aura manipulation. He had gotten lucky, the stone Farrah gifted him awakening an aura ability.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- **Aura (holy, unholy)**
- **Cost: None.**
- **Cooldown: None.**

- **Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)**

- **Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.**

Jason was happy with the aura effect, which would make his abilities more reliable while protecting his allies from someone like him. He was also fascinated by it being both a holy and unholy ability at the same time. Sadly, he couldn’t think of a good way to passive-aggressively let Anisa hear about it. He knew she was in the city somewhere, but it was probably for the best they hadn’t run into each other.

As Farrah instructed Jason on the basics of aura use, he discovered that for training purposes, the specifics of his aura didn't matter. The fundamental aspects of auras were all the same, which she introduced him to in the clinic yard as they sat on woven mats.

"By getting your hands on an aura power," Farrah told him, "you've gained the capacity to manipulate your aura. Like any other skill, it takes practice to do it right. Controlling your aura is important for many reasons, starting with the fact that as you get stronger, your aura will become increasingly energetic. Eventually, enough to be dangerous to the people around you. If you reach gold rank and can't control your aura properly, you can hurt normal people just by going near them."

"So, if you hit gold rank and can't control your aura," Jason asked, "do you have to hide so you don't hurt people just by walking down the street?"

"There are magic items you can use to suppress your aura," Farrah said. "People in that situation are required to use them."

"Do you get a lot of people who get to gold without any aura control?" Jason asked.

"No," Farrah said. "Usually your chances of getting to gold start with a good foundation, which means aura powers and aura training. It does happen, though. I once saw the aftermath of a gold ranker who forgot to put on an aura suppressor before going to a market. People were passed out, bleeding out their ears."

"That's not good," Jason said.

"No it isn't," Farrah said. "Which is why the training is important. There are other reasons, too. Anyone with a perception power will eventually be able to see auras clearly, so if yours isn't under control, they'll read you like you're holding up signs. Not just your location, either. If you can't restrain your aura, they'll read your emotions, know when you lie."

"Can you see my emotions right now?" Jason asked.

"No," Farrah said, "but my perception power doesn't improve my aura sense until silver rank. Neither does yours, by the way. I looked it up."

"So, what does your perception power do?" Jason asked.

"It looks good," Farrah said as her eyes turned into glowing embers. "It also lets me see through smoke and mist."

"Nice," Jason said. "Wait, what about my clothes-changing ability. That hides me in smoke. Can you see through that?"

"That's an interesting question," Farrah said, not answering it. "You know, if I ever get to diamond rank I can shoot fire out of my eyes."

"That doesn't answer my... wait, you're going to get eyebeams? That's awesome."

"I know, right?" Farrah said. "There aren't a lot of abilities where we know what happens at diamond rank. Rufus thinks that if I actually get there it will be overshadowed by what my other abilities can do."

"Then Rufus sucks," Jason said. "He thinks eyebeams won't be useful? The intimidation factor alone would be amazing. Who's going to meet your eyes when you can shoot heat-beams out of them?"

"That's what I said," Farrah agreed. "More or less. I didn't say heat-beams."

"Eyebeams are sweet," Jason said.

"I think we may be getting off-topic," Farrah said.

"Alright," Jason said. "So what do I do?"

"Broadly speaking, you can control your aura in three ways, and I'll teach you them in order."

"Sounds good," Jason said.

"The first two uses are the easiest," Farrah said. "They are, broadly speaking, projecting your aura and restraining it. Which is exactly what it sounds like. Projecting is pushing your aura out to affect people, and restraining it is used drawing it in, whether to hide it, or just not be rude."

"Or make people's ears bleed," Jason said.

"Exactly," Farrah said.

"What about the third one?" Jason asked.

"That's using your aura to suppress the auras of other people. It's harder than the others, and you should leave it alone until you reach a certain level of proficiency with aura manipulation."

"Fair enough," Jason said.

"We start with projecting, because you're doing it already."

"I am?"

"You are. Everyone is, until they learn not to. It's what makes people with no aura control easy to read. I'll also be teaching you how to hide your emotions even as you're projecting your aura to affect people."

"Can monsters manipulate their aura?" Jason asked.

"Higher-rank monsters can," Farrah said. "At your level, even mine, really, the most you'll find is a few stealthy monsters that restrain their auras to hide better."

"I think stealth is going to be my thing, too," Jason said. "I'd best learn to restrain my aura properly."

“You’re meant to be learning everything properly,” she said. “I’ll teach you all the fundamentals. Expanding your aura, narrowing it down onto some people and not others. Once I’ve taught you, though, it’s your responsibility to keep practising. Diligence makes the difference between crudely tossing around your aura and deft manipulation.”

“Then I won’t make my neighbours bleed out their eyeballs?”

“You’re a long way from needing to worry about that,” Farrah said. “A long way. But eventually, yes. More immediately, the skill with which we control our auras is how adventurers make their first impressions on one another. If you can’t do it properly, people won’t take you seriously. Excellent aura manipulation marks you as an adventurer of training and distinction.”

“So, you’re saying if I don’t control my aura properly, I won’t get invited to the nice parties,” Jason said.

“Something like that,” Farrah said. “When the rich and powerful bring contracts to the Adventure Society, they add bonus rewards to entice the best adventurers. At your rank, these contracts are usually first-come, first-serve. Once you go higher, clients start requesting specific adventurers. That’s when your reputation matters, and if your aura control is sloppy, you won’t get a second glance.”

“Good to know,” Jason said.

“You’re not expected to have the skills at iron rank, of course,” Farrah said. “That’s the time you’re meant to be mastering the basics, after all. But if you don’t have a handle on it by the time you reach bronze, you’ll find a lot of doors closing in your face.”

“Rufus told me that just being an adventurer opens every door.”

“Yes, well Rufus may not be the best authority on what life is like for the average adventurer.”

“The ones not born with talent, looks, wealth, privilege and influence?” Jason asked.

“Exactly. He grew up in one of the most prestigious adventure-preparatory schools in the world, with kings and the children of heroes as friends. He’s a great guy, but he’s oblivious to what the rest of us go through, sometimes.”

“So, to him, adventuring is just a parade of people telling you how great you are and handing you sacks of cash,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “I’m not saying the rest of us can’t get there, but Rufus never even saw the low rungs of the ladder. The things we’re teaching you now, he was learning from the womb.”

“Then if I’m going to catch up, we should probably get back to the lesson,” Jason said.

"I like the ambition," Farrah said. "First, let me take you through the process. As I said, we start with projection to learn the basics, then move on to restraining. Once you can do both of these to an acceptable level, we introduce more sophistication. Things like focusing on one person, or hiding aspects of your aura while projecting. That culminates in projecting and restraining at the same time."

"How does that work?"

"Well, for example, just say you've hidden yourself, but you want to use your aura. So you blanket the area with your aura ability, but hide your presence within it."

"Sounds like a good intimidation tactic," Jason said. "They know you're around, stalking them, but can't find you."

"Or you could just blow one of them up," Farrah said. "I find that intimidates the survivors just fine."

"You're a very aggressive person," Jason said.

"There's nothing wrong with enjoying your work," Farrah said.

"There is when your work is killing people."

"I was talking about monsters," Farrah said, her tone lowering with disapproval. "They're just globs of magic."

"But they can still feel fear and pain," Jason said. "They still suffer."

"So do the people they kill once they've been around too long and gone berserk," Farrah said. Her relaxed mediation pose was becoming rigid.

"You haven't seen a truly berserk monster," she said. "It's like they can feel their inevitable demise and want nothing more than to take as many living things with them as they can. Putting them down before they reach that state is a mercy."

"But mercy shouldn't be fun," Jason said.

Farrah normally kept her feeling hidden behind a veil of amusement, but Jason's attitude had stripped it away.

"It's easy to moralise when you aren't even an adventurer yet," Farrah told him, pointing her finger. "You don't understand the price of what we do. I want to see how you feel a year from now. How many monsters will you have killed with those powers of yours? How many people? Your abilities are all about slow, horrible death."

She got up, glaring at Jason as she brushed down her pants with her hand.

"That's enough training for today," she said. "Put away the mats."

She marched out of the yard through the gate in the wall, leaving Jason sitting alone.

"That turned heavy, fast," he told himself. "Good job, idiot."

Chapter 41: Vulnerable and Exposed

Jason apologised to Farrah the next day when she arrived at Jory's clinic for his training.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't realise until afterwards that I was accusing you of being callous. I can sometimes let my mouth run off on me without thinking it through, or considering the other person's perspective."

"That's very clear," Farrah said. "You weren't completely wrong, I guess. Mostly, but not completely. You do have to be a little callous, to do what we do."

"Maybe," Jason said, "but I shouldn't be judging you when I don't know what you've been through. The one thing I do know about this world is that I'm ignorant about all of it. It's just that... in my world, I'm not a person of consequence. Being one of the faceless masses isn't terrific, but there is one luxury the powerful don't enjoy."

"Oh?"

"When you're just a face in the crowd, then you can hold an ideal without being required to live up to it. But here, my decisions can be life and death. My principles are being put to the test, and I'm forced to confront what it means when they bend, or even break. Like anyone, I liked to think of myself as someone who would stand tall under the pressure. Now I'm really under it, standing up is harder than I thought. I have my own values, from my own world. They're the only thing I was able to bring with me. And sometimes, most times, it feels like this world wants to eradicate them. But if I let it, then what do I become?"

"I can't answer that for you," Farrah said. "Being good is easy when the choices are easy, but adventurers don't sign up for easy choices. Being a good person means being good when the choices are hard, and there's a price to that."

"Rufus told me something very similar."

"He might have his blind spots," Farrah said, "but his family have never been shirkers. When the time comes to stand, they stand at the front."

"Again, I'm really sorry," Jason said. "You were right that I don't know the things you've seen."

"I was, wasn't I?" Farrah said. "But I sometimes I forget how adrift you must feel, in a world you don't know."

"Adrift is about right," Jason said. "All I have to anchor myself is who I am. It feels like if I lose that, then I might never find a way home."

“You realise that doesn’t actually make sense, right?” Farrah asked.

“I’ve been in this world for three weeks,” Jason said. “I’ve been getting by on throwing myself into everything like a maniac, because if I stop moving I’m going to completely lose it. I’m one bad day from cracking like an egg.”

“So you cling to whatever you can,” Farrah said. “I can understand that. But the world isn’t going to stop and wait for you to get ready for it.”

“I know,” Jason said.

“For now, concentrate on the training,” Farrah said. “Perhaps some routine will help you keep it together.”

Even before Farrah’s prompting, Jason instinctively understood that staying busy would keep him from flying off in every direction. He threw himself into training, from early mornings with Gary to afternoons with Farrah.

Every afternoon, when his training with the others was done, he would make his way to the balcony of his personal suite. Every day he would practice the one essence ability that he was most excited to master, yet had yet to successfully use. Each power he awakened brought with it the instinctive knowledge of how to employ it, but something about this one ability was holding him back.

Ability: [Path of Shadows] (Dark)

- Special ability (teleport)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Teleport using shadows as a portal. You must be able to see the destination shadow.

The ability to teleport fired his imagination in ways his other abilities couldn’t match, yet it eluded him, day after day. Every afternoon he would sit under the awning on his balcony, trying to disappear into its shadow. His instincts screamed that it should be easy and natural, but there was something alien about that instinct. That feeling came from his essences, which were part of him now, but a new part. They didn’t entirely feel like a true part of him yet, and every day the sun would end on another failure.

His personal suite wasn’t on the ocean side of the building, so his balcony instead overlooked one of the guild district’s wide boulevards. Sitting cross-legged in the shadow of the awning, he would try and sink into it, for hours on end. As time went on, he became

more frustrated. He could feel success was tantalisingly close, as if it brushed against his fingers, only to slip away.

As days rolled on, it felt like was moving in the wrong direction, further from success than when he first started practicing. He pulled out his starlight cloak, letting it wrap itself around him for comfort. That ability had come so easily.

“Essence abilities should come naturally,” Rufus told him, when Jason asked for advice. “This kind of problem you’re having usually appears when people are getting in their own way. In your world, abilities like this aren’t possible, are they?”

“Definitely not.”

“It may be there’s a part of you still thinks it’s impossible,” Rufus said. “Your new instincts, conflicting with your old ones. A teleport power affects you more than your other powers; it consumes you, in a way. Perhaps you feel that and instinctively draw back, like flinching from a hot stove.”

“So, what do I do?” Jason asked.

“Instead of focusing on yourself,” Rufus said, “focus on your surroundings. Farrah has been teaching you to project outside of yourself with your aura. Use that. Probe the shadows. Instead of trying to use them, just try and understand them. What they are, what you can do with them. Right now, you have this idea of what shadows are in your head, but a power telling you something different. Until you resolve that conflict, using that power will remain out of reach.”

“You picked the basics of aura manipulation up quickly,” Farrah told Jason. “You’re slow and somewhat crude with it, but that’s to be expected. The only way to smooth the rough edges is with experience. There’s no substitute for practice.”

Jason nodded. They were Jory’s yard, sitting face-to-face on meditation mats.

“Now you have a grasp of the fundamentals,” Farrah said, “it’s time to show you the last aspect of aura manipulation.”

“I didn’t think it would be this quick,” Jason said.

“The basics of aura manipulation are exactly that,” Farrah said. “Like all essence abilities, there’s an instinctive understanding. The real difference between the capable and the incompetent is keeping up the practice. Practice is the only real secret to mastery.”

“No shortcuts,” Jason said.

“No shortcuts,” Farrah agreed. “Now we moving on to the third aspect of aura manipulation. You can perform projection and restraint to acceptable levels, so next comes suppression. Like the other aspects, the description is right there in the name; you use

your aura to suppress the auras of others. It really only works against people weaker than you, but it can be useful when you need to show dominance.”

“Alright,” Jason said.

“This is a little trickier to pick up,” Farrah explained, “because there isn’t anyone weaker than you to practise on. Even normal people won’t be far below your aura strength until your spirit attribute gets stronger. At this point I’m really just showing you, rather than teaching you. It’s something you need to know about, if only to be prepared when others use it on you.”

“So, you’re going to suppress my aura?” Jason asked. “Let me get a feel for it?”

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “I can be a disconcerting experience, so it’s best you learn what you’re in for.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Hit me.”

“Here I go,” Farrah warned. She expanded her aura, clamping onto Jason’s and suppressing it, pushing it forcefully into his body. She looked at Jason, watching for reactions. He pulled out a small paper bag, popping a few glazed nuts into his mouth.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“Um, yes,” she said. “You are feeling that, right?”

“Yep,” he said, holding out the bag. “Want some? I don’t know what they put on these nuts, but it’s really good.”

With a confused expression, Farrah reached out and took a couple of nuts from the bag.

“They are good,” she agreed. She looked at Jason, still under the effect of her aura suppression.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Feels normal,” Jason said.

“Most people find having their aura suppressed to be supremely unnerving,” Farrah said. “It leaves them feeling vulnerable and exposed.”

“Yeah, I noticed that,” Jason.

“I thought you said it feels normal?”

“That is normal,” Jason said. “I arrived in this world with no idea where I was, how I got there or why. I was literally trapped in a maze, naked, fighting monsters and dodging cannibals. Compared to how vulnerable and exposed that left me, you think giving me the evil eye will put me off my knitting?”

He let out a low chuckle.

“Ever since that day,” he said, “the more I learn, the more I realise that everything I knew or believed was either woefully incomplete or flat-out wrong. I’ve almost died several times, and there’s no telling when something will come along to finish the job. I’ve been dragged into circumstances before which I am both impotent and insignificant. I have precious-little understanding the world around me, and even less control. I’ve been living with that for every waking moment since I arrived here. So you making me feel vulnerable is like throwing sand on the beach. I only noticed the change because I watched you do it.”

One of luxuries of the suite Farrah shared with Rufus and Gary was the balcony terrace overlooking the ocean. There was enough outdoor furniture to serve as a private dining area, so Farrah carried a large tray of food from the dumbwaiter out to the table where Rufus and Gary were already seated.

“What about Jason?” Gary asked.

“Still trying to get his shadow teleport to work,” Farrah explained as she sat down.

“I’ve seen this kind of problem before,” Rufus said. “He’ll work past it, sooner or later.”

“I think it’s possible we may have overlooked some of what he’s going through,” Farrah said.

“Really?” Gary asked. “It seems like he’s doing fine.”

“He does throw himself into things like he’s looking for a distraction,” Rufus said. “You were going to suppress his aura today, right? Did he react badly?”

“He didn’t react at all,” Farrah said. “Working for the Magic Society, I’ve taught a lot of people to use their auras, but I’ve never seen that before.”

“You think there’s something behind it?” Rufus asked.

“He said it didn’t affect him because that’s how he feels all the time,” Farrah said. “He’s isolated and alone to a degree that I’m not sure I can get my head around.”

“He has us,” Gary said.

“But from his perspective,” Farrah said, “we’re another part of the strangeness. We can propel his boat, but we can’t be his anchor.”

“Have we been pushing him too hard?” Gary asked.

“No,” Rufus said. “If anything, I suspect the structure we’ve given him is what’s propped him up for this long.”

“Then what do we do?” Farrah asked.

“What we have been doing,” Rufus said. “The stronger he becomes, the more in control he will feel. You both know what I’m talking about; that feeling of power as your

abilities grow. Normally you have to stop people from running off like they're invincible, but hopefully it makes Jason feel more secure."

"Maybe we should start showing him around a bit," Gary suggested. "Let him see this world isn't all cultists and monsters. Remember the villages we passed through? He seemed a lot more relaxed around normal people, so maybe a little dose of ordinary is exactly what he needs."

"Are you saying we aren't normal?" Farrah asked.

"I'm normal," Gary said. "You two can be kind of intense."

"It's a good idea," Rufus said. "I'll be administering the field testing for next month's Adventure Society intake. I'll need to start preparing in a few days, and then I'll be gone for a week. Relax the training while I'm gone."

"Done," Gary said.

"Not too much," Rufus said, "but give him time to explore the city. This island is surprisingly impressive for a provincial city."

"If you have the money," Farrah said.

"Which he does," Rufus said.

"You did give him a cut from the blood cult job, right?" Gary asked. "If it weren't for him we would have failed and died."

"I did," Rufus said. "The church of purity made some noise about the completion bonus, after how things went with Anisa. The contract was through the Adventure Society, though, and the job did get done. They paid up."

"Wait," Gary said. "Did I get a cut? I don't remember getting the money for that."

"Because I gave it to Farrah," Rufus said. "You know; the person who stores all your money?"

"Oh, yeah."

Because they were on the balcony, they were able to hear a sudden commotion from outside the other side of the building. There was a yell of surprised panic, followed by a crashing sound and the shouts of several people.

Unable to see the source of the commotion, the three left their own suite and entered Jason's unlocked room across the hall. The balcony he should have been practicing on was empty. Going to the edge and looking down, they saw the outside dining area of the eatery across the street. The evening patrons had been disturbed by Jason landing heavily on a table in their midst, collapsing it to the ground. All the customers had stood up, while Jason still sprawled out in the remains of someone's supper.

He groaned, moving feebly to pluck a healing potion out of the air, tipping it into his mouth where he lay. Regaining strength as the potion took effect, he pushed himself off the table, staggering as he found his feet. He looked at the people standing around him.

“Sorry about your dinner,” he said, looking down at the food smeared on his clothes. “Smells good.”

“Jason?” Rufus called down.

Jason looked up at Rufus and gave a sore, but cheerful thumbs up.

“I got the ability to work!”

Moments earlier, sitting on the roof, Jason had been pushing his senses out and into the shadow of the awning. In defiance of what little he knew of physics, he had come to sense that shadows were more than just an absence, but something that existed in their own right. He could feel something there as he reached out with his aura. There was a depth to the shadow, an ephemeral, but very real substance. He could almost rub it between his fingers.

He felt a call from the shadow, to something that existed inside him. The power he had tried so hard to use, yet never could. He quieted his excited mind, resisting the urge to push. He relaxed, letting the substance of the shadow and the power inside him intermingle. Gently they connected, becoming one. It felt natural, and right. Then something changed.

As if dragged by a giant vacuum cleaner, Jason felt himself get sucked through shadow. As he did, he had the flashing realisation that in all the time he'd been working on the ability, he's never given much thought to a destination. He emerged from the shadow of the building across the street, reason giving way to panic as he started to fall.

Chapter 42: This is the Pits

As Farrah and Gary walked along, Jason would step into a shadow on one side of the street and reappear on the other.

“He seems to like that ability quite a lot,” Farrah said.

“I remember someone who was quite excitable when she got her fire jump power,” Gary said.

“Shut up.”

“He can use it in quick succession,” Gary observed. “Seems cheap on mana, too; he’s been at it for a while.”

“The benefit of being restricted to shadows,” Farrah said. “Regular teleport may use more mana and be available less often, but I still think I’d prefer it. If you get caught without any handy shadows, Jason’s ability is useless.”

“I don’t know,” Gary said. “Normal teleport you have to pick your moment so it isn’t wasted. This shadow-jumping business you could use enough to make it a centrepiece of your combat style.”

“Too reliant on the environment,” Farrah said. “How often do you get to pick your battles as you like?”

Jason emerged from a nearby shadow and joined them, wincing with a low-mana headache.

“It’s still taking me too long to activate the ability,” he said.

“Are you sure that’s not just how long it takes?” Gary asked.

“It should be almost instantaneous,” Jason. “I can feel it.”

“Keep practicing,” Farrah said. “You’ll get there.”

“How far can you go?” Gary asked.

“As far as I can see, I think,” Jason said. “As long as I can spot the shadow and it’s big enough, I can jump through it. I tried going through a small one, but it didn’t work.”

A wagon rumbled past, filled with manure. Farrah turned up her nose at the stench.

“Remind me why we aren’t shopping on the Island?” she asked. “I became an adventurer to get away from the smell of dung.”

“The markets on the Island are just trying to rip off rich people,” Jason said. “Besides, I promised Jory I would swing by the clinic.”

In the grimy heart of Old City's warehouse district was a huge stone building called the Fortress. Older even than the city walls, it had been built to last. In the earliest days of the city it had been where Greenstone's residents would take shelter during a monster surge, but those days were long past. Now it served as Greenstone's largest den of iniquity; its rooms and halls contained all manner of illicit behaviour, delights and horrors both.

The city authorities paid little attention to the goings on in Old City so long as the business interests of the city elite remained secure. That made Old City's three biggest crime lords its de facto rulers, who made sure that the Island elites had no reason to look any closer. So long as the money kept flowing, the Big Three were free to divide Old City between them.

The Fortress was neutral ground. It was the one place where the Big Three shared operation, dividing both responsibility and profit. It was also the best place in Old City to glimpse the Island elites. Whether to secure their interests or indulge their appetites, they would receive only the best of treatment in the Fortress.

Of the many itches one could have scratched in the Fortress, the fighting pits offered the greatest spectacle. Some were literal pits, others cages. At night, even adventurers could be found battling it out inside. Some sought challenge, others to pay off debts for their own costly indulgences. Some decided a life fighting monsters wasn't for them and sought to earn a spot working for the Big Three. The top enforcers of the crime lords were paid in not just coin, but also monster cores.

Among the seating arrangements at the fighting pits were a number of enclosed viewing rooms with glass fronts. These were more recent additions to the centuries-old building. Some were available to anyone with the coin, while four were permanently reserved. The Big Three each possessed one of the boxes, where they conducted much of their business. The fourth belonged to the Fortress' most frequent and prestigious patron.

Lucian Lamprey was an elf whose muscular frame was uncommon for his people. Expensive clothes aside, he would not look out of place in the fighting pits himself. He was not a member of the local elf families, instead having been banished to Greenstone for previous improprieties. He was director of Greenstone's branch of the Magic Society, a vaunted position within the city, but one for which Lucian held no respect. They could make him king of the isolated desert city and he would still yearn for what he viewed as true civilisation.

The Fortress was Lucian's consolation; a paradise to openly indulge the vices for which he was sent to Greenstone in the first place. His viewing box was more of an office

to him than the one at the Magic Society campus. He even managed to get work done, as the lower-card fights rarely drew his attention.

While the pits might operate all hours, only the essence users of the night fights got Lucian's blood boiling. Magic displayed any active fights on the giant window of his viewing box, but in the early afternoon he gave only them occasional glance. This time of day had single-essence fighters, only escalating to full-blown, iron-rank fights after sundown. Lucian would have preferred to see bronze-rankers as well, but they were too valuable to risk in the pits under any but the rarest of circumstances.

Only a precious few bronze-rankers lowered themselves to work for the Big Three, and were their most valuable assets. If they ever appeared in the pits, it was to settle grudges between the Big Three without spilling blood on the streets. Gang war meant drawing the attention of the Island authorities, which all of the Big Three knew to avoid.

Lucian's ability to use the Fortress as his office was largely due to his deputy director. Pochard Finn maintained things at the city campus while frequently travelling to the Fortress himself. He was also an elf, in his case, a local. Both elves enjoyed the relationship, as Lucian had his workload lightened, while Pochard was the de facto director of Greenstone's Magic Society. They had quickly moved from colleagues to friends as Pochard also came to enjoy the pleasures of the Fortress.

"Standish was looking for you," Pochard said, pouring himself a glass of wine. He gestured with the bottle invitingly, pouring a second glass at a nod from Lucian.

"Can't you deal with it?" Lucian asked. "He's always up in arms about something."

"He insisted on seeing you," Pochard said. "Something about spirit coins, I think."

"Tell him if he wants to see me, he can come here," Lucian said.

"I did," Pochard said, drawing a snort of laughter from Lucian.

"I would love to see that gangly moppet in the Fortress," Lucian said, then stared out the of the window-wall. "And now I have."

"You're kidding," Pochard said, following Lucian's gaze.

"He actually came," Lucian laughed. "Good for him."

Pochard groaned.

"I hope he doesn't make it a regular occurrence."

Lucian chuckled at Pochard's reaction as they watched the long-limbed Clive Standish navigate the fighting pit's viewing stands. It wasn't crowded in the early afternoon, yet the awkward man in the wildly out-of-place scholar's robe seemed to get in the way of every person he passed. Finally he reached the viewing room, opulent in its

wooden construction. Lucian and Pochard looked at each other as they heard a polite knock.

“Shove off!” Pochard yelled, prompting a belly-laugh from Lucian.

“Uh, sir?” a voice came through the door.

“Don’t just stand out there, Standish!” Lucian bellowed, and the door was pulled nervously open. Clive Standish was rather tall, but his narrow frame and hunched posture made him seem lanky and awkward. He wore voluminous scholarly robes, possibly to make him seem less narrow, but they dangling off him like they’d been hung out to dry. In the fighting pits of the Fortress, he looked as out of place as any man Lucian had seen. This was good for Clive, as it left Lucian in a better mood than Clive normally found him.

“Pochard tells me you have some kind of spirit coin problem,” Lucian said.

“Not exactly a problem, sir,” Clive said. “More like a curiosity that I believe warrants further inquiry.”

Clive rummaged through his robes to produce an iron-rank spirit coin.

“This coin, and several other like it have been found in circulation over the last couple of weeks. You’ll note the unusual embossing of a man holding up his thumb,” Clive said. Pochard leaned over to peer at the coin in Lucian’s hand.

“On the back,” Clive continued, “there is an inscription. Thus far, we have failed to identify the language.”

“Don’t you have a translation ability?” Pochard said.

“I do,” Clive said, “although that only tells us what it says, not the language in which it says it.”

“So?” Lucian asked, impatiently. “What does it say?”

“It reads, ‘product of Jason,’ and ‘good day, friend.’ The second part is contextualised as a greeting.”

“It’s certainly odd,” Lucian said. “It’s a real coin?”

“I’ve had every coin we’ve found tested, sir,” Clive said. “They’re all real.”

“You checked it against the registry?”

Clive nodded.

“It definitely didn’t come from a registered spirit coin farm,” Clive said.

“You think someone’s set up an unregistered farm?” Pochard asked.

“It’s possible,” Clive said. “Certainly worth looking into. But we haven’t seen a lot of these coins, and most shady coin farms try to imitate a registered imprint. Given the idiosyncratic nature of these coins, and the fact that we’ve only found a few, I think there is an alternative explanation.”

“Oh?” Lucian asked.

“You are, of course aware, that some essence users develop an ability to loot monsters without the use of the usual harvesting rituals,” Clive said. “Usually the prosperity essence is responsible, often in conjunction with a human awakening one of their racial gifts. Such abilities are known to produce spirit coins.”

“What’s the legality of that?” Pochard asked.

“If it’s an ability, then it’s perfectly legal,” Clive said. “Fascinating, but insignificant on an economic scale. That’s just conjecture, however. If it does turn out to be an unregistered spirit coin farm, then it obviously needs to be found and shut down.”

“Alright, Clive,” Lucian said. “You came all the way here, dressed like that, so I’ll go along with it.”

“This is how I always dress,” Clive said.

“Oh, I know,” Lucian said. “Pochard, put up a contract with the Adventure Society to look into an off-the-books farm. Try and get them to put it up as a three-star contract, so we get someone who’ll actually do the work. Adventurers get lazy with open-ended contracts.”

“If it involves the spirit coin farms, the Adventure Society will make it three-star,” Pochard said.

“Good. As for you, Clive, I’ll authorise you to use Magic Society resources to pursue your other idea. If these coins are just some guy with an ability, find him, so we can put the issue to bed.”

“Thank you, sir,” Clive said.

“You want some wine, Clive?” Lucian asked.

“Ah, no, sir. Thank you. I’d best get back.”

“You’d better shove off, then,” Lucian said. “Anyone staying here has to drink.”

Chapter 43: Nightingale

“This is nice,” Jason said.

“Certainly better than meditating in a dirty back-lot,” Farrah said.

The Island was divided in various districts, all connected by the subterranean, submarine transit line. The locals called it the loop line, or the loop, but Jason thought it deserved something more impressive. His thinking had gone as far as naming it the sub-sub way when he realised the loop wasn't so bad a moniker.

Farrah and Jason had taken the loop to the park district, which as the name suggested, was dominated by parkland. It was like someone had curated the delta, with paths and gardens winding around ponds and streams. Palm trees and vibrant tropical flowers punctuated open spaces of lush grass, while pathways vanished into shady areas of dense bushes.

Almost everywhere in the park district was open to anyone on the Island. The only private space was the walled-off residence of the city's ruler, the Duke of Greenstone. Jason and Farrah picked out a pleasant spot for their afternoon training. Farrah had suggested a more tranquil environment for meditation than Jory's back yard.

“I still need to go in to the clinic, though,” Jason said. “I promised I'd come in again this afternoon.”

“You realise that once you're an adventurer you won't have as much time for that,” Farrah said.

“I know,” Jason acknowledged, “but I'd like to make time, where I can. The idea is to help people, right? Killing some monster can do that, but so can turning a room full of sick people into a room full of healthy ones.”

“You know,” Farrah said, “Maybe there are some things worth holding onto in those values of yours.”

“Good to hear,” Jason said. “Does this mean you're going to stop trying to make me kill people?”

“We're not trying to make you kill people,” Farrah said. “We just want to prepare you for the inevitable. You make it sound like we're drugging random strangers, stashing them in a hidden location, handing you a large axe and locking you up with them, promising not to let you out until one of you is dead.”

“That was weirdly specific and detailed.”

“Shut up and meditate.”

Underneath the Old City fight pits in the ancient Fortress were a series of hallways and chambers. Fighters and other interested parties used them to prepare for upcoming fights. This included a large number of enforcers to make sure the enthusiasm of would-be participants didn't suddenly wane before their match.

One such chamber contained two women, one of whom was getting ready to fight. Instead of loose, cool clothes, she wore a form-fitting outfit that mixed protective treated leather with tough, but flexible fabric. She had one foot up on a stone bench as she wrapped a cloth around her knuckles.

Her skin was chocolate, her hair shining silver. Her sharp eyes reflected the colour of her hair exactly, the matching metallics a giveaway trait of the celestine race. Normally shoulder length, her shimmering hair was tied back in a simple and practical ponytail.

"Do you want me to knot it?" the other woman asked, glancing at the hair.

The fighter shook her head, saying nothing. Her gaze was locked on the wall in front of her as she put herself in the headspace to fight. Her companion looked on with disapproval. She was a human, with short, scraggly hair and cute features. Her mouth pouted as she glanced at the door.

"I can't believe she's making you do this," she said.

"Lindy," the fighter said, her voice firm. "We knew we wouldn't like it going in. But without her protection, we'd be in a worse situation than this."

"But putting you back in the pits?" Belinda complained. "Soph, you already earned your way out of this place."

"Under Silva's father," Sophie said. "Now that he's gone, the most important thing is staying out of Silva's hands. This is the price we pay for that."

"Except that you're doing all the paying," Belinda said.

"Ventress doesn't care about the fighting," Sophie said. "She just cares about provoking Silva by showing me off. Once that's done, she has no reason to keep us here."

"Will Silva even know?" Belinda asked. "You still only have the one essence. Does anyone pay attention to these low-card fights?"

"He'll know," Sophie said. "Sooner, rather than later."

The door to the chamber was pushed open by a huge leonid. Coming in behind him was a woman with dark, cascading hair and a walk so sultry she was almost swerving. Clarissa Ventress only looked a few years older than the two women she was walking in on, but command clung to her as tightly as her satin dress.

“Are we just about ready, ladies?” Ventress asked. Belinda opened her mouth to respond, but was silenced by a gesture from Sophie.

“Good,” Ventress said. “I’ve arranged a match up that Silva should hear all about. Put on a good show and we might only need the one.”

“What’s the match up?” Sophie asked.

Ventress had the smile of a snake who just found a nest full of eggs.

“Fire Fist,” she said.

“Are you kidding?” Belinda burst out.

“It’s fine,” Sophie said, voice flat and calm.

“Do you know what he does to people?” Belinda asked, wheeling on her friend.

“I know,” Sophie said.

“He does have a reputation,” Ventress said. “That works in our favour. And this is fun; it turns out he always wanted to fight you. You got out of the pits right when he was getting started, and apparently he views it as a missed opportunity. Seeing how enthusiastic he was, I just had to go and arrange a cage match.”

Sophie put a hand on Belinda’s shoulder to stop her from erupting again.

“You want a show?” Sophie asked. “You’ll get one.”

Ventress gave another serpentine smile.

“Precisely what I wanted to hear. Belinda, dear, why don’t you come and watch from my viewing box?”

“Go with her,” Sophie said. “I need to get my head in the right space.”

“Soph…”

“I’ll be fine,” Sophie said with grim determination. “You just watch.”

Lucian arrived at his viewing room with a contented sigh. Trailing behind him was Cassowary Finn, the son of Lucian’s deputy, Pochard. Cassowary spent much of his days working as a go-between for the two men, a key role in allowing Lucian to work out of the Fortress. Some tasks could only be done in person, however, which forced Lucian from his preferred habitat.

“I’m glad that’s over with,” Lucian said. “Maybe there’ll be a good fight on.”

“I did see them bringing out the cage,” Cassowary said. Always lurking near his father and Lucian, Cassowary was picking up on their taste for vicarious violence.

“Might be something interesting,” Lucian said. “Put it up on the window.”

Each private viewing room was fronted with a solid sheet of glass, enchanted to project images from the various fighting pits. It could show several at once, or focus on

one, all controlled by touching runes set into the wall. Cassowary did so, bringing up the image of Fortress personnel bolting together the walls of a large metal cage.

“Any idea what this is about?” Lucian asked. One of Cassowary’s tasks was to keep abreast of fights that might interest Lucian.

“If they’re bringing out the cage at this time of day,” Lucian said, “It’s probably the Fire Fist.”

“Fire Fist?”

Lucian rarely paid attention to the early fights, relying on Cassowary to dig out any worthwhile nuggets.

“I think you’ll like him,” Cassowary said. “He usually fights in escape the cage matches, which don’t end until one fighter leaves the cage. Fire Fist likes to toy with his opponents before he leaves.”

“Sounds fun,” Lucian said. “Why haven’t I heard of him before?”

“He doesn’t appear very often,” Cassowary said. “As you might imagine, they have trouble finding people willing to go up against him. They tried forcing people for a while, but that didn’t make for interesting fights.”

“So, this should be a good one,” Lucian said.

The fighting pits were, as the name suggested, a series of shallow pits in a wide area surrounded by tiered seating. Because the pits were shallow for people to see in, there would occasionally lead to casualties in the audience. It could be from an essence ability gone astray, or the crowd pleasing spectacle of a competitor trying to escape through the audience. The organisers had taken no steps to redress the issues in the many years the pits had been operating.

Lucian looked on as an announcer walked into view with a voice-projecting stone in hand. The viewing window picked up sound as well as vision, and those in the viewing rooms could hear the fights better than audience members at the edge of the pit.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer proclaimed. “Today we have a very special match. As you may have very well surmised from the cage behind me, we will have the pleasure of welcoming a favourite back to the arena. Please join me in welcoming the savage, all-consuming Fire Fist!”

There were stairwells leading down to the chambers below, placed to allow fighters to emerge and parade before the audience on the way to their chosen fighting stage. Fire Fist was tall and lithe, with red and yellow streaks of hair that was either dyed or the result of some essence power. He wore only a pair of red silk pants with a yellow flame motif, his

muscled chest bare. His hands, held leisurely at his side, were wreathed in flames that danced up his arms as he strutted through the open door of the cage.

“Fire Fist, ladies and gentlemen!”

Fire Fist held up an arm to acknowledge the crowd, which was large for the time of day. Word of the match-up had clearly gotten around. The announcer waited for the audience to quiet down before his next introduction.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer said. “For those true aficionados among you, there is a yet greater treat in store. Years ago, this arena was graced with the sweet flights of a beautiful bird. Sadly, she winged away from us, but today, ladies and gentlemen, she had returned. I give you the grace and beauty of... THE NIGHTINGALE!”

A dark beauty with silver hair marched up and out of the stairwell, without so much as a glance at the crowd. She stopped by the announcer, looking up and over the crowd to glare at one of the viewing rooms before heading into the cage.

In his own viewing room, Lucian stood up so fast he knocked over his chair. He walked around his desk and down to the window where he stroked his fingers over her face.

“Who is she?” he asked.

“I’m not sure, Mr. Lamprey. “I’ll find out.”

“See that you do.”

Chapter 44: Complimentary Ointment

"I always wanted to fight you," Fire Fist said to Sophie as they faced one another in the cage. "I was just starting out when you left. You were a legend."

Sophie knew what he was doing. The audience like some banter before a match. Not the crowds who couldn't really hear, but the big names in the viewing rooms would. They were the ones he wanted to impress.

"They don't schedule legends to fight just after lunch," she said. "You're overestimating our value to them."

"I'm going to earn more essences," Fire Fist said. "I'm not a debt-slave like you were."

"I'm no-one's slave," Sophie said.

"No?" Fire Fist asked. "Then why are you back here? Two years and no more essences than when you left."

"Because the guy looking to enslave me doesn't want me for fighting."

"I can understand that," Fire Fist, eyes roaming over Sophie's body. "We have some time together, once I put you on the ground. Until I leave the cage, we can have all the fun we want."

"I was just going to beat you," Sophie said. "For that, I'm going to hurt you."

"Think you have the skills, little girl?"

"I've seen you fight," Sophie said. "It won't take that much skill."

Fire Fist lunged forward, leading with the burnings fists from which he took his name. Sophie swayed around his straight punch and grabbed him by the wrist. The flames on his arm seared into her hand but she ignored the pain, yanking his arm and forcing his balance onto his forward leg. He yelled out in pain as her palm smashed into his elbow, trying to bend his arm the wrong way. The yell became a scream as her boot tried the same on the side of his knee. He collapsed to the ground, where a swinging leg smashed him in the face. Disoriented, he rolled with the blow, trying to scramble to his feet. Halfway up he found a hand on either side of his head, pulling it down into a rising knee.

Sophie dragged Fire Fist to the side of the cage by the hair.

"You realise they call you Fire Fist because that's all you have going for you, right?" she said. "You're a mediocre fighter with a gimmick that makes people flinch. I don't know what kind of ambitions you have, but I wouldn't bother. This is the highest stage you'll have any real accomplishment, and your reputation is about to take a big hit."

The cage had both vertical and horizontal bars, like a mesh, with gaps barely large enough to fit a hand or part of a foot. That was to slow down climbing, so a downed opponent had time to recover and prevent an escape. Sophie hoisted Fire Fist up, forcing his hands through a pair of the small gaps before dropping him again. He was left dangling by the wrists as they caught on the bars. She raised an elbow up and smashed it down on one of his forearms, producing a loud crack and horrifying shriek of pain. She did the same to the other arm, then left him hanging as she climbed out of the cage.

The Adventure Society campus had a marshalling yard where larger groups could assemble. Rufus arrived to find a large group waiting for him. He had two employees of the Adventure Society with him; the paunchy functionary, Albert, and an official who, like Rufus, was bronze rank. Originally Rufus would be administering the field test alone, but the Society had assigned another person to assist. Seeing the almost twenty participants, he now understood why.

“Are the groups normally this large?” Rufus asked Albert.

“No, sir, they are not,” Bert said, handing over a clipboard. Good luck sir, although I’m sure you won’t need it.”

“Why so many?” Rufus asked the Adventure Society official. He was a man in his late twenties, of rather distinctive appearance. He wore practical wear for the delta, tough but loose and breathable fabric. He had a bronze brooch in the shape of the Adventure Society emblem, which was standard for upper-tier officials. His practical clothes were topped with an impractical hat, broad-brimmed with an ostentatiously colourful feather. Overshadowing even that, however, was a moustache unlike anything Rufus had ever seen. Glistening with wax, it twirled its way out past the sides of the man’s head.

The official’s name was name was Vincent Trenslow. His appearance gave Rufus pause, but his manner in their short acquaintance had been nothing but professional.

“It seems there was some manner of grand administrative error,” Vincent explained unhappily. “More than half of these people already passed the field assessment and were admitted to the Society, but the records of their assessment were lost. Despite multiple copies of such records having been made and kept separately. It was decided that they should undertake the field assessment again.”

“In my experience, the Adventure Society is meticulous with their records,” Rufus said. “Even if they weren’t, what kind of solution is this?”

“The kind of solution you get when the error in question disproportionately affects members of the aristocracy,” Vincent said. “The kind aristocracy looking to make a connection with an important adventurer visiting from distant lands.”

“I see,” Rufus said darkly.

“The Director asked me personally to extend her apologies,” Vincent said. “She is new to the role and has a long way to go when it comes to purging outside influence. She made rather a point of inviting you to assess these applicants with, and I quote, ‘punishing rigour,’”

Rufus grinned.

“And what are your thoughts on this, Mr. Trenslow?”

“I may have a few suggestions that would interest you.”

“Thank you so much,” the woman said, still shaking Jason’s hand.

“No worries,” Jason said, extricating his digits from the woman’s grip.

“Make sure you drink a lot of water when you go home,” Jory told her. “Eating some fruit would be good as well.

“Oh, I’ll be drinking, alright,” she said as she left the clinic.

“That’s not the kind of drinking I meant,” Jory called out. “And she’s gone.”

He sighed.

“Well, that’s the last one. How about you and I have a drink?”

“Sure,” Jason said.

“You have a good night, Janice,” Jory said to his teenage receptionist.

“See you tomorrow, Mr. Tillman. Mr. Asano.

“Goodnight, Janice.”

They wandered into Jory’s office, sitting down on either side of Jory’s desk. He pulled out two bottles, and two glasses. He poured a bright green liquid into a glass and pushed across the desk to Jason.

“This stuff is a bit more potent,” he said, “so it should get past that poison resistance of yours. It’s also horrifyingly sweet, the way you like it.”

“Thanks.”

He took a sip, nodding appreciatively, at the taste.

-
- Special attack [Plime Fruit Liqueur] has inflicted [Alcohol] on you.
 - You have resisted [Alcohol].
 - [Alcohol] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

Jason sighed.

“No?” Jory asked.

“No,” Jason said. “Tastes good, though.”

“That’s not what booze is for,” Jory said, pouring himself something amber from the second bottle.

“You look kind of tired,” Jory said “I thought feeding on the sick freshened you up. Which is still creepy, by the way.”

“I’m not tired,” Jason said. “Or creepy. Weary, maybe. That woman had cancer, and I just took it away like it was never there.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Jory asked.

“Of course it is,” Jason said. “But back where I come from we don’t have essences. Or alchemy, for that matter, although we have something similar, I guess. We just call it pharmacology.”

“You don’t talk about where you’re from, much,” Jory said. “I remember you said there wasn’t a lot of magic. No monsters, right?”

“Never even heard of a monster surge until I came here,” Jason said.

“That’d be nice,” Jory said. “Like most things, the poor take the brunt of a monster surge. What happens when people get sick in your homeland?”

“We have medicine,” Jason said, “but without magic it has limits. Recovery can take a long time, and a lot of the options are bad. Take cancer, for example. Now I can just suck it out of people, but back home it isn’t that easy. They slice people open, try and cut it out of them. Poison them and hope the cancer dies before they do.”

“That sounds barbaric.”

“We don’t have better options,” Jason said. “I think about what I could do with the power I have now. All the people I could help.”

“Are you going back?” Jory asked.

“If I can,” Jason said. “Home is very far away, and I have no idea how to get there.”

“How did you get here?” Jory asked. “You said something about a magical accident?”

“A summoning spell went awry,” Jason said. “It reached into my magically desolate home and plucked me right out of it. That’s how I met Rufus, Gary and Farrah. I got dumped right into the middle of their mess.”

“Have you tried the goddess of knowledge?” Jory asked. “If anyone knows the way home, she does. There’s no guarantee she’ll tell you, but anyone can go to her temple and ask questions.”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I’m not really the religious type.”

“Even if there might be a way home?” Jory asked. “What will it cost you to try?”

“That’s the sort of question someone asks right before you they bury you in debt.”

Jory laughed.

“That’s fair,” he said. “But give it some thought.”

“I will,” Jason said. “Thanks.”

“I can’t believe you hid it from me,” Belinda said.

“It’s not a big deal,” Sophie said. “I had gloves on.”

“Heat goes through gloves. Your hand is the wrong colour.”

“It does feel a bit weird.”

They went through the door of the Broadstreet Clinic to find the receptionist packing up to go.

“Didn’t this place used to be full of people?” Belinda said. “I remember coming in here of an evening and was still packed to the door.”

Janice looked up at the pair.

“Since Mr. Asano started coming we get through everyone quicker,” she explained, “even with the all extra people.”

“Why are there extra people? Belinda asked.

“We just need some healing unguent,” Sophie said.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Janice said. “I’ll go see if Mr. Tillman is available.”

After a few moments they heard a voice loud with drink.

“Janice, why are you still here?”

“I wanted to finish up the records before I went home,” they heard Janice reply as she led Jory out from the back. His unsteady gait and expression of general bewilderment said he’d was well on his way through a bottle.

“I should pay you more,” Jory told his receptionist.

“You just started paying me more, Mr. Tillman.”

“Yeah? Good on me, then.”

He looked up at the two women.

“Ladies!” Jory greeted. “It’s been a while. Hello, Lindy. What brings you to my door?”

“Sophie’s fighting again,” Belinda said.

“Well, that’s no good,” Jory said.

“It is what it is,” Sophie said.

“Then I suppose I’ll be seeing more of you,” Jory said, beaming at Belinda. “That’s nice.”

“We just need some ointment,” Sophie said.

“Here,” a voice said. A tin was sailing through the air, Sophie reaching out to catch it. The man who threw it was human, but neither woman recognised his ethnicity, meaning he was unlikely to be local. His frame was narrow and his features were a little too sharp to be handsome. His dark hair had a silkiness to it, but it was hard to see cropped short as he had it.

“That’s not one of mine,” Jory said to the man. “Where did you get that?”

“From a monster,” the man said.

“You can’t just give random monster goo to two beautiful women.”

“It’s healing ointment. I’ve used a lot of it myself.”

“Sounds sketchy to me,” Jory said. “Janice, find me a jar of the good ointment.”

Sophie pulled the lid off the tin and sniffed at the contents.

“It’s fine,” she said, putting the lid back on. “What do we owe you?”

“On the house,” the man said. “It lets Janice go home instead of updating the inventory.”

Sophie nodded and back out the door.

“Soph, wait...” Belinda said. “And she’s gone. Bye Jory. Thanks, person I don’t know.”

“Bye Belinda!” Jory called out with a wave as the door closed behind them.

Chapter 45: So Much For Atheism

Jason had not explored many of the Island's districts. He took the loop to one he had never visited before; the temple district. His new world had no shortage of gods, which as a long-time atheist was more than a little disconcerting. He had been assured that gods existed, but he'd been hearing much the same from his Great Aunt Marjory for years. He wanted to see for himself.

Walking out of the loop terminal, he immediately saw a sign with directions to the Divine Square. Following it, he walked down a street where temples lined both sides of the road. Looking at the prominent signs and banners, Jason quickly gained a sense that gods had hierarchies of their own. The Temple of Roads, he saw, was nestled behind the larger and more impressive Temple of Journeys.

Soon the street opened up onto the square itself. It was a huge, crowded space. Green stone was prominent everywhere in the Island, but in the Divine Square even the flagstones were made from high-grade material. The square was filled with booths and tents, most of which seemed to be hawking religious paraphernalia to the faithful.

"Kind of the same, wherever you go," Jason mused to himself.

There were people proselytizing to anyone who would listen, and street thieves cutting purses. Jason had originally kept a small pouch of coins hanging from his waist so he didn't draw attention by plucking coins out of thin air. After the second time it was stolen in as many days he stopped bothering. Even if using his inventory drew attention, there were enough people with similar abilities around that it wasn't a lot.

Jason bought a sandwich from a street vendor, some kind of meat with cheese and a spicy sauce. Food was one of the ways in which Jason was most reminded he was on a different world. While the preparation was often similar, like bread, soup, sandwiches or cake, the ingredients were more often different than the same. Farms raised different animals and grew different crops. Trees sprouted different fruit. The bread was heavier than he was used to, the beer lighter. The meat was all different. Most of it came from the large lizards Jason had seen roaming in the delta. Even the crossovers, like apples, were not varieties he recognised.

He realised he was stalling, distracting himself with little details instead of following his actual purpose in coming to the temple district. Confronting a challenge to long-held beliefs wasn't easy. His objective wasn't the throngs of people in the square, but the temples around the outside. The buildings immediately abutting the square were the most

prominent houses of worship in the city, and the effort put into their designs seemed to reflect it. They seemed to be competing in grandiosity, each clearly an achievement in architecture and engineering.

There was a towering cathedral, a columned temple and other buildings the likes of which Jason had never seen. Oddly, there was one building that forwent the ostentation of the buildings around it, looking more like a public school library. It was a square, grey block, with the only ornamentation a picture of a scroll over the double-doors.

“I wonder if that’s what I’m looking for.”

While each building competed to catch the eye, in Jason’s opinion there was a clear winner. It was a huge tower in the shape of an arm thrusting into the sky. Most buildings in the city topped out at five storeys, and while it was not the only temple to breach this limit, the giant arm more than doubled it. At the end of the arm was a fist clenching a giant, bearded head. The head gazed down on the square, fiercely glaring at any with the courage to meet its stare.

“Well, that’s only completely horrifying.”

With all the people around it was easy to ask a passer-by about the unusual temple. The man Jason talked to was short and stocky, with skin of such a deep blue it was almost black. He had no hair at all and was covered in what looked like tattoos of various colours, which glowed faintly. Jason knew the markings were actually natural, a feature of the race known as the runic. They were a rarity in Greenstone, and while Jason had seen them around, this was his first chance to speak with one. Going by his clothes, the man was more likely a local than a visitor.

“That’s the temple of Dominion,” he explained as Jason pointed out the strange temple.

“Dominion over what?” Jason asked.

The man looked at Jason curiously.

“Over everything,” the man said. “Dominion issues the divine right to kings and nobles. It is he who determines who rules, and who serves.”

“Oh. That explains the creepy, overbearing temple.”

“You seem very easy with blasphemy,” the man said warily.

“I am,” Jason said absently. “Mostly to annoy my Aunt Marjory, but also recreationally. Does this world have little cartoon booklets that explain you’re going to hell if you eat between-meal snacks or whatever?”

The man shook his head in wonderment.

“What do you get out of that?” he asked. “Does it make you feel better to disrespect things others find meaningful?”

“Sorry,” Jason said, feeling like an idiot. “Where I come from, the gods aren’t real.”

“The gods are everywhere in this world.”

“So I’ve heard,” Jason said. “I find that a bit disturbing, to be honest. I mean, look at Dominion. I don’t like the idea of an infinitely powerful being whose job is to make sure people know their place.”

“Then venerate a different god,” the man said. “No deity is absolute. If you dislike the message of Dominion, seek out Liberty. They don’t get along.”

The man flashed Jason a cheeky grin.

Jason held out his hand and the man shook it.

“I’m Jason.”

“Arash,” the man introduced himself.

Jason was asking Arash if the plain-looking building was the Temple of Knowledge when a glorious light appeared in front of one of the temples. All through the square people started falling to their knees, Jason’s new friend included. Looking over, Jason saw a towering figure that looked human, but stood twice as tall as Gary. He looked rather like an adventurer, clad in light armour with a sword at his side.

Up to that point, the strongest aura Jason had encountered was that of a silver-rank adventurer he had seen at the Adventure Society. He had sat next to the man on the loop line and found the presence of his aura overpowering. He realised at the time why Farrah said that containing one’s aura was good manners.

The aura from the far side of the square made that experience inconsequential; it was comparing a candle to the blazing light of the sun. Jason had no doubt if the aura of that towering figure were truly unleashed, everyone in the square would drop dead.

“So that’s a god,” Jason said. “Honestly, I was hoping to be less impressed, but that is something to see. So much for atheism, I guess.”

“Get down!” Arash hissed, kneeling next to Jason. Looking around, Jason certainly stood out as the only person still standing. The god turned to Jason. Not knowing what else to do, Jason gave him a casual wave. It was hard to tell from across the square, but he thought he saw a smile tug at the god’s mouth.

“What’s he the god of?” Jason asked.

“That’s Hero,” Arash said. “Get down!”

“I think that ship has sailed my friend,” Jason said. “So, the god of heroes is called Hero. They really stick to that straightforward naming convention, don’t they?”

“Such a shame,” a melodious voice came from behind Jason. “I was hoping to be your first.”

Jason looked around, but didn’t see where the voice came from. He caught a hint of perfume in the air, fresh and clean like a sea breeze. Within it he sensed a fleeting, put potent aura, every bit the equal of the god across the square.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Jason muttered.

At this point Arash was yanking on Jason’s sleeve, trying to get him to kneel. The other people around them were looking at Jason with disdain.

“Calm down,” Jason said, tugging his shirt free of Arash’s grip. “Did you hear that woman?”

“What woman?” Arash said. “Get on your knees and show your respect for the god!”

“Just me, then. Kneeling isn’t how you show respect, Arash. That’s how you show obedience.”

“Obedience to a god is respect!”

“They say that where I come from, too,” Jason said. “Never really got onboard with the idea. I think I’m going to head off, Arash. All the people here are giving me the evil eye.”

“You are a fool!” Arash hissed after him.

“I can’t argue with that,” Jason said with a laugh. He started making his way across the square, but all the people who had dropped to their knees made for something of an obstacle course.

“Sorry. Pardon me. Excuse I.”

One of the people near Arash leaned over as he watched Jason wander off.

“Do you know that man?” the person asked.

“Absolutely not,” Arash said.

As Jason had guessed, the Temple of Knowledge was the plain, blocky building.

“Is there actually a public library in there?” he wondered. “That would make sense.”

The double doors in front of him were pushed open from the inside as he approached, revealing a pretty young woman. It the same acolyte who had tested his essences during his Adventure Society intake.

“Good day, Mr. Asano.”

“Gabrielle, right?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” she said. “It’s lovely to meet you again.”

“Likewise.”

Jason thought he should catch up with Humphrey, curious if the young man had made an overture since Jason gave him Gabrielle's name. Then he remembered Humphrey was off with Rufus for the field assessment.

"Why does it feel like you were waiting for me?" Jason asked Gabrielle.

"My lady told me you were arriving and sent me to guide you."

"Your lady?"

"The goddess. Follow me, please."

She led Jason inside and he felt an aura wash over him. It was unlike the aura of a person, more like an undercurrent that belonged to the building itself. It wasn't overbearing, but he could feel a vast power behind it. It also had the flavour of the fleeting aura that accompanied the disembodied voice he heard in the square.

They were walking between row after row of books, occasionally passing someone reading at a table. Some of the shelves, instead of books, held ornate tubes.

"Scrolls," Gabrielle explained, seeing Jason's curious glance. "The manuscripts here in the library are all copies. The originals are preserved in the archive."

"So, does your boss talk to you a lot?" Jason asked.

"My boss?"

"The goddess."

"Of course," Gabrielle said. "I may be only a junior member of the clergy, but I am a member, nonetheless. I see and hear my lady every day."

"That must be reaffirming. It doesn't work that way where I come from."

"Your world must be very strange. People serving gods that do not exist. How does that work, if I might ask?"

"Not really sure," Jason said. "They seem to lean heavily on metaphor. You know I'm from a different world?"

"The lady has imparted some knowledge. It is her nature."

"Her nature could use a privacy disclosure agreement. Where are you guiding me to, exactly?"

"The temple has a room for questions. Ask, and the lady will answer or not, as she chooses."

"She'll answer in person?"

"Answers come in many forms."

"Sounds like she's leaning on heavily metaphor, too."

Gabrielle gave Jason a confident smile.

"You will soon see for yourself," she said.

She led Jason to a set of double doors. They were larger than the ones that were the entrance to the temple, but just as plain. They were carved from wood, aged and unadorned but for a simple handle on each. Jason had the strange feeling they were older than the building in which they were affixed. Gabrielle pulled open the heavy doors with an ease that belied her small frame.

“This is as far I take you,” she said, gesturing for Jason to continue on. He passed through the doors and she pushed them closed behind him.

Chapter 46: Blatant Manipulation

The chamber was large and circular, a single room rising up five storeys to a glass ceiling. Light spilled in from above, reflecting from crystal mosaics that lined the walls to bathe the room in rainbow colours. This innermost chamber was the exact opposite of the temple's plain exterior.

"That is certainly impressive."

Jason walked into the room as Gabrielle closed the doors behind him. He looked at his arms as the light played over them. In the centre of the room there was a life-sized statue of a woman holding an open book. Jason walked around it, looking it over.

"Ask, and she shall answer or not, was it?"

Jason meandered around the room, looking at the crystal mosaics that ran from the floor, up five storeys to the ceiling. They depicted what he took to be various knowledge keepers; scribes, teachers, librarians. Rendered in colourful crystal and washed with light, they looked vibrant and bathed with glory.

He remained silent as he examined the artwork on the walls. He had always been prone to talking to himself, but the idea of expecting an answer back was disconcerting. He wondered if it was a little too close to prayer for his liking, then realised it actually was prayer.

"The idea," a female voice spoke from behind him, "is that I choose whether to answer your questions, not whether you choose to ask them."

It was the same voice he had heard in the square. He didn't turn from where he was looking at the wall mosaics.

"And you're in charge?" he asked.

"Definitively," the voice said. "It is my temple."

Her voice was melodious, with a hint of amusement. There was an undercurrent within it, an aura with the force of a tidal wave. It was somehow distant at the same time, like a photograph of a wild storm.

"Your house, your rules," Jason said. "My mother had a similar attitude."

"And you left," the voice said. "You have the same option here."

Jason turned around to find the statue had been replaced with a woman. She looked much the same as the people outside in the square, at least the human ones, with colourful clothes and Mediterranean features. She was beautiful, yet there was something

detached and untouchable about her. Jason noticed that, unlike the statue, she wasn't holding a book.

"So, were you the woman, or were you the book?"

"Neither."

"Misdirection," Jason said. "That's a magician's trick."

"I'm not the Wizard of Oz, Jason."

"You know my world?"

"I am Knowledge. Everything that is, or ever was known in this world. You brought your knowledge with you when you arrived."

"What about the other gods?" Jason asked. "Knowing everything they know would be a bit overpowered."

"We deities are of this world, but do not exist within it. Therefore their knowledge is not mine."

Jason looked the goddess up and down.

"It looks like you exist within it," he said.

"If you look at a pond and see a moon," she said, "is that moon within the pond, or is it a reflection of something much greater, very far away?"

"Nice metaphor," Jason said. "Classic religious imagery, but I suppose that's part of the job. You say you're not the man behind the curtain, but for all I know, you're just some pretty lady with several judiciously-placed mirrors."

"You think I'm pretty?"

"Well that's just blatant manipulation," Jason said. "If you already know everything, then asking me questions is just pantomime."

She laughed, a pleasant, tinkling sound. It gave Jason the sense of a country stream on a warm summer's day.

"You're quite fun," she told him. "You've felt my aura. And Hero's."

"A month ago I still thought auras were made up," Jason said. "Who knows how many ways there are to trick someone like me."

"I do, as it happens," she said. "What about all the people outside when Hero appeared? Do you doubt them all? Do you think we hired actors?"

"Argumentum ad populum?" Jason said. "If you're going to convince me you're a god, you'll need to do better than a second rate apologist."

"Have you considered how well the banana fits in the human hand?"

Jason burst into laughter.

"You've got jokes," he said. "I like that."

“If it makes you feel any better, just think of me as a vastly powerful, immortal entity. No need to use the G word.”

“Then what’s the difference between a god and some crazy-powerful super-being?”

“From your perspective? Very little.” she said. “The nature of transcendent beings are not bound up in physical reality. God and goddess are mortal words.”

“It doesn’t matter until I hit the level cap, is what you’re saying.”

“Something like that.”

“Can you read my mind?”

“In a way,” she said. “My knowledge of this world is absolute. So long as you know what you are thinking, I know what you are thinking.”

“So you know what I’m going to ask?”

“I know that which is, and that which was, but not that which is yet to come.”

“I bet you make some bloody good guesses, though.”

She laughed again, the sound flooding his body with pleasant feelings.

“I know everything in this world,” she said, “yet you mortals are a constant source of surprise. I did not expect, for example, that you would turn back and save the people in that sacrificial chamber.”

“That one surprised me too,” Jason confessed. He looked the goddess up and down.

“Why do you look like a local?” he asked.

“To appear requires an appearance, and this is as good as any. When I show myself to people looking as they do, it helps form a connection.”

“Then why don’t you look like someone from my world right now?”

“Because you didn’t come here for a connection. You came in wondering what happens when an atheist meets a god, so I met you as I would anyone else here. But now we have met, and the questions you came in with were not about me.”

“Yet I can’t seem to help myself,” Jason said. “Why would a goddess even bother to answer any of my questions?”

“I am Knowledge. It is my nature.”

“That feels like a lie.”

The corners of her mouth twitched up in a slight smile.

“Call it an incomplete truth.”

Jason laughed.

“You have your own agenda,” he said

“Don’t we all?” she said. “But whatever my motivations, you still have questions, and I still have answers. If it makes you feel better, know that you are insufficiently consequential to be worth manipulating.”

“That’s a little hurtful, but kind of reassuring, I guess. Can you actually smite me down?”

“We transcendent beings are limited in our ability to affect physical reality. We can affect magic, creating essences and awakening stones. We can also affect our area of influence. I am Knowledge, therefore I can bestow any knowledge I have at will.”

“And you have all the knowledge.”

She smiled.

“So, can the god of the oceans or whatever create tsunamis and such?”

“Yes, but direct intervention is antithetical to our nature, other than to redress an imbalance. More often we work through our followers.”

“So if you wanted to smite me, you could just find the nearest silver rank on the membership rolls and point in my general direction.”

“More or less,” she said. “Of course, another god could send their own agents to intervene. It is something akin to a matter of etiquette to let our followers determine the outcome of a conflict between deities.”

“Who doesn’t love a holy war?” Jason asked. “I suppose I should get on with the actual questions I came in here with, shouldn’t I?”

“Please do,” she said.

“Alright, then. When I was brought to this world, was I chosen?”

“No, it was happenstance. While your world is magically barren, this one is magically rich. That magic builds up over time, finding various forms of release.”

“Is that why the monster surges happen?” Jason asked.

“Indeed it is,” she said. “The magic can also be released by flaring out from this world, sometimes coming into contact with another. If conditions are just right, that contact forms a connection; an inadvertent bridge across which someone can be drawn.”

“If it’s just random chance, where do my outworlder abilities come from? They feel designed.”

“They are designed,” she said. “By you. The journey between worlds altered your body, flooded it with magic. Outworlders like yourself unconsciously shape that magic into a form they can understand, to help them navigate this world using the rules of their own.”

“So, I gave myself powers?”

“It would be more accurate to say that when the power came upon you, you chose its form. A way of framing this world through your own in order to make it comprehensible. As is so often the case when dealing with the dark depths of the mind, the results are more intuitive than practical. But what I am describing isn’t what really happened to you. It is simply the closest I can get to an explanation you could understand. Trying to explain the true forces at play would be like explaining mathematics to a rock. You fundamentally lack the capacity to perceive what I would need to show you.”

The goddess held her hands in a show of helplessness.

“If you were one of my followers,” she said, “I could do better. Imbue the knowledge directly into your mind.”

“No thanks,” Jason said. “I’m all about that self-determination.”

“Our followers are free to act as they will,” she said. “We are not tyrants.”

“Of course you don’t think that. To you, being all-powerful seems natural. If you know everything I know, then you know I’ve heard all that ‘freedom within faith’ nonsense before.”

“But the gods of this world are not remote entities that never show themselves or take action.”

Jason laughed.

“And you think that makes it better?” he asked. “I never abdicated my moral responsibility to an absentee sky wizard in my world, and I’m not doing it now that the wizard’s shown up to enforce it.”

The goddess chuckled.

“I didn’t think so, but I had to try,” she said.

“I get it,” Jason said. “Got to get those bums in pews.”

“You’re stalling,” she said. “Going off on tangents to avoid the question you’re not sure you want the answer to.”

“That’s a go-to move for me,” Jason said.

“I know. You won’t find me easy to manipulate.”

“I didn’t think so, but I had to try,” Jason said.

“We are both beholden to our natures,” she said. “Ask your question. The only real question you came in here with.”

“You already know the question,” Jason said.

“Yet you must ask it. Only then will the responsibility for hearing the answer be yours.”

Jason nodded.

“Is there a way for me to go home?”

“Do you want there to be?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I mean, that should be the goal, right? But there isn’t a lot waiting for me back there. Here, I see potential. What I can become. The wonders waiting over the next hill.”

He looked at the goddess.

“You know everything, right? You tell me if I want to go back.”

“That is a question only you can answer. That is why I asked it.”

“Is it possible?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“How?”

“You have possessed the means from the beginning, but you are not ready to use it.”

“From the beginning?”

Jason thought back to the day he first arrived. The first time he opened his inventory there was an object inside. An object his ability couldn’t, or wouldn’t identify, and had been sitting in his inventory ever since.

“The world-phoenix token,” he said.

“Yes. I would advise against trying to learn more about it. Anyone who would actually recognise it would be unwilling to leave it in your hands.”

“Why do I have it?”

“I am possessed of every piece of knowledge in this world,” she said, “but that is a question to which I do not know the answer.”

“That’s only mildly terrifying,” Jason said. “You said I wasn’t ready to use it?”

“Choosing to use it would require an act of faith,” she said.

“And faith is very much not my thing,” Jason said.

“of that, I am very much aware,” she said. “When circumstances dictate, the token will use itself.”

“Even if it’s my magical void storage thing?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re not going to tell me the trigger conditions, are you?”

“You were warned that I would answer or not, as I choose. In this case, I choose not.”

“So I could just be walking along the street and whoosh, back home I go?”

“If you decide that that you do not wish to return to your world, then discard the token.”

“So I have to choose if I want to stay,” he said. “Either I throw this thing away, or hang about until these mysterious circumstances to come about. What do I do in the meantime?”

“Get stronger” she said. “You will need that strength for what is to come.”

“You told me you couldn’t see the future.”

“I’ve been known to make some bloody good guesses,” she said

Jason laughed, and the goddess smiled.

“You know,” he said, “I didn’t know what to expect from a goddess. I figured, if you were real, that I wouldn’t handle it very well.”

“You could have done worse.”

“Yeah, but that’s the thing, though; I should have. When I came to this world, the magic changed me. I’m not even human, now. Did it change the way I think? Is that how I’ve been getting through all this without losing my mind?”

“No,” she said. “Your mind remains your own.”

“Really? I don’t feel like the same person I was before I came here.”

“You aren’t,” she told him. “Circumstances change, and people change with them. That is as true in your world as it is in mine. Not everything is a matter of magic.”

Jason nodded to himself.

“Alright,” he said. “Then I guess I just have one last question.”

“I do not know if the gods of your world are real,” she answered, not waiting for him to ask. “No one from your world who knows that particular truth has ever come to this one, and I only deal in knowledge. That being said, from what I do know of your world, it lacks the magic to sustain a divine entity.”

“That seems rather definitive.”

“You may interpret that as you will,” she said, “but I do not make interpretations. I deal in knowledge, and knowledge alone.”

“Wait, you said no one from my world. Are there other outworlders from my world?”

“There have been, in the past. Not for centuries, now. Those that came before either died or returned home.”

“But essence users can live for centuries,” Jason said. “Are there essence users running around my world?”

“I do not know,” she said. “Perhaps you should go back and see for yourself.”

Jason took a deep breath.

“You know,” he said, “you really dropped some bombs on me, lady.”

“People do not come to the goddess of knowledge for recipes, Jason.”

“Is that an option?” he asked.

“No.”

“I guess that’s everything, then,” Jason said. “Do I just go, now? Is there a donation box or something?”

As the goddess laughed, the doors were pulled open from the outside by Gabrielle. The acolyte gave a curious glance at the mirthful deity.

“My lady,” she addressed the goddess.

“I’m sure you can find your own way out, Jason,” the goddess told him.

“You’re going to talk about me behind my back, aren’t you?” Jason asked. “Gabrielle, try and explain privacy to your boss. I think she might have trouble with it, given her inherent nature.”

“Go away, Jason,” the goddess said, and he wandered off with a chuckle and a wave.

“I think it was this way,” they heard him say as he disappeared among the bookshelves.

“He seems like an unusual man,” Gabrielle said.

“Yes, but also a dangerous one,” the goddess warned. “Take care in your future dealings.”

“He never seemed that way,” Gabrielle said.

“It isn’t his powers or his appetites that make him dangerous,” the goddess said. “It’s his ideas. He’ll have you question your faith, just because it’s faith. He’ll have you question everything, if you let him.”

Chapter 47: Mirage Chamber

Rufus looked up as Gary emerged from his room, stretching his long arms and yawning.

"You're not breakfast," Gary said.

"You're just getting up?" Rufus said.

Farrah emerged from her own room, rubbing her eyes.

"Oh, welcome back, Rufus. No breakfast?"

"Why would I have bought breakfast? I told you to relax the training, not give it up entirely. Jason needs to develop good habits now."

"Forget that guy," Gary said.

Farrah nodded her agreement.

"He went to see the goddess of knowledge few days ago," she said. "Since then he's been like a monster. All we wanted was a few relaxing days before you got back, but he won't stop. The closest he comes to taking a break is having a drink with Jory down at the clinic, and I'm pretty sure that's only because it lets him train his resistance ability."

"Turns out booze is poison," Gary said. "I'm not going to stop drinking it, but it makes you think."

"Did you at least show him around the city?" Rufus asked.

"Oh, we showed him," Farrah said.

"Now he does an evening run each night around the Island," Gary complained.

The door opened up and Jason pushed in a trolley containing two rows of covered food trays.

"Rufus, you're back," Jason said happily. "You can join us for breakfast."

"From what these two were saying, I thought you'd be training."

"Yeah, I ate a spirit coin this morning, ran into the clinic and did some weight training. Then I ran back and got to work on breakfast. These two have been slacking off while you were away."

As he talked, Jason transferred food from the tray to the dining table. Gary and Farrah sat down, Gary rubbing his hands together.

"I'm starting to get a handle on the local food," Jason said. "I've been checking out the markets when I'm taking a break. But we can crank up the training intensity now that you're back, yeah?"

Gary's hands stopped moving.

“What do you mean by crank up the intensity?” he asked.

“We can stop slacking off. I’ve been slacking off a bit, cooking, making my way through Jory’s liquor cabinet.”

“Rest is an important part of training, too,” Rufus said.

“Exactly,” Gary mumbled around a mouthful of sausage.

Gary and Farrah were already tucking in as Jason poured out glasses of juice from a large pitcher.

“Have something to eat,” Jason told Rufus, pushing a laden plate his way. “Tell us how your field assessment thing went.”

Rufus picked up his cutlery.

“It does smell good.”

“So, I know this guy Humphrey,” Jason said to Rufus. “He was part of your group, right?”

“Humphrey Geller?” Rufus asked. “You know him?”

“We went in for induction on the same day,” Jason said. “Nice guy. How’d he do?”

“He failed,” Rufus said. “His skills are solid and he has a good grasp of his abilities. The ones he’s awakened, at least. His problem is one of mindset.”

“What do you mean?” Jason asked.

“Humphrey’s confluence essence is dragon,” Rufus said.

“Makes sense,” Jason said, thinking of Humphrey’s familiar. “I have to imagine that’s a good one.”

“They’re all good, if you use them right,” Farrah said.

“And there’s the problem,” Rufus said. “Humphrey is considerate, thoughtful, cautious and humble. Does any of that sound like a dragon to you? He needs to be confident, bold. He knows how to use his abilities, but he’s too indecisive about doing so.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “He’s a nice guy with the powers of an arrogant prick.”

“Actually, that’s exactly it,” Rufus said. “He wasn’t alone, though. There were nineteen people and we passed six.”

“Ouch,” Jason said.

“That’s a big group,” Farrah said.

“Some of the local aristocrats were looking to make a social connection,” Rufus said darkly. “Some of the records of their recently accepted adventurers were mysteriously lost, forcing them to re-take the assessment.”

“That sounds shady,” Farrah said. “The Adventure Society let them get away with that?”

“You haven’t seen what it’s like in these outlying branches,” Gary said. “They don’t the same funding, so they have to compromise with local powers.”

“Corruption,” Jason said.

“It’s easy to call it that,” Gary said, “but sometimes compromises have to be made. You pay adventurers with money, not principles.”

“Is there going to be any backlash?” Farrah asked.

“Probably,” Rufus said. “The ones who’d passed before their records mysteriously vanished had already been working as adventurers, but after I failed them, their membership was revoked. They won’t get it back until they pass another field assessment.”

“I bet they loved that,” Farrah said.

“The Duke of Greenstone’s nephew is part of that group,” Rufus said.

“You flunked out the city ruler’s nephew?” Gary chortled.

“I did,” Rufus said. “I suspect the people I failed will have an easier time with their next assessor.”

“Have you considered that you might not be the one to take the pain for this?” Farrah asked. “You might have dropped the local Adventure Society officials right in it.”

“Actually, the branch director was urging me on. Seems she’s trying to flush out at least some of the external influence.”

“Oh,” Farrah said thoughtfully. “Good for her.”

“So, what about Humphrey?” Jason asked. “You’re all about training up adventurers, right? I bet you have plenty of ideas to get him on track.”

“Humphrey’s mother is a family acquaintance,” Rufus said, “so I’ll help him out a little. I know exactly what he needs.”

“Oh?” Jason prompted.

“I’ve seen almost every kind of would-be adventurer there is,” Rufus said, then looked at Jason. “Almost every kind. Back at my family’s academy...”

He trailed off as Jason, Gary and Farrah all picked up their glasses of juice, draining them dry simultaneously.

“What was that?” Rufus asked as Gary refilled their glasses from the pitcher.

“What was what?” Jason asked.

“Never mind,” Rufus said. “Back in my family’s academy...”

Again all three picked up their glasses and chugged back the contents.

“What is happening right now?” Rufus asked. “Wait, are you playing that drinking game?”

The other three erupted into laughter.

“What is wrong with you people?”

“It’s just juice,” Gary said, as he started refilling the glasses again. “It is just juice, right?”

“Fresh-squeezed,” Jason said.

“So, now every time I mention my family’s-”

“Hold up,” Gary said, waving his hand at Rufus. “I can only refill these so fast.”

Rufus panning his glare around the table drew fresh peals of laughter.

“I hate you all.”

“This is where you grew up?” Jason asked as they walked through the verdant grounds of the Geller ancestral home. Jason and Rufus were being guided by Humphrey Geller and his mother, Danielle. Jason’s comment came as they walked through a tunnel of leafy vines grown into a tunnel on a bamboo framework. Splashes of sunlight stabbed through the foliage, punctuating the shade with beams of light.

“I would have loved this when I was a kid,” Jason said. “Who am I kidding? I love it now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Asano,” Danielle said.

“Jason is fine,” Jason told her.

“You’ll have to forgive Mr. Asano,” Rufus apologised. “He’s not well-versed in formality, in spite of any quite-thorough explanations he may have received earlier in the day.”

“Yes,” Jason said, “I’m not very smart and simple formalities are super-hard to figure out. It’s definitely not that I find them to be a set of arbitrary behavioural norms that serve as a tool of exclusionary tribalism and that eschewing the rituals of cultural performance facilitates the fostering of new relationships by having both sides step out of their preconceived societal modes.”

Danielle laughed while Rufus glared at Jason.

“I’m not sure how my translation ability handled that one,” Jason said.

“I should have left you in the desert,” Rufus muttered.

“Mr. Remore did mention you were an unusual man,” Danielle said. “I’m delighted to discover he was right. Please feel free to call me Danielle.”

Danielle Geller demonstrated that at silver rank, the beautifying effect of essences reached the realms of the supernatural. In addition to looking far too young to be Humphrey’s mother, she was stunningly perfect. Neither women nor men used cosmetics

in this world, but Jason realised there was little point. All the people that could have afforded it used essences, which was like air-brushing real life.

“So, have you spoken to Gabrielle, yet?” Jason asked Humphrey, who turned white and started shaking his head to silence Jason.

“Gabrielle?” Danielle asked. She may have looked too young to be Humphrey’s mother, but that tone of having latched onto a weakness was unmistakable.

“It’s nobody,” Humphrey said.

“Danielle,” Jason said, “as Rufus pointed out, my grasp of the local etiquette is limited. How does one go a-courting in local aristocratic circles?”

“Please stop,” Humphrey begged.

“That would depend on the relative status of the parties involved,” Danielle said.

“Then let me present a hypothetical, then.” Jason said. “Let’s take someone of roughly your social standing. A young member of your family, perhaps. How would they approach, say, an acolyte of the church of knowledge? I imagine there would something of a tangled nest of social, political and religious entanglements that would make it rather difficult.”

Jason and Danielle were happily walking side-by-side, with Rufus and Humphrey behind. Humphrey had his head buried in his hands, while Rufus just shook his head.

“Indeed there would be social complexities,” Danielle said. “The best approach the young man could take – I assume it is a young man in this example?”

“Why not?” Jason said.

“The best thing this young man could do,” Danielle said, glancing back at her son, “would be to inform his mother. Someone who can arrange things without youthful enthusiasm causing a political incident.”

“Oh, but you know how young people can be,” Jason said. “I bet he’d rather cut off his own arm than talk about this with his mother.”

“If only he had a friend to step in for him,” Danielle said.

“Jason and I can do some sparring, right?” Humphrey asked Rufus.

“I’ll make sure to schedule it in,” Rufus said.

“That,” Danielle said, “is the mirage chamber.”

It was a huge dome rising out from the trees and plants, segmented like the eye of an insect. If the pathways of the estate weren’t mostly shaded by canopy, the bulging edifice would be visible from most of the grounds.

“So, what is this thing, exactly?” Jason asked. “Rufus wasn’t very clear.”

“It creates false images of monsters,” Humphrey explained, “and a false image of your body with which to fight them. Everything feels completely real.”

“That sounds fantastic,” Jason said. “Do I get a go?”

“Another day,” Rufus said. “This time you’re just here for a look. Today we set Humphrey on the path to passing the next field assessment.”

“Didn’t you say that they’d just wave everyone through next month?” Jason asked Rufus.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Danielle said. “I was speaking with the branch director yesterday morning, and she’s very happy with how things went. That said, some kind of compromise is probably necessary.”

Getting closer to the dome, Jason saw that there was a complex of buildings adjoining it.

“That’s the viewing hall over there,” Danielle said, pointing out the largest building other than the dome itself. “We try and set up scenarios our family trainees can learn from, then get them all in to watch. Rufus tells me you’re an affliction specialist, which might be interesting to work with.”

“He’s a long way from any example but bad,” Rufus said.

“Rufus,” Danielle lightly scolded.

“No, he’s right,” Jason said.

“I heard you acquitted yourself quite well at the Vane Estate incident,” Danielle said.

“Then you might want to check your sources,” Jason said. “I got laid out multiple times by a guy with a shovel.”

She raised an eyebrow in Rufus’ direction, who nodded with a wry smile on his face.

“Rufus was saying you train family members from all around the world here,” Jason said.

“We have branch families spread far and wide,” Danielle said proudly. “They all come here at age fifteen, and stay until they reach bronze rank. We also take in some non-family.”

“Our family members have a habit of picking teams even before they get their essences,” Humphrey said. “We take the team members in as well.”

Danielle led them into one of the buildings, which turned out to be a large single room. The back wall had a long glass window through which was only darkness, but Jason’s power let his eyes penetrate the gloom. Beyond the glass was the empty interior of the dome. The dome itself was made of segments; irregular metal pentagons carved with magical symbols.

Underneath the window was a rectangular stone block. Carved into the top were numerous runes and sigils, made up of sophisticated patterns. The last feature of the room were low wooden platforms the size of single beds. They lined the left and right wall, a half-dozen to a side. More mystical symbols were engraved into their surfaces.

“This is the control room,” Danielle explained. “From that panel under the window we can control everything that happens inside the chamber.”

She turned to Rufus.

“So what do you have for us?”

Chapter 48: An Endless, Inescapable Nightmare

In the control room of the mirage chamber, all eyes were on Rufus. He walked over to the stone block under the window, which had a dizzying array of runes, sigils and intricate magical diagrams carved into it. He spent a few moments looking it over.

“Standard arrangement,” he observed. “Jason, hand me that crystal.”

Jason took a long, faceted crystal from his inventory, something Farrah had created using Magic Society resources. It looked rather like a long, narrow diamond, the facets catching the light and reflecting out flashes of rainbow colour. He handed it to Rufus, who looked around one side of the stone block, then the other, finding a hole into which he pushed the crystal.

“So, what’s with the crystal?” Jason asked.

“A mirage chamber projects things from these platforms along the walls,” Danielle said. Jason glanced again at the wooden platforms lining both sides of the room.

“If it doesn’t have direct access to something through the platforms,” Danielle continued, “you need to give it a magical imprint to replicate instead.”

“And the crystal is a storage device for the imprint,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Danielle said.

Rufus, having inserted the crystal, was now looking over the top of the stone block.

“This mirage chamber has an impressive array of monster imprints,” Rufus said, “but Humphrey needs something a little different to a basic combat scenario. What I’ve just added in should help him climb the next wall in his development. Humphrey, you can go on in, now.”

Humphrey lay down on one of the wooden platforms. The runes under him lit up and he went still as death. Suddenly Jason spotted him through the window, standing under the centre of the dome. He glanced back down at Humphrey’s still body on the platform, then up at his other body inside the dome, which turned to look at the window.

“That’s an illusionary body?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” Danielle said. It can only affect or be affected by other illusions created by the mirage chamber. To him, though, everything feels completely real.”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “Right now it feels completely real to him, but nothing he suffers will affect his real body.”

“What if something happens to his body here while he’s out there?” Jason asked.

“Then he’ll be snapped awake,” Rufus said. “The illusion feels completely real, but it’s just a projection. Being unexpectedly taken out is disorienting, but harmless.”

Rufus used a finger to trace out some of the lines of the stone slab in front of him. They lit up under his finger, but the real change was on the other side of the window.

The inside of the dome went from darkness to bright and wild illumination. Segmented panels blasted the interior with a maelstrom of rainbow lights, moving and flashing from one colour to the next as the interior of the dome became a shifting kaleidoscope. Humphrey's figure looked tiny in the vast, empty space, like the flood of colour would sweep him away. Rainbow light spilled through the window and over the observers.

“That’s certainly impressive,” Jason said. “Has this ever given someone a seizure?”

“Once,” Danielle said. “It turns out they had some kind of brain sickness. We had a healer remove it.”

“Of course you can casually cure epilepsy,” Jason muttered.

“There is nothing casual about maladies of the mind,” Danielle said. “You need to remove the sickness, then restore the damaged portions of the brain with healing, like a wound. After that, it often takes them time to recover. Especially if the condition had been with them for a long time. They can lose memories, even physical skills.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “It’s oddly comforting to know magic isn’t just the instant solution to every problem.”

“Magic is a tool, like any other,” Danielle said. “Delicate tasks require care and expertise.”

As Jason and Danielle talked, Rufus' hands moved over the engravings on the stone block like he was playing a theremin. On the other side of the window, the chaos of light was slowly moving towards order.

“Is he alright in there in there?” Jason asked.

“He has experienced this many times,” Danielle said.

“Sorry this is taking so long to get in place,” Rufus said. “I need to get a handle on the nuances of your chamber design.”

“What exactly are you planning for Humphrey?” Jason asked.

“We need to motivate Humphrey to act boldly. I have an exercise designed to instill that mindset”

“You think this new addition to our mirage chamber will do that?” Danielle said.

“In my family’s academy,” Rufus said, “I’ve seen plenty of people with Humphrey’s issue. Good people, heroic, even. You can’t motivate them with glory or power, not if you want to really move them to action. It has to be with consequence.”

The light inside the dome suddenly vanished. Even Jason’s dark sight power couldn’t penetrate the sudden darkness. Then daylight lit up the space beyond the window, which was no longer the inside of the dome. It was a wide desert gorge, with Humphrey standing at the bottom, near a shallow stream. Sunlight came down from a clear blue sky. Humphrey looked around, finding a small, adorable child standing next to him.

“Holodeck,” Jason whispered in awe.

Rufus tapped a rune on the control table.

“Humphrey,” he said. “Can you hear me?”

“I can,” Humphrey said, his voice emerging from the control table. “Why is there a little girl, here?”

“That’s Ellie,” Rufus said. “You have to protect her from the monsters.”

Rufus’ hands moved over the runes again. A half-dozen monsters appeared from further down the gorge, running toward Humphrey. They looked and moved like leopards, but were the size of full-grown tigers. Behind them, their tails were long and thick, ending in a huge, talon-like claw.

As Humphrey took a stance in front of little Ellie, armour formed around his body from thin air. It looked to be made of scales, mostly sandy yellow but flecked with other colours, like rainbow droplets. In his hands, a huge sword appeared. Absurdly large and shaped like an extended dragon wing, Jason couldn’t help but question the practicality.

Staying close to the little girl and shielding her with his body, Humphrey awaited the monsters. As they arrived he started swinging his huge sword. Jason was startled at the ease and expertise with which he wielded the massive weapon. It was clearly heavy, but his footwork seamlessly shifted to manage the weight and momentum. Each blow was the end of a monster, but he couldn’t take down all six quickly enough. Two of the nimble monsters skipped around Humphrey as he dealt with the others. By the time he fought past them, Ellie’s corpse was being pulled apart in a tug-of-war between two monsters.

Even watching from a distance, Jason felt viscerally sick at the sight. Rufus tapped a rune, causing the monsters and the child to vanish. Humphrey looked at the now-empty ground in horror, the huge sword falling from his hands and vanishing.

Danielle reached over the console and tapped the rune to close communication with Humphrey.

"Are you trying to traumatise my son?" she asked Rufus, her tone a clear warning that his answer had best be a good one. Rufus calmly turned to face her as she stepped forward to confront him.

"Yes," Rufus said. "I am trying to traumatise your son. During the field assessment, I could see clearly the training he had been through. His skills are exceptional, but it was equally evident you have coddled him to the point of a critical deficiency. The reason I failed him isn't that he lacks the ability. It's because he doesn't understand the duty of being an adventurer. You taught him to handle killing, but not how to handle failure. He hesitates in critical moments because you've taught him to be too perfect."

Jason watched Humphrey's forlorn figure through the glass. He agreed with Humphrey's mother that Rufus' training was essentially emotional abuse, and thought Rufus' speech sounded suspiciously like a pot critiquing a kettle. From what he could tell, Rufus and Humphrey had similar upbringings. He wondered if Rufus had been through the same exercise himself.

"He'll stop to look for the optimal path when what he needs to do is act," Rufus continued. "If you want Humphrey to act quickly and decisively, he needs to understand the price of not doing so. I can let that slide with the other adventures in this city, but you wanted him to meet my standards. These are my standards."

Danielle was a head shorter than Rufus, but she got right up into his space, tilting her head back to glare at him.

"Is this how you treat people in your famous academy?"

"Yes," Rufus said. "It is."

Rufus turned back to the control table and reopened communication.

"Get ready, Humphrey," Rufus said. "We're going again."

Jason watched Danielle, seeing she was on the edge of stepping in to stop it. In the end, she took a step back. Inside the dome, a small boy appeared next to Humphrey.

"What about Ellie?" Humphrey's voice came from the control table.

"Ellie's dead," Rufus said coldly. "She was torn apart by monsters. This is Ben."

Jason winced, looking once again at Danielle. She was looking sternly at Rufus but didn't say anything.

Humphrey's real body stirred on the wooden platform, the runes under him fading. He swung his legs off the side and sat up, face pale, eyes wide and shaking. He had failed to protect every new child Rufus had placed with him.

“How was that?” Rufus asked.

“A nightmare,” Humphrey said weakly. “An endless, inescapable nightmare.”

“Not inescapable,” Rufus said, devoid of sympathy. “You had the power to protect those children. It was your hesitation and doubt that doomed them. You need to understand that sometimes the best action is the immediate one. You’ll do better tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” he asked weakly.

“And every day, until you stop getting the children killed.”

“I... I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Yet you think you’re ready to do it when the people are real?” Rufus asked.

“Adventurers aren’t hunting monsters recreationally, Humphrey. We are the shield for those who can’t protect themselves. Yes, there are adventurers who only care about money and status. But the real ones, and I know you want to be one of the real ones, care about duty. You have the heart for it, but until you have the mindset to match, all you’re going to do is fail.”

Rufus placed a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder.

“Only you can decide how much you’re willing to go through to do the right thing.”

Rufus and Danielle sat in the shade with a pitcher of iced drinks on a picnic table. Danielle had suggested Humphrey lead an enthusiastic Jason in the direction of the orchards.

“I’m sorry if you feel I went too far,” Rufus said. “You’re a good adventurer. You know the things he’ll be facing sooner or later.”

Danielle nodded.

“My father always said I shield him too much from the realities,” Danielle said. “But he was always such a good boy. It’s like there’s something inside him that makes him want to help people. I didn’t want to break that.”

“Did you consider something for him other than adventuring?” Rufus asked. “There are other ways to help people.”

“Not in our family, there isn’t. Gellers are adventurers, with all the good and bad that comes with it. And he has talent.”

“He does,” Rufus said. “If he can get past this obstacle, he could be one of the greats one day.”

“You have similar hopes for your friend, Jason, yes?”

“I’m sorry about him,” Rufus said. “He has a habit of saying whatever pops into his head.”

“No he doesn’t,” Danielle said. “You should pay more attention.”

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you noticed the way he seizes control of a conversation? The way he provokes people out of their comfortable patterns? He has a very political mind, but he applies it quite unlike anyone I’ve met. I do hope Humphrey can learn from him, a little.”

“You want Humphrey to be more like Jason?” Rufus asked incredulously.

“Humphrey is too straightforward a thinker for that,” Danielle said. “I’d just like him to understand that things are more complicated than he realises. Social survival training, if you will.”

“I think you may be overestimating Jason. You might be conflating unpredictability with cunning.”

“Perhaps,” Danielle said. “I will acknowledge he’s hard to predict. You know, I heard an interesting thing while you were off doing the field assessment.”

“Oh?”

“A god appeared in Divine Square.”

“They do that all the time,” Rufus said.

“There were a couple of interesting quirks in this particular instance.”

“Which god?” Rufus asked.

“Hero,” Danielle said. “Interesting god. Did you know he’s the only core deity not to have subordinate gods?”

“I did, actually.”

“That’s right,” Danielle said. “Your uncle is a member of Hero’s clergy, isn’t he? How is he doing?”

“Very well. I’ll tell him you asked after him.”

“Please do. What really caught people’s attention about Hero’s appearance, though, was that when everyone kneeled before the god, one man did not.”

Rufus put a hand over his eyes, groaning wearily.

“Jason has something of an issue with religion,” he said.

“I did hear some rumours about that priestess you were working with,” Danielle said.

“She has some unkind words about you, by the way. But you can see why I wasn’t startled at Jason’s lack of formality. What is the deference due an aristocrat when you won’t bow to a god?”

Rufus narrowed his eyes at Danielle.

“You seem to know a lot about Jason for someone who just met him,” Rufus said. “It’s hardly a surprise for someone of your influence to hear about the Divine Square incident, but you were certain it was Jason. You’re investigating him, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Danielle said. “At your father’s request.”

Rufus groaned.

“Thousands of miles away, and he still can’t let me chart my own path.”

“He’s concerned about the man arresting so much of his son’s attention,” she said. “A man who seemingly fell out of the sky. Imagine my surprise to discover he did almost exactly that.”

“You know he’s an outworlder.”

“I do,” Danielle said. “Very exciting.”

“How?”

“It was a fanciful guess until I met him. He’s so obviously a man out of place. The way he talks, the way he thinks. The way he looks at things. He doesn’t fit.”

“The way he looks at things?”

“Like a man who doesn’t expect to recognise anything.”

“Have you told my father what he is?”

“I did,” Danielle said. “It won’t be hard for anyone to put the pieces together once people start looking for them. Which they will, when they realise you’re training him.”

“It’s inevitable, I know,” Rufus said. “I wanted him to reach the point where his skills at least weren’t an embarrassment. Jason doesn’t seem to embarrass, though.”

“Oh?”

“He can be frustrating to teach,” Rufus said. “He’s driven, but he has this habit of already knowing the lessons he was meant to learn through hardship.”

“How do you think he manages that?”

“I advise strongly against ever asking him to explain. Something about an old man making a boy put wax on a carriage, then take it off again, because people were mean to him at his school. I think Jason’s world must be a very strange place.”

“Sounds rather intriguing,” she said.

“Then feel free to ask him about it,” Rufus said. “Just do it when I’m somewhere else.”

Danielle laughed.

“When will he find his way into the mirage chamber?” she asked.

“Sooner, rather than later. I want him to use a martial arts skill-book first. I’ve been holding that off to prepare him as best I can, but he’ll need at least a few weeks to

consolidate before his field assessment. So, in a few days, most likely. In the meantime, do you need me to keep coming for Humphrey?"

"No, our family has trainers enough with the stomach for it," Danielle said. "When you bring Jason by, we can have them spar a little."

"I will," Rufus said. "But first, I need to have a talk with my father."

Chapter 49: A Voice From Home

The Adventure Society offered a limited, if valuable, array of services. The Magic Society, by contrast, provided all manner of magical amenities to anyone with the money to pay for them. The main lobby of the Magic Society services building was quite large, with many comfortable chairs. Those who could afford their services were accustomed to luxury.

An elven man in expensive clothes approached. Rufus noted a brooch in the shape of hand inside a circle, the Magic Society emblem.

"Lord Remore," the man said. "Such a pleasure. I'm Pochard Finn, deputy director of the Magic Society here in Greenstone."

Rufus stood up and shook his hand.

"It's just Mr Remore," Rufus said. "One of my ancestors made rather a point about refusing title, and it's become something of a family stance."

"Very principled, I'm sure," Pochard said. "Please, allow me to be your guide to our humble branch. Not as magnificent as what you are used to, I'm sure."

"I wouldn't want to trouble you," Rufus said.

"No trouble at all," Pochard said. "If the director were not indisposed off-campus, I have no doubt he would greet you himself. He certainly wouldn't want you waiting out here with the ordinary people. Title or not, I can comfortably assert that you are far from an ordinary visitor."

"I'm just here to use a communications channel," Rufus said. "I wouldn't want to miss my father because I was socialising."

"Your father," Pochard said. "Will he be visiting our fair city?"

"He will not," Rufus said firmly.

"A shame," Pochard said. "At least allow me to guide you to our speaking chambers."

"Very well," Rufus said. "Lead on."

The speaking chambers were accessed from a long hallway, where a series of doors led into each chamber. Pochard showed no hesitation in explaining how excellent they were

"A man of your background is naturally familiar with speaking chambers," Pochard said, "but were you aware the very best chambers are constructed from watergreen marble? We may just be a remote branch, but our speaking chambers are a point of pride."

“Watergreen marble?” Rufus asked.

“Watergreen marble is one of the higher-grade stones quarried right here in the Greenstone region. It has a strong water affinity, which makes for an excellent connection.”

Rufus thought that Pochard was just talking up his facility, but when he stepping into his assigned speaking chamber, it really was grander than he anticipated. It was larger than others he'd seen, although the layout was normal. Half the room was covered in a pool of water, the dry half with a low, circular platform to stand on. Rather than the usual surfaces, the floor was covered in blue and green tiles, the marble walls had lush plants set into alcoves, while the roof was a colourful mosaic in shades of green and blue. The light in the room was shimmering blue-green, the source of the light being located under the water pool. The air was moist, but fresh and pleasant, with the scent of the sea. Walking into the room felt like stepping onto the ocean floor.

"Mr Pochard," Rufus said. "I must confess, I didn't give much credence to your claims about your speaking chambers. Consider this my apology for doubting your words."

“Gratifying to hear, Mr Remore. I will leave you to your call.”

Rufus turned and shook Pochard’s hand before the elf departed.

“Thank you,” he said with a smile.

Pochard left, closing the door to the chamber behind him. Rufus stood on the circular platform on the floor and waited, enjoying the pleasant atmosphere. He'd spent enough time in plain, cramped, humid speaking chambers to genuinely appreciate the difference.

Finally, the pool of water started stirring, indicating the connection was being made. The light coming through the pool started wildly shimmering. The water rose up from the pool, surging into the shape of Rufus’ father. Colour appeared in the water as if someone had tipped dyes into it, fleshing out the image to a rather excellent facsimile of his father’s features.

Pochard hadn’t been understating the quality of the connection. The image of Rufus’ father, Callum Remore, was startlingly lifelike. When the image shifted from water statue to animation, it replicated his expressions and body language with startling accuracy.

“Son,” the water representation of Callum said. “Good to see you.”

“Father,” Rufus said.

“I know that tone,” Callum said. “What did I do?”

“You’ve been spying on me.”

“Of course I have,” Callum said. “You almost died out there on some nothing contract.”

“Which you only knew about because you were spying on me!”

“It wasn’t spying,” Callum said. “I was only having a few updates sent back. Then you almost got yourself killed and I started spying. I’m surprised Danielle told you.”

“She didn’t tell me,” Rufus said. “I figured it out.”

“Son, if that woman doesn’t want you to know something, you’ll be as ignorant as a newborn babe. If you figured it out, it’s because she led you to water. You only think it was your idea to drink.”

“Well, you need to stop.”

“Of course, son.”

“Did you just lie to me?”

“Of course, son.”

Rufus let out a weary groan.

“So,” Callum said. “Tell me about this outworlder of yours.”

“He’s a bit odd,” Rufus said.

“They’re all odd,” Callum said. “What’s he actually like?”

“Do you remember the first time you told me about outworlders?”

“Hmmm. Wasn’t it when we had that one stay with us at the academy? The pretty one that you-”

“I remember the one, Dad.”

Callum’s water image let out a gleeful chuckle.

“This is a good connection,” Callum said. “I can see you scowling.”

“Dad, do you remember when you told me there were two kinds of outworlders?”

“I do,” Callum said. “The ones that die immediately, and the ones that survive and thrive.”

“Jason is definitely the die immediately type,” Rufus said, “but he survives and thrives anyway.”

“That is odd,” Callum said. “Sounds like trouble.”

“Are you telling me to back off?” Rufus asked. “Because I won’t.”

“Of course you won’t,” Callum said. “Heading for trouble is the whole point of being an adventurer. Otherwise, what’s all the training for?”

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that,” Rufus said. “I have a proposal for the academy.”

“Oh?”

“Not having someone looking over my shoulder has been an education,” Rufus said. “As an adventurer, I’ve gone from thinking I knew everything to realising how much I don’t.”

“That’s good,” Callum said. “A few close scrapes, some costly mistakes. It’ll turn you into a real adventurer.”

“That’s exactly my point,” Rufus said. “It wasn’t until you released me into the wild that I realised how far I have to go. It’s why the Gellers keep training their family here at the south end of nowhere. They can let them loose to make their own mistakes.”

“So, you’re proposing we start sending people there?” Callum asked.

“I am,” Rufus said. “We could establish a graduate station here. The Geller family facilities are well developed, and we could arrange an exchange. They help us get off the ground, and we help them refine their training programs.”

“Have you put this to the Gellers, yet.”

“No,” Rufus said. “I wasn’t going to reach out before clearing it with Grandad. Not to mention that I’d also need specifics to take to them. I’d never make an approach without knowing what I could and couldn’t offer.”

“Good lad,” Callum said. “Alright, I’ll float it to the family. For now, you and I can start having weekly meetings. Being our man on the ground will be a good chance for you to step up in the academy. A project like this won’t be small or quick.”

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be here,” Rufus said. “Emir could arrive any day. I suppose could extend my stay; I don’t have to go back with him when he’s done.”

“Oh, uh...,”

Callum started sheepishly rubbing his chin.

“I was meant to tell you,” he said. “Emir won’t be there for a little while.”

“How little a while are you talking about?” Rufus asked. “And why? We found what he was after.”

“Well, we know you think you found it,” Callum said. “But can you really be certain? One of his other teams found something really promising in the Godspear Islands, so he’s heading there to check it out. So... two months?”

“Two months!”

“Three, at the absolute most,” Callum said. “Well, maybe not the absolute most. And that’s from when he leaves here, obviously. Call it four months.”

“Four months,” Rufus said incredulously.

“Well now you have your project, that works out,” Callum said.

“He doesn’t know that. Did you say he hadn’t left Vitesse yet? What is he doing?”

“There’s been a lot going on,” Callum said. “It’s a busy time.”

Rufus narrowed his eyes at his father’s projection.

“Isn’t it time for the flower wine festival?”

“Is it?” Callum asked, innocently. He wouldn’t meet his son’s eyes, even through the projection.

Rufus ran a hand over his face.

“Alright, Dad,” he said wearily. “Weekly meetings?”

“I’ll send you a message with the times.”

“No, I’ll send you a message. You can work around my schedule.”

“Son...”

“Give my love to Mum. See you next week, Dad.”

Rufus stepped off the circular platform and the image of his father broke apart, splashing into the pool.

“Four months,” he muttered to himself. “Alright, then.”

Rufus stormed through the back gate into Jory’s courtyard. Jason was seated in a meditation pose on a mat while Farrah sat on a chair reading. Gary was cooking meat skewers on a grill fuelled by magic fire.

“Farrah,” Rufus said sharply, “get the book out.”

She glanced at the book in her hands.

“Not that book,” Rufus said. “I mean... the book.”

“The *book* book?” she asked.

“Yes,” Rufus said. “The book book.”

“What’s the book book?” Gary asked.

Jason opened his eyes.

“Why is everyone making chicken noises?” he asked.

“It’s time for you to get your hands on a martial art skill book,” Rufus told him.

“Ooh, nice,” Jason said, getting up and brushing his legs with his hands.

“Wait, that’s what you want the book for?” Farrah asked.

“What book?” Gary asked.

“You know,” Farrah said. “The book. From under the lake.”

“Didn’t we decide to give that to Emir?” Gary asked.

“We did decide that, yes,” Farrah said.

“The contract from Emir wasn’t to find a book,” Rufus said.

“Giving it to Emir was your idea,” Farrah said to Rufus. “You talked us into it.”

“That’s true,” Gary said, prodding at the cooking meat with a fork. “We wanted to sell it.”

“Well, Emir won’t be here for four months, so he’s missing out,” Rufus said.

Gary, poised to shove a whole skewer in his mouth, stopped to look at Rufus.

“Four months?” he asked.

“From when he leaves,” Rufus said.

“He hasn’t left?” Farrah asked.

“Flower wine festival,” Gary mumbled around a mouthful of meat. “You weren’t kidding about this marinade, Jason.”

“One of the others teams has a promising lead,” Rufus said. “He’s going there to check it out first.”

“Which team?” Farrah asked.

“Godspear Islands.”

“Are you kidding me?” Farrah asked. “Mirabelle and her army of idiots? Of course, they think they found it.”

She got up from her chair and started pacing.

“That isn’t the place,” she said. “This is the place. We found the place.”

“I know,” Rufus said.

“What place?” Jason asked.

“It isn’t like we’re just confident this is the place,” Farrah continued. “This is the place.”

“It is,” Rufus said.

“Then why is Emir sailing off in the wrong direction?”

“Well,” Rufus said, “they know we *think* we found it, but...”

“I hope his boat sinks,” Farrah said.

“That’s pretty unlikely,” Gary said.

“So the book?” Rufus asked.

Farrah’s stone chest erupted out of the ground. She opened the lid, reached in and came out with an absurdly large book. It seemed like she should be staggering about, but her small body contained a powerful strength. She slammed the lid of her storage chest down and dropped the book onto it with a resonating thud. It was almost as large and thick itself as the stone chest lid on which it was resting. Bound in thick leather, embossed into the front of the book were the images of two scythes crossed over a skull.

“That’s a hefty and sinister tome you’ve got there,” Jason said, moving to look closer.

“We each agreed to give you a gift,” Rufus said, “as thanks for saving us. Farrah’s you’ve already received. If the others don’t object, I’d like this to be mine.”

"Works for me," Gary mumbled.

"Well, you were always going to get him a skill book," Farrah said. "I have to assume this one is better than most."

"It's obviously special," Jason said. "Where did it come from?"

"We can't tell you that yet," Rufus said.

"You're giving him the book," Farrah said, "but saying where it's from is where you draw the line?"

"The book wasn't in the contract," Rufus said. "Keeping our mouths shut was."

"So, can I use this?" Jason asked, reaching a hand towards the book.

"Not so fast," Rufus said. "Now that we'll be here for a while, we don't have to be in such a rush. I can make sure you're ready before letting you use it."

"And when will that be?" Jason asked.

"I told you when we started," Rufus said. "There's going to be a test."

Chapter 50: The Full Keanu

Rufus swung the staff horizontally, Jason swaying back so it passed in front of him. Rufus kept the momentum, bringing the staff up and over into a downward strike. Jason kept control of his balance, shifting to the side without disrupting the centre line of his body. Rufus kept pushing, not too swiftly, but relentlessly. Jason handled the pressure without tripping or stumbling, even as Rufus started ramping up the speed. Just as Jason thought it would be too much, Rufus stopped.

“Why am I happy?” Rufus asked, neither looking or sounding happy.

“Because you finally got me to learn a lesson the hard way?” Jason asked, turning Rufus’ gaze into a glare.

“What is the lesson?” he asked.

“That the all exercises you put me through; the balancing, the handstands, the footwork. They were never about making me faster, or more agile. It’s about being in full control of my body.”

A slight smile forced itself onto Rufus’ lips.

“Good,” he said.

“Good?” Jason asked.

“Good,” Rufus said.

Jason’s eyes moved over to the huge book still waiting atop Farrah’s stone chest.

“Does that mean I get the book?” Jason asked.

“You’ve clearly been working hard in my absence,” Rufus said. “Unlike some people I could mention.”

“I think he means you,” Gary mumbled at Farrah from around a meat skewer.

Jason walked over and reached out for the massive book.

“Wait,” Rufus said.

“What?” Jason asked.

“Before you use that book,” Rufus said, “you have to understand what it is. By which, I mean, you have to understand what it isn’t.”

“Okay,” Jason said.

“The thing you need to understand about the skill book,” Rufus said, “is that it isn’t going to teach you how to fight.”

“That sounds a bit dodgy,” Jason said. “Isn’t that exactly what the book is for?” Jason asked.

“No,” Rufus said. “It will teach you technique, not how to use it. It’s a shortcut that saves you years of repetitive exercise, but that isn’t fighting. Any martial system, at its core, is a method of effectively leveraging strength. That makes it a tool useful for fighting, but the one who does the fighting must still be you. Even the best hammer doesn’t push the nails in itself.”

“There isn’t a magic hammer that does that?” Jason asked.

Rufus gave him a disapproving look.

“Jason, there’s a time to be clever pendant, and a time to shut your mouth for once and learn something.”

“Sorry,” Jason said.

“So, martial arts are a tool,” Rufus continued. “Your physical attributes and essence abilities will impact how that tool is used, but only experience will teach you how to turn form into function. Only using it against actively resisting opponents will let you make it your own, instead of something a book gave you.”

Rufus walked over to where Jason was standing next to the book and placed a hand on it.

“The book will give you the techniques,” he said. “We will show you how, when and why to use them.”

“By beating it into me,” Jason said.

“That’s right,” Gary said from behind the cooker. “We’re going to beat you like a drum.”

“Suddenly I’m a lot less excited,” Jason said. “Couldn’t you just let me have my moment of happiness?”

“I just don’t want you to think learning martial arts from a book will magically make you good at fighting.”

“That’s a disappointment,” Jason said, “given its literal purpose is to magically make me good at fighting.”

“Like I said,” Rufus told him. “We’ll teach you to understand the difference.”

“With our fists,” Gary added. “And our knees, elbows, and such.”

“Can I just use the book, now, please?”

“Go ahead,” Rufus said.

Taking a deep breath, Jason reached out and placed a hand on the book.

Item: [Way of the Reaper: Five Forms I] (iron rank, legendary)

A magical book detailing the foundational techniques for all five forms of the Way of the Reaper (consumable, skill book).

- Requirements: Ability to use skill books.
 - Effect: Imparts iron-rank techniques of the Way of the Reaper's five forms.
 - You are able to use skill book [Way of the Reaper: Five Forms I]. Use Y/N?
-

Jason stood still, hand on the book, eyes closed. He took another deep breath.

"Something wrong?" Rufus asked.

"I'm just not rushing this," Jason said. "It's a big moment for me. I'll probably go the full Keanu."

"What does that mean?" Farrah asked.

"It means be quiet and let me have my magic kung fu moment."

"Kung fu is what they call punching people where Jason comes from, right?" Gary asked.

"What's happening?" Jory asked, wandering out from the clinic's back door.

"Jason's about to use a skill book," Farrah said.

"Will everyone please shut up!" Jason barked, taking his hand off the book and glaring at the others.

"Just give him his quiet moment," Rufus said. "He won't take the book in as well if he's agitated."

"That's true," Farrah said. "Sorry, Jason. Try clearing your mind, like you're going to meditate. It might help."

"Thanks," Jason said. He placed his hand back on the book, closing his eyes. He did as Farrah suggested, emptying his mind and calming his emotions.

"Do you think he's going to take long?"

"Shut up, Gary," Farrah said.

"I'm just wondering if I should grill some more meat."

There was a sizzling sound, followed quickly by a yelp of pain.

"What did I say about lava in the yard?" Jory asked.

Jason let the sounds drift away, letting only the rhythm of his breathing occupy his mind. He felt his body drift away from the world, floating through nothingness. All sensation left him, except for the leather of the book under his hand.

➤ You are able to use skill book [Way of the Reaper: Five Forms I]. Use Y/N?

He mentally assented and the huge book floated up off the chest to hover over Jason's head. The ponderous cover flipped open and text started rising from the page, disembodied runes turning from black to glowing gold. There was a sizzling sound, like meat on a grill as the text transmuted. The first page of the book turned itself over as the last of its text floated off and the second page began disgorging its contents into the air. With each page, the process grew faster and faster, the glowing jumble of text in the air forming a thick cloud. Even with the increasing pace at which the pages were beginning to turn, it was taking a long time to make it through the massive tome.

"Do skill books normally take this long?" Jory whispered to Farrah.

"No they don't," Farrah said, "although I've never seen a skill book that big before."

The cloud of text kept growing, spreading down until Jason was completely obscured. Finally, the sizzling stopped. They couldn't see the heavy book any more, but they heard it hit the ground with a thud. The cloud of golden text started darting about like a swarm of angry bees. Inside, they could hear Jason grunting in pain.

"Hold on," Rufus called out. "Try and last out the whole thing."

"Is he alright?" Jory asked.

"Using a skill book is strenuous," Farrah explained. "The more it's trying to teach you, the greater the strain."

"People often pass out while using them," Rufus said, "but the information isn't passed on as well once they're unconscious. It takes them longer to consolidate what they've learned afterwards."

The cloud shrank over time until they could once again see Jason. He was staggering in place, arms out to keep balance. They watched the golden text diving into his body.

"You're doing good!" Gary cheered him on.

"Hold on as best you can," Rufus encouraged.

Finally the last of the text sank into Jason, leaving him standing unsteadily, but still upright. He took in a sharp breath.

"Whoa," he croaked.

"Still standing," Rufus said. "You've done well."

"How do you feel?" Farrah asked.

Jason stood up straight, eyes gleaming in triumph.

"I know kung fueeeaaauugh..."

Vomit spewed out of him and he fell to his knees, coughing up more before toppling onto his side, unconscious.

“Is he alright?” Jory asked.

“For Jason,” Gary said, “this is actually pretty good.”

In the fighting pits of the fortress, two women were squaring off inside a steel cage. The first was Sophie Wexler, the Nightingale. The other was called the Queen of Thorns, for the thorny whip manifested by her power. It had length enough that no part of the cage was safe, and being a power rather than a weapon, the Queen had devilish control over it. Sophie was cut and bloody from numerous wounds, but the weakness of the whip was its inability to deal critical damage. So long as it failed to ensnare an enemy, it couldn't deal a finishing blow.

Sophie's ability was speed. Not only was she fast, but she could run up walls or even over water. She was boxed in by the cage, but she pushed her reflexes to the limit to avoid being entangled. She had suffered lashes, but the whip had never managed to tie her down.

Sophie ran up the side of the cage as the whip lashed under her, flipping off and into a kick, but her opponent jumped back out of reach. Having missed the kick, Sophie landed off-balance. Seeing her chance, the Queen flung the whip quickly, wrapping it around Sophie's forearm. Grinning triumph at Sophie, she only found resolution on her enemy's face. Too late, she realised she'd been baited.

Sophie shifted her seemingly-unbalanced stance, bracing her weight and yanking on the whip with both arms. The Queen stumbled forward and Sophie ducked behind, looping the slack whip around the Queen's neck to choke her with her own power. The Queen dismissed the whip and Sophie acted quickly before the Queen had a chance to conjure it up again.

Sophie swept the Queen's unbalanced feet out from under her, grabbed her by the hair and smashed her face into the floor. The hard-earth floor of the Fortress was practically stone and Sophie smashed the Queen's face into it a second time and a third, over and over until there was a sharp crack and the Queen's body went limp.

Skin painted red, silver hair matted with sweat and blood, Sophie left the cage without looking back.

“Your winner, ladies and gentlemen... the Nightingale!”

Three viewing boxes, normally empty in the early afternoon, all had occupants watching Sophie's match. In one as Cole Silva, the newest member of the Big Three crime lords of Old City. With his father's passing, the old man's protection could no longer keep Sophie from his grip. Just as he had been closing his fingers around her, she had run to Clarissa Ventress. Now Ventress had Sophie fighting ever more-dangerous opponents. There was every chance she would be ruined before he could snatch her back into his clutches. Watching her bloody form stride away from the cage, he slapped the fruit platter in front of him across the room.

In her own viewing box, Clarissa Ventress was happily imagining the look on Silva's face. She was less happy with Sophie's friend, Belinda.

"You can't keep doing this!" Belinda said. "You're going to get her killed."

Clarissa sighed, her good mood deflated. She responded to Belinda without deigning to look at her.

"The arrangement," Clarissa said, "was that dear Sophie would help me provoke Silva into the kind of rash action that his father always kept him from making."

She turned her head toward Belinda.

"The form that provocation takes is for me to decide," Clarissa continued. "How Sophie survives it is for her to figure out."

"You filthy..."

Belinda cut herself off as Clarissa's enormous bodyguard stirred. Darnell had the predatory features universal to leonids, and Belinda took a step back.

"That's what I thought," Clarissa said. "I don't want to hear your pitiful whining again. Go tend to your injured friend."

Belinda desperately wanted to tear a chunk out Clarissa's throat, but she was not the match of Clarissa or her bodyguard, two of the criminal underworld's rare bronze-rankers. She also knew Sophie would be awkwardly applying medicine right now and making a complete mess of it, so she turned and left.

The third box in which the match had been closely viewed belonged to Lucian Lamprey. Old City might be the territory of the Big Three, but as Director of the Magic Society, he might as well have been the sky above them. If nothing else, as a silver-ranker he could personally tear through Old City's strongest enforcers like they were mewling children.

Outside Lamprey's viewing box, Cassowary Finn hesitated before knocking on the door. As the son of Lucian's friend and deputy, Pochard, Cassowary had been installed as Lucian's dogsbody and normally enjoyed the man's favour. His lack of progress in finding

information on the Nightingale had turned that favour on its head. Hoping that was about to be rectified, he knocked on the door.

“Enter!” Lucian’s voice barked from inside.

Chapter 51: Song of the Nightingale

"Enter!" Lucian's voice bellowed, and Cassowary opened the door. Following him in was a nervous-looking, middle-aged man with a balding head and noticeable paunch.

"Cassowary," Lucian said, his forehead creasing into a frown. Elven features weren't well-suited to malevolence, but Lucian made it work.

"I take it," Lucian said, "that you're showing your face here because you have what I asked for."

"Yes, sir, Mr Lucian," Cassowary said quickly. "This man is a bookmaker here in the pits and has been for some years. He knows all about the girl."

The middle-aged man visibly gulped as Lucian looked him up and down.

"Name?" Lucian demanded.

"Hubert, sir. They call me Bert the Bookie."

"Not your name, imbecile. The fighter, Nightingale."

"Sorry, sir. Her name's Sophie, sir. Sophie Wexler."

"You just heard Cassowary tell me you knew everything about her which, for your sake, I very much hope is true. Tell me everything, Bert the Bookie."

"Everything, sir, yes, sir," Hubert said. "She wasn't born local but came over with her father, when she was real little, like. This was at the time of the monster surge before last. I remember that's when it was because her father was part of this merchant group. The head of their muscle. Seems they hadn't been doing so well and gambled big on a sailing run during the surge. There's a reason no-one sails during a surge, though, and they lost everything. Only a handful made it in on some dinghies, including the girl and her old man. She couldn't have been more than two or three years old."

"He took a little girl out to sea during a monster surge?" Cassowary asked. "What a prick."

"Shut up," Lucian said to Cassowary, then returned his gaze to Hubert. "You, keep talking."

"Well, the merchant group was done," Hubert continued. "No ships, not even the money for passage back after the surge was over. The girl's old man went to work for Silva. Not Cole Silva who's in charge now, obviously. His old dad. Good man, too. Tough, but fair, you know?"

"Get on with it."

"Sorry, sir. So, the girl's old man could fight, like, proper fight, and catches the old man's attention. Does well under Silva Senior for a lot of years, until there's a problem. Silva Junior takes an interest in the girl."

"Hardly a surprise," Lucian said. "He has eyes."

"She is a looker, sir. But she didn't want any part of Silva the younger, and none could blame her. He'd left more than a few professional women in no state to undertake their profession, if you catch my drift. Old man Silva, he knows what his son is, and likes the girl's father. So he tells his son that it's hands-off."

"I bet he took that well," Lucian said.

"About how you'd expect, sir, yes. He did as he was told, but didn't make things pleasant for the girl. Got to the point that her father decided to get her out. He just didn't go about it a good way."

"Oh?"

"The father takes out a loan from Silva the senior. A hefty one. Tries to start up his own trade expedition, but even without a monster surge, the man ain't got no luck with the sea."

"Monster attack?"

"Pirates. Was quite the excitement, from what I hear; father and daughter fighting pirates back to back. Managed to fight them off, too, but the father didn't last long after, and neither did the ship. For the second time in her life the girl arrives at the city in a dinghy, and this time she's got no father and a shipload of inherited debt. She would have been sixteen, seventeen back then. She had an essence her old man had bought, which had just made the debt all the bigger."

"That was when she started pit fighting," Cassowary contributed.

"Shut up, Cassowary," Lucian barked. "Carry on, Bert."

"Now, I knew the father and daughter going back to when her father was muscle here in the Fortress," Hubert said. "He was a hard man. No essences, but I'd seen him put down people who had one, even two. He never fought in the pits himself, but the fighters showed him nothing but respect. His girl, as it turns out, was even better. Run up walls, fly through the damn air like a bird."

"Nightingale," Lucian said.

"That's right," Hubert said. "She had a good run. Took some beatings early on, but she learned fast. Add that to the way she looks and she got some attention."

"She fights for Silva?" Lucian asked.

"She did back then, for Silva the elder," Hubert said. "He looked out for her, kept his son off her back, which Silva Junior did not care for. But the old man took a real shine to the girl. Eventually, she gave up the ring, found some other way to pay the old man back. High-end thieving was what I heard. She had a friend who made the plans and the tools, she did the second-storey work."

"Then why is she back in the pits?" Lucian asked. "And who does she fight for, now?"

"That goes back to when Old Man Silva died," Hubert said. "There was talk old man Silva wasn't going to pass the mantle down to his son," Hubert said. "Too impulsive, too beholden to his own appetites. Word is, the old man was going to step back and pass it to one of the old-guard before he passed. Someone who'd respect the old man's treatment of the girl."

"But he didn't pass it on to anyone else," Lucian said.

"No, he didn't," Hubert agreed. "Couple of months ago, the old man went in his sleep. There were rumours, of course, but nothing came of them. Since the old man hadn't said otherwise, the son stepped in. Damn near the first thing he did was go after the girl. As far as I know, she'd almost cleared the old debt, but now it's in the hands of Silva Junior. He made plenty clear the only payment he'll take. She and her friend have a skill-set, though, and made themselves scarce. Found their way to another of the Big Three, Clarissa Ventress. Cut a deal to protect them from Silva."

"So Ventress is making her fight again?" Lucian asked.

"Word is, she's only doing it to annoy Silva."

"What does she get out of that?"

"The transition from father to son hasn't been smooth for Silva's people," Hubert explained. "The old man was stable and reliable, while it's no secret his son is just the opposite. He ousted his father's old guard, put in his own people. That's left a lot of folks uncertain and nervous about Silva's position in the Big Three. There's been talk about the other two snatching away at of Silva's territory. Word is, the only reason they haven't moved is they don't want Island folk coming down here. Begging your pardon, sir."

"So Ventress is using the girl," Lucian said. "She wants to make Silva do something stupid."

"The Big Three know better than to rock the boat too hard," Hubert said. "They don't want folk like you, sir, coming in and dealing with them."

"But if Cole Silva does something loud and impulsive," Lucian said, "then Ventress steps in to settle it down. She claims new territory and makes good with the Island powers at the same time."

"You see it clear," Hubert said. "If I might say, sir, you're as smart as I've heard."

Lucian laughed.

"I usually detest sycophancy," Lucian said, "but I like you, Bert the Bookie."

He opened a drawer, taking out a pouch of coins and tossing it to Hubert.

"You're a good storyteller," Lucian said. "If you come across any others worth telling, you came and find Cassowary, here."

"Thanking you, sir, I'll be sure and do that."

Hubert departed the viewing box, coin pouch clutched possessively in both hands. That left Lucian and Cassowary alone, the younger man looking nervously at his employer. Lucian glanced at the younger man, his own face unreadable. Cassowary grew increasingly more unnerved as the silence extended.

"Adequate," Lucian said finally, sending relief spilling over Cassowary's face. "I want you to arrange a meeting with Clarissa Ventress. Can I rely on you for that?"

"Yes, Mr Lucian, sir."

Belinda arrived at the Broadstreet Clinic to find a notice on the door. It announced that Mr Tillman wasn't in for the day. Basic medical supplies could be purchased from the reception and Mr Asano would be in at the usual times, but strictly for emergency cases.

Inside, the waiting room was quite full.

"Sorry, Mr Asano," she heard Janice the receptionist say. "The notice said emergencies only, but of course, people ignore it."

"Or can't read," a man said, coming out from the back room. It was the same man who had given Sophie the free ointment. His sharp features and dark, clear eyes looked stern until a friendly smile lit up his face like a light.

"Who's next, Janice?" he asked.

Janice called up a young mother with her son, the man leading them into the back. Belinda then approached the reception desk.

"I'm looking to buy some more ointment and potions," Belinda told Janice. "And some crystal wash, if you have it."

The magic cleaning fluid was more expensive than a shower, but Sophie kept ending up drenched in blood. She knew Jory produced some to sell at the Adventure Society trade hall.

"All out of crystal wash, I'm afraid," Janice said. "Mr Asano keeps buying it all. He's very particular about cleanliness. He says there is tiny dirt that you can't see, but can make

you sick. Sounds like nonsense to me, but Mr Tillman says he's right, so there you have it."

"Who is this guy?" Belinda asked. "Another alchemist?"

"No, he's training to be an adventurer," Janice said. "He's always out back, lifting weights or meditating. He just pops in every once in a while to cure everyone lined up with his abilities. Does it for free, too."

"For free?"

"For free," Janice confirmed.

"Doesn't that hurt Jory's business?"

"Oh, he never makes much money off the clinic, anyway," Janice said. "Mostly he sells things at the trade hall or even takes the occasional adventuring contract. That's where he is today."

"So what does this Asano get out of it, if he's working for free?" Belinda asked.

"Doesn't that seem a bit suspect, to you?"

"No, Mr Asano isn't like that," Janice said. "He says it lets him practise his healing ability, and he is always practising so hard. But really, I think he just likes helping people."

"Still sounds suspicious to me."

"Oh, you wouldn't think so if you got to know him," Janice said. "It's also good that Mr Tillman has a friend. He used to spend all his time upstairs with his little experiments."

"Still, keep an eye on him," Belinda said. "You should never trust people who say they just want to help."

Chapter 52:

Pain

"I'm taking it up to five," Rufus' voice echoed through the mirage chamber. Jason stood waiting in his illusionary body. He was under the dome, but it was hidden by the false landscape. His senses told him he was standing on a desert hillside, ancient ruins all around him and dead enemies at his feet.

The mirage chamber was a strange experience. To Jason's senses, everything was real, including himself. He felt the impact of every blow and the pain of every wound, even as his body lay unharmed in the control room.

The wounds vanished from Jason's body and the fallen enemies around him vanished. In their place, five men appeared and immediately jumped to the attack.

Jason's new art was different in many ways from what he had expected, although in hindsight such differences were obvious. In his own world, martial arts were designed to fight other humans, operating within a fixed range of physical capability. Adventurers had to fight anything from people with superhuman attributes to shark-crabs to spiders the size of a delivery van. It was tricky to put a wrist lock on something that didn't have a wrist.

The Way of the Reaper consisted of five forms, which shifted the combat style's priorities to meet changing circumstances. They were not organised to confront specific challenges, but rather to meet challenges in specific ways. The form, Way of the Sage, for example, was the most mobile of the five stances. It was of equal use against multiple opponents in complicated terrain as it was against a giant creature with many legs.

The Way of the Hierophant form was direct and aggressive, while the Way of the Trickster was the exact opposite. Full of strange movements and unconventional attacks, it reminded Jason of drunken boxing. The Way of the Hunter offered debilitating attacks against the unaware victims, and methods to hone in on the weak point of a monster. Against human opponents, the Way of the Hermit put attackers off-balance to set up devastating counters. Against monsters, it was used to defend against unusual attacks from the most bizarre creatures.

All together, it made for a comprehensive style, incorporating strikes, grapples, even acrobatics. How to move quickly and quietly, or with swift, breakneck efficiency. All the things he had been learning came into play, from Rufus' footwork to Gary's movement training, even Farrah's situational awareness techniques.

Despite all of that, Rufus' proclamations about the nature of fighting came to pass. The result of his sudden martial skills reminded Jason of playing a video game for the first

time. His avatar may have an array of amazing abilities, but his fumbling efforts to use them left him beaten, battered and failing to live up to the potential. Boxed in by the five illusionary enemies,

He was pinned down and savagely beaten. Rufus took longer to end the simulation than Jason would have liked, but eventually he did and Jason woke up in his real body. He swung his legs off the platform he was laying on, letting out a groan as he rubbed his side.

“I swear I can still feel it,” he said.

“Phantom pain,” Rufus said. “You get used to it.”

“Five enemies was a little much,” Jason said. “I could barely handle four.”

“You want to go back down?” Rufus asked.

“No, the challenge is good.”

“That’s what I want to hear,” Rufus said.

“Still better five illusionary goons than one of Humphrey,” Jason said. “I’d call him a monster, but I’ve fought monsters. He’s worse.”

“Humphrey has been training since he was able to walk upright,” Rufus said. “He and I have that in common. A book won’t close that gap overnight.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said.

“What did your parents teach you when you were growing up?” Rufus asked.

“My dad’s parents came from another country,” Jason said. “My mum was very big on having us learn about it. The language, the culture. Dad himself couldn’t care less, and I was the same. It was really my brother’s thing.”

“Well,” Rufus said, “you can speak the language now.”

Jason tilted his head thoughtfully.

“Huh. I guess I can.”

Jason and Rufus left the mirage chamber and started back for the city. Rufus asking about his family had left him uncharacteristically quiet. Jason didn’t have a lot of contact with his family after they had fallen out. When he dropped out of university he didn’t move back from Melbourne. The only ones he saw regularly were his much older sister, along with her husband and daughter. Uncle Jason was the cheapest childcare in town, but for all his complaining, he loved that little girl. From literally a world away, conflicts that once seemed intractable now looked small and meaningless.

As they made their way from the grounds of the Geller Estate, Rufus looked over at Jason, locked in contemplation. He wasn’t used to be the one making conversation.

“How are your essence abilities coming along?” Rufus asked.

“What? Oh, good, yeah” Jason said. “I’m getting better with the shadow teleport. I’ve been testing its limitations.”

“Oh?”

“It needs a distinct shadow,” Jason explained. “I can’t just teleport around wherever I like in the dark.”

“So you need at least some light,” Rufus said.

“Yeah,” Jason said, “but I have a solution for that. Shadow jumping isn’t the only ability I’ve been working on.”

“Good,” Rufus said. “Mastering your essence abilities is crucial. What have you learned?”

Jason stopped and looked around. They were on a wide path through a grove of what looked like banyan trees. Like most of the Geller estate’s winding pathways, the vegetation shaded the path from the punishing sun.

“This’ll work,” Jason said. “You remember how my cloak can light up with stars?”

“I do.”

“Watch this.”

Jason’s shadowy cloak appeared around him like dark smoke. Stars started to appear upon it, lighting it up as Rufus had seen in the past. Then the stars started floating off the cloak, more and more of them drifting out, spreading their cool light under the shady trees. The lights weren’t overpowering, filling the area with shadowy nooks and crannies. Jason started moving around. but the star motes didn’t move with him, floating independently.

“So you can bring your own shadows,” Rufus said.

“That’s the idea,” Jason said. “I’ve been practising at night. Once I have it down, I should be a proper menace in the dark.”

“Well, keep at it,” Rufus said. “Ideally, you will have solid control of your abilities for the Adventure Society assessment. It’s only a couple of weeks away now.”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I’ve come so far since I was stumbling around that hedge maze with no pants, but it feels like there’s still so much further to go.”

“The only thing you can do with that feeling,” Rufus said, “is to get used to it. I’ve been going through one form of training or another for as long as I can remember, and I still feel like that.”

The interior of Lucian Lamprey’s viewing box was spacious and split into two levels. The smaller, higher level was at the back. Behind Lucian’s heavy wooden desk was the

luxurious chair in which he spent most of his day. The larger space was a relaxed lounging area, with plush chairs and a comfortable couch. They were arrayed in a semicircle around the viewing window, with a low refreshments table in the middle.

Lucian had descended from his usual perch as a gesture to his visitor, awaiting her in one of the soft chairs in the viewing lounge. Respect was not the same as deference, however, and he didn't stand as he waved her to another of the chairs. The director of the Magic Society did not stand up to meet a crime lord.

"Thank you for your kind invitation," Clarissa Ventress said. Her bodyguard, Darnell, remained outside the door. He rarely was away from her side, but Ventress was at a rare disadvantage. The Fortress was the symbol of power in Old City, and she was one of its rulers. In front of Lucian Lamprey, however, she was reminded that Old City's power was only hers so long as the Island had no interest in taking it from her. Lucian Lamprey represented both danger and opportunity.

"You have been the Fortress' most important patron for some time now," Ventress said. "I'm delighted you've given me the privilege of a meeting."

Lucian nakedly ran his eyes over Clarissa. He could sense her bronze-rank aura, see the body sculpted into lithe perfection by the magic of her essences. She wore an exquisite green dress that both commanded and provoked. Lucian had heard the delta contained several breeds of snake that were beautiful in their colouration, but deadly to encounter. He had the same impression of Clarissa Ventress.

"The pleasure is genuinely mine," he told her.

Lucian's assistant Cassowary brought drinks brought refreshments, sitting them on the table as Lucian and Clarissa exchanged some more niceties.

"As you may be aware," Lucian said, "I am an enthusiast of the fights here in the Fortress."

"I have heard as such," Clarissa said.

"Normally it is the evening battles that interest me. Fighters with a full set of essences. But lately, I have found one of the lower-card fighters to be highly compelling. One of your fighters."

Clarissa smiled. The key to controlling a person was finding what they wanted. Now she understood what Lucian wanted, her concerns melted away.

"The Nightingale," she said.

It was hardly a leap of deduction. A certain kind of man took perverse pleasure in breaking the will of a strong woman. It was the reason Sophie made such a useful stick

with which to prod Cole Silva. Clarissa enjoyed such men, as she found them weak and easy to handle.

"Her real name is Sophie Wexler," Clarissa said. "She came into my employ under the condition that I would protect her."

"Give her to me."

"Of course, I would like to do nothing else," Clarissa said. "But there are complications."

Lucian scowled.

"You must understand," Clarissa said, "that my deal to protect her is widely known. That knowledge is no small part of where the protection comes from. I have gotten where I am in no small part on the strength of my reputation. If I make a deal to protect a person, then hand them over to someone else, I am no longer able to vouchsafe any agreement on the strength of my world alone."

"And if I just decide to take her?" Lucian asked.

"Then no one in Old City could stop you," Clarissa said. "But if Old City was all you had to worry about, you already would have. The Director of the Magic Society can't just go around kidnapping women for his own pleasure, and that kind of thing has a way of getting around. What you need is to have her placed under your power in such a way that will not be given a second glance."

"Go on," Lucian said.

"I think, perhaps," Clarissa said, "there is a way in which we can have both of our needs met. It will take some effort on my part, but the conclusion should be mutually satisfying."

"Explain," Lucian demanded.

"You must understand that one's word is not something that can be repaired. Once broken, it stays broken. I made an agreement to protect the girl from external influences, in return for certain services. Should something befall her in the course of providing those services, I cannot be expected to protect her from herself. You may or may not be aware, but she is a professional thief. If she were caught through lack of ability in her chosen trade, then I could hardly be blamed. Once she was in the hands of the legal system, I have no doubt a man of such staggering influence as yourself could take charge of the matter from there."

"I do believe I could," Lucian said thoughtfully. "But can you get her there?"

"It will require me to take some pains," Clarissa said. "But what's a little pain in service to a man such as yourself?"

Chapter 53: Nightlife

With Jason's Adventure Society field assessment looming closer by the day, Rufus, Gary and Farrah pushed him harder than ever. As a release, they would spend their evenings exploring the night time entertainments offered by the city. Danielle Geller acted as their guide to local society, usually with her son, Humphrey, in tow.

The symphony was a revelation to Jason. The concert hall was situated in the guild district, conveniently close to their lodgings, and they enjoyed the view from the Geller's private viewing box.

The instruments weren't what he recognised, although many were similar, at least in appearance. It was the magic they contained that made the performance as magnificent visually as it was musically. As they played, dancing streamers of light rose up from the instruments, galloping out over the audience to frolic in consonance with the music. Harmony of light and sound came together to transfigure the performance into something unlike any Jason had experienced before.

"How often do they put this on?" Jason leaned over to ask Danielle.

"The full symphony? Once per month, although smaller performances happen all through the week."

"Is there a membership or something I can get?"

"There's a patronage program with the Musical Society," Danielle said. "I can introduce you to some people from the Musical Society if that is of interest to you."

"Please and thank you."

At an evening of ballroom dancing, they encountered the young acolyte of knowledge, Gabrielle Pellin.

"Fancy that," Danielle said innocently.

When Humphrey failed to muster up the courage for an approach, he was left watching in horror as Jason taught her a dance from his own world. After Jason slipped the string quartet a few coins, they claimed the floor to demonstrate it in full, to the applause of the gathering.

Afterwards, Jason escorted her in the direction of Humphrey, Danielle and Jason's friends.

"You're quite the spirited dancer," Gabrielle told Jason as they walked leisurely around the dance floor. "You never did tell me the name."

"It's called the tango," Jason said.

"Is it well known, in your world?" she asked.

"It's probably the most famous dance there is."

"It was my older sister, who taught me to dance," Jason said. "I wasn't very interested until my father gave me some sage advice. He told me that if I wanted to be successful in love, I needed to learn three things. How to dance, how to cook, and how to keep my damn mouth shut."

"How did that work out?" Gabrielle asked.

"Well, Jason said, "I can dance and I can cook. Gabrielle, you'll remember Humphrey Geller."

"Of course," she said. "I haven't assessed that many people for the Adventure Society, but of those I have, I think he may have been the most talented."

"You realise you assessed me right after?"

"I do," she said primly.

"Ouch," Jason said, turning his gaze to Humphrey. "It seems this rose still has her thorns. Humphrey, I think I'll leave this next dance to you."

They both looked to Humphrey, who was looking nervous. His sheepish embarrassment could not hide the broad shoulders and chiselled features, however. He was another in a long line of annoyingly attractive people Jason was getting to know.

"I think that would be delightful," Gabrielle said, taking mercy on him.

"What do you say, Humphrey?" Jason asked.

"That... you... I would like that very much."

Unlike most society hotspots, the theatre district was actually located in Old City, quite close to the Fortress. It allowed members of high society to seem like they were heading to a play instead of the less-savoury delights of the city's chief den of iniquity. Leaving a private viewing box, Jason and his companions discussed their opinions of the play.

"The stage combat was actually rather impressive," Rufus said. "I found the plot to be a little slight, however. I like a performance with something to say."

"It did have something to say," Gary said. "That sword fights are great. The good guys win, the bad guys lose, the end. I liked it."

Jason was shaking his head.

"You disagree?" Danielle asked him.

"I'm probably just misreading it because of the difference in culture," Jason said.

"It's not like you to be diplomatic," Rufus said. "Just say what you really think."

"I think it did have something to say," Jason said. "I think the main characters weren't the heroes; they were the villains. I think the whole play was a critique of hereditary power structures and by overcoming the antagonists, the central characters were restoring a state of oppression."

"You think the main characters were the villains?" Rufus asked.

"I do," Jason said.

"I don't see it," Rufus said.

"Don't you have a childhood friend who's a member of some royal family?" Jason asked.

"He does," Farrah said.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Rufus asked.

They exited the theatre through the doors reserved for private box holders, where members of society were reboarding their carriages. Jason noticed a woman with the same silver-rank aura and physical perfection of Danielle. She broke away from her own group of ladies, making a beeline for Danielle.

"Danielle," the woman greeted. "Always lovely to see you. Young Master Humphrey. And you must be Rufus Remore, with your erstwhile companions, of course."

"Lady Thalia Mercer," Danielle introduced the lady.

Thalia's eyes settled on Jason.

"We haven't had the pleasure," she said. "You must be the young man people are getting so curious about."

"I'm no one important," Jason said.

"Yet, you keep important company," Thalia said.

"I do?" he asked. "I don't really know these people. I'm only here because I won a raffle."

Farrah snorted a laugh, while Rufus ran an exasperated hand over his face.

"Wait, there was a raffle?" Gary asked, only to be shushed by Farrah.

"This is Jason Asano," Danielle introduced, a smile playing over her lips. "He will be taking his field assessment for the Adventure Society when Humphrey retakes his. I assume your son will be there as well?"

"He will," Thalia said unhappily. "I tried to convince my husband that Thadwick would benefit from additional training, but he was quite adamant."

Thalia turned to Rufus, the man who had failed her son during the previous assessment.

"You know, Mr Remore," she said, "you rather overturned the fruit cart with how you conducted the last assessment."

"I'm sorry if you feel your son was treated unfairly," Rufus said, "but since he had previously passed, perhaps it would have been better not to put him forward for reassessment."

Thalia laughed.

"I couldn't agree more," Thalia said, to Rufus' surprise. "However, my husband cannot seem to help poking his fingers into things best left alone."

"It's a shame you weren't here when Thalia's daughter was tested," Danielle said. "Thalia oversaw her training personally, and I have no doubt she would have passed. Where is Cassandra, this evening?"

"Out in the delta somewhere, on a contract," Thalia said. "I do look forward to introducing you, Mr Remore."

After some more niceties, Thalia excused herself and the group boarded the Geller family carriage. It was one of the ones drawn by magic rather than animals and was larger than the equivalents from Jason's own world.

"I do believe Thalia is trying to set you up with her daughter," Danielle told Rufus.

"He's used to it," Farrah said.

"If she's anything like her brother," Rufus said, "I'd rather she didn't. I've never seen anyone that incompetent undertake a field assessment before. I'm convinced the other members of his group passed because they honed their abilities covering for that idiot. It was to the point that it could be a whole new training methodology. The trick would be finding people so aggressively incapable."

"You'll find her daughter to be a very different prospect," Danielle said. "Cassandra is a remarkable woman, and right about your age. Actually, she rather reminds me of Jason."

"You're kidding," Rufus said.

"Oh, at a glance, they seem different," Danielle said. "She's more of a knife to Jason's hammer, but they both seem to enjoy provocation as a social tool."

"On second thoughts," Rufus said, looking warily at Jason, "I might prefer to deal with the brother."

Sophie and Belinda were summoned to Clarissa Ventress' home instead of the Fortress; a sprawling manor in Old City's canal district. The canal district had its own internal city wall. It was a legacy of time before the Island, when the district was home to

the city elite. It had been left to those who had wealth but lacked in prestige, preferring to stand tall in Old City than go underfoot on the Island.

The two women were led through the compound, past various thugs standing guard. Centuries ago, Clarissa's residence had been the seat of the Mercer family. The grounds were quite expansive, with more than one canal flowing through it.

Inside the house itself, they were guided by Clarissa's hulking leonid bodyguard, Darnell. Clarissa was waiting for them in a parlour, sitting at a table with morning tea set out. Hers was the only seat in the room.

"Ladies," greeted them. "I have good news for you."

"I don't suppose it's that Sophie's done with the fighting pits," Belinda said sullenly.

"Actually, it is," Clarissa said.

Sophie and Belinda both looked up sharply.

"Really?" Belinda asked.

"Yes," Clarissa said. "She's had her last pit fight."

"Then what is it you want me doing next?" Sophie asked, eyes narrowing as she looked at Clarissa.

"So cynical," Clarissa said.

"Just say it," Sophie said.

"You two were an excellent team," Clarissa said. "I suspect that even now, the two of you are the only ones who know exactly how many jobs you pulled for Old Man Silva. I just want you back to doing what you do best."

"The deal was that we help you provoke Silva," Sophie said. "Now you want us to steal from him?"

"Of course not," Clarissa said. "I would never put you in that position."

"Then what?" Sophie demanded.

"It is well known that for almost a decade now, the Silva family has enjoyed the services of a pair of excellent thieves. When those same thieves start robbing the social elite, right out in public, the pressure on Silva will be considerable"

"Are you crazy?" Belinda yelled, stepping angrily forward. Clarissa's bodyguard moved towards her, but Clarissa casually waved him back.

"This will be the last task I assign you," Clarissa said. "Naturally, stealing from Greenstone's wealthiest will get adventurers investigating. Once they realise that the Silva family's most capable thieves are the most likely culprits, the pressure on Silva will be immense."

“Are you really willing to risk bringing the powers from the Island down on your own head?” Sophie asked.

“It’s hardly a risk,” Clarissa said. “What they’ll find is that after conducting a series of expertly-carried out robberies, the thieves who have worked for the Silva family for years are no longer in the city. Because, having met your end of the deal, you will be far from here, as promised. With a goodly amount of money for your troubles.”

Belinda opened her mouth to snap back a response, but was silenced by a gesture from Sophie.

“Alright,” Sophie said. Belinda wrenched her head to look at Sophie as if she’d lost her mind. Sophie gave a slight shake of the head to keep her silent.

“Excellent,” Clarissa said. “Now, your first target-”

“No,” Sophie interrupted.

“Excuse me?” Clarissa asked.

“The goal is to draw attention down on Silva,” Sophie said, “not to undertake any specific robbery. So, it doesn’t matter what we take, or from who, so long as it’s high profile and it’s public. Belinda and I will choose the targets and the timing.”

“Choosing the targets,” Clarissa said, “means I can meet more than one objective at a time.”

“Our deal didn’t include any other objectives you may have,” Sophie said. “So you can sort them out yourself. You aren’t staking us out as bait for some other reason, are you?”

“Of course not,” Clarissa said.

“Then we choose the targets and we choose the timing,” Sophie said.

“Fine,” Clarissa conceded. “Just make sure I’m notified beforehand.”

“No, we’ll keep you out of it,” Sophie said. “We wouldn’t want people moving attention from Silva to you, after all. We plan and execute the robberies alone, and fence the goods through Silva’s people. We have connections enough for that.”

Clarissa’s mouth was smiling, but her eyes were spraying venom.

“Very well,” she said. “But I want jobs done quickly and repeatedly. If not, then you aren’t holding up your end, and there won’t be a place in this city you can hide from me. As for escaping it... if you could leave this city alive, then you wouldn’t have come to me in the first place.”

Sophie gave a curt nod, then strode away. Belinda followed in her wake, Clarissa’s bodyguard trailing them until they were out of the compound. They walked through the darkened streets of Old City at a rapid stride.

"What was that?" Belinda angrily demanded once she was sure they had cleared Clarissa's eyes and ears. "That whole thing makes no sense. Everything hinges on people figuring out that we're the thieves. And stirring up trouble with the Island people? They'll send adventurers after us. Is she trying to bring all that down on her own head?"

"You're right," Sophie said. "It doesn't make sense if this is still about provoking Silva. Something's changed, and somehow Island politics are involved. Ventress wouldn't risk provoking the Island unless she has some kind of backing to shield her."

"This whole plan is madness," Belinda said.

"Yes," Sophie agreed.

"Then why go along with it? She has to know how transparent she's being."

"You know how Ventress is about her reputation. She wants us to break the deal, even if everyone knows she pushed us into it."

"Why bother?" Belinda asked. "We aren't any use to her except as a stick to poke Silva with."

"I don't know," Sophie said. "Maybe she's looking for an excuse to hand us over to him. Whatever she's into now, we've somehow become leverage. But she can't be seen breaking the deal."

"Her vaunted reputation," Belinda said.

"If we break the deal, she can openly do whatever she wants with us," Sophie said.

"So you bought us as much time and freedom as you could," Belinda realised.

"We need to figure out our next move. Ventress is no longer our way out of the city."

"Dorgan?" Belinda suggested. The third member of the Big Three had been quiet since the death of Old Man Silva.

"We don't have anything to trade for protection," Sophie said.

"Then what?" Belinda asked. "Try and make our own way out?"

The reason they had gone to Clarissa in the first place was that escaping the city unnoticed by the Big Three was as good as impossible. They had an iron grip of the shipping trade, and there was very little overland travel.

"We may have to try the overland route," Sophie said.

Escaping the Greenstone region overland meant one of two routes. The first was to go river to the Mistrun Oasis, then keep going through the desert to the central veldt. From there, south, to the more fertile lands and a port where the Big Three had interests enough that they could easily be dragged back to Greenstone. The other way was to make for the Northern territories, which means crossing the dead sands, braving monsters and nomadic bandit tribes.

“We ruled that out for a reason,” Belinda said. “Our experience and expertise ends at the city wall. If we try the wilderness, it’s a pure gamble.”

“A gamble may be all we have,” Sophie said. “For now, we do enough to keep Ventress mollified while we figure it out.”

Belinda hung her head.

“Things just keep getting worse,” she said softly.

“I know.”

Chapter 54: Field Assessment

The layout of the Adventure Society campus reminded Jason of a university. One of the nice ones, with expanses of lawn, gardens and tiled pathways leading through impressive stone arches. The marshalling yard was like a small town square for larger expeditions to assemble. When Humphrey and Jason arrived together, a dozen people were already waiting. An entitled cliché walked out of the group to sneer at Humphrey.

“Here he is,” the young man said. “The pride of the Geller family. But that out-of-town prick failed you, just like the rest of us.”

Like everyone other than Jason himself, the person approaching them was somewhere in his mid to late teens. This made the assemblage of would-be adventurers young men and women, but Jason could only think of the sneering idiot as a boy.

“We all have areas in which we can improve,” Humphrey said. “There’s no shame in admitting that.”

“Shouldn’t your hair be more oily?” Jason asked.

“What?” the man asked, turning from Humphrey to Jason as if surprised to see him there.

“Your hair,” Jason said, pointing. “When the sneering idiot who will inevitably be humiliated comes out to do his sneering, his hair should be properly greased back. Clearly, you’ve overdone it with whatever goo you put in there, but I really feel like you could have slathered in some more.”

“Who are you?” the boy asked. He was looking at Jason with the same expression he’d give to furniture that unexpectedly started talking.

“I’m no one important,” Jason said.

“Clearly,” The boy said. “Do you have any idea who my father is?”

“Does anyone?” Jason asked. “Your mother’s a friendly woman.”

Humphrey winced, while the onlookers all looked shocked, none more so than the boy himself.

“Are you looking to die?” the boy asked.

“Is your father going to kill me?” Jason asked. “You don’t strike me as someone who fights his own battles.”

“Uh, Jason,” Humphrey interjected. “That’s Thadwick Mercer. His father actually might kill you.”

“You’re Thadwick Mercer?” Jason asked.

“That’s right. Feel like apologising, now?”

“I do, actually,” Jason said. “I shouldn’t have said that about your mother. I have neither the knowledge nor the right to criticise how she conducts her personal affairs and I apologise unreservedly. I only met her briefly, but she struck me as a woman of style and intelligence. Now I’ve met you, I can see why people wonder how you turned out this way.”

“What?” Thadwick asked.

“It was actually the first thing I heard about you,” Jason said. “What was it Rufus said, Humphrey? The most incompetent person he’d ever seen attempt to join the Adventure Society? And Rufus grew up in a school, so he’s seen the bottom-end of a lot of classes.”

“I’m going to destroy you, you no-name little prick,” Thadwick spat. “I’m going to scrape you off my shoe.”

“Is that a challenge?” Jason asked. “Like a duel, or something? How do you want to do it; dance-off, or yo-mama fight? I’d prefer a dance-off because I actually like your mother. Also, I’ve got the moves.”

“What?”

“You say that a lot,” Jason said, “and you always look kind of confused. You’re not the sharpest tool in the shed, are you?”

Thadwick raised a hand at Jason, flame crackling over it.

“THAT’S ENOUGH,” a voice bellowed. Everyone turned to see a man wearing an Adventure Society pin approaching the group. Jason had never seen Vincent Trenslow before, although Rufus had described his glorious moustache. As promised, it extended past either side of his head. Behind Vincent was another official that Jason did recognise, as did Humphrey. It was Guy, the official present at their Adventure Society intake.

“Mercer,” Vincent barked, “if I see you try to use an ability on a fellow candidate again, you will fail on the spot. And you, Asano, is it? I suggest you clamp that mouth shut before someone puts a fist through it. Which will be recorded in my report as a self-inflicted injury. Geller, do try and keep your friend in check.”

“Yes, sir,” Humphrey said. Thadwick flashed an insolent look but remained silent. Jason was barely listening, transfixed by the man’s moustache.

Rufus had spent a week working closely with Vincent Trenslow during the last field assessment. After hearing Vincent would be taking Jason’s assessment, Rufus told Jason what he could anticipate.

“There may be some level of corruption in this branch of the Adventure Society,” Rufus had told him, “but Vincent Trenslow is exactly what I expect from a Society official. I

know you have your own ways of showing respect, but try and use mine, for once. Humphrey Geller will be there, so follow his lead.”

Jason respected Rufus’ judgement and intended to do his best, while acknowledging his best wasn’t that great. He also recognised that Rufus had very much undersold the magnificence of the man’s moustache.

Vincent explained the procedure for the Adventure Society field assessment. The group would depart for one week, during which time the candidates would attempt to complete postings from the adventure boards in towns and villages of the delta.

“For the duration of this assessment,” Vincent said, “you may refer to me as Instructor Trenslow and my fellow official as Instructor Spalding. For the second month in a row, we have extended numbers. We are taking a different approach this month and splitting the group in two.”

The other official, Guy, stepped forward.

“Last month there were problems finding enough postings for everyone on the notice boards,” Guy said. “Therefore, the groups will be assessed separately, taking different routes through the delta.”

“There weren’t enough monsters last month?” Jason whispered at Humphrey.

“There were plenty,” Humphrey whispered back. “Watch how they split the groups.”

Jason spotted that while he hid it well enough, Vincent had a hint of disdain around the eyes as Guy divided the group.

“My group,” Guy said, “will consist of those who have passed the assessment before, but their records were lost. I’ll be administering a specially-tailored program of reassessment for all of you that takes into account past achievement.”

“And now you see it,” Humphrey said softly.

“Yes I do,” Jason agreed.

There were seventeen candidates, ten of which went off with Guy for their special assessment. The remaining seven followed Vincent.

“So that’s how the Society came down,” Jason said. “The people who weaselled their way off the books weasel their way back on, while the rest of us pass an actual test.”

“Mr Asano,” Vincent called out sharply. “If and when you have passed this test and become a member of the Adventure Society, you can comment on how the Society conducts itself as much as you like. For the next week, however, you are a worthless flesh-sack nestled vulnerably in the palm of my hand. It would serve you well to disincline me at every opportunity from wanting to make a fist.”

“Uh, yes, sir,” Jason said.

Travel through the delta was mostly along the raised embankment roads. The group travelled in the back of an animal-drawn wagon, which didn't sit well with everyone. They were from wealthy and privileged families, unused to such rough treatment. A few complained loudly until browbeaten by Vincent, after which they restricted themselves to unhappy muttering. Others followed Humphrey's lead and took the conditions in stride.

Walking along a narrow embankment road, Jason glanced at Vincent, then at Humphrey. Both had crystals floating over their heads. The one over Vincent was silver-grey, while Humphrey's was a glowing blue.

"What's with the crystals?" Jason asked. "Should I have gotten a crystal from somewhere?"

"My crystal isn't a magic item," Humphrey said. "It's an essence ability that restores my mana. The one Vincent has is a recording crystal. You haven't seen them before?"

"I haven't," Jason said. "What do they record?"

"An image of whatever is in front of them, plus whatever they can hear," Humphrey said. "He's recording everything for later assessment. After the last time, Mr Remore took me through all the things I did wrong, in excruciating detail. He kept playing them, over and over."

"Where would I get something like that?" Jason asked.

"The Magic Society makes them," Humphrey said. "They sell them at the markets on the Island, and at a few stores in the guild district. You can get them at the trade hall in the Adventure Society, too. Assuming you pass and are allowed in."

The group was walking through an expanse of leafy, knee-high plants when Vincent quietly called for a stop. The plants were some kind of crop Jason wasn't familiar with, divided into fields by bamboo fencing. Vincent pulled out another crystal and tossed it into the air in front of him, where it started floating. In front of it, an image shimmered into being and Jason realised this new crystal worked like a telescope. It showed a distant part of the sprawling fields, where a pack of rodent-like monsters were gorging themselves on the crop.

The monsters were half as tall as a human but looked like oversized mice. They stood on their hind legs, hunching forward. Instead of forelegs, they had long arms that ended in eerily human-like hands. They used them to pluck leaves and stuff them into their mouths.

“Ratlings,” Vincent said. “Thirteen of them. They’ll run rather than fight, and if they reach their burrows, that’ll be it. They won’t surface again until they go berserk, at which point it won’t be crops they’re after.”

Vincent turned to look at Humphrey.

“Mr Geller, the only reason you failed last time was that you lacked decisiveness. So long as you can show me you’ve learned something in the last month, you’re the easiest pass in this group. Can you get all thirteen?”

“Yes, sir,” Humphrey said without hesitation.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Prove it.”

Jason watched as scaly wings appeared out of thin air on Humphrey’s back. He brought them towards the ground, pushing him into the air. The dragon wings sent him surging away at a rapid pace. Humphrey’s familiar, which had been sitting on his shoulder in the form of a bird, flew after him.

“Wow,” Jason said.

Jason and Humphrey had trained together several times over the last month. They had focused on martial technique, so each was yet to see all the other’s essence abilities. Humphrey’s martial art was called the Surging Storm style, an explosive and unrelenting combat art that was completely at odds with Humphrey’s personality. Thus far, Jason’s skill-book derived technique hadn’t come close to matching it.

The group watched Humphrey climb higher into the air as he grew smaller with distance. Suddenly he plunged out of the sky and all eyes snapped to the magnified image in front of Vincent. They saw Humphrey crash into the monsters like a meteor, a huge sword in the shape of a dragon’s wing appearing in his hands. He came down like a meteor, his boots landing on one monster and his sword on another. They died in a single, gruesome instant.

The other ratlings let out panicked screeches while Humphrey swung the huge sword in a low, horizontal arc. It ploughed through the monsters as if they weren’t there, severing three clean in half with a single swing.

The ratlings scattered, but instead of chasing, Humphrey dropped his sword, which vanished into the air. He took a deep breath, then a stream of fire sprayed out of his mouth like a human flamethrower. He walked the burning line over the fleeing ratlings, torching crops and monsters alike. Three ratlings escaped the flames, having run at different angles to the main cluster. One was being harried by Humphrey’s familiar, which had

turned into some kind of predatory cat, around the same size as the ratling. The other two were sprinting away in different directions.

Humphrey's wings had vanished after he landed, but they reappeared briefly to fling him forward through the air. They only appeared for a moment, in which they hurled him faster than he had been flying earlier. Another sword appeared in his hand, this one smaller, with a blade made up of metal feathers. He brought it down on a fleeing ratling as he landed, cutting it down with one strike. He vanished from the spot he was standing, reappearing in the path of the final ratling. His sword was held out in front of him and the startled ratling ran straight onto it. Humphrey yanked the blade up, spraying blood as the monster fell dead.

"He got teleport," one of the candidates next to Jason said as they watched Humphrey through the magnified image. "I bet they paid a lot for that awakening stone."

Humphrey glanced over to his familiar, who was sitting proudly next to a ratling, dead at his feet. As soon as it saw Humphrey notice it, it transformed into a dog and bounded over for Humphrey to scratch behind its ear. Humphrey walked back to the group through the field, his body drenched in monster blood. The others gave him a wide berth, except for Jason.

"You alright?" Jason asked. He knew Humphrey had killed monsters as part of his training, but also knew Humphrey was a kind man. Violence didn't come naturally to him.

Humphrey nodded. His normally friendly smile was macabre on his bloody face.

"That's what I like about you, Jason," he said. "You don't pretend that what we do doesn't affect us."

"I don't think being numb to it all makes you strong," Jason said. "Strong is accepting the choices you make and owning up to the consequences."

Like Jason, Humphrey had a dimensional storage space, from which he took a bottle of clear liquid and tipped it over his head. The crystal wash flowed over him, eliminating every trace of blood and filth.

"I'd like to be strong like that," Humphrey said. "You know, Jason, sometimes it's like you're from another world."

Jason had long ago realised that Danielle had figured him out, not realising she hadn't shared it with Humphrey. He decided to tell his friend all about it when they had the time. For now, they were surrounded by other people. Vincent looked Humphrey over, now clean, the crystal wash rapidly evaporating.

"You got them all," Vincent said.

"Yes, sir," Humphrey said.

“Burned a good portion of a farmer’s crop, though.”

“I thought the farmer would rather lose some harvest now than family later,”
Humphrey said. “I made a choice.”

“Yes you did,” Vincent said, putting a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder. “Good job.”

Chapter 55: Rune Tortoise

The routine for the field assessment was to stop in a town or village each night. In the morning they would collect monster notices from the adventuring board and set out to deal with them. Vincent took an approach where the would-be adventurers who met his standards were no longer called on for the monster hunts. Starting with Humphrey, the first three days saw four of the seven candidates move from participants to onlookers.

On the third morning, they were delayed in one of the towns Jason had passed through on his original journey to Greenstone. Vincent wasn't willing to turn away the quickly growing crowd of earnest sick people, so the town constable once again turned his office into a makeshift clinic.

Stopping to help the locals delayed the group's monster-hunting activities until the end of the morning. As Jason healed the sick, the grateful locals pulled out tables and benches, laying out a cornucopia of food for his companions. Some of the aristocratic candidates turned up their noses at a rustic feast until they started to smell the food. Once Humphrey started filling his plate with enthusiasm, the others followed his lead.

Liana Stelline was one of the adventurer candidates who was acquainted with Humphrey. Their families moved in similar circles, and they had both failed the previous assessment together. Like Humphrey, her family wanted her to pass on merit, rather than privilege. Sitting next to him on a bench, she asked Humphrey about Jason.

"How did you end up friends with him?" she asked. "Don't you find him insufferably smug?"

"He can be... challenging," Humphrey said. "He's a long way from home and I think he likes to put people off-balance because it's how he feels all the time. He can be difficult, and oblivious, but I think there's a kindness and generosity under it all. Look at what he's doing right now."

"Tell Thadwick Mercer about kindness and generosity," Liana said.

"That's fair," Humphrey said. "He can be mean and self-impressed when he's trying to prove how clever he is, which maybe isn't quite as clever as he thinks. He certainly won't get along with everyone. But look around us."

He gestured around at the villagers and all feast laid out for them.

"How many adventurers get this kind of reception?" he asked.

“He gets along with common people because he’s common, she said. “That, and he’s giving out free healing,” she said. “My sister has healing powers; she could do the exact same thing.”

“But does she?” Humphrey asked.

In the constable’s cottage, the last person shuffled out.

“That’s everyone?” Vincent asked.

“I think so,” Jason said.

“The constable nodded.

“You know,” he said, “it would make my life easier if you’d warn me you’re coming through instead of just turning up.”

“That’s on the boss man,” Jason said, jabbing a thumb in Vincent’s direction. “He sets the destination. Did I hear something about lunch being put on?”

That night they were stopped in another little town where they had taken up all four of the inn’s twin rooms. Humphrey and Jason were sitting on their beds because there wasn’t space anywhere else in the cramped twin share. Jason was going over the clothing in his hands, examining the ragged claw marks in the light of a magic lamp.

“This cloth armour doesn’t hold up so well,” Jason said.

“Well, it is cloth,” Humphrey said. “If you want real protection out of it you need to spend more on the magic. Or you could try something heavier.”

“I didn’t like the leather I was finding,” Jason said. “It was either too stiff and restrictive, or too expensive for what it did. I have a good amount of money, but that doesn’t mean I’m alright with being ripped off.”

“All the best armour is bought and sold at the Adventure Society trade hall,” Humphrey said. “Once we pass the test you can buy something there. How well does that cloak power of yours protect you?”

“I did some testing with Gary,” Jason said. “It doesn’t hold up to bronze-level attacks at all, which was no surprise. It’s really good against cutting attacks, so that’s a lot of swords, knives and claws.”

He looked down at the claw marks in his magically-treated cloth.

“So long as they actually hit the cloak, anyway. Stabbing attacks punch through a bit better, like those spines that monster shot at me yesterday.”

“And blunt attacks?” Humphrey asked.

“The cloak doesn’t cushion them at all,” Jason said.

“That’s a shame,” Humphrey said. “A lot of monsters are just big, tough, and try to batter you to death.”

“That’s where the unrestricted movement comes in,” Jason said.

“Maybe you can show that off tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “I went with Instructor Trenslow to take the notices from the board, and we’re going after a bark lurker.”

“Bark lurker?”

“I think it’s some kind of troll,” Humphrey said.

“I’ll look it up.”

Jason pulled a tablet of white and blue marble from his inventory. At Farrah’s suggestion, Jason had purchased the active monster registry from the Magic Society. It contained all the information the Magic Society had about monsters and was updated along with the Magic Society’s own archives. There was an index on the tablet, seemingly engraved in gold script, but the engravings shifted as Jason touched his finger to the inscribed letters.

“You’re right,” Jason said as he read from the tablet. “It is a form of troll. Less intelligent than most troll varieties, but has the usual troll resilience and rapid healing. Vaguely human-shaped, but stands twice as tall. Usually dwells in swampland. Has a hard, bark-like shell, but due to its thickness, the shell-plates leave exposed areas around the joints. Usually slow and uncoordinated, but can demonstrate bursts of rapid movement. It can breathe water and likes to hide near the water’s edge, mimicking a submerged log.”

“What about numbers?”

“Almost always manifests alone,” Jason read, “except during a monster surge.”

“There you are,” Humphrey said. “Big and slow, only one to deal with. Sounds perfect for an affliction specialist.”

“If I see it coming,” Jason said. “I’ll need to bait it out, somehow.”

“Maybe after this, Trenslow will finally pass you,” Humphrey said. “I don’t understand why he hasn’t already.”

“He’s not satisfied with my performance,” Jason said. “That’s easy enough to figure out.”

“You’ve done just as well as any of the others who passed,” Humphrey said.

“Except for you,” Jason said. “You’re head and shoulders above the rest of us, yet Trenslow kept pushing before he passed you. He was holding you to a higher standard.”

“You think that’s what’s happening?” Humphrey asked.

“Rufus came out of last month’s assessment with a pretty high opinion of the instructor,” Jason said. “Now that Rufus will be around longer than he thought, he doesn’t feel the need to rush me along so much. It wouldn’t surprise me if it turned out Rufus had a little talk with Trenslo, to make sure he fails me if I’m not up to the standard Rufus wants.”

“You think he’s going to fail you?” Humphrey asked.

“Probably,” Jason said. “You’ve seen Rufus’ standards.”

“You shouldn’t give up yet,” Humphrey said. “Go all out, give it everything. You might impress him so much that he has to pass you.”

The group of adventurer candidates were assembled on a huge, grassy field while one of their members fought a monster. There was enough neatly-cut grass for a good-sized sports arena, and it was just as flat. There were a few buildings around the edges, some of which looked to be good-sized barns. With the scarcity of lumber-worthy wood, they were primarily constructed out of mud-brick.

“What is all this for?” Jason wondered.

“What do you mean?” Humphrey asked.

“Every part of the delta that isn’t underwater is being put to efficient use,” Jason said. “Except for the parts some rich people walled-off for themselves, anyway.”

Humphrey gave him a side-glance but said nothing.

“This is good grass,” Jason said, crouching down and rubbing some blades beneath his fingers. “Real good grass, like a St. Augustine. Someone’s been taking care of it, too. Is this a turf farm?”

“What’s a turf farm?” Liana asked.

“The Island is an artificial island made of stone,” Humphrey said. “When people want to landscape their grounds, they have much the actual work done here in the delta, then transported over as slabs of earth. All that grass in the park district was grown in places like this.”

“I take it everyone cleared out when the monster showed up,” Jason said.

“They did,” Vincent said. “It isn’t the first time they’ve had monsters wander along. You seem strangely knowledgeable about grass.”

“My Dad’s a landscape architect,” Jason said.

“Is that what it sounds like?” Humphrey asked.

“Pretty much,” Jason said. “He designs big fancy gardens.”

“So he’s a gardener,” Liana said.

“Pretty much,” Jason said. “A well-trained, highly-paid gardener, but yeah.”

Vincent made an unhappy noise at the fight going on in the distance. It wasn’t going well.

Most monsters at iron rank did not boast exotic abilities. Some might shoot quills or rapidly heal, but they were largely reliant on their physical attributes. One of the rare exceptions was the rune tortoise, a creature with blue skin and a turquoise shell that was only around a metre long. The danger came from its shell, where every segment had a glowing rune, each of which could produce a different magical effect. The key challenge in facing a rune tortoise was that each one had a unique set of runes. The wide variety of potential abilities made it an unpredictable enemy.

As he had done with each of the more difficult creatures, Vincent took the time to explain the creature and the best way to fight it. In the case of the rune tortoise, its weakness was that after using an ability, it took time for that ability to become available again. The key to defeating it was baiting out the abilities, after which it was no more dangerous than a regular tortoise.

Looking out at the fight in progress, Jason saw several of its runes had dimmed after use. The tortoise had not spent them cheaply, however, as could be seen from the would-be adventurer trying to hunt it. His hair was blackened where it wasn’t burned-off entirely, his skin smeared and cracked. His armour had been shattered, his clothing reduced to rags.

“That’s enough,” Mobley,” Vincent called out. “If you go back in, it will probably kill you.”

“I can take it!” the bedraggled candidate yelled back.

Jason observed that the tortoise was possibly withdrawing from the fight. At the pace it moved, it was quite hard to tell.

“You probably can,” Vincent called out to Mobley, “but being an adventurer is about reliably dealing with monsters, not probably dealing with them.”

Mobley turned around to face Vincent and the onlookers.

“You’ll fail me if I don’t kill it, won’t you?” Mobley yelled miserably.

“I’m failing you either way,” Vincent called back. “Even if you kill it, I’ll fail you for the poor judgement of risking your life to do so.”

“Risk is what adventurers do,” Mobley yelled, pleadingly.

“Which makes accurately assessing risk the most important skill we have,” Vincent said. “Get back here.”

Of the three candidates yet to pass, one was trudging a bedraggled path back to the group. The others were Jason and a young woman staring uneasily at Mobley's charred state.

"Either of you care to volunteer?" Vincent asked. "Or do I send Humphrey?"

"I'm happy to go, unless you want it," Jason said to the young woman. "It's already gone through most of its abilities.

"No, you go ahead," she told him.

"Think you can handle it, Asano?" Vincent asked.

Jason set off toward the tortoise at a casual stroll, which was still outpaced the tortoise at full flight.

"I'll muddle through," he said.

Chapter 56:

Gary's Gift

Jason and Mobley passed each other as Jason walked in the direction of the rune tortoise.

“Sorry mate,” Jason commiserated. The burned and blackened would-be adventurer just shot him a contemptuous look and kept walking. Jason wasn't sure if it was the immediate circumstances that drew the man's ire, or just general dislike. Jason had become an outsider to the group, for a couple of reasons.

The first was Jason's unusual mannerisms and general disregard for status and etiquette. The same traits that helped him get along with the people in every town and village they passed through didn't endear him to wealthy scions that made up his fellow candidates. For them, status was everything, and only someone like Humphrey, born at the very top of the pile, could disregard it.

The other reason they disliked him was his friendship with Humphrey. The Geller family stood at the peak of Greenstone society, and their local power was just a fragment of their world-spanning influence. On top of that, Danielle Geller was the strongest adventurer to come out of Greenstone in generations. Building a friendship with her son was a ticket to the top not just for an adventurer, but their entire family.

For some of the candidates, making a connection with Humphrey was more important than passing the field assessment. Having their chances monopolised by Jason left them increasingly rankled. Jason didn't much like those who shunned him for this reason, finding moments to tell him that he should know his place. He much preferred someone like Liana Stelling, who disliked him for himself rather than having an agenda.

Jason moved forward until he was just outside what he estimated to be the maximum range for the rune tortoise's powers, based on its battle with Mobley. He had a new wristband, which had a small razor that could be easily pushed in and out of a sheath. The tiny blade was in no way an effective weapon, but the sharp edge was perfect for quickly and easily drawing a shallow line of blood on the back of his hand.

Holding the cut away from him, leeches started spraying out of the wound like he'd knocked the side off a fire hydrant.

“Now I know what an emptying balloon feels like,” he muttered. “Alright, Colin; fetch.”

What came next was a slow-motion pursuit as Jason's sedately ambulating pile of leeches undulated in the direction the tortoise's soporific escape.

“I know there isn’t a strict time constraint,” Vincent called out, “but we do have other monsters to get to.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason called back. “Colin is just my stalking horse.”

The rest of the group looked on with varying reactions.

“Are those leeches?”

“Did he say Colin?”

“What’s a horse?”

Jason trailed well behind his familiar. His concern was that the tortoise had failed to notice it, so he pulled out a throwing knife. The skill book had given him proficiency with an array of weaponry, but Rufus had concentrated training on only a few. As Jason’s primary weapon was his poison dagger, Rufus had focused on various knife techniques, even throwing.

“They won’t deal any real damage,” Rufus had explained as he introduced Jason to throwing knives, “but they can offer some utility, or distract an enemy in a critical moment. Putting some poison on them wouldn’t be a terrible idea, either.”

Jason tossed the knife, but it was a long throw as Jason maintained distance, landing an embarrassing few metres to the left of the tortoise. He turned around to face the group.

“New knives,” he yelled at them. “I’m still getting used to them.”

As second attempt also missed, but the third bounced off the tortoise’s shell with a barely audible thud, rather than the satisfying clank Jason had been expecting.

“I think movie sound effects have given me unrealistic expectations for how cool the world sounds.”

There was a sharp crack as an arc of electricity erupted out of the shell in reaction. It didn’t reach Jason, instead blasting into his familiar, sending scorched leeches scattering about. On the tortoise’s shell, one of the runes dimmed away.

“Actually, that sounded amazing,” Jason said, looking at the burned and blackened remains of leeches. The pile was about a third smaller.

“You alright, buddy?” Jason called out. “Wobble to the left if you’re alright.”

The pile moved slightly left as it continued the pursuit. The tortoise slowly turned to face its new opponents. Jason observed there were only three runes still glowing on the tortoise, after which it would be no more powerful than an ordinary tortoise of its size.

Another rune faded as a huge globule of water shot into the air, then burst into mist. From the mist, bullets of water started shooting down into the leech pile, but the water didn’t seem to have a huge effect of the leeches.

In the wake of the water bullets' failure, the penultimate rune faded and the humid, delta air was suddenly stirred into motion. Directly over the pile of leeches, a small, but powerful dust devil formed, sucking up the leeches and scattering them to the wind. One even slapped into Jason's face, which he peeled off with a frown. As the wind faded, Jason looked around at the leeches cast as far as dozens of metres away.

"You did good, little guy," Jason said, moving the leech to the back of his hand where it disappeared into the cut. "You just gather yourself back together while I deal with the mean tortoise."

Jason looked over at the tortoise, which only had one remaining rune lit up. Confident he could handle one ability, he started closing in on the sluggish monster. The tortoise, for its part, made a very optimistic dash for freedom as Jason strolled in its direction. When Jason reached it, it ducked its head and limbs into its shell. The last rune dimmed as the tortoise's body took on a metallic sheen.

Jason crouched down to peer into the openings where the tortoise had disappeared into its shell. Some kind of plate had moved into place at each of them.

"I've seen this ability," Vincent said, startling Jason. He was sure he'd seen Vincent back with the others just moments earlier, and hadn't felt the approach of his aura.

"This is probably the strongest ability a rune tortoise has," Vincent said.

"How so?" Jason asked.

"It massively increases its defence," Vincent said. "It'll take a bronze-rank attack to break in, and a strong one at that. Even worse for you, it makes it immune to afflictions."

"How long can it keep it up?" Jason asked.

"Not sure," Vincent said. "Certainly long enough for its powers to come back. "I'll deal with it now."

"Hold on," Jason said. "You're the one who asked for a volunteer, so let me sort it out."

"You think you can get around this ability?" Vincent asked.

"Easily," Jason said. "There's a bunch of ways. It still needs to breathe, right? I don't know if it's aquatic, or burrowing, but we could bury it, or drown it. We could throw it off a great big cliff; I bet that'd crack it."

"I don't think there's a lot of cliffs in the delta," Vincent said.

"I'm just saying there's options," Jason said. "The one I'm going to go for is testing out a gift a friend gave me."

Jason drew a sword from his inventory. It was simple but elegant in design, not overly long, with a straight, double-edged blade. The hilt was red gold, the grip a dark, soft fabric. A short, simple tassel, of the same black fabric, dangled from the red gold pommel.

Other than knives, straight swords were the weapons Rufus had drilled Jason on the most, knowing Gary was already working on such a weapon for Jason. Taking it out, Jason smiled as he thought of the day Gary had presented it.

“We all wanted to give you something,” Gary had told him when handing over the sword. “Farrah gave you that awakening stone, and Rufus the skill book. I made you this and it turned out pretty well, I thought. It’s not a big deal, or anything.”

Despite Gary’s words, Jason could feel the care and effort that had gone into it. Magic items had auras of their own, and the aura of the sword was stronger than any other iron-rank items Jason had encountered.

Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).

- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a physical immunity to it, an instance of [Stone Cutter] is applied to the blade.
-
- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a magical immunity to it, an instance of [Spell Breaker] is applied to the blade.
- [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage; highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- [Spell Breaker] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage; highly effective against magical defences and incorporeal entities. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Growth Conditions (bronze):

- 1 kilogram of blood gold
 - 4 kilograms of low grade (bronze rank) star-fall silver
 - 100 bronze-rank iron quintessence gems.
 - 100 bronze-rank magic quintessence gems.
 - 1000 bronze rank spirit coins.
 - Ritual of bronze ascension.
-

Jason didn't read past the description before grasping Gary's huge, hairy body in a hug.

"I'm not really a hugger," Gary had said as he awkwardly returned the embrace.

"Well you should be," Jason told him. "You're really good at it."

Jason looked down at the bunkered tortoise, then back at his sword. He turned it over in his hand, watching the sun strike the clean edge.

"He's been secretly working on it for weeks," Rufus had told Jason later. "We don't really talk about it, but none of us thought we were getting out of that sacrifice chamber alive. We owe you a favour we can't ever repay."

Jason slapped him on the arm.

"Friends don't count favours, Rufus. They just show up when they're needed."

Jason looked down at the tortoise, hunkered in its shell.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Asano?" Vincent asked.

"Not at all."

Rather than bring the sword down on the shell, he casually stabbed the monster's side.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Rune Tortoise].
 - [Rune Tortoise] is immune to afflictions.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
-

"You may need a little more gusto to penetrate the protection," Vincent said.

"Actually," Jason said, "the key is persistence."

Jason stabbed out again and again. With each strike the sword became more powerful, until the first gouge appeared in monster's side. A section of flesh chipped off like stone under the monster's protection ability.

"I'm an affliction specialist," Jason told Vincent as he continued to chip away. "We don't do speed. We do inevitability."

Chapter 57: Rainbow Smoke

Jason looked at the dead rune tortoise.

“Sorry, mate,” he told it. “Can’t have you going berserk and wandering into town shooting lightning bolts at people.”

“You’re apologising to a dead monster?” Vincent asked.

“It might just be a congealed blob of magic, but it was still alive, and died trapped in its own shell. It might have only had an animal’s intelligence, but it could feel helpless and afraid. It’s a rough way to go.”

“You’re an affliction specialist,” Vincent said. “It’s always a rough way to go with you.”

“You know Humphrey breathes fire, right?” Jason said. “Burning to death can’t be great, either.”

Jason tapped a finger on the dead creature’s shell.

➤ Would you like to loot [Rune Tortoise]?

Jason walked away before mentally accepting the loot.

-
- [Monster Core (Iron)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Lightning Quintessence] has been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Wind Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Water Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Fire Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - [Intact Rune Tortoise Shell] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Shell-Skin Potion] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Behind him the rune tortoise started dissolving into rainbow smoke, rising up into the air. The colourful display was as beautiful as the stench of it was horrifying, which was why Jason had learned not to loot monsters until he was some distance upwind.

Having a power to harvest monsters, Jason discovered, was a rare and useful one. For most people, they had to use a specialised branch of ritual magic. It was something many learned, however, due to the lucrative rewards. Getting lucky and looting an awakening stone or an essence, even valuable materials paid out better than the contract to kill the monster in the first place.

“One of the candidates from last month had a looting power,” Vincent said as he glanced back at the rising smoke.

“Oh?” Jason said. “Is he in the other group this month?”

“Actually, he passed,” Vincent said. “One of the Mercer boy’s lackeys, unfortunately. Damn waste of talent.”

They reached the rest of the group, where Mobley had only partially healed up through potions. This group of candidates included a few with self-healing, like Jason, but no one who could help others in the group.

“You ready for the next one?” Vincent asked, as he and Jason walked back to the group.

“I am,” Jason said.

“Good,” Vincent said. “We’ve got a few more to get through, today.”

The mangrove swamp was wet and hot, the air full of tiny bugs. The mangroves were large and dense, shrouding the areas within in darkness. Passage through the swamp was either by shallow boat, or along Bridge Road; an extended chain of low, flat bridges, spanning the distance between sporadic patches of solid ground. Most of the construction in the delta was either mudbrick or yellow desert stone, but Bridge Road was built from the region’s signature green stone. It reminded Jason of the impossible bridge that carried the Mistrun River over the massive gorge on its way down to the delta. He wondered if it had the same, mysterious constructor.

They were crossing Bridge Road in their wagon, which Vincent drew to a stop at a seemingly random point in the middle of the swamp. He turned back to address the adventurer candidates in the back.

“Undeveloped areas like this can be some of the most dangerous in the delta,” Vincent explained. “There’s a lot of territory for monsters to go unnoticed until they hit the berserk stage. You won’t need to deal with that today, though. We have two sets of monsters in this area; one single monster and one pack.”

Vincent dropped down off the wagon and the group clambered out the back. After half a week, even the more spoiled members of the group had stopped complaining about the basic transport. Vincent gathered the group together on the side of the bridge.

“When you get a monster notice,” Vincent said, “whether from a notice board or the Adventure Society directly, it has three pieces of information, so long as that information is known. The name of the monster, or a description. The number of monsters, and the approximate location.”

He panned a stern eye across the group.

“What I am about to tell is you is the most important thing you will learn during this assessment. It is the single greatest contributing factor to adventurer death, bar none. It’s a simple thing, but if you disregard it, there’s a very good chance you will die. If you routinely disregard it, your death is inevitable.”

Vincent held the notice in his hand.

“This information is not reliable. It usually comes from local residents, with limited understanding of monsters and who run the moment they see them. They may well recognise monsters common to their area, but monsters are misidentified on a regular basis. Descriptions are wrong. Numbers are vastly inflated or grossly underestimated. People even get the place they saw them wrong.”

He waved the notice in their faces.

“Do not trust these notices. Prepare as best you can, not the best you can be bothered, and always be ready for everything to go horribly wrong. Most importantly, do not hesitate to run for the hills if something seems wrong. If you have any ideas about the dignity of an adventurer, or a noble, or whatever, then throw those ideas away or they will kill you. Your first duty as an adventurer is to come back alive. You can always come back with more people to kill the monster later.”

Vincent took a cleansing breath.

“It is the responsibility of an adventurer to understand what they are walking into, as best they can. In this case, our monster is a bark lurker. I know Geller warned you it, Asano. Are you prepared?”

“I am,” Jason said.

“Then you’re ready to go?”

“I am.”

“According to the notice,” Vincent said, “there should only be one, somewhere in the vicinity of bridge marker sixteen.”

He pointed to a stone marker on the side the bridge, on which the number 16 was inscribed.

“As that is all the notice says, that is all the information you’re getting. As I have just explained, however, that information is not reliable. Out in unclaimed territory, where the report was made by someone who fled off at first glance, there is every chance it is wrong. That said, most notices are fairly accurate. Which is why you have avoid becoming complacent.”

Vincent held something out for Jason to take. It was a crystal, like the one floating over Vincent’s head.

“A recording crystal?”

Vincent shook his head.

“A far-sight crystal,” he said. “As long as it’s active, we can see through it from here. It has a maximum range, but the monster should be well within it.”

“How does it work?”

“Just toss it in the air.”

Jason did as instructed and the crystal moved over Jason’s head. In front of Vincent an image appeared, showing the perspective from Jason’s crystal. The image looked a lot like the interface screens that appeared for Jason’s ability. Vincent adjusted the image with a flick of his hand, panning back for a wider view.

“Off I go, then,” Jason said, walking to the edge of the bridge. His cloak of shadows and stars appeared around him as he stepped off, drifting gently down to the water. He started walking over the surface of the water, his footfalls landing with a ripple.

Standing on the water, he concentrated on the auras around him. The strongest were on the bridge, Vincent’s bronze rank aura, the iron rank auras of the others. He moved his focus to the weaker auras around him. The swamp was teeming with life, inundating Jason with normal-rank auras. Animals were sensitive to auras and avoided him, even the ones that would normally view a human as potential prey.

Jason moved further from the bridge, still concentrating on the auras. He was looking for an aura dead zone, knowing the ordinary animals would give the unnatural monster a wide berth. He was out of sight of the bridge when he found what he was looking for. The normal auras, were avoiding something, much as they avoided Jason himself. He wasn’t close enough to pinpoint the source, as his aura sense was still limited.

Jason walked over to the mangroves at the edge of the water. He picked a spot where the trees weren’t too tightly packed, but still provided enough cover to make solid shadows. From his inventory he took out a slab of meat, something looted from a monster several days ago. He wedged it in between the mangrove roots, just under the surface.

The night before, Jason and Humphrey had pored over the monster archive entry for bark lurkers, looking for the best approach. What they had come up with was baiting the creature out with meat. Its ability to sense auras was weak, a trait common to humanoid monsters. Its sense of smell, on the other hand, was excellent, especially in water. Using monster meat made it less likely to attract normal creatures.

Jason waited, well away from the bait. He stood stock still in the shadows of another set of mangroves, his aura retracted as best he could. He sensed the monster beneath the dark water before he spotted the ripples on the water as something large moved within it.

He could see the monster barely broach the surface of the water; if it wasn't moving he would have mistaken it for a log. It moved slowly at first, before splashing wildly as it lunged onto the submerged bait.

It rose up out of the water, lifting the meat up in triumph as it let out a wild roar. It looked like a giant wearing armour made of swamp logs, water pouring off the pocked and craggy shell. Jason vanished into the shadows, emerging from those right next to the creature. His snake-tooth dagger easily found the gap between the thick sections of shell, cutting deeply into the flesh beneath. The creature's roar of triumph became one of startlement and pain.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Bark Lurker].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Bark Lurker].
 - Aura [Hegemony] reduces the resistances of enemies for each instance of [Sin].
-

Jason danced away across the water, his boots moving lightly over the surface. The monster wheeled on him, wading sluggishly in pursuit. It was twice Jason's height, but it was waist deep in water, leaving them face to face. The slow creature was impeded all the more by having to wade through the swamp. Jason knew it would move faster if it swam underneath, but it was too enraged and too stupid to think tactically. He led it toward another patch of mangrove trees.

Jason's back came up against the trees and the monster thought it had him. It lurched forward with a sudden burst of speed as Jason stepped back into the shadows of the mangrove trees. The monster crashed into the space he had just vanished from, becoming entangled in the trees. Jason emerged from the shadows just to the monster's side, again finding a gap in its bulky shell.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Bark Lurker].
 - Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Bark Lurker].
-

The trees were little impedient to the monster's strength, whole root systems wrenched from the water as it thrashed about. It failed to find its attacker as Jason was already gone, emerging from the shadows of another patch of mangroves. The monster cast its gaze about, spotting Jason and resuming pursuit. As it did, Jason calmly watched its approach as he chanted a spell.

"Your fate is to suffer."

➤ Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Bark Lurker].

With the spell taking hold, Jason's victory became inevitable. The poison from the dagger would necrotise the creature's flesh, while the sin curse would make the necrosis even worse. The spell would cause both curse and poison to accumulate over time. The combination resulted in exponentially escalating damage that would inexorably overwhelm the monster. It did have a rapid healing ability, but the bleeding effect Jason inflicted would absorb at least some of that. He could have unleashed his familiar, but wanted to see what his abilities could do against a tough enemy.

Jason led the creature along the edge of the mangroves, back in the direction of the road bridge. The creature continued its furious pursuit, slow wading interspersed with rushing bursts. Jason strolled casually over the surface of the swamp, shadow-hopping through the shady mangroves as necessary to stay ahead. The road bridge was in sight when the monster was finally overwhelmed and fell dead. Jason went back to loot as it sank into the water.

The candidates gathered on the bridge watched Jason, cloak of stars swirling around him on a breeze no one else could feel. He walked lightly over the water as a patch of swamp roiled behind him, disgorging rainbow smoke into the air.

Chapter 58: A Man of Malevolent intellect

With the bark lurker dealt with, the group completed the crossing of Bridge Road and mangroves gave way to marshland. Once again they were riding atop the embankment roads that were the main thoroughfares of the delta. Sitting in the back of the wagon, Jason looked out at the sun getting low over the wetlands, golden light shimmering on the water. The hour was fairly late, the summer causing the sun to linger in the sky.

Jason took out a red marble tablet from his inventory, the image of a bird etched into it in gold.

“What’s that?” Humphrey asked.

“Something I have to decide whether to keep or throw away,” Jason said.

“Why?” Humphrey asked.

“Probably best I don’t say,” Jason told him. “You know, Humphrey, my experiences in your little stretch of reality have been pretty extreme. I’ve had some rough moments.”

He looked out again at the sun setting over the wetlands.

“Some good ones, too. Whatever complaints I may have had, things being bland isn’t one of them.”

“Shut up, Asano,” Mobley said. “No one wants to hear your winsome prattling. You’re not profound.”

Humphrey was about to say something, but Jason waved him down with a gesture. Jason looked at Mobley but didn't say anything either, shaking his head as he returned the tablet to his inventory.

Vincent pulled the wagon to a halt at a junction where two embankment roads crossed one another.

“There’s a good size town beyond the marsh,” he told them, turning to look at the group sitting together in the wagon. “There’s a dedicated accommodation for adventurers on the road, so you can expect the nicest night you’ll have during this trip. Before that, though, there’s one last notice for the day.”

He panned his eyes slowly over the group. Humphrey and the three others who had already passed, Jason and the young woman who could still go either way. His gaze stopped at Mobley, the one member who had ostensibly failed.

“I won’t lie,” Vincent said. “This is a rough one. I’m willing to let any or all of you participate; you can sort that out amongst you. Mobley, you make a good showing, here, and I’m willing to reconsider your position.”

Mobley had been sullenly slumped in the wagon since his encounter with the rune tortoise that morning. Potions and ointments had healed him up, but his hair was still largely burned away. Jason had offered Mobley some hair-growth ointment Jory had given him, but he wanted nothing to do with Jason. On hearing Vincent's offer, however, his head jerked up, hope lighting up his eyes.

"What's the monster?" Humphrey asked.

"Trap weavers," Vincent said.

Humphrey and some of the others took on serious expressions, recognising the monster by name. The others waited for the explanation, but Mobley was the first to speak.

"Are you trying to get me killed?" he asked wildly. "Did someone put you up to this? It was the Kilgane family, wasn't it? They paid you to make sure I didn't come back."

The other candidates went as still as the suddenly frozen expression on Vincent's face. There was a long period of icy silence before Vincent spoke.

"Mr Mobley," Vincent said. "I am willing to take that accusation in the manner I believe it was made, which is to say, thoughtlessly. So long as I have your apology, I am willing to consider it an outburst made in a moment of surprise, that we can put behind us and speak no more about."

Mobley visibly gulped. Jason could hear something dangerous lurking behind Vincent's words as if his audibly controlled enunciation was trying to keep it from getting loose. Suddenly the man with the outrageous moustache didn't seem silly at all.

"You have my apology, sir," Mobley said.

"Good," Vincent said. "Mr Geller, please inform the members of our group who are not aware as to the nature of trap weavers."

"Perhaps we should disembark from the wagon first," Humphrey suggested.

"Good idea, Mr Geller."

Leaving the tense air of the wagon seemed like an escape. The marshland was vast, reeds and copses of trees punctuating expanses of water. The air was heavy, wet and warm, even as the sun ducked out of sight. The sky was a mixture of dark blue and orange-gold, reflected on the still mirror of marsh water.

"Instructor Trenslow," Humphrey said. "When you were collecting notices, I didn't see one for trap weavers."

"It came from the Adventure Society directly," Vincent said. "They have provided the location of the nest."

"Sir," Humphrey said, "trap weavers are dangerous, and this half-light will favour them strongly. Perhaps it would be best to come back in the morning."

"I asked you to inform the group of what trap weavers are, Mr Geller," Vincent said. "I did not ask your opinion on how I conduct this field assessment."

"Sorry, sir," Humphrey said. "Trap weavers are a kind of giant spider. Their main body is around the size of a man's torso, but they stand as tall as a man with their long legs. They can produce webs that are very strong and hard to see in certain light conditions, which is why they are most active during the pre-dawn and twilight hours. The webs can be used to create traps that can ensnare a person, or to directly attack and entangle. They are highly stealthy, and can hide their aura better than most monsters."

Humphrey gave Vincent an uncertain glance as he kept talking.

"Trap weavers roam in search of prey but return to a nest, usually in environments with water and dense trees. They use their webs to create traps that make invading their nests extremely difficult. This is especially true at the cusp of daylight where their webs are the hardest to spot."

Humphrey's face went hard.

"Trap weavers usually spawn in groups, at least two or three and as many as twelve or thirteen. There have been some occurrences of higher numbers, although I'm not sure of the record."

"Nineteen," Vincent said. "Outside of a monster surge. No one's counted the size of the swarms during a surge, but dozens of them."

"Using environmental and numerical advantages," Humphrey said, "trap weavers are responsible for more iron-rank adventurer deaths than any other monster in the Greenstone region. There is a standing advisory that they should be dealt with in groups, during daylight."

"Very comprehensive, Mr Geller," Vincent said.

"I'm not done, sir," Humphrey said. "Instructor Trenslo has asked us to decide for ourselves which of us will deal with the trap weavers. I strongly recommend we choose no one. Fighting these creatures, especially now, is a danger I don't feel to be appropriate. There is a strong likelihood of some of us dying too quickly for instructor Trenslo to intervene."

"I didn't ask for that, Mr Geller," Vincent said.

"With respect, Instructor Trenslo," Humphrey shot back, "you instructed us to decide for ourselves who will participate. This is my contribution to that discussion."

Vincent looked at Humphrey, his expression unreadable.

"What about you, Mr Asano?" Vincent asked.

Jason gave Vincent a long, assessing look before amusement crossed his face.

“Probably best I don’t say anything either way,” he said.

Humphrey looked at Jason, about to speak, but stopped at a slight shake of the head from Jason. Confusion crossed Humphrey’s face, but he stayed silent.

The other candidates who had already passed the assessment joined Humphrey in declining, leaving Mobley and the young woman who, like Jason, was yet to pass or fail. They looked at each other and also declined. Humphrey turned to Vincent.

“There’s our group,” Humphrey told him. “We choose no one.”

“Very well,” Vincent said, his face betraying nothing. “then I guess you should all get back in the wagon.

As promised, the town at which the group rested for the night had a large building for adventurers, with a common room, dining hall, and bedrooms enough for a dozen people. It was situated on the edge of a pond, with a covered terrace. They didn’t arrive until after dark, and most of the group were gathered in the common room.

Jason explored the sizeable kitchen, but the cupboards and cooler box had no food, only crockery and cutlery. Jason made a salad with ingredients from the market towns they had passed through. He left a stack of bowls and forks next to the big salad bowl, filling two and taking a fork for each.

He made his way through the common room, where the other candidates were discussing the day’s events. In the end, Jason had killed both monsters, aside from the trap weavers they had left alone. He had no interest in the circle of unwelcome looks, instead making his way out to the terrace. The night lit up by a bright pair of moons, shining high over the surrounding wetlands.

There was patio furniture on the terrace, Vincent casually reclined as he looked out into the night. Jason put a bowl and fork down on the table next to him, before taking a seat himself. He pulled a couple of glasses from his inventory, along with a bottle. He poured a little bit of blue liquid into each glass.

“I think you’ll like this,” Jason said. “It has a fresh, crisp flavour that should go nicely with the salad.

“Thank you,” Vincent said.

“For being so handsome?” Jason asked. “It’s attached to my face, so I had to bring it with me.”

Vincent shook his head.

“Rufus told me you’d be trouble,” Vincent said.

"He told me you were worth showing respect," Jason said. "Sounds like disparate treatment, to me."

Vincent nodded at the door Jason had emerged from.

"What are they doing in there?"

"Talking about the trap weavers," Jason said. "Humphrey's idea, of course."

"He's a diligent young man," Vincent said. "Have they figured it out, yet?"

"That we were never meant to fight them? They might get there, they might not. The rest are more interested in clamping onto the Geller family's leg."

"You haven't given them much of a chance," Vincent said. "He seems to value your judgement, for reasons that escape me."

"My judgement is excellent, thank you very much," Jason said. "Also, I think his mother wants him to learn something from me."

"Why?"

"You mean 'what.'" Jason corrected.

"No, I meant 'why.'" Vincent said. "Has she actually met you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, she has. You really do think my judgement is suspect, don't you?"

"You tried to start a fight with Thadwick Mercer the first time you met him."

"If I tried to start a fight," Jason said, "then there would have been a fight. What I was doing was getting you to prevent a fight."

"For what conceivable reason would you do that?"

"Social advancement," Jason said. "If I get into it with Thadwick Mercer, then people see me as someone who operates at that level."

"Doesn't wandering around with Geller do that for you?"

"No, that makes me look like a hanger-on."

"I'm not sure outwitting Thadwick Mercer puts you any higher," Vincent said. "He's not one of the great minds of the younger generation."

"The point was to engage with Thadwick Mercer. Just that much puts me above a certain threshold, socially speaking," Jason said. "As for how far above, what do people see when they look closer?"

"They see you standing next to Humphrey Geller," Vincent said, realisation dawning.

"Rufus has been very good to me," Jason said, "but he takes a somewhat top-down view of society. Due to his upbringing, from what I understand. He wants me to reach a level of basic capability as an adventurer before certain facts come to light, but he's rather oblivious as to building social standing."

"I'm not sure your approach is the best way either," Vincent said. "In fact, I'm confident it isn't."

"Is that so?" Jason asked. "Less than two months ago, I walked into Greenstone with no name and no background. Two weeks ago, I watched the symphony from the private viewing box of one of the city's most prominent families. Two days ago, aristocrats were giving me death stares for my friendship with the son of the city's most powerful adventurer. Two minutes ago, you and I started discussing my conflict with the nephew of the city's ruler."

"I'm not really sure what to say to that," Vincent said. "You realise there will be consequences for the way you're going about things."

"Of course," Jason said, "but nothing is more impressive than handling the consequences of one's actions with grace and aplomb."

"And you can do that, can you?" Rufus asked.

"I have absolutely no idea," Jason said with a laugh.

"Rufus warned me about you," Vincent said. "He said you were a man of malevolent intellect."

"That may be the nicest thing anyone has ever said about me."

"That's the nicest thing?"

"What we find complimentary is often subjective," Jason said.

"You are a very strange man."

"That's just cultural differences," Jason said. "Where I come from, I'm perfectly ordinary."

"And where is that, exactly?" Vincent asked.

"Maybe it is possible that I'm slightly unusual," Jason conceded, instead of answering the question.

"Well," Vincent said. "Thank you, in any case, for not interfering when I told you to go after the trap weavers," Rufus said. "Pointing out what I was doing would have been easy points for you, socially speaking."

"No worries," Jason said. "It's not the easy points that win the game."

"You know why I haven't passed you, yet, don't you?" Vincent asked.

"I don't care what you tell us," Jason said. "You won't pass or fail anyone until the assessment is over."

"True enough," Vincent said, "although I don't see Humphrey dropping down this time. He did well, taking leadership today. He had a similar chance last month and second-guessed himself into silence."

“Did Rufus ask you to fail me?” Jason asked. “Or did he just ask you to set the bar high?”

“If I was going to fail you arbitrarily, I wouldn’t have brought you along,” Vincent said.

“Professionalism,” Jason said. “I can’t ask for more than that. Wait, yes I can. What is it going to take to get a pass?”

“You’re an affliction specialist,” Vincent said. “Something like the bark lurker would be trouble for most adventurers, but you handled it easily.”

“So why put me up against it?” Jason asked.

“You tell me,” Vincent said.

Jason thought it over.

“To make sure I can actually use my own specialty?” he ventured.

“There you are,” Vincent said. “So what will it take before I pass you?”

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Affliction specialist is a niche role,” Jason pondered out loud. “Just the thing to deal with a certain flavour of monster, but against ordinary ones, I’m just a slower version of any middle-of-the-road adventurer.”

He glanced over at Vincent, whose expression gave away nothing.

“If I want to pass then,” Jason reasoned, “it isn’t about beating the unusual monsters, because that’s basic stuff for my ability set. It’s about showing I can dominate the ordinary ones as well as any other adventurer. Am I close?”

“You’ll find that out when the assessment is over,” Vincent said.

The door from the common room burst open.

“Jason,” Humphrey said, striding out onto the terrace. “We were never meant to fight the trap weavers, we were meant to refuse! The whole thing was a test of leadership and judgement.”

Shock and disappointment crossed Jason’s face.

“Is that true, Instructor?” he asked, turning on Vincent. “Is something that devious even ethical?”

Chapter 59: Falling Short

The adventurer accommodation had a dozen bedrooms, with three bathrooms shared between them. Jason found the bathrooms strange in their familiarity, tiled surfaces and magical plumbing. Jason was fresh out of the shower, with a towel around his waist. He was standing over a basin, looking into the wall mirror as he washed cream off his face.

“Stash!” Humphrey’s voice yelled from the hall outside. It was followed by the door handle turning, the bathroom door opened from the other side by some kind of chimp-like creature. It then turned into a bird that flew up and perched atop Jason’s head, chirping triumphantly at its reflection in the mirror.

“Sorry,” Humphrey said from the door.

“No worries,” Jason said. “Just so long as the bird he turns into is a small one.”

“What’s that on your face?” Humphrey asked, standing outside the half-closed bathroom door.

“Shaving cream, kind of,” Jason said. “You just leave it on for a few seconds, then any hair washes right off with the cream. An alchemist friend gave it to me. You want to try?”

“I have a magic crystal that you rub on your face,” Humphrey said. “Anyway, I shaved yesterday. I don’t need to do it every day.”

Jason frowned. In the midst of a monster-hunting expedition, it was easy to forget that his fellow candidates were all sixteen or seventeen years old. Jason was only a half-dozen years their senior, but the idea of killing and dying at that age made him grateful he wasn’t forced to grow up young.

“Seems like it would be easy to accidentally take off hair you wanted to keep,” Humphrey said, oblivious to Jason’s thoughts.

“I have some ointment that causes hair to grow,” Jason said. “That’s the one you want to be careful about applying. It works everywhere, whether hair is meant to grow there or not.”

“That makes sense,” Humphrey said. “I was wondering why you didn’t have eyebrows when we met, but a couple of days later you did.”

In the final days of the field assessment, some of the candidates began to realise the results weren’t as decided as Vincent may have implied. Recognising that coasting on what they thought was a done deal wasn’t the best strategy, there was increased

competition for each new monster they went after. Jason didn't push himself forward as the others vied for additional chances to prove themselves, as he was still considering his approach to fighting monsters.

Compared to even the most mediocre of his fellow candidates, Jason's abilities were slow and weak. A fire blast or magical sword strike could take down an ordinary monster in a fraction of the time it took Jason to apply his various afflictions. Worse was that in the time it took them to overcome the afflicted monster, it could well have ravaged any companions Jason had with him in the fight.

His first thought was of his eight unawakened essence abilities, but they would not help him in the remaining days of the field assessment unless he stumbled on a cache of awakening stones. Even if he did, his new abilities would likely be similar to those he already possessed.

Jason's revelation came while watching Humphrey dispatch a group of monsters. They were dog-headed humanoids, with physiques like bodybuilders heavily into steroid abuse. Their jaws could produce a powerful bite, but their most dangerous feature was the sickle-like claws at the end of their arms. Combined with the crude clothing they fashioned for themselves with the flayed skin of their victims, they were an intimidating sight.

The monsters were called margolls. Despite their appearance, they were not very dangerous individually, at least to a fully trained and equipped adventurer. The problem was that they always appeared in groups. As many as a dozen could appear at once, and they were highly aggressive, even for monsters. They were one of the monsters most dreaded by normal people. Every resident of the delta heard stories of a margoll pack descending on a farm or ranch, or even attacking villages.

Humphrey had not put himself forward often since the early days of the field assessment, but he didn't hesitate to step out for the margolls. Rather than rely on his abilities, he used his combat skills to deal with the group. His martial techniques were most useful against humanoid enemies, and beyond summoning his sword and armour, he fought the monsters without powers.

Jason was reminded of the way combat styles of his new world differed from those in his old one. Brazilian jiu-jitsu might be practical in an MMA fight, but have limited application against a crab the size of a delivery van. An acrobatic kick may get punished by a skilled human fighter, yet perfectly deliver a special attack to an inhuman monster.

In all the time Rufus and the others had been training Jason, they devoted very little time to Jason's essence abilities. Outside of aura training, they largely left him to practise them on his own. Instead, they worked on his physicality, mentality and skill; everything

but essence abilities. Rufus had been especially unrelenting in driving Jason to master the martial techniques that came from the skill book he used.

Jason had sparred many times with Humphrey over the last few weeks as part of Rufus' ruthless regimen, and as he watched Humphrey dismantle the monsters, he realised that he had been far too focused on his essence abilities during the assessment. What worked perfectly against a bark lurker was pushing a square peg into a round hole against a small, quick ratling.

The last day of the field assessment would close their looping path through the delta, arriving back at Greenstone in the evening. They had spent the night in a barricade town, whose high walls and expansive lodgings were designed to be a safe-haven during monster surges. Jason had stayed in a similar town in the desert with Rufus Gary and Farrah, except this one had a sprawling stockyard in which to keep herds.

Jason made his way out of the mudbrick cabin he had shared with Humphrey, looking and feeling weary. His plan to put aside his slow essence abilities in favour of martial abilities hadn't worked as well as he had hoped. He was still able to put down the monsters, but not in the domineering fashion he was aiming for.

"Just give it time," Humphrey advised. "I've been training my whole life for this. You've been training for two months."

The group was assembling around the wagon when another wagon came bolting into town, drawn by a four heidels that were panting from how hard they'd been driven.

"Is it just me," Vincent said, "or do those look like some people in need of an adventurer? Everyone form up!"

Vincent approached as the driver pulled up the wagon.

"You need some assistance?" he asked.

A bedraggled driver glanced back into the wagon before dropping down, looking over Vincent. Most people, whether in Greenstone or the delta, wore loose-fitting, breathable clothes because of the heat. Adventurers, at least while on the job, wore more fitted outfits, often with overt protective properties. They carried arrays of weapons and other useful gear. This was also true for the candidates, making their occupation obvious. To dispel any doubt, Vincent wore his brooch bearing the Adventure Society emblem.

The driver explained that his family had escaped their nearby farm after a pack of margolls arrived. The only reason they got away was the margolls were caught up slaughtering their herd, giving the farmer time to load his family in the wagon and flee. This would make the fourth group of margolls the group had encountered in three days.

“Margolls again,” Mobley muttered. “Do you think it’s a sign the monster surge is starting?”

“Possibly,” Humphrey said, “but not likely. There hasn’t been an increase in overall activity or a sharp rise in pack numbers. The first sign is usually when solitary monsters start appearing in groups.”

After getting details from the man, Vincent addressed the group.

“We’re looking at a large pack,” Vincent told them, “somewhere around ten to twelve margolls. Geller, are you comfortable handling that many?”

“I want it,” Jason said before Humphrey could answer.

Mobley looked derisively at Jason.

“We’ve seen you fight, Asano,” he said. “You can’t handle twelve. You can’t handle half of that.”

Vincent looked contemplatively at Jason.

“Why?” Vincent asked him.

“Because I know I’ve been falling short, even if I’ve been muddling along. If I’m going to break through, I need to be pushed harder. Put myself in more danger.”

Vincent considered it for a few moments.

“Geller,” he said finally. “You be ready to get him out when it goes wrong.”

“You mean ‘if’ it goes wrong,” Humphrey said.

“I know what I said, Geller.”

Rufus, Gary and Farrah had spent hour after hour, day after day pounding Jason’s fighting skill into a usable state. He had come further in just a few weeks than he would have imagined possible, but it wasn’t close to matching a dozen monsters. As for the essence abilities he had been relying on in the early days of the assessment, nothing had changed. They were still too slow for a fast-paced battle.

“You don’t have to do this,” Humphrey told him.

“Let him,” Mobley said. “I’d love to see that smug look frozen on his corpse.”

Humphrey glared at Mobley.

“What’s so great about him?” Mobley asked. “Sure, he handled the bark lurker and the rune tortoise, but against anything the rest of us could walk over, his powers are useless. So he gives up on the powers and starts just fighting them straight up? Sure, he’s got some skills, but how long is an adventurer going to last when he fights without using his abilities? He’s not even going to pass if he can’t use his abilities and his combat skills together.”

Jason's eyes shot open.

Was it that simple? Had he really been that stupid?

Jason's mistake came to him as a revelation. Somewhere in his head, he had been putting his martial arts in a box belonging to his old world, and his essence abilities in one belonging to the new. He had been crippling both by subconsciously separating the two.

"I'm an idiot," he said.

"I know," Mobley agreed.

Jason spent the rest of the ride with a grin on his face, eyes flashing as a floodgate opened in his mind. He could suddenly see with perfect clarity how badly he had been hamstringing himself. By the time the wagon turned off the embankment road and down a slope towards the farm, he was itching to begin. He was the first to vault out the back of the wagon.

Vincent had stopped the wagon on the outskirts of the farm. In the distance they could see a clutch of mudbrick farm buildings, past fields of a low, leafy crop. Vincent, still in the driving seat of the wagon, tossed Jason a far-sight crystal.

"We'll watch from here," Vincent said. Margolls had poor vision and aura sense, but their smell and hearing were highly sensitive. The group would see everything through the crystal without interfering with Jason's fight.

As Jason marched away without pause, Humphrey followed. He maintained enough distance that he wouldn't interfere either, but could still intervene if necessary.

Jason neared the farm's largest building, a big, square barn. As he did, a margoll came wandering out, chewing on the remains of what Jason looked like the family dog. Somehow, the idea of a dog-headed monster eating a dog made it even more disgusting. The monster sniffed the air, then turned to Jason, dropping its meal in the dirt.

Jason had never been this close to a margoll before. It had the face of a pit-bull and the body of a power-lifter, with sickle-claw hands. Its arms were drenched up to the elbows in blood, as was its wide mouth. It threw its head back, letting out a wild howl.

Chapter 60: Making Music

Jason and the margoll faced off outside the mud-brick barn. The margoll's howl called out more, who emerged from in and around the building to join it. As they assembled, Jason and the first one remained where they stood, gazes locked. Jason was the first to move, walking closer to the wall of the barn.

That first step was like a starter's pistol, the monsters lunging into a sprint. Jason kept walking casually as the creatures closed the distance, pounding over the dirt. When they were almost upon him, he dropped into the shadow of the building like falling through a manhole.

He rose up from the ground behind the monsters, silently emerging from one the margolls' own shadows. In the brief but crucial moment of confusion, Jason noticed the margoll in front of him had loose skin at the back of its neck, like a dog. He grabbed a fistful of skin and yanked back, pulling the monster off-balance.

The creatures were already wheeling on Jason, so when his dagger tore the throat out of the monster in his grip, blood sprayed over the others.

-
- You have defeated [Margoll].
 - Would you like to loot [Margoll]?
-

He shoved the dead monster forward as it dissolved into rainbow smoke. The stench was horrifying, but bearable for Jason, but he lacked the powerful sense of smell the margolls had. For them, the smoke was like tear gas, the closest ones staggering away with dog-like yelps of misery.

The group of margolls was large enough that those furthest from Jason weren't disabled, although they were scattered and distracted. Jason moved right into their midst, making full use of his martial skills in the chaos. Another margoll dropped dead, throat slashed open. A forceful kick to the side of the knee dropped sent one dropping to the ground. Jason's flashing dagger inflicted more injuries, non-lethal, but distracting enough to keep the monsters off-balance while they were still reeled from the smoke.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Margoll].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Margoll].
 - Aura [Hegemony] reduces the resistances of enemies for each instance of [Sin].
-

The margolls started to recover from the stench. Jason moved out of the encirclement he had placed himself in but was only a step away from the reach of those razor claws. One such claw swiped at him and he lifted a forearm to take the strike. The claw raked through his cloth armour like it wasn't there, cutting deep gouges in his arm. Then, like a burst balloon, leeches erupted from the wound to spray out over the margolls.

The monsters panicked, yelping in horror as leeches dug into any available patch of exposed skin. Leeches buried themselves into the monsters' arms, bodies and even faces. The margolls scrambled to tear them off, but every leech tossed aside took with it a chunk of flesh in its lamprey-like teeth. One margoll pulled a leech from its eye, which burst into goo as the leech came away.

-
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Margoll].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Margoll].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Margoll].
-

The leeches that didn't land directly on the margolls started accumulating in a pile, lurching toward the margolls at the back who had been missed in the initial spray. Jason raised his arm at the margoll that had cut into him and chanted a spell.

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

The margoll's life force started glowing dark red from within its body, before siphoning off in a stream toward Jason's extended hand. As it sank into Jason's skin, the claw marks on his arm closed. It didn't heal completely, but open wounds become bright red welts. By the time the margoll's life force retracted into its body, it looked weak and pale. Jason kicked it into its fellows and once again launched himself into the stricken pack of margolls.

Jason danced through the chaos, dagger flashing, elbows and feet lashing out.

-
- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Margoll].
 - [Bleeding] already in effect, [Bleeding] is refreshed.
 - Special attack [Leech Bite] has drained health and stamina.
-

He did not go for quick kills, instead working to keep the large group distracted and panicked. Yelps and wails came from the margolls as they thrashed about. The stench of the smoke was still in the air and leeches dug into their flesh. Afflictions turned their blood black with poison, even as it leaked from their bodies.

Through it all moved Jason, like a demon conducting an orchestra of the damned. The margolls followed his direction, their screams of misery his music, until the last monster was dead and the air fell silent. Every part of Jason not shrouded in his cloak of

shadows was painted red and black with the tainted blood. At his feet, the leech swarm surged, gorged to bursting. Jason reached down, slicing his hand on a claw for the leeches to clamber back into his bloodstream.

Humphrey watched as Jason walked back Behind him, the rainbow smoke of a dozen monsters drifted into the sky. It also rose up from his body as the blood of his enemies burned away.

The rest of the trip back to Greenstone was almost entirely silent. Although a bottle of crystal wash had cleaned away the residue of the fight, it was as if the other adventurer candidates could still see the blood painted over Jason. Through the far-sight crystal, they had watched him play the creatures to a screaming, suffering demise.

Even Humphrey was shaken. He could tear through a pack of monsters better than any of them, but the worst he could do was burn a creature to death with his fire breath ability. He had never seen anything like Jason's symphony of horrors, shrieks of despair made into unholy music.

As for Jason, he was eerily still in the back of the wagon, staring out at the delta landscape. The horrors he had wrought played out again and again in his mind, but they did not horrify him. For the first time since arriving in his strange new world, he didn't feel like a helpless pawn of fate. He was in control. He had the power. What troubled him wasn't that his moment of catharsis was marked by the screams of the dying. It was that he couldn't ignore the part of himself that wanted more.

The sky grew darker as the wagon passed through cut-down flatland around the Old City wall and through the city gate. After the sprawling delta, everything felt pushed together in Old City, from the narrow streets to the buildings crammed against one another. The wagon rolled through up Broadstreet Esplanade which, in spite of the name, would barely pass as a laneway on the Island. Stalls were packed away and storefronts were closing with the setting sun. Jason noted Jory's clinic as they passed it by.

The Broadstreet Bridge was the same one Jason had crossed on his first day in Greenstone, the wagon getting waved straight into the rich people lane. The pace picked up one the wide and the wagon soon pulled up at the Adventure Society's marshalling yard.

The sun was completely gone by the time they arrived, but Jason's mood had lightened. He hopped free of the wagon feeling a different man than the one who climbed on a week earlier. He had a sense of power about him, of control over his own fate.

“And here we are,” Vincent said as the candidates decamped from the wagon. “Results of the assessment can be collected from administration individually as of tomorrow afternoon. If you wish to challenge or query the results, you may do so with administration at the time you collect them.”

The marshalling yard was thoroughly illuminated by magic lamps, and a small crowd was awaiting their arrival. The other group had apparently just arrived as well, already being greeted by waiting family. Humphrey spied his mother, fending off several would-be social climbers, and headed in her direction. Jason spotted Rufus standing next to her, but also spied Thadwick Mercer. From the body language, he guessed Thadwick was being met by a household servant rather than a family member.

Jason walked over in that direction, calling out Thadwick’s name.

“What do you want, Asano?” Thadwick asked, warily.

“I wanted to apologise,” Jason said. “There are some flaws in my character that sometimes lead me to be smug, childish, and a little too impressed with myself. Last week, I subjected you to all three.”

Jason held out a hand.

“I’d like to apologise, and start fresh.”

“You think I’d even touch your hand?” Thadwick asked. “You went out of your way to make me look like a buffoon, and now you think I’ll take your hand? You aren’t worthy to breathe my air.”

Thadwick stormed off, leaving Jason standing there, holding out his unshaken hand.

“Ah, well,” he said and turned in the direction of Rufus, Humphrey and Humphrey’s mother. Vincent had already moved to join them, and they were all looking in the direction of Jason’s encounter with Thadwick.

“Danielle!” he called out with a wave as he approached. He flashed Humphrey a grin, and Humphrey’s shoulders lost some of the tenseness they had been carrying since Jason’s fight with the margolls.

“Nicely done with young master Mercer,” Danielle replied with a smile. “I do hope you’re paying attention, Humphrey, dear.”

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“Jason,” Rufus scolded, “stop making a spectacle of yourself.”

“Oh, do leave him alone, Mr Remore,” Danielle said. “He knows what he’s doing.”

“I think I might have missed something,” Humphrey said.

“Same here,” Rufus said unhappily.

Danielle sighed, giving Jason a sympathetic look.

"You're wasted in this city, you know that?" she asked him.

"I do," Jason said, shaking his head with mock sadness. "But you can't help where some lunatic cultist summons you to."

"What?" Vincent asked.

"Would you please not provoke Thadwick Mercer?" Rufus asked.

"Or weirdly flirt with my mother," Humphrey added.

"Humphrey, dear. Mr Remore." Danielle said. "You have to remember that Jason wasn't born on top of the pile like you two. He has to make his own place in society, which is why he's playing around with poor Thadwick."

"Then why humble yourself in front of him?" Humphrey asked Jason.

"Because then I'm the reasonable one," Jason said.

"But he stormed off," Humphrey said. "Doesn't that make you seem below him?"

"It isn't about what Thadwick thinks," Jason said. "It's about all these nice people here. The people who saw me seem perfectly reasonable in front of a member of the Mercer family, then wander over here to where I'm on a first name basis with Danielle Geller herself. Where does that put me, in their eyes?"

"Right at the top," Rufus realised. "But why bother? You're already appearing in high social circles."

"As an adjunct to you," Jason told him. "What all this is really for is the people who recognise what I'm doing and why."

"Wait, Humphrey said, "I thought it was about all the people here. You're manipulating Thadwick, and all these people, for the benefit of the ones who see through it all anyway."

"Now you're getting it, dear," Danielle said happily.

"I'm fairly certain I'm not," Humphrey said.

"Dear boy," she said to him. "The people who know what he's doing recognise and respect his ability to do it. That's how you earn a place in the backrooms, not just the ballrooms."

"I still don't follow," Humphrey said.

Danielle sighed.

"Sometimes I think you and your sister are a little too much your father's children. Come along, everyone; I have a carriage waiting and dinner prepared. You will join us, won't you, Mr Trenslow?"

"It would be my honour, Lady Geller."

Chapter 61

TRADE HALL

Jason looked at the various suits of cloth armour draped over the balcony. He had taken three with him on the field assessment, and each had come back covered in rents and tears. Gary was standing next to Jason, also looking them over.

“I’m going to need some new armour before I take any contracts,” Jason said.

“I told you that you needed something heavier,” Gary said.

The armour was all heavy fabric with a few reinforced sections. A combination of magical construction and alchemical treatment of the fabric made it tougher than it looked, but the effect was limited.

“I don’t want to lose the flexibility,” Jason said. “My powers are better suited to speed and mobility, healing up the occasional hit.”

“Then if you won’t increase the bulk,” Gary said, “you’ll need to increase the quality.”

“Meaning something more expensive,” Jason said.

“That’s right,” Gary said. “It’s not like you don’t have the money, and can you really put a price on not dying?”

“That’s certainly hard to argue against,” Jason said. “And I do still have a decent amount of money.”

“You should definitely buy something good,” Gary said, “but don’t take it too far with iron-rank armour. Just find something reasonably protective and save up for bronze rank. What you really want is something that has a self-repair enchantment, which will save you a good lot of money on repairs.”

“Do you know where to find something like that?” Jason asked. “I looked around at the guild district markets, and these were the best I found.”

He pointed out the bedraggled suits of armour.

“There’s only one place to go for the really good stuff,” Gary said. “You’re an adventurer, now, so you can start enjoying the perks.”

Jason hadn’t been allowed entry to the Adventure Society trade hall, but he had seen it from the outside. It was a huge complex of buildings just off the loop line station, with several annexed structures connecting off a massive central building.

It was a huge bazaar restricted to members of the Adventure Society, along with traders who received dispensation to operate there. It was where Adventurers could trade away any valuables, sell off old equipment and buy gear and supplies for their adventures.

Jason was yet to receive his Adventure Society badge, gaining entry with a temporary permit he received with the results of his assessment.

Inside the main hall, Gary led the way as they merged into a crowd as packed as any Old City street market. It was a vast, open room, three storeys high, with two mezzanine levels. Light poured in from a series of skylights that made up the bulk of the ceiling.

The ground level was a boisterous mix of stalls, ranging from the semi-permanent to the very temporary. Some were just an open tent with a few items laid out on a table. Others were essentially stores, constructed from artfully dyed and woven reed panels, complete with signage. Most fell somewhere in between, but all were swarmed with people almost shoulder to shoulder.

"I didn't realise there were this many adventurers," Jason said, speaking loudly over the din of people.

"A lot of them aren't active adventurers," Gary said. "Mostly they're essence users from the aristocratic and wealthy families who joined the society for the benefits. Like the right to come here."

"But they had to pass the field assessment, right?"

"Not all field assessments are alike," Gary said. "Just ask Rufus if you want to hear him complain for an hour. The problem is worse here than in most places."

"What about monster surges?" Jason asked. "They have to front up for those, right?"

"They do," Gary said, "but most places have what's called a reserve program."

"Meaning they get to stand at the back?" Jason asked.

"That's the one," Gary said.

Gary led him to the side of the hall, where arcades led toward other buildings in the complex, but instead of leaving the main hall, they took one of the broad stairways leading up.

"The main floor is all iron rank stuff," Gary said. "Next floor up is bronze."

The second and third floor were mezzanine levels. Gary didn't pause at the second, leading them up to the third.

"The third floor is silver rank?" Jason guessed.

"No, there isn't the market for it here," Gary said. "Apparently there's only forty or so silver rankers in the whole city, and they aren't very active. The magic level here is too low, so silver-rank monsters are rare. Any silver rankers here permanently are semi-retired at best. People like Danielle Geller and Thalia Mercer are only here in anticipation of the monster surge."

"So what is the third floor for?" Jason asked.

“Brokerages,” Gary said. “Most adventurers can’t be bothered with the trouble of renting a stall and waiting around for people to buy whatever random pile of loot they have. Brokers buy almost anything of value and sort it more effectively for sale. For a percentage, of course.”

“That’s fair enough,” Jason said.

“Brokers also organise the auctions,” Gary said. “In a smaller city like this, they’ll usually hold on to the valuable stuff, like essences and awakening stones. Then the brokers will work together to hold a big auction event. Once we finish that shield, that’ll sell at auction.”

The most valuable item Jason looted during the field assessment was the shell of the rune tortoise. Finding an intact one was rare and lucrative, as they could be turned into magical shields. Gary and Farrah were going to work on it together, then split the profits three ways with Jason.

“Most brokers also do money-changing services,” Gary said. “If you want to split a coin, say bronze down to iron, they’ll do it for free. If you go the other way they charge ten percent. That’s standard everywhere, so if they ask for more, just go somewhere else.”

Gary led them into a brokerage office, where they were greeted by a receptionist. They were quickly led into a room where they were met by an item assessor, who would value the items so they could get paid. They just had to put out everything on a table for the assessor to go over.

Jason put out the various items he had looted from monsters. There was bark-lurker hide, monster cores and a variety of loose quintessence gems. On Gary’s advice, Jason kept certain items, but most of it was cleared out to make room in Jason’s increasingly full inventory. Even if many items stacked into a single slot, he was getting close to filling all forty spaces. Jason had a strange moment as he took out the magical robes he had taken from Landemere Vane.

Landemere was the very first person Jason met in his new world. He was also the first person Jason killed. It had been less than two months, but he felt like a completely different person from the concussed, panicked idiot in the Vane family basement.

“Something wrong?” Gary asked, and Jason realised he was staring into space, the robes held in his hands. The blood had long since been cleaned off of them.

“I’m fine,” Jason said, putting the folded robes on the table.

With fresh coins added to the currency counter in his inventory, they headed back downstairs and into the main hall. Making their way through the throng as they looked at the goods on offer, Jason spotted a familiar face. Jory’s stand wasn’t one of the permanent

stalls, but it was one of the larger ones. At the front was a glass counter lined with colourful bottles and vials, behind which stood Jory himself. Most of the stall was storage space, hidden behind a curtain. While Jory was selling a woman a bottle of perfume, Jason perused the chalkboard beside the counter listing the available products.

“Crystal wash,” he read out loud.

“Seriously?” Jory asked, as his customer rejoined the crowd. “I can only make so much of it, and there are other people who want to buy it. People who don’t get the friends discount.”

“You realise I had to trudge through a bog marsh, right? To protect the poor, innocent people of the delta?”

Jory groaned.

“I can give you one crate, but that’s it for the week.”

“Twelve bottles?” Jason said. “I can’t get by on twelve bottles.”

“You do know about showers and baths, right?” Jory asked.

“He cleans his teeth with it,” Gary said.

“What?” Jory said.

“It leaves my mouth feeling fresh,” Jason said.

“Well, if you want more,” Jory said, “I’m not the only alchemist here.”

“What about those assistants you were talking about getting from the Alchemy Association?” Jason asked.

“Expanding my operations isn’t something I can just do on a whim, you know. I have a lot of demands on my time.”

“I thought that’s why you wanted the assistants,” Jason said. “Someone to take over the grunt work.”

They paused for Jory to sell an adventurer a bundle of potions.

“It isn’t that simple,” Jory said, resuming their conversation. “If I’m going to do it properly I need to put together a whole new facility. Extra space, new equipment. Wages for the assistants. You know the kind of margins I work under.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “Have you considered investors?”

“You offering?” Jory asked.

Jason held up a hand, three gold coins stacked between his thumb and forefinger.

“Something like this get you started?”

The basic coin of the realm was the lesser spirit coin. Iron spirit coins were worth a hundred lesser coins, used by bulk traders, adventurers and other members of the wealthy elite. After that, it was ten iron to the bronze, ten bronze to the silver and ten silver to the

gold. The gold spirit coins in Jason's hand was worth three hundred thousand units of the basic currency.

"You're not serious?" Jory said, to which Jason placed the coins down on the counter. Jory hesitantly picked them up, peering at them nestled in his palm.

"Do you know how many people I can help with this kind of money?" Jory asked.

"It doesn't matter how many people you help," Jason said. "What matters is if this gets me another crate of crystal wash."

"I still can't believe you gave him all that money," Gary said as they made their way through the crowd.

"It's an investment," Jason said.

"In what? That guy spends all his money on helping sick poor people."

"But imagine a world where everyone gave money for things like that," Jason said.

Gary thought it over for a moment.

"Then there'd be more healthy poor people?"

Jason allowed himself to be led by Gary's expertise as they looked at various armour for sale. They checked out large stalls selling armour in job lots and small stalls with expensive, handcrafted work. The main hall was only the beginning of the grand bazaar. Side corridors led to sprawling arcades lined with boutique shops. Jason spotted one with a sign so long it threatened to encroach on the abutting storefront.

GILBERT'S RESILIENT ATTIRE FOR THE DISCERNING GENTLEMAN

Jason walked inside, which was a large open space lined with armour of the lighter variety Jason preferred, largely cloth and leather. Most of the wares were draped over mannequins to demonstrate the hang of the garb. Several customers were perusing the wares, along with the proprietor in a frock coat that bulged heavily in the middle. Jason recognised middle-aged man's paunchy frame and balding head.

"Bert," Jason said.

"Indeed I am, sir. Gilbert, of Gilbert's Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman. For fine men as yourselves, however, I invite and appeal upon you to call me Bert. I take it from that glint of recognition in your eye that you are familiar with one of my brothers? Please tell me it isn't Filbert, of Filbert's Fine Leather Emporium."

"Uh, no," Jason said. "I'm Jason, and this is Gary."

Gary waved vaguely from where he was already inspecting the merchandise.

"I've met Bertram and Albert and Robert, but not Filbert," Jason said. "You're quintuplets?"

“Actually, it’s octuplets,” Gilbert said.

“There’s eight of you?”

“Indeed there are,” Gilbert said. “There’s Herbert, who sells fruit with Robert, but on the Island instead of Old City.”

“Selling the same fruit, but charging three times as much?” Jason asked.

“I knew you for a gentleman of discernment,” Gilbert said. “There’s also Hubert, but we don’t really talk about him. Got caught up with a criminal element. That just leaves Bertrand. He’s the handsome one.”

“You aren’t all identical?”

“No, we are.”

Jason was about to inquire further when Gary jostled his arm.

“There’s some quality stuff here,” Gary said. “Take a look at this.”

“Ah,” Gilbert said. “Trap weaver silk, alchemically treated for maximum resiliency. Leather panels carefully placed to provide additional protection without compromising flexibility. The magic in is integrated right down to the weaving pattern of the cloth. Tricky and laborious work, but the results speak for themselves. It also allows for the loose, flowing design, which is quite unusual with protective wear.”

Just as Gilbert said, the armour was almost a robe, in shifting shades of dark grey. The more fitted parts around the torso, arms and legs had black leather panels, but the layered garment was also draped with flowing cloth. It was a strange combination of tactical armour from Jason’s world and some kind of wizard robe. Jason was immediately taken with it.

“There’s a mythological order of dark warrior mystics where I come from,” Jason said. “They dress like this. I don’t suppose you know where I can get a sword with a blade made of red light?”

“Not in this city,” Gary said. “I’ve seen some gold-rank weapons like that.”

“Nice,” Jason said. “I have to start ranking up.”

“You’re a long, long way from gold rank,” Gary said with a laugh. “You should keep your eyes on what’s in front of you, for now.”

Gilbert smelled a sale and continued his spiel.

“The mix of shades and the flowing lines are of value to clients who value stealth,” Gilbert said, continuing with his sales pitch. “While not assisted by magic, the drape of the fabric breaks up the lines of the body, making it harder to recognise in the dark.”

“That does actually work,” Gary said, “although it doesn’t really matter with that cloak of yours.”

Jason reached out to run his fingers over cloth, which felt smooth and sleek.

Item: [Trap Weaver Battle Robe] (iron rank, epic)

A full body armour, carefully hand-crafted from the silk and leather of trap weavers. (armour, cloth/leather).

- Effect: Increased resistance to damage. Highly effective against cutting and piercing damage, less effective against blunt damage.
 - Effect: Repairs damage over time. Extensive damage may require external repair.
 - Effect: Absorbs blood to prevent leaving a blood trail.
 - Effect: Increases resistance to bleed and poison effects.
 - Effect: Resistant to adhesive substances and abilities with adhesive effects.
 - Effect: Adapts fit to the wearer, within a certain range.
-

“Well?” asked Gary, familiar with Jason’s ability to examine items.

“I like it,” Jason said. “I like it a lot.”

“It’ll probably cost more than you should really spend,” Gary said, “but you should always spend a little more than you want to on armour. It’ll keep you alive.”

“No wiser words have ever been spoken within the walls of my establishment,” Gilbert said.

Gary took on the job of haggling the price down, both he and Gilbert seeming satisfied with where the number landed. The price was in bronze coins, unusual for iron-rank equipment, but Jason had no issue for the quality of the product. He had only seen a handful of epic-quality armour in all their browsing, none of which met his needs so well as the one he finally purchased.

After paying for the armour, Jason placed it into his inventory. He pulled up the outfits tab, slotting the armour into a new outfit. He then tapped the equip button and obscuring smoke suddenly surrounded him. It cleared a moment later, his clothes gone and the armour in their place.

“Very impressive, sir,” Gilbert said, without apparent surprise. “And might I say, it suits you well. Please, do see for yourself.”

Gilbert pointed Jason to a standing mirror in the corner, where Jason admired himself in the dark combat attire.

“I think I’m having a chuunibyou moment,” Jason said.

“My apologies sir,” Gilbert said, “but I’m not sure I grasp your meaning.”

“We find it’s better not to ask,” Gary said.

Jason’s shadow cloak appeared around him, merging well with flowing lines of dark armour.

“I’m definitely having a chuunibyouto moment.”

They left Gilbert’s Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman with Jason back in his street attire.

“I like how loose it feels,” he said. “I wasn’t sure about all the really loose clothes they wear here, but once I started wearing armour I really missed it.”

Jason had long ago bought fresh clothes, discarding those he looted from the Vane Estate. Daywear in Greenstone wouldn’t look out of place at a tropical resort, with bright colours and loose fits. Eveningwear was more fitted and formal, with flaring frock coats in dark, sober colours.

“I like it too,” Gary said. “Finding clothes comfortable over fur can be a pain. You should see what they wear where I come from. It’s basically just underwear and a bunch of belts strapped over everything.”

They were making their way through the crowds in the direction of the exit when Jason stopped when he spotted a stall.

“What is it?” Gary asked.

It was a large stall selling recording crystals. Jason’s eyes fell on a box of crystals being sold in bulk, which he pointed out to the bored-looking woman behind the counter.

“How much?”

Chapter 62: Have Some Damn Adventures

“Hello,” Jason said, waving at the crystal floating in front of him. “I’m not sure if, or when you’ll be seeing this, but I didn’t die, or whatever you think happened to me. You probably know that, since the only way you’re likely to see this is if I give it to you.”

He let out a dissatisfied groan.

“Maybe I should have scripted this. Oh, well. Where should I start? It’s been about two months since I arrived here. Where is here? That’s complicated. I’ve made some friends. I just got a new job, although I haven’t started yet. They’re meant to be sending my ID over today. The application process involved sort of a week-long retreat, which I got back from a couple of days ago.”

He took a deep breath.

“I suppose I should start with that complicated question of where I am. Right now, as you can see, I’m in an expensive hotel suite. It isn’t actually mine; that’s across the hall. This one belongs to some of those friends I mentioned. They went three-bedroom, which came with this nice, open living area.”

Jason had purchased recording crystals that gave him a lot of control about how they moved. He got up and led it out to the balcony, where he panned it over the ocean view.

“Nice, right? One of my new friends is kind of a big deal, so he got the best room in the house. We’re on an artificial island, which is pretty crazy, given the size. At some point I’ll do a tour video. The subways here are amazing.”

“Jason,” Farrah’s voice called out from inside. “Who are you talking to?”

Jason went back inside. Although he hadn’t been out on a job yet, having passed muster with the Adventure Society prompted Rufus to declare Jason ready to guide his own training. Although he and the others would provide occasional guidance, the hours of intensive oversight was a thing of the past, leaving the others with more time for their own pursuits. Farrah and Gary had been working on the rune tortoise shield they were going to sell off, while Rufus was preparing to expand his family’s interests into Greenstone.

“I’m talking to my family,” Jason said as he walked back inside. Farrah and Gary had just returned.

“Your family?” Farrah asked.

“It’s a recording stone,” Jason said. “I’ve decided to make a record of my time here. Something I can show them, if I ever get home. Family, this is Farrah and Gary.”

“Er, hello,” Farrah said, giving the awkward, home-movie wave that apparently transcended realities.

“Hey!” Gary said, waving enthusiastically. “Hello, Jason’s family!”

“Didn’t the goddess of knowledge tell you that you definitely would get home?” Farrah asked.

“I’m not wildly trusting of authority figures,” Jason said, deactivating the crystal. He took a carousel out of his inventory, full of recording crystals in little trays. He stowed the crystal away in an empty slot and returned the carousel to his inventory.

“You do realise the Adventure Society you just joined is a world-spanning organisation, right?” Farrah asked. “A global authority.”

“I’m anticipating the odd bit of friction,” Jason said. “I know I’m not to everyone’s taste, but coming to this world is a chance to be who I am, take it or leave it.”

“Even if it kills you,” Gary said cheerfully. “You decided to keep the thing that’ll randomly send you home, then?”

“I did,” Jason said. “I could always change my mind, but being here has given me some perspective on what’s really important. I hadn’t seen most of them in a long time.”

“What happened between you?” Farrah asked.

“The love of my life cheated on me with my brother, then they got married and my mother basically told me to shut up and take it like a man.”

“Harsh,” Gary said.

“We never really got along,” Jason said. “My brother is everything she ever wanted in a son. It was kind of the other way around with Dad. It was always him and me, but after the way things were, I didn’t see him so much.”

There was a knock on the door and Gary let in Vincent. They all sat down in the lounge area and Jason put out a tray of snacks he took from his inventory.

“You just had those ready?” Gary asked, picking up a candied grape.

“Turns out my storage space maintains freshness and temperature,” Jason said. “Which is lucky, because I had that tyrannical pheasant meat in there for almost two months.”

“You mean, the meat I had the other day?” Gary asked.

“That’s the one,” Jason said.

“Is that why you didn’t want any? Were you testing it out on me?”

“It wouldn’t worry me,” Jason said “I resist poison.”

“But I don’t,” Gary said.

“You’re bronze rank,” Jason said. “It’d be fine. If you’re worried about the food I make, you don’t need to eat any of these snacks,” Jason said.

Gary looked at the candied grape in his fingers, then put it into his mouth.

“We don’t have to go that far,” he mumbled.

Vincent watched the exchange with raised eyebrows.

“Are you two quite finished?”

“You sound like Rufus,” Gary said.

“I don’t think Rufus could pull off that moustache,” Jason said.

Jason liked Vincent. He was a very serious man with a very outrageous moustache, which Jason appreciated.

“There’s been a slight problem with your Society badge,” Vincent said.

After receiving confirmation that he had passed the assessment, Jason had undergone the final process of becoming an Adventure Society member. Each member had a badge that served various functions beyond proof of membership. It let members claim adventure notices and allowed the Society to track members in case they went missing. It also let the Society know immediately when a member died.

Badges were managed by the Adventure Society’s Member Logistics Department, of which Vincent was one of the chief officials. In addition to the assessment and induction of new members, their responsibilities included the dispensation and monitoring of membership badges.

Although the badges were managed by the Adventure Society, it was the Magic Society that created them. Jason had been sent to the Magic Society so they could take an aura imprint from which to make his badge. It was a simple process, just standing in the middle of a magic circle for about a minute.

“Every time a badge is made,” Vincent said, “it’s paired with a tracking stone. It tells us if your alive or dead, and lets us find you if you go missing or die. Yours doesn’t work, though. The stone can’t track your the aura imprint.”

“I’ve seen this before,” Farrah said. “Some people have abilities that block magical tracking.”

“That was the Magic Society’s assessment as well,” Vincent said.

Farrah turned to Jason.

“You have the dark essence, right?” she asked him. “A lot of hiding abilities can protect you from location effects.”

“It’s not the dark essence,” Jason said. “It’s one my other abilities. My, uh, out of town abilities.”

Ability: [Mysterious Stranger]

➤ Immunity to identification and tracking effects.

“It seems that I’m completely immune to tracking effects,” Jason said.

Vincent nodded.

“That’s fine,” he said. “Just as long as we know there isn’t someone messing with our membership systems.”

“So what does that mean about getting my badge?” Jason asked.

“There’s not much we can do,” Rufus said. “Your badge will still work fine for your adventuring activities. It just means we can’t track you if you go missing,” Vincent said. “Or find your body, if you die alone.”

“I can live with that,” Jason said. “Tracking everyone seems a little dystopian, anyway.”

Vincent plucked an object out of thin air. Many essence users had abilities to store objects in dimensional spaces, like Jason’s inventory, or Farrah’s bottomless stone chest. Vincent handed a square, leather object to Jason. It was a badge wallet, which Jason flipped open to see the badge inside. It was a circular medallion made of iron, embossed with a sword and rod crossed over a shield; the emblem of the Adventure Society.

“Congratulations,” Vincent said. “As of this moment, you are officially a member in good standing of the Adventure Society. That badge represents your membership, and the authority that represents.”

“I have authority?” Jason asked, flipping open the wallet like a TV cop flashing his badge.

“Not really,” Vincent said. “There is a certain level of prestige that comes from membership, but any actual authority comes from the contract you are carrying out. A common example is when the city puts out a contract to capture a wanted criminal. Whoever is assigned that contract has the power to investigate and arrest bestowed by the city, but only so long as they are on that contract. You don’t have the rank to take on a contract like that, however.”

“I have a rank?” Jason asked.

“Your rank can be seen on your medallion,” Vincent said. “One-star, iron rank.”

Jason looked down at his new badge. On the iron medallion, underneath the Adventure Society emblem, was a single star.

“The ranking system of the Adventure Society has two parts,” Vincent explained. “The first element is not assessed at all, being a reflection of your rank as an essence user. You’re iron rank, so you’re an iron rank member.”

“Simple enough,” Jason said.

“The second part is not an assessment of your power, but your judgement. That’s the star ranking, and is wholly determined by the Adventure Society. Everyone begins at one star, with the maximum number of stars being three. The number of stars determines the kinds of contracts you can take. One star contracts are pure monster hunts, with no complicated elements to deal with.”

“What’s your star rating?” Jason asked.

“Society officials operate outside the rating system,” Vincent said. “It helps us to work with members, irrespective of their rank.”

“Makes sense,” Jason said. “If you’ve got a two-star official running an operation with three-star members, they might start taking things into their own hands.”

“Precisely,” Vincent said.

“So what about you two?” Jason asked Gary and Farrah.

“Two star,” Farrah said. “Rufus, as well. We were kind of hoping to get bumped up to three after the Vane contract, but that didn’t work out.”

“Rufus gave an honest report,” Gary said. “We didn’t come out looking great.”

“Ironically, you did,” Vincent said to Jason. “I saw that report.”

“I don’t suppose that counts for my promotion chances?” Jason asked.

“Not directly,” Vincent said, “but it may be taken into account in the future. Once other achievements have the Society considering you for promotion. Achievements made while actually a member.”

“So what do two and three stars actually represent?” Jason asked.

“In short,” Vincent said, “two and three stars represent a level of confidence in your judgement on the part of the Adventure Society. Two stars means the Society recognises your ability to undertake at least some level of actual, unsupervised responsibility. You’ll be able to take different kinds of contracts, such as investigating potentially dangerous situations or unknown phenomena. It also means you can lead small expeditions of one-star members.”

“We never got to two star at iron rank,” Gary said. “In the high-magic areas there isn’t a lot of chance to shine. You spend the whole time following more powerful adventurers so as not to die.”

“Three stars is much the same as two, but more so,” Vincent said.

“Three stars means they trust you to handle yourself when things get political,” Farrah said.

“That’s a fair assessment,” Vincent said. “Three star members are expected to anticipate and manage consequences at a higher level than other adventurers.”

“How do you go for promotion?” Jason asked.

“You can apply,” Vincent said, “usually on the back of some accomplishment. The Society prefers to choose for themselves, however. When they think you’re operating at a higher level than your current rank, they’ll do an assessment. We don’t like to see useful assets wasting themselves on work any idiot could do.”

“I think he’s talking about you,” Farrah said to Gary.

“You’re not any higher rank than I am,” Gary shot back.

“There is one important thing to be aware of,” Vincent said, ignoring the pair. “The stringency with which promotions are considered scales upward with power. What is good enough for two stars at iron rank is not the same as at bronze or silver rank, where the stakes are higher. As such, you can expect to drop a star rank each time you increase a tier in power. Unless you’re still one-star, of course. No one really expects anything from you if you’re stuck at that level.”

“He’s still talking about you,” Farrah said.

“I have two stars,” Gary said. “We’re the same rank,” Gary said.

“So, what now?” Jason asked.

“That’s easy,” Gary said. “You’re an adventurer, now. Go to the jobs hall, get a contract and have some damn adventures.”

Chapter 63: Sunk-Cost Fallacy

Jason was trying something new on his morning run to Jory's clinic. With his cloak of shadows around him, he used its ability to reduce his weight to accelerate his progress. It required careful control, kicking off each step with his full weight, then reducing it to let the force propel him. At first it didn't work at all as he hopped into the air or tripped and fell.

Slowly getting a handle on it, he developed an unusual stride. His steps came less frequently, but with a lunging power that sent him skimming almost weightlessly over the ground. The disadvantage was that the weight-reduction slowly consumed his mana. By the time he arrived breathlessly at Jory's, the little mana bar at the edge of his vision was as empty as his stamina. He was as exhausted mentally as physically.

When Jason staggered through the back door of the clinic, Jory quickly brought in someone for Jason to use his power on. The patient looked worse than Jason, pale-skinned and walking strangely. He was accompanied into the room by a deeply unpleasant smell. Jason held out a weary hand, mumbling the incantation for the spell.

"Feed me your sins."

-
- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Dysentery] from [Human].
 - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Syphilis] from [Human].
 - Your stamina and mana have been replenished.
-

Both Jason and the patient let out sighs of relief.

"Thank you sir," the man said to Jason as Jory led him out. "I couldn't really make it here without soiling myself a little."

"Oh, we noticed," Jory said.

"Did I hear him say something about sins?" the man asked Jory.

"Don't worry about that," Jory said. "You just go home and get yourself cleaned up."

Jory came back to find Jason leaning against the wall. The few afflictions he had drained from the patient weren't enough to fully restore him.

"What happened to you?" Jory asked.

"I'm trying a new thing with one of my abilities. Something to help me travel faster. I'm going to pick up my first contract today, and most of them will be out in the delta."

"Why not hire a heidel from the livery stable? That's what most adventurers do."

"They creep me out," Jason said. "They're like a horse, except horribly, horribly wrong."

"I don't know what a horse is, but why do you think heidels are creepy?" Jory asked.

"They are creepy."

"There's a leech monster that lives inside you, and you think heidels are creepy?"

"Yeah, well... actually, that's a pretty good point. Still, I can think they're creepy if I want; it's a subjective position. Can you help me out with some cheap stamina and mana potions?"

"That's not a problem," Jory said. "Making those on the cheap were some of the earliest results of my experiments. They won't as strong as the more expensive sort, though."

"That's fine," Jason said. "I just need something to top me off a little. I'll save the high performance stuff for combat."

"I have crate-loads of the cheap stuff," Jory said. "You can have them at cost."

"Thanks," Jason said. "I'll be spending more time out in the delta now. I probably won't be able to make scheduled appearances so often."

"Don't worry," Jory said. "The clinic got along just fine before you came along."

"I'm not saying I won't be here," Jason said. "It's just the timing might get a little erratic."

"Any time you can spare, I'll appreciate," Jory said. "Things will be a bit hectic once the expansion starts, anyway."

"How's that going?" Jason asked.

"I bought the building next door," Jory said. "I'm going to have the two buildings connected, using this one as the clinic and putting a huge alchemy facility in the other. Construction starts in a few days."

"Best bring on the next patient," Jason said. "I want to get through them and head up to the jobs hall."

"Not a problem," Jory said, heading for the door, then pausing, looking back at Jason.

"Having you been passing weird spirit coins?" Jory asked.

"Those one I gave you should have been legitimate," Jason said.

"Not those," Jory said. "Iron rank stuff. Janice said some Magic Society guy came in looking for you."

"Is that bad?" Jason asked.

"Not unless you've been passing counterfeit coins," Jory said.

"I don't think they're counterfeit," Jason said. "Just personalised."

"What do you mean, personalised?" Jory asked.

Jason took out a coin checked it was one of his and tossed it to Jory, who looked it over.

“Is that a picture of you?” Jory asked, peering at it.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Wait a second,” Jory said, heading for the stairs. He came back down with a stone plate, with six gems set into it. He sat it on a bench and placed Jason’s coin on it. The second gem immediately lit up with the blue-grey colour of an iron spirit coin.

“The coin’s fine,” Jory said. “They’re all like this one?”

“They are,” Jason said.

“Looting ability?” Jory asked.

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“No wonder you don’t mind healing people for free,” Jory said. “You can basically punch coins right out of monsters. I’m going to go get some more sick people for you.”

“Wait,” Jason said. “What do I do about the Magic Society guy?”

“The coins are the real deal,” Jory said, “so don’t worry about it. You’re an Adventure Society guy, now. There’s something of a friendly rivalry between the Magic Society and the Adventure Society, at least between people who aren’t members of both. If he shows up, feel free to stick it to him. Just do what you normally do to people.”

“What do I normally do to people?” Jason asked.

“Confuse them until they want to punch you in the face,” Jory said.

The jobs hall was an annex of the main administration building on the Adventure Society campus. Compared to the overbearing immensity of the trade hall, it was a small and discrete. Inside was a moderate sized room divided into rows by standing bulletin boards. There were a few adventurers amongst them, perusing the posted contracts. To the right of the entrance was a stairwell going up, while the left had a man behind a desk. The familiar looking man was leaning back in his chair, dozing lightly in the warmth of the afternoon.

“Afternoon, Bert,” Jason greeted.

He had learned that when it came to the Berts, the best way to identify them was to feel out their auras, which were almost, but not quite as identical as their faces. This was Albert, an Adventure Society functionary Jason had met before.

“Mr. Asano,” Albert greeted. “You’re not in for your first job, are you?”

“I am, as it happens.”

“You know, there’s another young fellow doing the same.”

“Oh?” Jason said, looking around. He spotted Humphrey emerging from behind a bulletin board.

“I thought I heard your voice,” Humphrey greeted.

After exchanging small talk, they started exploring the bulletin boards. It was the first visit for both of them, but Humphrey had been preparing to be an adventurer his entire life. He acted as a guide as he showed Jason through the various sections.

“This floor is all iron-rank contracts,” Humphrey explained. “It starts at one-star contracts down this end, with three-star on the far side of the room. That section is usually empty, though. Most iron-rank contracts are ordinary monster hunting.”

He pointed out the stairs.

“Upstairs is bronze rank. There isn’t a spot for silver rank, since there isn’t enough call for it.”

They started strolling through the rows, glancing over contracts.

“Contracts can be closed or open,” Humphrey explained. “A closed contract can only be taken by one person, on a first-come, first-serve basis. You take the notice, register it at the desk, and off you go. Open contracts are a lot less common, where any number of people can join in. Usually that’s a widespread infestation of lesser monsters, with rewards per kill.”

“I’ve killed a few lesser monsters.”

“They aren’t a big problem unless they come in numbers,” Humphrey said. “Any farmer with a pitchfork can handle most of them.”

“Not all of them, though,” Jason said. “Have you ever seen a malicious hedgehog? Shoots spikes out of its body.”

“I haven’t,” Humphrey said.

“I suppose you don’t get a lot of hedgerow omnivores in this climate.”

“When it comes to choosing a contract, not all are created equal,” Humphrey said, continuing his explanation. “Once a contract has languished for a couple of weeks, it gets assigned to members on a compulsory basis. As to who gets the assignments, that’s all internal politics. There have been some rumblings since the new director came in. There are a lot of nominal Adventure Society members who don’t take any contracts suddenly finding contracts assigned to them.”

“I’ve heard there’s been some internal conflict,” Jason said. “The new person in charge, trying to purge some of the corruption.”

“My perspective has been somewhat peripheral,” Humphrey said, “not being a member until now. My mother likes the new director, though.”

“That’s a good sign,” Jason said.

“The new director had been making a lot of changes,” Humphrey said, “even here in the jobs hall.”

“Such as?”

“Contracts come from the general population,” Humphrey said. “From people who have a problem, usually a monster problem, that requires an adventurer. People of means can offer incentives, so that their contract is taken up more quickly. As you might imagine, there’s a lot of competition for the more lucrative contracts.”

“The new director banned incentives?” Jason asked.

“No, they’re still there,” Humphrey said. “It’s just that there used to be a special notice board up the front with all the incentivised contracts, because they were the ones people were most interested in. The new director put an end to that and had the incentivised contracts posted with all the rest. I’m not really sure what that accomplishes, other than taking up people’s time.”

“It’s actually a smart move,” Jason said. “Once people have put in a certain amount of effort into something, they feel like they need to follow through, or their effort was wasted. They call it the sunk-cost fallacy, where I come from.”

“Sunk cost?” Humphrey asked.

“Think about that board you described,” Jason said. “The one with all the most lucrative contracts on it, sitting up the front. I bet you’d get a lot of people who come in, saw that board was empty, and walked away. Now think about if they have to comb through all the boards to find those high-paying contracts. After having spent that much time looking, at least some of those people will take a contract, even if they don’t find one with bonuses. Otherwise, they feel like they’ve wasted all the time they spent looking.”

Humphrey frowned as he looked at Jason.

“Does it ever bother you?” Humphrey asked. “Manipulating people, I mean. Like with Thadwick Mercer. If you were actually arguing with him would be one thing, but provoking him because a public argument helps your social standing?”

“Manipulation isn’t bad, in and of itself,” Jason said. “Look at it this way: if you have the choice between manipulating someone into doing the right thing, or punishing them for doing the wrong thing, which is more moral? Pushing someone onto a better path and having the right thing done, or having the wrong thing done and hurting the person for doing it? Righteous honesty says to be upright and put the moral decision onto the other person. But what is more important? Feeling righteous, or putting a little more good into the world?”

“You have to give people the chance to make their own mistakes,” Humphrey said. “Otherwise, you’re just trying to control everything, even what’s right and wrong.”

“There is always someone controlling what’s right and wrong,” Jason said. “Look at you, for example. How do you feel about benefiting from a society where the vast majority of the population are exploited for the benefit of you and people like you? The same people who govern the structure of society are the one who benefit the most. That’s true everywhere, your world or mine.”

“I was brought up to believe that nobility is as much duty as privilege,” Humphrey said. “That the advantages we have come with a lifelong responsibility to earn the everything we’ve been given.”

“That’s commendable,” Jason said. “But Thadwick Mercer received every opportunity you did, and he doesn’t strike me as the lifelong responsibility type. How many of your peers are like you, and how many are like him? How is that fair to the people of Old City or the delta? Do you think someone living in a hovel would turn down a mansion because they would have to live up to the responsibility that came with it? Someone like Thadwick isn’t inherently evil, but he’s part of a system that tells him he deserves more than other people, just for being born. Do you think he’s right to think that?”

“Of course not,” Humphrey said.

“But you’re the same,” Jason said. “That responsibility you were talking about? That is you, striving to be better because the world tells you that you’re better and you feel responsible for living up to that. I respect that choice, but it is a choice. If you wanted to slack off and exploit people, there’s very little to stop you. Not everyone gets the chance to live up to that privilege.”

Farrah, had she been present, would have recognised Jason ramping up into full-blown, morally superior proselytising. Not being there to stop him with a sharp punch to the face, Jason’s rant continued.

“You think criminals just woke up one day and thought, ‘gee, I sure would like to take other people’s stuff?’ They turn to crime because it’s that or they go hungry. Their children go hungry. That’s something you and I never had to deal with. We get to choose to be good or bad, because we don’t have to spend our time breaking our backs just to eat or have a roof over our heads. People live their whole lives with nothing but that struggle, birth to death. But we never had to deal with that, and it’s not likely we ever will.”

Humphrey shook his head.

“So what are you suggesting?” he asked. “Revolution? Bring everything crashing down? It’s easy to point at the injustices of the world and use that as an excuse for whatever behaviour you’re trying to get away with.”

“I don’t have an answer,” Jason said, deflating from his self-righteous high. “I’m like you, Humphrey. I’m trying to do my best with what I have. In your case, that’s talent, wealth, looks and privilege. As for me, I’m good at people.”

“You mean good *with* people,” Humphrey said.

“No,” Jason said. “I meant what I said.”

Clarissa Ventress’ bodyguard Darnell led Sophie into the garden, where Ventress was enjoying tea on a terrace.

“Sophie, dear,” Ventress said. “It’s been so long since I’ve heard from you.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“With that little request of mine, yes. But as I recall, what I instructed were high-profile thefts in the midst of public events. It’s been weeks, and I haven’t heard about a thing. If you were doing as you were told, I really should have.”

“Your part in planning this operation,” Sophie said, “was to tell us to do something breathtakingly idiotic. Our part was to figure out how to do that without being caught immediately. Our part is harder, so it takes longer. Unless your intention was for us to march over to the Island and mug the first rich-looking person we see.”

Darnell moved forward threateningly as Sophie raised her voice, but Ventress waved him back.

“But I don’t think that’s what you wanted,” Sophie said. “That might get you out of our deal when I’m hauled away by the guard, but everyone will know that you sold me out. Where would your precious reputation be then? Stop sending your goons to drag me back here, Ventress. You’re only slowing me down.”

“Two weeks,” Ventress said. “I want to hear about your first bold caper within two weeks, or I will consider you as having failed to live up to your side of our little pact. At which point, I will throw you to whichever wolf leaves the thickest slab of meat at my door. And if I hear you try to run out on me...”

She gave Sophie her best serpentine grin.

“...there are men in this city with tastes that would make someone even as hard as you turn soft, Sophie dear.”

Sophie looked ready to spit venom, but kept her lips pressed tightly together. She stared daggers at Ventress, who smiled back as if Sophie’s glare was good for the skin.

“Can I go now?” Sophie asked, biting off every word.

“Of course, dear,” Ventress said. “Two weeks; don’t forget, now.”

Chapter 64: Take My Wife, Please

Luckily for Jason, most of the contracts in the jobs hall were for areas close to the city. Unless the threat was urgent, those further afield were posted on each town or village's noticeboard. Every month, the Adventure Society would send out a number of people to patrol those areas and resolve those notices. It was not a popular task, as it meant a full month away from the city and any opportunities that might arise.

Jason started taking one or two contracts a day, depending on the location. He would then try and clear a notice or two off the local boards while he was out, even if it meant spending the night out in the delta. People were more than welcoming, especially as he took the time to help any sick locals.

In the jobs hall, Jason placed a notice on the desk. Albert was on duty again today, making a record of the contract.

"Badge, please," Albert said.

Jason took out his Adventure Society badge and touched it to the contract. There was a shimmer as the badge touched the magic paper and Albert filed it in one of the desk drawers.

New Quest: [Contract: Bog Shambler]

A bog shambler has appeared close to the village of Hule. You have accepted a contract to eliminate the creature.

- Objective: Eliminate [Bog Shambler] 0/1.
- Reward: Spirit coins.

The Adventure Society rewarded iron spirit coins for an iron-rank monster-slaying contract. The amount depended on number of monsters, travel time and perceived difficulty, from ten, anywhere up to a hundred. If the contract proved more difficult than was originally assessed, bonuses would be given. They went from extra coins, all the way up to an awakening stone, although such a reward was extremely rare.

Jason himself could loot coins from each monster, while the quests that appeared for each contract would give more coins again, and sometimes other valuables. He was effectively being paid three times for each contract.

"Your armour is looking a big ragged," Albert observed. "That thorny-tongue frog from yesterday?"

"It certainly was as thorny-tongued as advertised," Jason said. "The armour self-repairs, but it got torn-up pretty well. It'll be fine in a few days."

"I imagine you got torn-up as well," Albert said.

"I self-repair too," Jason said. "You on tomorrow, Bert?"

"Nah, they've got me on the admin desk, tomorrow."

"I'll see you in a few, then."

Jason made to leave, but found someone standing in his path. It was a tall, gangly fellow who looked a few years older than Jason. He had an iron-rank aura, so he was probably the age he looked. He was wearing robes that were a size too big, with the emblem of the Magic Society prominently placed.

"Mr Asano?" the man asked.

"And you are?" Jason asked.

"Standish," the man said. "Clive Standish, of the Magic Society. To be precise, I am Adjunct Assistant to the Deputy Director of the Magic Society, Greenstone branch."

"That must make for a long desk plate. Is there a reason you're standing in my way, Standish?"

"Actually, Mr Asano, I've been looking for you for some time," Clive said.

"Well it isn't my fault," Jason said. "I had no idea she was your wife, so you can't blame me."

"What?" Clive asked. "I'm not married."

"She told me the same thing," Jason said, shaking his head ruefully. "I wouldn't worry about it."

Clive's brow creased into a frown.

"I'm not entirely sure what's going on here," he said.

Jason patted him consolingly on the arm.

"Welcome to my life," Jason said, then walked past Clive and out the door.

Left standing inside the jobs hall, Clive stood on the spot, confused.

"What just happened?" he asked.

"That's Jason," Albert said. "Nice enough guy. A bit odd."

"Bert?" Clive said, turning to the man behind the desk. "I thought you sold fruit?"

"You're probably thinking of my brother, sir."

In the delta, Jason had been given a room at the only inn in the village. After clearing out a monster and healing some of the sick, the innkeeper refused to take payment. The room was humble, but clean, and Jason sat on the floor performing his evening meditation.

Jason had yet to arrive in Greenstone when Rufus told him the three foundations of building his power as an essence user. Training, to prepare himself; danger, to push his limits; and meditation, to consolidate his efforts. For months, Jason worked on two of the three pillars, under the guidance of Rufus Farrah and Gary. Without all three, however, his abilities made little progress.

Jason was driven to take contract after contract, fighting monster after monster. He was caught up in the heady rush of danger, his skills and powers the line between life and death. It was one of the three pillars Rufus scribed as the foundations of power advancement, and Jason was starting to see results.

The fastest was his vision power, which Farrah told him was normal. After all, it was constantly in use. The next fastest was the spell he used to cleanse sickness and poison, feast of absolution. It had been crawling slowly but surely upwards as he used it over and over at the clinic. Once he started using it in combat, the slow climb turned into a regular upwards tick.

Feast of absolution was more useful in combat than he anticipated, as many monsters spawned in groups. He could use it on a monster right before finishing it off, replenishing himself on the afflictions he had placed on it himself. The injection of mana and stamina gave him the endurance to go full-bore through an extended fight, instead of needing to pace himself.

-
- Ability [Feast of Blood] (Blood) has reached Iron 1 (100%).
 - Ability [Feast of Blood] (Blood) has advanced to Iron 2 (00%).
-

It was usually during meditation that Jason's abilities broke through. He smiled with satisfaction, breaking his meditation and taking a sandwich from his inventory to munch on.

His abilities grew stronger with each rank, although it was easier to see with some than others. His vision power, for example, not only increased his ability to see through darkness, but also his normal visual acuity. Colours were brighter, distant objects clearer. It was a concrete reminder of what all his efforts were for.

He decided that after pushing himself so hard, he would take a few days to rest on returning to the city. He also wanted to look into obtaining more awakening stones. Until he awakened all of his abilities, he couldn't make any true progress toward bronze rank.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: iron
- Progression to bronze rank: 0% (0/4 essences complete)

Attributes

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

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

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

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (3/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 4] 39%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 3] 08%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 3] 21%.

Blood [Power] (4/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 3] 04%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 2] 89%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 2] 00%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 2] 16%.

Sin [Recovery] (4/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron 2] 85%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 3] 96%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 3] 21%.
- [Hegemony] (spell): [Iron 2] 67%.

Doom [Spirit] (1/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 2] 67%.

He would only start down the path to bronze rank once all his essence abilities were awakened. Jason didn't feel put upon by his lack of awakening stones, as even Humphrey

didn't have his full set of powers yet. According to Humphrey, it was Geller family tradition to supply their scions with enough awakening stones to get started, while the rest had to be earned.

The Adventure Society was known to give out awakening stones for exceptional service, although rarely. Usually it was for unexpected success when a contract proved more difficult than expected. Some open contracts also offered stones as rewards for those with the greatest contributions. The competition would strongly drive performance.

Otherwise, awakening stones could be purchased through brokers, almost always at auction. They came up semi-regularly, but the prices were exorbitant. Rufus advised him to be patient and work hard. The Adventure Society made sure stones found their way into the hands of good adventurers.

Returning to the city in the morning, Jason stopped in at Jory's clinic before returning to his lodgings on the Island. Jason's inn was expensive, closer to a luxury hotel than the inns and hostels of the delta towns. Downstairs was a sumptuous lounge, dining hall and bar. When Jason entered the lounge from outside, he spotted the landlady, Madam Landry, berating a tall man in scholar's robes.

"...think you can sleep in my lounge area like it's a common flop house!"

Clive was profusely apologising. Somehow his gangly height seemed lesser than the tiny woman scolding him.

"I fell asleep while awaiting an acquaintance," Clive said. "I'm happy to pay the fee for a night," he said.

"So you do think it's a flophouse!"

"No, good lady I can assure you that..."

Clive continued struggling until he spotted Jason, his eyes lighting up.

"Mr Asano!" he called out.

Clive fled Madam Landry in Jason's direction.

"Here, good lady," Clive said. "This is my acquaintance, Mr Jason Asano."

"Who's your acquaintance?" Jason said, voice and expression full of offence. "After you slept with my wife?"

"What?" Clive said, flustered, head swivelling between Jason and Madam Landry.

"Wait, you're not doing that to me again."

He jabbed a finger in Jason's direction.

"You don't even have a wife."

"Not anymore," Jason said. "She ran off with this tall bloke from the Magic Society."

“You absconded with Mr Asano’s wife and have the nerve to use my inn like some cheap tavern!” Madam Landry said.

“I never touched his wife!”

“I’m off upstairs for a rest, Madam Landry.” Jason said. “Probably best if you showed him the door.”

“You have a good rest, Jason dear,” she said. “I know you’ve been working hard.”

Clive watched Jason disappear up the stairs, and was shuffled outside by Madam Landry. He stood out on the street, looking at the door that had been closed in his face.

“What in the world is going on?”

Chapter 65: Curious Urges

Jason tugged his bowtie into shape in a large standing mirror.

"That's an unusual outfit," Gary said. "A bit more snug than I like. I think the locals have it right, fashion-wise."

They were in the lounge room of the suite shared by Rufus, Gary and Farrah. Gary was wearing evening wear that showed off all the colourful drapery favoured by Greenstone high society.

"I had Gilbert make it up," Jason said. "It's called a tuxedo."

Jason enjoyed the hang of a well-tailored suit, but he found himself missing his armour. He had been wearing it almost constantly, through battles and danger until it felt like a part of him. Still, a night at the symphony involved neither battles nor danger, so perhaps it was best to feel a little different. And even if it did, his tuxedo had some strengthening treatments and a few enchantment tricks to facilitate a quick escape, if necessary.

"Not enough colours," Gary said, still eyeing off Jason's clothes.

"I like it," Farrah said, emerging from her own room. "Simple and elegant."

"Why does Rufus always take the longest to get ready?" Gary asked. "He doesn't even have hair. I'm ready, I'm pretty much all hair."

"I remember not having hair," Jason said. "Didn't care for it."

"It's nice to be going out again," Farrah said. Jason moved so she could take his place to check her outfit in the mirror.

"Agreed," Jason said. "The program was in three parts, right? A nice, long evening at the symphony will be just the thing, I think."

"Danielle said she invited us because she thought you would enjoy it," Farrah said. "She knows you've been working hard."

"I ran into Humphrey out in the delta, yesterday," Jason said. "We did a job off a noticeboard together."

"How was that?" Farrah asked.

"Well, I stood there while and he killed the monster immediately, so... straightforward."

"Everyone's ready?" Rufus asked, stepping out of his room.

"Of course we're ready," Farrah said. "You're always the last one out."

"Did you wax your head?" Gary asked Rufus.

“No,” Rufus said. “I did not wax my head.”

“Really?” Gary asked. “Because it looks like you waxed your head.”

“There is something of a sheen to it,” Jason observed.

“Maybe I rubbed in a little moisturising treatment,” Rufus admitted.

“You did,” Gary said. “You waxed your head.”

“I did not wax my head.”

“I think it looks nice,” Farrah said. “Very shiny.”

Unlike the theatre district, which was located in Old City, the Grand Concert Hall was very close to their lodgings in the guild district. They walked the short distance through the wide streets, the sun low, but still hanging in the summer sky. The concert hall was a magnificent, circular building that Jason walked past every day on his way to the Adventure Society campus. With two lengthy intermissions scheduled, Jason intended to take a look around between performances.

They joined Danielle Geller and her son Humphrey in their private box. When the first interval arrived, the rest of the group headed in the direction of the drinking lounge restricted to private box holders. As they left, Danielle discreetly stopped Jason.

“I have a friend I would like you to meet,” she said quietly, handing him a piece of paper. “I said you would find her during the first intermission. You won’t make a liar of me, will you?”

“You aren’t pushing me into a box are you, Lady Geller?”

“I wouldn’t dare,” she said with a sly smile.

As Danielle left him behind, Jason glanced at the piece of paper. It listed directions to a room on the second floor, one down from the Geller’s third-floor private box. Walking through the hallways was like walking through an art gallery, with paintings and recessed sculptures carefully lit with delicate magical lighting.

He found the room listed on the paper, where a plaque declared it the Edith Vane Memorial Conference Room. He frowned at the name. There was one aura that he could sense within, with the overpowering strength of silver rank. He considered knocking but just went in instead.

The conference room looked like just that, with a long table surrounded by chairs. Soft lamps hung from the ceiling, filling the room with warm light. Along one wall, windows looked out over the city. The guild district was mostly low buildings, with the Adventure and Magic Society campuses looming large, along with the concert hall itself. The sun had set

during the first performance and street lamps lit thoroughfares below, lighting up the bustling nightlife.

The room's single occupant had her back to him as she looked out over the city. She wore a formal dress in the local style; a loose draping of layered colours, cinched with flattering strategy. Chestnut hair spilled down her back, with a pair of tapered ears poking out to reveal her as an elf. Jason couldn't have hidden his presence if he wanted to, but she gave no reaction to his entrance at all.

Jason took a bottle and a glass from his inventory, pouring out a measure of sweet, green liqueur.

"Drink?" he offered.

She held out a hand without turning around. The glass tugged itself from Jason's grip and flew across the room into hers, without so much as spilling a drop.

"Thank you," she said and took a sip. "This is one of Mr Norwich's private concoctions. He's a friend of a friend, yes?"

"He is," Jason said. Norwich was an alchemist friend of Jory's who had been trying to brew a drink that would get through Jason's poison resistance. Norwich didn't want to turn to bronze-rank ingredients, partly as a challenge and partly to prevent a bronze-rank hangover.

Jason took out another glass and poured a drink for himself, then wandered over to stand next to the woman. He looked out at the city instead of at her.

"Do you know who I am, Mr Asano?"

"I only really know the one elf. We don't get along."

"The priestess of purity."

"That's the one," Jason said. "Very severe woman. Powerful, Aryan vibe. Sexy, but you know you really shouldn't. Like an evil lady torturer."

"You think speaking a little nonsense is going to put me off kilter?"

"You think bringing me to a room named after a family I killed half of will do the same to me?"

She turned to look at him, then back to the window.

"Forty-one contracts in eighteen days, if we count adventure board notices," she said. "You've been a busy man."

"It feels like I have a lot of catching up to do."

"Can you keep this pace up?"

"Not unless someone makes me a magical scooter."

"Is that some manner of transport from your world?"

"It is," Jason said. "I think it would be nice. Riding along the embankment roads, the wind in my face."

"I did hear about your distaste for heidels. Quite unusual, for an adventurer."

"Eccentricity is the prerogative of the wealthy and powerful. I barely qualify for either, but I'm working on it."

"Then you should make more lucrative investments than in a man who has dedicated his life to healing the poor."

"I'll muddle through," Jason said. "Did you want anything more than to point out how much attention you're paying, Director? This intermission won't last forever."

Elsbeth Arella was director of the Greenstone Branch of the Adventure Society. Rufus had pointed her out, along with any number of other local notables, during their spate of social outings the month previous.

"You'll find, Mr Asano, that these intermissions last as long as certain people want them to."

"I see."

"I'm satisfied with how you have been conducting yourself since joining the Adventure Society."

"Awakening stone satisfied?"

"I would not take your self-satisfaction as a reasonable measure of mine, Mr Asano. I especially do not care for some mid-level Magic Society functionary contacting my office to request a meeting with a member of my society, one not even a month clear of assessment."

"Couldn't they just come and find me directly?" Jason asked innocently.

She turned to give him a withering glare, her aura crushing his into the floor. He nonchalantly sipped at his drink, still looking out the window.

"Take a break from contracts for a little while, Mr Asano. You've been clearing out the backlog I use to prod some of our members who don't share your work ethic. I will see you are assigned appropriate contracts; just check the desk at the jobs hall. If you do well, you can expect to see a second star in the near future."

"You're the boss," Jason said.

"You don't strike me as a man who pays much heed to authority," she told him.

"I'm not big on abdicating moral responsibility," he said.

She drained the glass and handed it back to him.

"You have a taste for the sweet things, Mr Asano. You drink like an elf."

"You can knock back the plonk pretty well," Jason said. "You drink like an Aussie."

"I have no idea what an 'Aussie' is," she said.

"I am, Director. I am."

"A friend of yours," Jason whispered to Danielle as he took a seat back in the viewing box.

"A new friend," Danielle said, "but I think, a good one."

The art-lined public corridors of the concert hall worked their way around the circular building. There were plenty of concert goers taking in the art during the second intermission, Jason included. Drink in hand, he meandered down a hallway, alone. He stopped to consider a painting of a barren desert wasteland. It was impressionistic in style, reminding Jason of his earliest days in his new world. A woman joined him in examining it. He spared her a glance before turning back to the picture.

He sensed no aura from her at all. His aura senses weren't the sharpest, but to hide it completely meant she was probably higher rank than he was. She looked to be in her early twenties, by which point any decent adventurer hit bronze rank. Not many got a late start like Jason. She had the olive skin of a local, her delicate features an effortless, dangerous beauty. Dark hair cascaded over her shoulders to a gown that was elegance in cream silk.

"Mediocre," the woman critiqued the painting in front of them. "They hang the superior works in the restricted lounges."

"I like it," Jason said. "It looks how the desert feels."

"You've spent some time there?" she asked.

"A little," Jason said. "It reminds me of parts of my homeland."

"And where is that?" she asked.

"Very far from here," he said wistfully.

She turned her head towards him.

"You're Jason Asano."

Jason kept his eyes on the painting.

"I'm not sure you understand how introductions work," he said. "I already know who I am."

She frowned, and he felt a bronze-rank aura blaze out to suppress his own. He had been told that was the very height of rudeness, but he kept being subjected to it. He thought there might be a lesson there, but he had no interest in learning it. Absently, he wondered if he was becoming a masochist.

“A beautiful woman invading my personal space,” he said, unconcerned. “Should I be scared or delighted?”

The corners of his mouth turned up in a sly smile.

“Perhaps,” he mused, “the most delicious choice would be both.”

“Do you want to get slapped?” the woman asked him.

He turned his head to face her.

“Would you think less of me if I said yes?” he asked.

She arched an eyebrow.

“My name is Cassandra Mercer,” she said.

“Ah,” Jason said, turning back to the painting. “Now I see.”

“See what?” she asked.

“Everything.”

“Oh really?”

“If Thadwick had sent you,” Jason said, “then this would be an alley and you would be much less pretty. I imagine you are here at your mother’s behest. You strike me as someone very good at satiating urges of curiosity.”

“If I struck you, Mr Asano, you’d know all about it. And speaking of my mother, I’ve heard you said some unkind things in her regard.”

Jason turned again from the painting to give her a sheepish smile.

“For that,” he said, “please convey my unreserved apologies. I didn’t know who your brother was at the time, and he actually asked me if I knew who his father was. You don’t walk away from a line like that.”

“A man of dignity would.”

Jason let out a sinister chuckle.

“Yes, I imagine one would.”

“I did make some discreet inquiries about you,” Cassandra acknowledged. “There was enticingly little to find. You have me at a disadvantage.”

Jason raised his eyebrows at that claim.

“Miss Mercer, you have power, influence, connections, wealth and knowledge. What possible advantage could I have over you?”

“Mystery,” she said. “Isn’t that the greatest advantage?”

“Mystery is an illusory shield,” Jason said. “The moment the veil is pierced, your vulnerabilities become exposed. And there is only one arena in which vulnerability becomes a weapon.”

“And what arena is that?” she asked.

His face showed disappointment.

"It's truly a shame you have to ask," he said. "If you'll excuse me, I believe the intermission will end soon."

He left without looking back. She watched him walk away, a contemplative expression on her face. She left in the other direction.

In their family's private booth, Cassandra sat down next to her mother. Thalia Mercer looked more like her daughter's sister than her parent, the age-defying power of her silver-rank essences.

"Well?" Thalia asked.

"He's dangerous," Cassandra said. "Don't let Thadwick anywhere near him."

"Thadwick isn't the problem," Thalia said. "The problem is how much trouble your father will cause to salve your brother's pride. You know how he is about his male heir."

"That could be a concern given Asano's connection to Rufus Remore," Cassandra said. "Have you found out any more about his background?"

"I have confirmed that Remore is training him," Thalia said, "with no small amount of dedication. As for where Asano came from, it's like he fell out of the sky."

"I've heard something else," Cassandra said. "I wasn't going to say anything until I confirmed it."

"Oh?"

"You'll recall that Remore and his companions undertook an expedition out of the city," Cassandra said.

"The Vane problem," Thalia said. "I always disliked Cressida."

"They went at the behest of the Church of Purity. Took one of the church's healers along with them. A girl from the Lasalle family."

"You know her?"

"I do. Anisa. Zealous girl. Dangerously committed."

"What does she have to say?"

"I can't approach her directly," Cassandra said. "She thinks I comport myself in a sinful manner."

"I should hope so," Thalia said. "That's where all the fun is."

"What I'm hearing from my sources in the church of purity," Cassandra said, "is that Anisa left Remore's group after some stranger with dark powers joined them."

“Interesting,” Thalia said. “That fits with something I heard about Remore believing he bungled the contract. That he would have failed if not for the intervention of someone else.”

“I heard much the same,” Cassandra said, “but how could that be Asano? I’ve already confirmed that he came to the city with no skills at all. Remore and his companions trained Asano for weeks just to get him to a minimum standard.”

“You said dark powers,” Thalia said. “Asano is an affliction specialist.”

“Certainly enough to put a priestess of Purity right off,” Cassandra said, “but there are still incongruities. My instincts tell me there’s more to this.”

“Trust your instincts, dear,” Thalia said. “Find out what you can.”

“Of course. Steps have already been taken.”

“For the moment,” Thalia said, “is it worth you taking the time to beguile him?”

“It might be worth the effort,” Cassandra said, “but not worth the risk.”

“Oh?” Thalia prompted.

“He treated the full suppression of my aura like it was the pleasant cool of the evening.”

“That’s certainly unusual,” Thalia said. “And you aren’t normally so crude as to use your aura like that.”

“I was trying to throw him off-balance,” Cassandra said, “but there’s something strange about him. It’s like he lives off-balance. Talking with him feels like teetering on the edge of something I don’t understand.”

Thalia glanced at her daughter from under an arched eyebrow.

“What?” Cassandra asked.

“Nothing, dear,” Thalia said, turning her gaze to the stage, a slight smile playing across her lips. They sat in silence for a few moments before Cassandra spoke again.

“Mother?”

“Yes, dear?”

“When does vulnerability become a weapon?”

Thalia chuckled, quietly, prompting an irritated look from Cassandra.

“Vulnerability is a weapon of seduction, dear,” Thalia said. “Tricky to use, but devastating, if wielded well. Perhaps Thadwick isn’t the only one I should keep away from this young man.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mother.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is he winning?" Humphrey asked.

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh?"

"He beat my brother."

"He beat Rick?" Humphrey asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

She pulled out a pocket watch to check the time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Humphrey did as he was told and sat down.

"I never have before," he said.

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

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

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

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

"Rakishly handsome?"

Danielle chuckled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And if I fail miserably?" Jason asked.

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

Jason laughed.

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

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

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

She chuckled again.

“Yes, I do,” she acknowledged.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You have?” Jason asked, looking disconcerted.

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

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

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

Danielle chuckled.

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

"Not like likely," Jonah muttered.

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

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

Rick punched him on the arm.

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

Danielle gave Rick an approving smile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 67: This is What it Means to Fight Me

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Fire Bolt."

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

"Henry?" Rick called out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Hannah looked at him like he was an idiot.

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

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

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

The webbing proved to be very widespread.

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

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

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

“I don’t like this,” Henry said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rick looked around, peering at every shadow.

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

“Hannah?”

The whole team craned their necks searching in every direction.

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

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

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

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

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

"How did he do that?" Jonah asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Are you sure about that?" Claire asked.

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

The others shook their heads.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Be made clean.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“So much for camaraderie,” he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Rick?" Jonah asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“They had to, right?” Jonah said.

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

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

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

Jonah grimaced and Jonah let out a painful grunt.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Your fate is to suffer."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I wonder how yours will taste."

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Feed me your sins.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

He let Claire drop back into the water.

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

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

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

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

Chapter 68: Good News For Clive

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

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

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

"There's a recording?" Jason asked.

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

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

"Hannah thinks you're amazing."

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

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

"Why would she do that?"

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

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

"Not like that," Rick said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That's right," Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I know a few," Jason said.

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

"Humphrey?" Jason asked.

"Humphrey," Rick said.

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

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

"Alright, thanks," Jason said.

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

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

"Mr Asano."

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

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

Clive followed Jason outside and down the street.

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

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

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

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

"On the way where?"

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

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

"So it goes after people?" Jason asked.

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

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

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

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

“What?”

“Your coming with me,” Jason.

“No,” Clive said. “No, I’m not.”

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

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

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

He waved an arm at the sky.

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

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

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

Clive looked over the contract again.

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

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

“You did this!”

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

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

“Just call me Jason.”

“What I call you isn’t the issue!”

Jason stopped walking, turning to face Clive.

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

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

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

Clive goggled at Jason.

"I have so many questions," he said

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

"I did introduce myself," Clive said.

"Clive, have you heard of lying?"

"Of the concept of lying?"

"Yes."

"Of course I have," Clive said.

"There you go," Jason said.

Clive shook his head.

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

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

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

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

"I had some good fortune," Clive said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

That got Jason's attention.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You killed Landemere Vane?" Clive asked.

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

"I knew him," Clive said.

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

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

Jason looked up and around.

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

"You know this area?" Clive asked.

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

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

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

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

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

“Who?”

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

Chapter 69: Dumpling Soup

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

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

"I hope so," Jason said.

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

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

Jason stopped, looking at Clive.

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

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

"Like magic CPR," Jason said.

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

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

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

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

"Is someone hurt?" Jason asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The mayor looked at him, nonplussed.

“You’ll just give us a potion?”

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

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

Jason winced.

“I’d better get straight onto that.”

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

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

“Feed me your sins.”

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

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

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

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

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

“What?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Something's not right,” Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

“I could just pull out the stake.”

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

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

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

"How so?" Clive asked.

"How fast is this mangrove snatcher thing?"

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

Realisation crossed Clive's face.

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

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

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

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

"Oh?"

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

Quest: [Contract: Mangrove Snatcher]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Didn't know what? What annihilation?"

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

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

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

"Dumpling soup?"

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

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

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

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

Clive shook his head.

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

Clive paused, tilting his head in thought.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Like a big summoning spell," Jason said.

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

"How big a part?" Jason asked.

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

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

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

"So?" Jason said.

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

"You said that," Jason said.

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

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

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

“Or she lied.”

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

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

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

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

“I suppose you did,” Clive said.

“Then how am I here?” Jason asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Jason?”

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

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

Jason sat head bowed, mind reeling.

“Is this why I didn’t have hair?”

“Uh, Jason?”

“I said give me a minute, Clive!”

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

Chapter 70:

Rewards

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

“Emplace the mark of power.”

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

“Mind if I loot?” Jason asked.

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

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

Jason poked at a chunk of flesh.

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m really more of a scholar.”

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

“Land mines?” Clive asked.

Jason groaned.

“Let’s just go to the next village.”

Quest: [Contract: Mangrove Snatcher]

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

“That was the last one,” Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s a good power,” Jason said.

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

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

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

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

“What for?” Clive asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Dumpling soup," Clive said with a wave.

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

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

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

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

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

"You seem a little lost," she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You like a sophisticated gentleman," Jason said.

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

"Evil genius," Jason said casually.

"Evil genius?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

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

"The evil?" Cassandra ventured.

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

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

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

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

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

"You are as well," she said.

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

She laughed.

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

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"There's a lot of adventurers here."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Robberies?"

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

“That’s certainly bold.”

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

“The same thief?” Jason asked.

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

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

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

“Why?” Jason asked.

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

“I see,” Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“You want me to catch her myself?”

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

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

“Where is she hitting next?” Lamprey asked.

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

Lamprey looked dissatisfied but gave a reluctant nod.

“My patience is not infinite, Ventress.”

“But it will be rewarded, Director.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 71:

A Bit of Poo

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I know all about you, Asano,” Dink said. “That Geller lady set up a fight so you could beat all her fancy trainees, teach them a lesson or some crap. But the whole thing was rigged, and really you’re weak. But since you beat those Gellers, people don’t know that

yet. Someone is gonna make a reputation kicking the crap out of you, and it's gonna be us."

Jason let out a weary sigh.

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

"You think you can bluff your way out?" Dink asked. "I don't need powers to beat you."

"Just that stick, then," Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The man looked up at Jason. He looked around fifty, wearing loose coveralls and a workman's cap. He had a tool belt, in which Jason could see implements both magical and

non-magical in nature. From the outfit, Jason took him as the kind of highly skilled tradesman with training in the magical aspects of his job. His aura revealed no essences; his expertise was wholly in external magic.

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

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

"It's Farrokh."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I'll do that, Frank."

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

"That depends on the rats," Jason said.

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

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

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

Chapter 72:

Rat Race

Stone-chewer rats were around the size of house cats, with grey fur, protruding teeth and oversized, talon-like claws. Jason watched as a half dozen of them struggled to scratch away the leeches digging into their flesh. One writhed around until it fell into the water.

“Colin, what did I say about letting them go in the water?”

The rats, it turned out were heavy, and after falling into the water didn't come back up. The leeches on them had no such problems, crawling out after the rat had died of either the leeches' ministrations or from drowning.

“How am I meant to loot them down there? The ones hidden away in those nests are one thing, but this is throwing away money.”

The rats were all dead and all the nearby leeches crawled back into a pile. Jason looked at it.

“I'm sorry, Colin,” Jason said. “You're doing all the work, and here I am complaining. I know you're doing your best, buddy. Good job.”

The leech pile started undulating with what Jason assumed was happiness. He pulled up the quest screen.

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

Rats have infested the water tunnels underneath the Cavendish District of Old City. Clear out the nests and eliminate all the rats.

- Objective: Clear out rat nests 5/6.
- Objective: Eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/44.

“One more nest to go. That's a lot of leftover rats for the last one. Or are the others roaming around loose?”

Jason was curious why some quests showed him the exact number of monsters why others didn't, but he wasn't going to complain. He pulled a pocket watch from his inventory and saw they were making good time. Colin might be slow, but its ability to sense life was unerring.

Looting the lesser monsters only produced lesser spirit coins, but they were welcome nonetheless. Most things were paid for in lesser coins and it saved him using the moneychanging services of a brokerage.

Moving further into the tunnels, he followed Colin's leisurely lead. He noticed a change in Colin's behaviour as they went further. Throughout the hunt, leeches had been breaking off in batches to seek out rats inside tunnels and various unreachable nooks. Now they were all slowly converging in the one direction.

"One big nest it is, I guess."

➤ Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/43.

Jason looked at the message that popped up. Normally it told him when he had progressed the objective, but he hadn't killed any more rats. He looked at it again.

"The objective used to be forty-four rats," he mused. "Did some old lady with a broom kill one?"

-
- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/43.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/42.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/41.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/40.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/39.
-

"What's going on there?"

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Hidden objective discovered: Find the secret of the final rat nest 0/1.
 - Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are completed.
-

"All hidden objectives? There's more?"

Jason wanted to pick up the pace, but without Colin leading the way he could easily go off track in the maze of tunnels. He considered for a moment, then lowered his hand close to the ground. The cut on his palm was still there, as his rapid regeneration only worked while the familiar was inhabiting his bloodstream. The leeches crawled into his hand, vanishing as they touched his blood. He wondered if he should have washed them first. Finally, only one leech was left, sitting in his hand.

"Alright, Colin. Lead the way."

Jason moved forward at a brisker pace, hand held out in front of him. Holding Colin out in front of him, he could move his hand side to side. The leech would rear up when Jason was holding it in the right direction, letting him find the right path at every junction.

-
- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/38.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/37.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/36.
-

“Is someone killing them off? What do you think, Colin? Is it going to be super easy? No, I don’t think so either.”

- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/35.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/34.
-

Colin pointed Jason at a tunnel that looked like it hadn’t seen maintenance in a long time. Mortar was loose, bricks had fallen out of the walls. All the tunnels were wet, but here some kind of fungus was growing, in places almost completely obstructing the path.

“That is a lot of fungus.”

- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/33.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/32.
-

“If I were being honest, Colin, I’d admit to becoming a little concerned.”

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/31.
 - Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are complete.
-

“Hidden objectives,” Jason grumbled. “I better get some solid loot for this.”

He looked at Colin in his hand.

“Yes, I know other adventurers don’t get a quest system. Shut up.”

A sound, a low rumble, came rolling through the tunnel.

“What do you think, Colin? The sound of a hidden objective?”

The rumble grew louder and clearer. It wasn't an earthy sound, but a sloshing. The water flowing through the middle of the tunnel started running faster and higher, splashing against the brick walkway.

“Ah, crap.”

Water came surging down the tunnel, raising the water level and overrunning the walkway. Jason stood still as the water rose halfway to his knees, not wanting to be knocked over.

“This isn’t good water,” Jason said. “Is this stuff going to clear out?”

The surge of water passed, dropping back to its normal level. Jason guessed it to be a normal function of water tunnel operations. Jason took a few unhappy, squelching steps, then was struck by a horrible revelation.

“Oh, bloody hell,” he exclaimed, slapping a hand into his face. “I totally forgot I can walk on water.”

He continued down the tunnel, squelching boots accompanied by a stream of grumbling.

“I see you did just fine,” Jason said to the leech still in his hand. Then he noticed a circular welt.

“Do you try to eat me while I was distracted?”

The leech waggled its toothy maw back and forth innocently.

“Don’t act nonchalant with me, Colin,” Jason said. “And after I gave you all that blood pudding yesterday.”

Continuing on, Jason paused as he heard scurrying from somewhere ahead. It sounded loud for a rat, even the oversized stone-chewer rats. In any case, all the stone-chewer rats were gone. The sound got closer, and a ratling came rushing out of a side junction.

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Hidden objective discovered: Eliminate [Ratlings] 0/12.
- Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are completed.

Ratlings looked like mice, but stood on their hind legs, half the height of a human. They were also cowardly, usually running from any confrontation, but this one didn’t even slow down as it approached. It tried to barrel past Jason, but bounced off, tumbling from the walkway and into the water. Unable to swim, it splashed about ineffectually as the water flow carried it away. Jason pulled a knife from his inventory, cutting into his hand, sending blood and leeches splashing into the water after it. The rest he let pile at his feet.

“Make sure it doesn’t survive,” he told the leeches, then started off down the tunnel it had emerged from. Whatever the ratling had been running from apparently filled it with more fear than Jason had.

“Too bad monsters didn’t see me in the mirage arena.”

➤ **Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 0/11.**

“This again? I don’t think there’s an old lady with a broom killing ratlings.”

He heard squeals of fear coming from further down the tunnel. Five more ratlings came scrambling out of the tunnel, rushing toward Jason. This time he was ready, smashing one into the wall with a low kick as he grabbed another by the throat. They were weak and cowardly creatures, and he ended both quickly.

➤ **Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 2/11.**

The other three made it past him. Two of them tried leaping over the water to the opposite walkway, but only one made it. The other fell short, splashing into the channel. The third one dashed past Jason as he killed the first two, leaping over the pile of leeches.

“What kind of effort was that?” Jason asked Colin. “Now I have to go running after them. Go catch that other swimmer.”

As leeches piled into the water he started chasing the other two. He started with the one on his own side of the tunnel. Letting out just enough light from his cloak to turn pitch dark into shadowy gloom, he shadow-jumped ahead of the creature, grabbing it as it ran right into him. A quick knife slash and it was done.

➤ **Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 3/11.**

“That other prick has run right off.”

Dropping the light down to nothing again, so it wouldn’t see him coming, he started hunting it down, which took the better part of an hour. He took solace that the leeches had used the time to catch up with the two ratlings that had fallen in the water. In the meantime, another pair of ratlings had mysteriously vanished.

➤ **Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 6/9.**

Jason took stock as leeches crawled back out of the water at his feet. There were three ratlings left. He set off, Colin lagging behind. He didn’t slow down, leaving Colin to follow as best it could.

“Three to go.”

➤ Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 6/8.

“Alright, two to go. Some kind of monster suicide pact? Did the ones running away chicken out and refuse to drink the punch?”

Pausing at another junction, he wasn't sure which way to go. A sudden squeal of fear and pain gave him a path. The sound didn't last long.

➤ Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 6/7.

Jason moved in the direction of the suddenly cut-off screaming.

Chapter 73: A Grim Sword to Live By

Jason was heading down the tunnel from which he had heard the screaming. A bellowing roar came from the same direction, but it definitely wasn't made by a ratling. Jason moved forward, taking care with the wet stone of the walkway and the slimy fungus underfoot. He was still in complete darkness.

At a junction ahead, a ratling sprinted out. Some kind of tentacle snaked after it, wrapping around its ankle. The ratling tripped and was dragged, squealing, back into the tunnel. Jason raced forward to catch a look at the ratling's fate.

What he saw was something like a rat version of Gary, complete with huge, muscular frame and body covered in fur. It was so big it was standing astride the water rushing through the middle of the tunnel, a foot each on the walkways either side. Standing upright, it was so tall it almost scraped the arch of the tunnel with its head. Its body was much more human-shaped than a ratling's, which made its nakedness more obvious.

"You need to put that thing away, mate."

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Hidden objective complete: Find the secret of the final rat nest 1/1.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- Hidden objective discovered: Eliminate the [Rat Gorger] 0/1.
- Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are complete.

The rat monster roared at Jason. It had the head of a rat, except the mouth was larger, its face almost unhinging to reveal jagged teeth like a shark's. It had small, darting eyes, which stared straight at Jason in spite of the total darkness.

Dangling in front of the rat monster was the ratling it had dragged away. The rat monster's tail was metres long, thick, ropy and prehensile. It was also strong, easily holding up the ratling for the monster to bite into. There was a slurping noise as the ratling withered away. Like sucking the juices out through a straw, the monster drained the ratling to little more than skin and bones.

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Ratlings] 6/6.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are complete.
-

“Rat Gorger,” Jason said as he watched in disgust. “The name makes sense.”

It dropped the dead ratling into the water, where it floated past Jason. He looked at the withered remains as they drifted down the tunnel.

“This must be what it’s like to fight me.”

The rat gorger licked its lips with a long tongue that sought out any leftover ratling fluids around its huge maw. Its body rippled and bulged. Jason watched its already powerful form grew bigger and stronger in front of his eyes.

“So that’s what you’re up to,” Jason said. “Sacrifice ratling to get +1/+1.”

The creature started lumbering forward. Jason didn’t want to wind up in the creature’s clawed hands, but that wasn’t a large concern. The extra growth had made it almost too big for the tunnel and it was forced to shuffle along with a foot on either side of the waterway. It was slow, awkward and ponderous, exactly Jason’s kind of enemy.

The only element that worried Jason was the tail, which lashed out in his direction. As quick as the rest of the monster was slow, it snaked around Jason’s waist. It pulled him off his feet and started dragging him toward the monster. Jason took his knife and dragged it heavily across the tail. The monster roared, yank it back and freeing Jason.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Rat Gorger].
-

Jason kicked back up onto his feet, one of the benefits of all his training. He couldn’t use his shadow teleport in total darkness, so he produced tiny motes of light from his cloak, sending them floating up and down the tunnel. He kept the illumination at a minimum, transforming the darkness into a playground of shadows.

The rat gorger continued its slow, hulking approach. The tail snapped forward again, this time lashing out like a whip instead of trying to wrap around him. Jason lacked the reflexes to intercept it, so he vanished and the tail hit nothing but air. Appearing behind the monster, he slashed out with his dagger, cutting into the immobile base of the tail.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Rat Gorger].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Rat Gorger].
-

The monster swung back with a huge arm, but Jason had already teleported back to his previous position.

“Alright, mate,” Jason said. “How dumb are you?”

The tail whipped out again, with the exact same result. Jason jumped behind it and slashed the same spot at the base of the tail, severing the tail entirely.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Rat Gorger].
 - Special attack [Leech bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Rat Gorger].
-

Jason shadow-jumped out of range as the creature went wild, thrashing about itself impotently, as it roared in rage and pain.

“Pretty dumb, then,” Jason said. “Works for me.”

In its mindless fury, the monster stumbled, tumbling into the water. It was far too big to be pulled along in the current, the channel only submerging it to the waist. Putting a huge hand on walkways beside it, it pulled itself out of the water. While it did do, Jason watched from a safe distance. With the severing of the prehensile tail, the main source of danger for Jason was gone. As he watched the monster push itself upright, he chanted out a spell.

“Your fate is to suffer.”

-
- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Rat Gorger].
-

The monster was tough, but with Jason’s afflictions in place, its death was inevitable. He led it up the tunnel, the bellowing its rage at Jason as it sluggishly, hopelessly pursued. It struggled along as its blood poured from the stump of its tail and its flesh blackened with necrosis. It toughed it out surprisingly well until it crossed paths with the leeches that had finally caught up to Jason. Misery and pain finally overwhelmed its rage as it met a terrible, pitiful end, screams of pain and helplessness marking its passage into death.

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Hidden objective complete: Eliminate the [Rat Gorgor] 1/1.
 - [Rat Essence] has been added to your inventory.

 - Objective complete: Clear out rat nests 6/6.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“Hey, an essence. Rat essence? Appropriate, but not what I would have picked.”

Animal type essences were common, as much as any essences were common. Some, like bear, wolf and snake were quite prized, while others, less so. He didn't hold high hopes for the rat essence, but he should be able to trade it for several of the more common awakening stones.

Jason walked over to the dead monster.

“Why couldn't it have been the might essence?” Jason asked it. Some essences were common as animal essences, yet were more valuable due to their desirability. The might essence, the shield essence or the magic essence could all have been traded for some quality awakening stones.

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

The red glow of the monster's remnant life force emerged from its body, streaming up into Jason's outstretched hand. The monster's body withered to a dried-out husk. It looked a lot like the ratling the monster itself had drained.

“Live by the sword, die by the sword, isn't it mate. Actually, I hope not. I live by a pretty grim sword.”

He lightly touched the corpse, then backed away before it dissolved into smoke.

- 10 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - [Awakening Stone of Wrath] has been added to your inventory.
-

Jason took in a sharp breath.

“Boss drops. Now we're talking.”

He pulled out the awakening stone immediately. It was the same round, palm-sized crystal as other awakening stones. Inside was a burning, shifting red, wreathed in white-gold light.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Wrath] (unranked, uncommon)

An awakening stone that unlocks the power of wrath (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
 - Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
 - You have 8 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Wrath]. Absorb Y/N?
-

As much as he wanted to use it, he put the stone away for the moment. After reabsorbing Colin, he was about to leave when he heard an echoing voice.

"Hello?" it called out. "Anyone down there?"

"Frank?" Jason called back.

"Oh, Mr Asarno," Frank's voice came down from somewhere above. It sounded like he was talking through a pipe or very narrow tunnel.

"Where are you?" Jason called out.

"Up on the street," Frank called down. "There were some pretty loud monster noises coming up through the drains, and the folk up here were getting a bit worried. After it went quiet, I thought I may as well see if anyone was alive down there."

"It was just a rat," Jason called up. "It's dead now."

"That didn't sound like any rat I've seen," Frank said.

"It was a big rat."

"I thought you might not have made it," Frank said. "There some pretty awful sounds of misery and dying at the end there. Thought that might have been you."

"It kind of was, Frank," Jason said. "That's the sound things make when I happen to them. Can you find me the closest way back up to the street?"

"Uh, yes sir, Mr Asano, sir. I'll have you out in no time."

Chapter 74: Doing Better

The balcony for Jason's suite was not as expansive as the one Rufus, Farrah and Gary shared, but it was still more than large enough to put out a reclining lounger. Being on the opposite side of the building, Jason's balcony looked over the street instead of the water. The sounds of the guild district's bustling daytime activity came in through the balcony doors as Jason opened them up.

He was ready for a lazy afternoon, with a colourful, short-sleeved shirt, and loose, knee-length shorts. He lay back comfortably, pulling a small red-gold crystal from his inventory.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Wrath] (unranked, uncommon)

An awakening stone that unlocks the power of wrath (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 8 unawakened essence abilities.
- You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Wrath]. Absorb Y/N?

"Time to see what you have for me."

Jason was about to absorb the awakening stone when there was a knock on the door. Jason groaned, putting the stone away and getting up from the lounger. He made his way back inside and opened the door.

"Humphrey," Jason said. "I haven't seen you in a while. Come on in."

Jason watched as Humphrey came inside. Humphrey's body language was uncertain and uncomfortable, and he was uncharacteristically quiet. Humphrey normally moved with confidence and was quick with the verbal niceties.

"Something the matter?" Jason asked as he directed Humphrey into a comfortable chair.

"Jason..."

Humphrey was hesitant but carried on.

"...can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Jason said.

"I... can you not answer the question with a question?"

"Is something bothering you, Humphrey?"

"I watched you fight and the other in the mirage arena."

Jason chuckled.

"I'm not sure anyone was expecting that," Jason said. "Even me. Your mother gave me way too many advantages. Do trap weavers really show up in numbers like that?"

"During the monster surge they do," Humphrey said. "The last surge was when I was a boy, but a whole army of them got into family grounds. Walls don't stop something that climbs the way they do."

"Wow. You couldn't have been more than six or seven."

"How are you alright with what you did to them? Rick and the others, I mean."

"Ah," Jason said, leaning back in his chair. "You're concerned about the way I fought them."

"We were watching you, from the viewing room," Humphrey said. "Watching them, really; we didn't see that much of you. What we did see, what we heard... the way you took Hannah and Henry while they were distracted. That laughter as you mocked them from the darkness. It was chilling. What you did do Hannah's body; draping her body off a monster's webs like a decoration."

"What do you think about what I did to them?" Jason asked.

Humphrey sat up in his chair, shaking his head. "You always do this," he said. "I ask you about something that seems questionable, but when I question it, you just question me back. Instead of defending what you did you just talk and talk as if right and wrong are whatever you want them to be if you explain them enough."

Jason sighed.

"You know, I've been where you are," Jason said. "A lot more recently than I'd like. I accused a friend of mine of having an immoral perspective on adventuring, without ever having been an adventurer myself. You're making the same mistake I did, not seeing my perspective, any more than I did hers."

Jason gave Humphrey a friendly, but tired smile.

"I know this is coming from a good place," Jason said. "You have this certainty about right and wrong, and you don't want a friend going down a bad path. I'm not going to sit here and say that you're wrong to do that, but not everything is as simple as it seems from the outside."

"Some things are just right and wrong, Jason," Humphrey said.

"Sure," Jason said. "But the consequences of our actions aren't always what we want them to be. Humphrey, let me put a hypothetical situation to you."

"You're going to make things complicated again, aren't you?" Humphrey said.

“Humphrey,” Jason said unhappily, “you essentially came in here to ask me if I’m an immoral person, which is more than a little rude. This is the answer I have for you. If you don’t want to listen, the door works just as well for leaving as it did for coming in.”

Jason gestured at the door. Humphrey glanced at it but turned his gaze back to Jason.

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “Imagine you’re on a contract. You have to go to a town out in the desert, way out past the delta. It’ll take you a few days to get out there, and you’ve stopped overnight along the way. You’re in a little town, staying at the only inn. You’ve had a long, hot day on the road, and you don’t want to just eat a spirit coin and go to bed, so you head downstairs. The common room is busy, but you find a quiet corner to have something to eat and drink without anyone bothering you.”

“What does this have to do with anything?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m setting a scene,” Jason said. “So, there you are, minding your own business. But like I said, the common room is busy. Some people are eating, everyone’s drinking. There’s this one guy. You’ve been seeing him all night because he’s loud and his aura is the strongest one here. Not compared to you, but a couple of essences make him the toughest guy in this little town.”

Jason paused to take a glass of juice from his inventory.

“Want one?” he asked.

“No,” Humphrey said, then smacked his dry mouth. “Actually, yes. Please.”

Jason handed over a second glass, taking a sip of his own.

“Just make sure and use a coaster,” Jason said. “Wooden tables don’t grow on... oh, I guess they kind of do.”

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jason said. “So, this guy is the town tough. It becomes clear as the evening goes on that he and everyone else knows it. There’s this girl, young, pretty, who works at the inn. The guy has been giving her a hard time, and it’s only getting worse the more he drinks. Everyone can see what’s happening. He’s too rough, she’s too young, but all she can do is bear it. No one is stepping up to help her, because he’s the strongest guy in this town.”

Jason looked Humphrey straight in the eye.

“Except he isn’t,” Jason continued. “Not this time. That night, you’re there. So what do you do?”

“The right thing is obvious,” Humphrey said, “but you’re clearly setting me up to be wrong.”

“Of course I’m setting you up to be wrong,” Jason said, “but that doesn’t change the situation. The girl is clearly uncomfortable. As this guy goes deeper into his cups, he’s even hurting her a little. But no one is saying anything. They might give him some covert looks, but they won’t challenge him. What do you do, Humphrey?”

“I stop him,” Humphrey said.

“How?”

“I go over there and suppress his aura.”

“He's not iron rank," Jason said. "He's too weak to sense your aura and too drunk to realise what you're doing to him. This is his town, and he's the toughest guy in it. You've just challenged that, and he's way past making smart choices. He wants a fight. He shoves you.”

“I kick him out on the street.”

“That works,” Jason said. “You’re stronger than him at his best, which he is far from in that particular moment. He wants to keep fighting, but he’s got a couple of friends sober enough to realise you’re an adventurer and not to be messed with. They take him home before he can cause any more trouble.”

“Then what?” Humphrey asked.

“Then nothing. Without that guy and his friends around, the mood is lightened and everyone has a pleasant evening. The girl thanks, you, nervously, and you go to bed. The next day you move on because you still have a long road ahead.”

“I don’t see the problem,” Humphrey said.

“Well,” Jason said, “what happens the next night? You’re not there, but the town tough isn’t going anywhere. His reputation just got destroyed. He was manhandled and humiliated in front of everyone. It was mostly by his own actions, his own arrogance and pride, but he doesn’t care. Who does he take it out on? How does he re-establish his dominance? How does he put the fear back in these people? How does he teach them what happens if they confront him the way you did? What happens to that girl?”

“You think I should have left things the way they were?” Humphrey asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “Standing up for those who can’t stand up for themselves is a virtue. But if acting on that virtue puts more hurt into the world than it takes away? Is that still moral?”

Humphrey slumped in his chair.

“I don’t have an answer to that,” he said.

“There isn’t always a good option,” Jason said. “Doing nothing to change a bad situation may not feel right, but if anything you do will make it worse, then it’s the only choice to make.”

“What does that have to do with what you did in the mirage arena?” Humphrey challenged.

“Do you know why your mother lets us spend time together, Humphrey?”

“She doesn’t decide who my friends are.”

“Of course she does,” Jason said. “Answer the question.”

“Why?” Humphrey asked. “You didn’t answer mine. You always answer questions with more questions.”

“Fine,” Jason said. “You want a simple answer, then here it is: Things are complicated. That’s it. Your mother wants you to recognise that the world is a lot more complicated than right and wrong, good and evil. I don’t think the way you do, and she wants that to challenge you.”

“You think she wants you to think like you?” Humphrey asked.

“No, Humphrey,” Jason said, shaking his head. “It’s like forging a sword. A sharp edge takes heat and hammering. She wants your principles to go through the fire so they don’t collapse once you’re out in the world where she can’t watch over you. I’ve been playing along, but I want a friend, not a frigging ethics pupil.”

Jason sat up straight in his chair and continued, voice rising as pent-up frustration leaked out.

“I may not always make the best choices. Sometimes I do things that are selfish and hurt other people. I try and do good, and when I fall short, I try to do better. That’s all I can do, all anyone can do.”

“How was hanging Hannah’s corpse up like a party decoration trying to do better?” Humphrey asked.

“That wasn’t real, Humphrey. But it could be. The consequences of what we do, as adventurers. The risks we take. Yes, what I did was traumatising. But now they have a better idea of what could be out there waiting for them, and they’re a little more ready for it than they were before. You think I don’t know what my powers are?”

“And if they freeze up because they’re afraid of what you did really happening?”

“Then they shouldn’t be out there at all,” Jason said. “Isn’t that the whole point of all this training? To make sure we go out as ready as we can be?”

“Does that justify what you did to them?”

“My powers are what they are, Humphrey. There’s no point trying to stab someone with a hammer. If I run around pretending I have your powers, then I will die, and die quickly. Maybe I should have waited for different essences, but you have no inkling of how lost I was when I first came here. I would have done anything for just a little bit of control over my circumstances, and now all I can do is live with the consequences.”

“You think that makes it alright to terrorise people?” Humphrey asked.

“I know what my powers are, Humphrey. Misery and death. Blood turned black with taint, your body dying around you while you're still alive. You think I want to use that on a person? Maybe someone wants to come after me, but they hear about that day. Maybe even see the recording. They decide against coming after to me because the price if failure is too high. Not some clean, quick kill, but a slow, lingering death. Every enemy that fears me too much to come after me is a person I don't have to do use those powers on.”

Humphrey shook his head.

“You’re good with words, Jason. Anything I say, you’ll have an answer for.”

He stood up.

“That’s why I’m done listening,” he said. “I watched what you did in that arena. I listened to you taunt them. I’ve never heard a sound so cruel, so inhuman as you laughing at the suffering of others.”

“Humphrey, that was just theatrics.”

“Was it?” Humphrey asked. He walked over to the door and opened it.

“I think you need to take a look inside yourself, Jason. To find out where that was coming from.”

Chapter 75:

Progress

“So,” Clive asked, “the original sanguine horror came from the full creation process? The sacrifice chamber, the alchemy pit, the whole thing?”

As he talked, he enthusiastically gesticulated with a fork, a piece of fried sausage skewered onto the end.

“The whole thing,” Farrah said.

The large suite shared by Farrah, Gary and Rufus included a space with a large dining table. The three of them, plus Jason and Clive, were eating the breakfast Jason had brought upstairs from the inn’s kitchen. Gary was excavating the small hill of sausage, egg and fried vegetables on his own huge plate while Jason and Rufus ate quietly. Farrah and Clive were caught up talking, having barely picked at their food.

“I’d love to see that chamber,” Clive said.

“I’m not going to stop you,” Farrah said, “but it’s way out in the desert, so I’m not going to take you there, either.”

“And the awakening stone came from the horror itself?” Clive asked. “Produced by your looting ability, Jason?”

“That’s right,” Jason said. “You keep waving that sausage around and it’s going to end up on the other side of the room.”

“What?” Clive said, then looked at his fork as if surprised to find it there. He bit off the piece of sausage.

“What I find interesting” Farrah said, “is that a summoned familiar is created through completely different means than the sanguine horror we killed. Yet, that’s what Jason summoned.”

“A good thing they’re different,” Rufus said. “We wouldn’t want a sanguine horror roaming around at full strength.”

“Well,” Clive said, “it is possible that if Jason ever reached diamond rank, his familiar would attain the full strength of a sanguine horror. Of course, it would still be under his control, thus would be unlikely to scour all life from the planet.”

“I actually think I figured out what they wanted the horror for,” Farrah said.

“And you’re only telling us now?” Rufus asked.

“Well, I’ve been going over that book from the sacrifice chamber,” Farrah said. “As it turns out, you can get a non-summoned sanguine horror as a familiar. First, you have to make the thing, which they did. Or we did, whatever, but you start by making the thing, and

then you have to starve it. It starts at bronze rank, that's how it was when we fought it, but it goes down to iron rank if you leave it long enough."

"Can you do that with other monsters?" Jason asked.

"No," Farrah said. "The sanguine horror comes with the inherent ability to shift ranks, which normally means going up, but down is possible too."

"There are other monsters like that," Clive said. "They're all quite rare, though."

"Very," Farrah agreed. "So, once you have your sanguine horror, and you've starved it down to iron rank, you get the right essence and awakening stone and then hope you get a familiar bond essence ability. There are no guarantees, of course."

"Which essence and awakening stone are best?" Clive asked.

"For top reliability," Farrah said, "according to the book, a blood essence and an apocalypse stone are what you're looking for."

"That's exactly what I used," Jason said. "Why bother with all the big chamber and the sacrifices when you can just get one? Are the made ones better than the summoned ones? Do I have a defective familiar?"

"The actual sanguine horrors would be the same, in terms of abilities," Farrah said. "The difference would be the same as between any bonded familiar versus a summoned familiar."

"Which are?" Jason asked.

"Bonded familiars survive, even if the essence user dies," Clive said.

"A summoned familiar won't survive the death of the summoner," Farrah agreed. It also can disappear into the summoner's body, which bonded familiars can't."

"That's alright then," Jason said. "I'd hate having to carry Colin around in a bag or something."

"I still can't believe you named an apocalypse beast Colin," Rufus said.

"Well if you call your apocalypse beast Gorgos, the Enslaver of Worlds, then people are likely to start questioning your intentions," Jason said.

"That's actually a good point," Farrah said.

"I have to imagine reliability is the key factor that led them to make the sanguine horror themselves," Clive said. "When going for a bonded familiar instead of a summoned one, things are much more likely to go your way, if you prepare accordingly. So long as you have the creature on hand and use the right essence and stone combination, that is as close as you'll come to a guaranteed result with any awakening stone. Look at your friend Humphrey and his dragon. I guarantee the Geller's didn't leave anything to chance."

Jason scowled.

“They had a little bit of a tiff,” Farrah said.

“It wasn’t a tiff,” Jason said. “It was a philosophical disagreement.”

“Of course it was, sweetie.”

“Actually, there’s something I’ve been wondering about,” Jason said. “The sanguine horror we fought was vulnerable to salt. I checked, and my familiar is the same. So how would it kill all life in the ocean, which is full of salt?”

“Those vulnerabilities would eventually go away,” Farrah said. “That book has a lot of details about sanguine horrors. It starts off a bronze rank, which is where we fought it, and has some extreme vulnerabilities at that stage. Fire and salt are the big ones, along with esoteric ones that only essence abilities can produce. But those vulnerabilities go away as it grows stronger. Salt stops being an issue once reaches gold rank, after which it can go swimming all it likes.”

“I’d love to get a look at that book,” Clive said.

“Why didn’t Anisa take it?” Rufus asked. “She was collecting everything.”

“From the manor,” Farrah said. “We weren’t in the manor when we found it, so she had no right to it.”

“I’m not sure she would agree,” Gary said. His first contribution to the discussion coincidentally came right after his huge plate was emptied.

“He’s right,” Rufus said. “There’s no way she would have quietly let you take it.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell her,” Farrah said.

“Good call,” Jason said. “I still think there was something shady going on with that woman.”

“Didn’t you say she was a priestess of Purity?” Clive asked.

“Exactly,” Jason said.

“It’s been a while since we’ve all been here together,” Rufus said as they stood in the yard behind Jory’s clinic. There was less space than in the past, with construction materials taking up much of the room. Jory had purchased the large building next to the clinic, and renovations were in full swing.

Like Jason, Rufus Gary and Farrah had all been carrying out contracts. Some they did together, others alone as they each pursued other projects. Rufus had preparations for his academy's joint venture with the Gellers, while Farrah had been undertaking work for the Magic Society. Gary had been exploring the use of local materials in crafting weapons and armour. He sold the work he was satisfied with at the trade hall, with no small

success. The rune tortoise shield he made with Farrah had auctioned well, getting him a lot of attention.

They started with weights training, which left Jason feeling inadequate. Rufus was bad enough, with the strength of a late-stage bronze ranker, but Farrah and Gary were worse. Farrah had a strength power from her earth essence and Gary's race were all physically powerful. They were lifting half-ton barbells in each hand, while at least Rufus had the decency to struggle with one. By comparison, Jason was an out-of-shape guy in his first week at the gym.

The others stopped to cool down as Jason headed inside, using his power to help the waiting patients. With clinic hours reduced by the expansion and Jason often away on contracts, the clinic was more busy than ever.

"Haven't seen those friends of yours in a while," Jason said to Jory. "The fighter didn't get hurt too badly, did she?"

They had just healed up a pit fighter who had been cursed by an opponent.

"No, she's out of the pit fighting game again," Jory said. "Haven't seen them in a while."

Back outside, Rufus was waiting for Jason.

"Time to see if those skills have atrophied," Rufus said.

"Actually," Jason said, "I've been working on something. My martial art, The Way of the Reaper..."

"What's wrong?" Rufus asked.

"Just saying it out loud makes me realise how over the top that name is. Where did you say that skill book came from?"

"I didn't say," Rufus said.

"Not like it matters," Jason said. "I'm a kung-fu wizard of darkness and blood. The good ship Chuunibyou has well and truly set sail."

"Were you approaching some kind of point?" Rufus asked, "or were you just going to stand there and spout nonsense?"

"He's done it before," Gary said, prompting a hurt look from Jason.

"He's done it a lot," Farrah added.

"Farrah, you too?" Jason asked.

"You were saying something about your martial art?" Rufus asked impatiently.

"Right, yes," Jason said. "So, my martial art has five forms. Different approaches, different situations. At first, I thought it was about choosing the right form for the right enemy. Then I spent a lot of time fighting people in the mirage arena."

"I heard about that," Rufus said. "Danielle said she had a recording to show me. I heard you were challenging all comers for most of a week. What did you learn in that time?"

"That the Gellers really teach their kids how to fight," Jason said. "I lost a lot of times."

"What else?" Rufus asked.

"Only using a fifth of your martial arts is like... only using a fifth of your martial arts. The forms aren't just five mini martial arts bundled into a skill book anthology. It was only when I started mixing things up that I realised the key to the whole thing."

"Which is?" Rufus asked.

"The real trick to the style is understanding how and when to move between forms. A well-timed, well-executed change in approach can clinch a victory."

Rufus took up a fighting stance.

"Show me."

Rufus was faster and stronger, with more skill and experience. In all their time training, Jason had never landed more than a glancing blow. Not only did this latest sparring session follow the same pattern, but Jason was performing worse than he had since the early days. Farrah and Gary were watching from the side, using piles of bricks as furniture.

"I'm not impressed," Rufus said after knocking Jason into the dirt again. "You're full of openings, more than when you first used the book. I think your attempts to change things up are making you lose what the book gave you in the first place."

Jason picked himself up from the dirt, body aching from the punishing lesson. He brushed himself down and resumed a fighting stance.

"Prove it," he said.

Spectating from the side, Gary chortled.

"It's on now," he said.

Jason's clear eyes locked on Rufus, who shook his head.

"Some people need the truth beaten into them," he said.

He came at Jason, hard and fast. Jason floundered back, narrowly avoiding a clean hit while almost tripping over his own feet. Rufus held the momentum ruthlessly, pushing Jason into a corner both figuratively and literally. Jason stumbled as a finishing blow came ramming at him, but then his body shifted. Rufus's blow hit nothing but air as Jason shunted into his body, pushing Rufus off-balance. Jason's elbow crashed into the side of Rufus' head, ringing it like a bell.

Rufus staggered and Jason pressed, but suddenly Rufus was moving twice as fast and a fist slammed into Jason's gut, doubling him over and lifting him right off his feet. An elbow was crashing down on the back of Jason's head, but Rufus stopped it before he smashed open Jason's skull. Jason collapsed to the ground anyway.

"Good," Rufus said, stepping back.

"Doesn't..."

Jason barely got a hoarse word out before a coughing fit sent blood speckling into the dirt. He pulled a healing potion from his inventory and tipped it down his throat.

"I think you might have gone a bit hard, there, Rufus," Gary said.

"He did well," Rufus said. "Made me use my full strength for a moment. It was good."

"Doesn't feel good," Jason croaked.

"On your feet," Rufus said coldly.

"Come on, Rufus," Farrah said. "You hit him so hard he had to drink a potion."

"Which he did," Rufus said. "So now he can get up."

Rufus walked over to where Jason was still laying in the dirt.

"This is where he gets to choose," Rufus says. "Is he going to be adequate, or is he going to be great? Stand up or lay down. What's it going to be, Jason?"

Jason pushed himself up and onto his feet.

"You know," he said, "Instructor Rufus is kind of a prick. Haven't you heard of positive reinforcement?"

"All those openings you were showing," Rufus said. "They're a trap."

"Well, some of them are traps," Jason said. "It took you a while to go after the right one."

"Only once you close all those real openings will you have made the style your own," Rufus said.

"No," Jason said. "Once I transform every opening into a trap, *then* I've made it my own."

Rufus grinned.

"I like the ambition. You have a lot of work to do."

Chapter 76: Preparations

"Mr Asano," Gilbert greeted, "always such a pleasure."

"Morning, Bert. Your message said you found something for me?"

"Ah, yes," Gilbert said, looking reluctant. "Loath as I am to refer you to my brother, he does have something that meets your specifications quite neatly. Of course, I could offer you something adequate myself, but adequate isn't the Gilbert's Resilient Attire for the Discerning Gentleman way."

Gilbert held out an envelope for Jason to take.

"Thanks, Bert. Good looking out, mate."

Filbert's Fine Leather Emporium was located in one of the other arcades within the trade hall complex, requiring Jason to pass through the main hall. He passed by Jory's stall along the way, although Jory himself was still overseeing renovations. Instead, it was being run by Jory's assistant, Janice.

"Hello, Mr Asano."

"Hello, Janice. I don't suppose you have any crystal wash back there?"

"Now, Mr Asano, you know what Mr Tillman said. We have to keep some for the other customers."

"Janice," Jason said, voice buttery smooth. "Can't you just free up just a few little bottles? It can be our little secret."

"Mr Asano, Mr Tillman only produces four crates a week, and after you were so generous with the construction funding he lets you take two of them. We keep having to turn people away because we've run out. He'll be stepping up production once his new workshop is up and running."

Jason shook his head sadly.

"You're killing me, Janice. If I don't get that crystal wash, I'm going to end up all dirty. You don't want to be responsible for turning me into a dirty man, do you, Janice?"

Her eyes ran Jason up and down.

"I could live with it," she said.

"Janice!" Jason said, voice filled with admonishment. "I've never heard the like! I think I'd better go."

He moved on, Janice seeing him off with a coquettish wave.

"What has gotten into that girl?"

Moving through the main hall, he was stopped by some people he didn't know. It was a pair of young women with iron rank auras.

"Excuse me," one of them said. "Are you the guy with the evil powers?"

Jason winced. Hannah Adeah was the archer from Rick Geller's team, who Jason had fought in the mirage arena. She had apparently taken upon herself to distribute the recording of their fight, and Jason had been getting variations on the question for a week. Almost every time he visited the jobs hall or the trade hall, someone would approach him about it.

"No," he said, wearily. "I don't have evil powers."

"You're not the guy from the recording?" the other asked.

"I am the person in the recording, but my powers aren't evil."

"Controlling monsters seems pretty evil."

"I don't control monsters!"

Shaking his head, Jason walked away as the pair talked behind him.

"I heard those leeches live inside his blood."

"I bet that's true. Kevin Wasserman has a lizard that lives inside in his skin."

"That makes so much sense. His skin is always clammy."

Jason sighed, grateful as their voices were lost in the noise of the trade hall crowd. He found his way into the right arcade and entered Filbert's Fine Leather Emporium.

"Hello, sir, and welcome to Filbert's Fine Leather Emporium. Which is to say, we are an emporium of leather goods, not an emporium made of leather. Just a little joke we like to say around here. I am the proprietor, Filbert, but you may call me Bert."

"G'day, Bert."

Filbert, like the other Berts, was thick in the middle and thin on top. He wore a waistcoat and jacket, more snug than most local fashion and definitely too hot for the climate. Jason handed over the envelope. Filbert opened it up and read the contents with a frown.

"I won't hold it against you, sir, that you chose to offer my brother your custom. Fortunately for you, Gilbert has acknowledged the superiority of my wares. You are looking for some specialised desert boots?"

"That's right," Jason said. "I have a contract starting tomorrow involving desert travel. I want something that will work well in sand."

"Well, if Gilbert sent you to me, rather than selling you his usual tat, then you must be a gentleman of capability and means. He has suggested something he knows one of my fine craftspeople developed."

Filbert sent off a staff member hovering quietly to fetch something from the storage room in the back.

“While sweet Julio fetches the boots,” Filbert said, “is there anything else I can interest you in?”

The store was laid out with lots of open space, the products displayed on wall racks. It was mostly shoes and accessories like bags and belts. Jason’s eye was drawn to a row of bags that looked like simple leather sacks. He reached out and touched one.

Item: [Dimensional Bag] (iron rank, rare)

A bag that contains a dimensional storage space (container, bag).

- Effect: Can be used to store items in an extra-dimensional void.
- Effect: Can be to fill a bag slot, increasing inventory space by eight.

“Bag slot?”

Help: Bag Slots

- Bag slots can use dimensional bags to expand inventory size. Increase is based on rank of bag. At iron rank, one bag slot is available and can hold only iron-rank bags.

Jason opened his inventory, seeing five new squares in the corner. The first square was glowing, while the others were greyed out.

“Dimensional bags,” Filbert said. “Crafted right here, in the workshop from mirage hound leather. A common enough monster in the desert, but quite tricky to catch. Not so much once they’ve been around long enough to turn aggressive, but the leather has degraded by then, becoming sadly useless.”

“You hire adventurers to hunt them for you?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Filbert said, “but it’s tricky work, and they appear out in the dunes. Hiring someone with the skills to both hunt them and harvest the pelt requires incentive. Thus, I can only offer them at a premium price.”

“I’ll take one,” Jason said.

“Capability and means,” Filbert said. “My fine customers are usually possessed of one or the other, but just between you and I, sir, all my favourite customers have both.”

“I imagine they do,” Jason said wryly.

The store assistant, Julio, brought out a large, single oversized leather boot. Filbert took the large boot from Julio and from inside pulled a box made of stiff, woven reeds, dyed black.

“Novelty shape dimensional bag,” Filbert said, resting a hand on the boot-shaped magical bag. He opened the box and took out a pair of boots that were a different thing altogether. Matte black, with sleek lines, sides embedded with a mesh of black shards.

“I rather like these particular boots,” Gilbert said. “If you’re looking to spend time in the dunes, you won’t find anything close to this quality anywhere close to this price point. I should warn you, however, that it has been the more skilled clientele who enjoy the most success with this design. The ordinary adventurer would be better served by a more... basic product.”

“That’s some fine salesmanship, Bert,” Jason said as he looked the boots over. “Who wants to think of themselves as an ordinary adventurer? It’s a profession for those looking to be extraordinary.”

“Sir, I can assure you, I stand behind my products.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” Jason said. “I’ve found your brothers to be upright in all their dealings. I was actually complimenting you. I appreciate someone who wields their words with purpose and care.”

“I’m glad to hear it, sir. Although, as upright dealings go, it seems you haven’t met my brother Hubert.”

"Haven't had the pleasure, no," Jason said, taking the boots from Filbert's hands.

Item: [Sand-Cutter Boots] (iron rank, rare)

Boots incorporating the chitin of a sand-cutter, inheriting some of its power (apparel, boots).

- Effect: Improved ability to walk on sand.
- Effect: Increased jump height and distance.
- Effect: Enhanced kick attack. Highly effective against enemies with strong earth affinity.

“What’s a sand-cutter?” Jason asked.

"Ah, you have a good eye, sir. Are you familiar with the grasshopper and the mantis?"

“I am,” Jason said.

"Well, the sand-cutter is about halfway between, except it's four-feet long and lives in the desert."

"That sounds horrifying," Jason said.

"They're actually quite good at hunting mirage hounds," Filbert said. "Shame you can't train them."

Filbert rubbed a hand over his mouth, thoughtfully.

"You know," he said, "I did just hear about an adventurer that can control monsters. I wonder if I could get into contact with him."

"That's an unfounded rumour," Jason said darkly.

Filbert, sensitive to the mood of the customer, returned the boots to the box.

"I imagine you'd know, sir, being the capable adventurer. So it was just the boots and the dimensional bag?"

"Thank you, Bert."

"The first green pill will change your aura," Belinda said. "Don't use any mana or they'll be able to sense your real aura through the fake one. I don't have to tell you how fast they'll be on someone with two auras. Once you've got the goods, get to the change point where I'll be waiting."

"I know all this," Sophie said. "We've been over it many times."

"Would you rather be bored from hearing it too much, or caught from hearing it too little?"

Sophie let out a sigh.

"Right, yes. No using mana."

"At the change point," Belinda continued, "I'll give you the blue pill, which will purge the aura of the first green pill. That will take a minute to completely go through your system, during which time you change outfits. Then I give you the second green pill for another false aura. You leave the goods behind and catch the loop line to Marina South."

"I don't like leaving you behind," Sophie said.

"I have to clear the goods of anything they've done to track them," Belinda said. "The change point and the contingency point are the only places I have shielded from whatever they might be using."

"No one knows what we're after," Sophie said. "How would they know what to tag?"

"Ventress has been pushing people hard," Belinda said. "We don't know if she's compromised any of the people I sourced our assets from. If she's figured out the target, or even narrowed it down, she may have warned the potential targets. Even if she hasn't,

you know the kind of people we've been stealing from. They probably tagged their valuables themselves."

Sophie shook her head.

"I hate this," she said. "I'm amazed we haven't been caught already."

"Thank the Adventure Society," Belinda said. "Because you aren't even iron rank, they're refusing to let anyone higher than iron go after you. So the only bronze-rankers you'll have to deal with are any that decide to chase you in the moment. That's why you don't want to get caught swapping your aura mask."

"And if a silver comes after me?"

"I can't imagine a silver who would deign to bother with you. They don't want to be seen doing iron-rank work. But that's why the disguise isn't magical; it'll hold up under magical scrutiny. So will the fake aura, so long as you don't use any mana."

"Are you sure about those pills?" Sophie asked. "The guy sells low-quality potions to poor people in Old City. Every other alchemist I've heard of rakes in money from rich people on the Island."

"He knows what he's doing," Belinda said. "And just as importantly, doesn't know what we're doing. He doesn't ask questions, because he's sweet on me."

"How sweet will he be when Ventress sends Darnell to break his elbows?" Sophie asked.

"She can't," Belinda said. "He's in the Alchemy Association and the Adventure Society."

"And you?"

"What about me?" Belinda asked.

"Are you sweet on him, Lindy? Is your judgement compromised?"

"My judgement has gotten us this far," Belinda said, "and I'm hardly the one with the questionable taste in men. Could you pick one guy who wasn't a con man or some kind of swindler?"

"They're more fun."

"Three of your lovers tried to sell you to Cole Silva. That would inspire most people to examine their taste in men, but you pick up every lying, scheming weasel that stumbles into view."

"Not every one," Sophie said. "And they weren't lovers; they were just a bit of fun. And things didn't exactly work out for them, did it?"

"The point is that you need to raise your standards. We aren't in a great place to be socialising right now, but if you are going to pick a guy, pick a good one."

“Then find me a good guy who’s also lying, scheming weasel,” Sophie said.

Belinda groaned.

“I don’t think there is anyone like that,” Belinda said. “He’d have to be a crazy person.”

She pulled out a pocket watch to check the time, then put on her game face.

“Four minutes,” she said. “Time to go.”

Chapter 77: Group Cohesion

Jason walked through the Adventure Society campus with a recording crystal floating over his head.

“...looks a lot like a university campus,” he continued narrating. “It’s more about child soldiers than education, though. Not super-young; more America than Sierra Leone. Late-mid teens.”

The marshalling yard came into sight, where a number of young adventurers were loosely gathered.

“As you can see, late teens. The big one with the bird on his shoulder is my friend Humphrey, who I’ve mentioned before. We had bit of a fight last week, and we haven’t talked much since, so things are still a little tense.”

Jason saw Humphrey’s face light up with a smile, following his gaze to where an extremely pretty young woman was approaching him with a wave.

“That girl walking up to him is Gabrielle. She’s a priestess in training, with the god of knowledge. Goddess, whatever. Deities are gender fluid, as it turns out. Heard that from the goddess of knowledge herself; direct quote. Oh yeah, I found religion, which is kind of a big deal. I didn’t join, but I found it. It seems fine, just not for me, really but who knows? Maybe there’s a god of delicious sandwiches. If God helps those who help themselves, then the god of sandwiches might offer a two-for-one deal. I might check that out.”

Jason took a pocket watch from his inventory, checked the time and then turned away from the marshalling yard.

“Still got time to check if that bloke with the juice stall is on campus today. An interesting fact about the goddess of knowledge is that she knows everything that anyone in this world knows, including me. Which means she knows a bunch of Mario Kart shortcuts, which is kind of awesome.”

Jason spotted a cart stall set up on the main promenade. The proprietor had set up an awning for shade, with a folding table under which were boxes of fruit and large paper cups.

“There he is. Nice.”

Jason joined the short queue, soon reaching the front.

“Blasphemer,” the man running the stall casually greeted him. “Gods haven’t struck you down, yet?”

He was a runic, with the usual dark skin marked by faintly glowing runes.

“Not yet, sorry Arash.”

They had first met right before Jason saw his first god. Arash hadn't been happy with Jason's lack of reverence, but that wasn't enough to make him turn away a customer.

“What do you have for me today?” Jason asked.

“I just got in the first gem berries of the season,” Arash said. “I can do you a blend with blood-wing cherries over ice I think you'll like.”

“Sounds refreshing,” Jason said. “I'm heading into the desert, today, so rack me up a half-dozen.”

“Perhaps the goddess of earth will drown you in sand,” Arash said optimistically.

“I guess all you can do is pray,” Jason said.

Arash tapped his finger on a plate fixed into the table in front of him, which lit up with a glowing magic circle. He started tossing fruit into the air, which stopped over the magic circle as if caught by an invisible hand. From crates under the table, he threw out berries, cherries and a few other fruits, as well as ice from a magical freezer box. Each fruit he threw up floated in a slow circuit over the magic circle.

Arash placed six large, paper cups on the table, in the circle under the floating fruit. He took out a pair of crystal rods the size of knitting needles and started waving them about with practised ease. They didn't touch the fruit, which nonetheless reacted to their waving like an orchestra to a conductor. Fruit peeled itself, pureeing in the air as berries, cherries and ice were crushed. None of the resulting slurry splashed away or onto the table. At the direction of Arash's needles, it separated into six portions and slid into the cups.

Putting down the two rods, Arash added a paper straw to each cup. Jason paid in lesser spirit coins, then took an experimental sip, giving it a solid thumbs-up.

“Oh, that's a winner,” Jason said. He placed the other cups in his inventory, keeping one to drink immediately.

“What's with the recording crystal?” Arash asked, looking at the object floating over Jason's head.

“I'm making a record of what my life is like here,” Jason said. “Something to show the family if I ever get home. Now they get to see you making a delicious beverage.”

“I don't think it'll be that exciting,” Arash said.

“You might be surprised,” Jason said.

“Where is home?” Arash asked.

“Further away than even the gods can reach.”

“Get away from my stall, blasphemer.”

Jason chuckled.

“Will you be here all day?” Jason asked. “I could see myself picking up another round when I get back from the desert.”

“I’ll be at the Magic Society in the afternoon. You just be careful out there.”

“No worries, mate.”

Jason stowed the crystal away as he wandered back in the direction of the marshalling yard. There were benches around the side and he sat alone, looking over the assembled adventurers. After months of observation training with Farrah, Jason quickly took everything in. Who was alone, who was in a group; what their body language said about group dynamics. What equipment did they have? It was hard to tell who was under-equipped for a journey into the desert, and who had a storage space like Jason.

Farrah had drilled Jason to quickly and thoroughly recognise and catalogue such details. They would watch people in places around the city; Outside Jory’s clinic, the Adventure Society campus, the concert hall. In addition to the practical use of observation skills, exercising the mind also exercised the spirit attribute. It was just as important as working on the power attribute by weightlifting.

Humphrey glanced over at Jason with a complicated expression before turning back to his conversation with Gabrielle and another young woman. Jason gave him an awkward smile back.

“Don’t tell me the honeymoon is over?” a sneering voice came in Jason’s direction. Jason had spotted Thadwick Mercer and his offsiders, not paying him any attention until Thadwick loudly approached Jason.

“Not on the outs with Geller, are you?” Thadwick asked. “I thought you were friends?”

“It hurt his feelings that I’ve been spending so much time with your sister. Do say hello to Cassandra for me.”

Thadwick turned red with fury, pointing a finger in Jason’s face.

“Stay away from my sister, you jumped-up commoner trash!”

Jason glanced at the two flanking Thadwick, who looked more embarrassed than supportive. From what Humphrey had told him, they were both stuck under Thadwick due to their families.

Thadwick’s Mercer family was very powerful in Greenstone. This was only highlighted when the Duke of Greenstone’s brother, Thadwick’s father, married into it. The power of the Mercer family placed it above numerous others, especially those without aristocratic title.

According to Humphrey, both of Thadwick's lackeys were positioned there to help their family interests, rather than any actual regard or friendship. Rufus considered this a shame, as he had evaluated them both highly during their field assessment. They had both passed where Thadwick and Humphrey failed.

Jason was about to say something else when he spotted Vincent Trenslow coming out of the nearby administration building. Paying no more attention to Thadwick, Jason got up and joined the others in converging on the Adventure Society official.

The group was ten altogether, including Jason himself. He knew Humphrey, Gabrielle and, sadly, Thadwick. He recognised Thadwick's offsidiers, although he hadn't spoken with them at all. The others he didn't know, including the woman Humphrey and Gabrielle had been talking to. She looked a little older than the others, maybe eighteen or nineteen.

"Everyone listen up," Vincent told them. "Your task today is to head out to spirit coin farm Geller-Seven. There you will meet with a bronze rank adventurer and assist him in escorting a shipment of spirit coins back to the city."

"Who's in charge?" Thadwick called out.

"The bronze-ranker who you're going to meet," Vincent said irritably.

"If they'll only be with us for the journey back," Thadwick said. "What about on the way there? I think I'm the clear choice for leader. My team is the largest group here."

"That's only three people out of ten, you nonce," a woman said. Jason didn't know her at all, but she immediately made a favourable impression.

"It's still the largest," Thadwick said. "And, of course, you all know who my family is."

Some of the people looked awkward, others disdainful. Jason chuckled quietly to himself, wondering if Thadwick should be the basis of a drinking game. One of the Thadwick's offsidiers put a hand over his own face while the other winced, looking at his feet.

"Contrary to what you may think," Vincent said, "Young Master Mercer is quite right." That drew everyone's attention back to Vincent.

"There may be minimal risk on the outward leg of your trip, but there is always a chance something goes wrong. If you encounter a bronze-rank monster, then you will need to make a coordinated response. A leader can direct you to fight as a team, instead of as individuals.

"Which means doing what I say," Thadwick said with smug satisfaction.

Jason snorted a laugh at Thadwick setting the self-destruct on his own dignity.

"Actually," Vincent said, "that means doing what Young Mistress Geller says."

He put a hand on the shoulder of the woman Humphrey had been talking to that Jason didn't recognise.

"For those who haven't met her, this is Phoebe Geller. She will be the group leader until you reach the spirit coin farm."

"Why her?" Thadwick asked.

"Because she has done this before," Vincent said, "because she actually knows the way to the spirit coin farm, and finally, because she's the only two-star adventurer here. Which puts her a star and a half over you, Thadwick,"

Confusion crossed Thadwick's face.

"A star and a half?" Thadwick said. "You can't get half stars."

Jason burst out laughing, drawing Thadwick's ire.

"You find something funny?" Thadwick asked him.

Jason looked at Thadwick's face and cracked up all the harder.

"He saying," Jason chuckled, "that you're a half-star because you're not a legitimate adventurer."

Thadwick's face was a mix of anger and pride fuelled by a nagging sense of inadequacy.

"Do you know who my uncle is?" Thadwick asked.

"And drink," Jason said, sipping at his fruit beverage.

"What?" Thadwick asked.

"Of course I know who your uncle is," Jason said. "Everyone knows who your uncle is. That's the whole point. Thadwick Mercer never passed the Adventure Society assessment. The Duke of Greenstone's nephew did. I hate to break it to you, Thadwick Mercer, but the only part of your name anyone respects is the last part. You can't be the leader because no one trusts you to do anything. At all. The guys on your team? They have to carry you so hard that it's training. They're really good because they're compensating for your outlandish lack of competence."

He gestured at the gathered adventurers.

"This job means placing our lives in one another's hands. No one here is going to trust you with their life. They might not tell you that, Thadwick, because you're so petty, entitled and insecure that you'll hurt them or their families using your own family's egregious level of influence. Which is, to be clear, the only reason anyone, anywhere puts up with you for so much as a single moment."

As Jason's rant came to a close, most of the people looked on in shocked silence. Humphrey, having seen Jason's mouth run away from him before, was shaking his head.

“You aren’t doing a lot for group cohesion, Jason,” Humphrey said.

Jason looked over at Humphrey and absently nodded.

“Yeah, I uh... that one got away from me.”

“I don’t have to put up with this,” Thadwick snapped. “I’m leaving, and you will pay for this insult, Asano.”

Thadwick started storming off, then realised his lackeys hadn’t followed.

“Well?” asked them, turning back.

“We were assigned this contract,” one of them said.

“We’re refusing it,” Thadwick said.

“We... the Society doesn’t like it when you refuse an assigned contract,” the other lackey responded.

“Who cares? My uncle will put them in line.”

“And drink,” Jason said, finishing off his juice.

Thadwick marched off again. The pair of reluctant flunkeys looked at each other unhappily, then followed.

“Maybe it was good for group cohesion after all,” someone said. “Thadwick’s gone.”

“It wasn’t,” Phoebe Geller said. “Our only healer just walked off after him.”

A slew of unhappy gazes were turned on Jason, who winced.

“Sorry,” he said.

Chapter 78: Jason Has the Good Biscuits

The group, now reduced to seven, made their way through the desert sand. This was proper desert, with blistering sun scouring any life out of the rolling dunes. There were no landmarks, so Jason checked his map from time to time. It unveiled nothing but empty desert as they passed through it, but he saw they were travelling in a dead-straight line. Leading from the front, Phoebe Geller knew exactly where she was going.

Jason had prepared thoroughly for the trip, even though it was expected to only last the day. Aside from the juice he picked up, he had ample supplies of food and water. He could get what he needed from spirit coins, but he had once found himself in the desert, benefiting from Farrah having packed bottles of water.

His oasis bracelet protected him from the heat, and he had plenty of spare water quintessence to fuel it. He also had his new boots, which were already paying off. While others were trudging through the sand, the magic of his boots made every step light and easy.

He'd also brought along some combat items, as open desert was not an environment that played to his strengths. His belt had loops containing vials with various utility potions, along with the usual health and mana potions. The magic on the belt was designed to protect the vials from incidental damage. The belt also carried the scabbard for the sword Gary made on Jason's left hip, with his snake tooth dagger sheathed on the right.

He wore a bandolier diagonally across his chest, with nine throwing darts sheathed into it. Each dart had a small, corded grip, in different colours. Three had a black cord, three had dark orange, with the last three being green.

It quickly became clear which members of the group had joined Jason in making appropriate preparations. Humphrey, Phoebe and Gabrielle were easily chatting as if strolling through a garden. The other three struggled with the sand underfoot and the sun overhead. They repeatedly used spirit coins to replenish their reserves.

"This contract will cost us more coins than it gets us," one of them complained.

"Then you should have prepared," Phoebe said. "Look at how comfortable Jason is."

All eyes turned to Jason, sipping on an icy fruit drink.

One of the exhausted adventurers narrowed her eyes at Jason.

"Aren't you that guy with the evil powers?"

Jason shot a withering look at Phoebe, who gave him a wink and a cheeky smile in return.

Jason returned the drink to his inventory. One of his favourite things about the inventory power was that anything he took out was in the same state he put in. Food stayed fresh, drinks stayed cold. His food supply included bread straight from the oven that would stay warm and fresh until he took it out again.

One of the adventurers Jason didn't know suddenly called out.

"Everyone stop!"

"What is it?" Phoebe asked.

"There's something under the sand ahead of us," the adventurer called out.

There were many kinds of perception powers. Some saw through darkness, like Jason's ability, while others had superior aura perception, or could see magic. Common to the earth essence was a tremor-sense power, able to detect things in or on the ground over large distances.

"Jason," Phoebe said. "You cost us our healer, so you're the bait."

Jason nodded, walking ahead of the others as the starlight cloak formed around him. He kept a quick but measured pace, ready to react at any time.

"How close?" he called back.

"About a dozen metres in front of you."

Jason stopped, drawing one of the green-corded darts from his bandolier. It was a single-use magic item that would manifest a false aura on impact. He threw it into the ground, a dozen metres ahead of him, where it struck the sand.

Sand exploded into the air as a monster erupted from the ground. It looked like a giant, emaciated shark, but with shell instead of skin, spidery crustacean legs and huge pincers.

"A shab?"

It looked similar to the shabs Jason had encountered in the past, but at least triple the size. Instead of the red and purple colouration, it was sandy yellow. The creature skittered about, as if confused, then seemed to spot Jason and moved towards him. Jason walked toward the creature, in turn, as he drew another dart. This one had a black cord and he tossed it at the creature.

The dart bounced off its shell, the impact triggering the dart. Darkness burst out of the dart, shadows engulfing the creature in defiance of the glaring sun. It wasn't complete darkness, instead, a murky region of roiling shadow. Jason continued forward, casually walking into the dark mass as if he hadn't noticed it. The other adventurers looked on as Jason vanished into the shadows.

"What is that thing?" Humphrey asked.

"A sand shab," Phoebe said. "Bigger than the aquatic variety. Likes to drag victims under the sand instead of underwater."

"Should we help?" Gabrielle asked.

Alien shrieks of monstrous rage came from within the darkness.

"I wouldn't bother," Jason said, suddenly next to them.

Phoebe looked between Jason and the darkness into which he had vanished.

"Teleport?" she asked.

"Shadow teleport," Jason said.

"What shadow?"

Jason looked down and she followed his gaze to see he was standing in her own shadow.

"That's sneaky."

"The monster isn't dead," Gabrielle pointed out. Angry cries were still emerging from the patch of shadow, which was fading away. They could see the outline of the monster within.

"The darkness fades over time," Jason said. "It'll last about thirty seconds, total."

He casually restocked his bandolier darts from his inventory. In his other hand was his dagger, blade slick with yellow ichor. He took out a rag and started wiping it clean.

"What about the monster?" Gabriele asked.

"It'll last about fifty seconds, total" Jason said. "That's a guess, since I'm going to try a new ability."

The last vestiges of the magic shadow faded, the shab scrambling around in confusion. It spotted the adventurers and headed in their direction.

"Uh, Jason?" Humphrey said.

"Yes, Humphrey?"

"It's coming this way."

"Shabs aren't very quick," Jason said. "I just need those afflictions to stack up a little more."

He finished cleaning his dagger, returning it to its sheath. He glanced over at the approaching shab. It wasn't built for forward movement, skittering side to side as it came. He raised an arm in its direction, chanting out a spell.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

Black spread out across the shell of the monster as if it were passing into shadow. It's hectic skittering slowed to an uneasy stagger. When one of its shell-encrusted legs

crumbled like dry, stale bread, it collapsed to the ground. More of its shell broke apart to reveal blackened, withered flesh. It didn't get back up.

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: 30 seconds.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (01%).

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.
-

"Uh, Jason?" Humphrey asked.

"Yes, Humphrey?"

"What just happened to that monster?"

"Massive necrosis," Jason said.

"I'm not sure what that means."

"Well," Jason said, "you know what happens to a body when it dies? A regular body, I mean. Not a monster body."

"I'm roughly familiar," Humphrey said.

"I convinced its body to do that," Jason said. "Just very quickly, and while it was still alive."

"Uh, Jason?"

"Yes, Humphrey?"

"Are you that guy with the evil powers?"

"I hope you get eaten by a shab."

The seven adventurers continued their trek through the desert. The three Jason didn't know were bringing up the rear, sweat pouring out of them as they were still forced to replenish themselves with spirit coins. Phoebe and Gabrielle were together, glancing over at Jason and Humphrey talking loudly.

"...how did so many people even see it?" Jason complained. "It was just that archer distributing copies, right."

"Actually, my mother started to help," Humphrey said. "Our people have a lot of family pride, which is good, but she doesn't want us veering into... let's call it Thadwick territory."

"So she started showing people a recording of some random guy no one has heard of going one-versus-five with a bunch of your family members?"

"That's the basic idea, yes."

"She could have asked," Jason said.

"I thought the whole point was to intimidate people."

"Yeah, well that was my chuuni tendencies getting away from me. Now everyone thinks I control monsters. How would I not be the strongest iron-ranker in greenstone if I could control hundreds of trap weavers?"

"What are chuuni tendencies?" Humphrey asked.

"My powers aren't evil," Jason said. "You breathe fire. Burning to death isn't exactly a fun way to go."

"You do have a leech colony living inside you."

"Lots of people have summoned familiars!"

Humphrey's familiar, Stash, was happily walking along next to Humphrey's feet. He barked happily, like a dog, which was a little odd given that he was currently a lizard.

"Who's a good boy," Jason said, prompting Stash to transform into a small bird and fluttered up onto Jason's shoulder. Jason took a biscuit from his inventory and held it up for the bird, who turned into a puppy and snuffled it out of Jason's hand. Jason used the empty hand to stop the enthusiastic puppy from falling down.

"You spoil him," Humphrey said.

"He deserves it."

Stash yapped his agreement, spilling crumbs.

From where she was walking beside Phoebe, Gabrielle looked on unhappily.

"Why does he like Jason more than me?" she asked.

"Which one?" Phoebe asked. "Humphrey or Stash?"

That earned her a sharp elbow. As Gabrielle has the might essence, it sent Phoebe reeling.

"Sorry," Gabrielle said with a wince.

Phoebe regained her balance, shaking her head.

"Maybe you should carry biscuits around," Phoebe suggested, nodding at Jason feeding the puppy another one.

"Biscuits for who?" Gabrielle asked. "Humphrey or Stash?"

Phoebe laughed.

"I actually did try that," Gabrielle confessed. "I think Jason has better biscuits than me. He makes them himself."

"I didn't think you knew Jason that well," Phoebe said.

"The goddess told me."

"The goddess told you he makes his own biscuits?"

"She seems strangely interested in him."

"Oh?"

"I saw them together, briefly. It was a weird atmosphere."

"You don't suppose she's, you know, *interested* interested?" Phoebe asked.

"Dear gods, no," Gabrielle laughed. "I think it's because he's an outworlder. He doesn't act the way other people do. She said he's dangerous."

"How can that guy be dangerous to a goddess?"

"Not to her," Gabrielle said. "To me. She thinks he's a threat to impressionable young minds."

"She'd know, I guess," Phoebe said.

Suddenly, the adventurer with the tremor-sense called out in alarm.

"Everyone stop!"

"What is it?" Phoebe asked.

"There's something around us. All around us."

Everyone went on alert, scanning the empty desert terrain.

"Is it in the sand?" Humphrey asked.

"I think it *is* the sand."

Chapter 79: Sand Everywhere

Chaos erupted as the sand came to life all around them, surging like waves. From the empty desert, they were suddenly surrounded, the sand rising up to take a variety of crude forms. None were any larger than a person, but there were dozens of them, from crude torsos like half-melted snowmen to sharks swimming through the sand like it was water. The shapes were all poorly formed, without delicate features.

New Quest: [Elemental Ambush]

You have been surrounded by sand elementals. Defeat them before your team is overwhelmed.

- Objective: Defeat [Lesser Sand Elemental] attack.
 - Reward: Quintessence.
-

“Sand elementals!” Jason heard Phoebe shout over the sudden chaos. “Use powerful attacks to completely break up their forms or they’ll just recover!”

Jason released his aura as he felt others wash over him.

- You are in the area of an ally’s [Dragon Might] aura. Your [Power] and [Speed] attributes are increased.
 - You are in the area of an ally’s [Presence of the Master] aura. The effect of your essence abilities is increased.
-

He could easily sense Humphrey and Phoebe through their auras. Gabrielle and one of the other adventurers also projected auras, but they didn’t seem to affect him. Unfortunately, Jason’s own aura was unlikely to have a large impact on the fight.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy)
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are afflicted with.
-

He doubted creatures made of sand would be using any afflictions, and his own would certainly not affect them. For that reason, he drew the sword Gary had made for him instead of his dagger. By the time it cleared the scabbard, Humphrey was already in motion beside him.

Dragon scale armour shimmered into existence around Humphrey as an enormous, wing-shaped sword appeared in his hand. He swept it in a wide arc at the three elementals closest to himself and Jason. They exploded as the sword hit them, showering Humphrey and Jason in sand as the sword didn't even slow down.

"You good?" Humphrey asked Jason.

Jason's starlight cloak manifested around him.

"Do your thing, mate."

Humphrey nodded as dragon wings appeared on his back. They launched him into the air, beating to hold him aloft as he surveilled the team. Phoebe was fine, blasting huge chunks off elementals with explosive palm strikes. Gabrielle had conjured a huge iron staff that was twirling around her like she was putting on a show. Any elemental foolish enough to get close was torn apart by its powerful momentum.

Two of the other adventurers were holding their own, back-to-back against the elementals, while the last was alone and already struggling. Humphrey didn't know him before they teamed up, but seeing he was an elf, the man was almost certainly a spell caster. Close combat was likely to be the man's least-favourable circumstance, so Humphrey dived in immediately.

Humphrey's wings pushed up hard, sending him plunging into a dive bomb special attack. Hurling out of the sky, his feet smashed apart an elemental as he passed through it to land, the wings on his back vanishing as his sword lashed out.

The might essence was one of the most common essences to be found, yet also one of the most highly regarded. Even someone as privileged as Humphrey, who had his pick of essences, had chosen to use it. It was a simple essence, with simple abilities. Mighty strength, for example, was exactly what the name suggested. As the most common ability of the most popular common essence, it was the single most common essence ability in the entire world.

No one needed to have explained what made the might essence so popular, but anyone would think Humphrey was going out of his way to demonstrate. He swung his enormous sword with power and precision, as if it weighed almost nothing. Every elemental it touched blew up like a car in an Eighties action movie, showering the area with sand.

After clearing some space, Humphrey spared a glance for the beleaguered elf, who looked at him with gratitude.

“Keep them off me and I can take a bunch of them out,” the elf told him.

“Do what you need to do,” Humphrey said. “I’ve got you.”

In the meantime, Jason was dealing with elementals of his own. He lashed out with his sword, to minimal effect.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Lesser Sand Elemental].
 - [Lesser Sand Elemental] is immune to afflictions.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
-

Jason lashed out with quick light strikes, putting a special attack into each one. The blade barely finished making a cut before sand removed any trace, but that was never the goal. Each failed affliction triggered the effect of his sword, which grew more powerful with every strike.

-
- [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage. Highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Every attack started blasting sand off the elementals, but was yet to leave a lasting impact. The sword might not deter the encroaching elementals, but he had an answer for that. He would keep one elemental to build up stacks with his sword; a sluggish, snowman-shaped one, too slow to pose a real threat. At others, he would lash out with kicks, not hitting the creatures, but slicing his foot past them. As he did, a razor-whip of black shards extended from his boot, cutting through the elemental and scattering it to the winds.

“I love these boots.”

Item: [Sand-Cutter Boots] (iron rank, rare)

Boots crafted with the chitin of a sand-cutter, inheriting some of its power. (apparel, boots).

- Effect: Improved ability to walk on sand.
 - Effect: Increased jump height and distance.
 - Effect: Enhanced kick attack. Highly effective against enemies with strong earth affinity.
-

It was taking time to accumulate power onto Jason's sword, but with dozens of elementals still swarming them, he was in no danger of running out. With every attack, the sword's power grew. Sand started blasting off the elementals as it landed, leaving noticeable gouges.

He became more aggressive, lashing out with his sword and his razor-whip boots. The sword kept getting stronger until it was carving a path through the elementals. By the time he fought his way over to Humphrey, Jason's sword had joined his boots in taking down elementals at a single blow.

Humphrey had set about keeping the elementals off the spell caster. By the time Jason reached them, the elf behind Humphrey had gathered a huge sphere of white and fire-orange magic over his head. Looking up at it with a wild grin, he started chanting.

"Fire and air, fuel and feast, come forth and devour, the vortex beast!"

"Hey, that rhymes," Jason said as they watched the orb drift slowly over their heads, drifting toward the largest mass of elementals. Heat and wind washed over them as it passed. Then they heard the elf behind them yell out.

"RUN!"

They turned to see the elf already following his own advice, sprinting away from his own spell at top speed. Jason and Humphrey glanced at one another and did the same. A few seconds later there was a cacophonous explosion behind them as a force wave blasted them off their feet.

Jason pushed himself up from where he sprawled in the sand, head ringing from the noise. All he could hear was a rushing sound, like the ocean. Kneeling in the sand he wavered, unsteadily. Humphrey tapped his arm and pointed forward where the elf had gotten back up and continued running. Jason nodded, and after a dizzy false start followed, picking up his sword from where he'd dropped it.

Jason staggered forward, an equally unsteady Humphrey at his side. They caught up to the elf who had stopped to avoid running into elementals from the other direction. Still unable to hear, Jason felt the air stirring, loose sand fluttering along the ground.

Looking back the way they had come, he saw a burning orb surrounded by a vortex of air, dragging things into it. Closer to the orb, the suction was clearly more powerful, sucking up the sand elementals as they struggled to escape. Those that were caught up passed through the orb, splattering out the back as gobbets of molten sand.

Humphrey tapped Jason on the shoulder again, gesturing the other way. Jason looked to see Phoebe and Gabrielle handling the elementals just fine by themselves. The adventurers fighting back-to-back were doing less well as elementals converging on them.

Jason took a healing potion from his belt, Humphrey doing the same from his own. They each thumbed the stoppers off their vials and draining the contents. Jason head cleared, the rushing noise in his ears replaced with actual sound.

Behind them, they could hear the suction of the vortex. Ahead of them was what sounded like muffled explosions as Phoebe blasted apart elementals with bare-handed special attacks. From Gabrielle's direction was a regular smacking sound as her iron staff burst open more elementals with raw strength.

"Your lady friend is kind of scary," Jason told Humphrey.

"Not the time, Jason," Humphrey said, wings appearing briefly as he used a special attack to leap away. He landed like a grenade near the pair of struggling adventurers, sweeping away elementals.

Jason took a couple of steps and used the leaping power of his boots to follow, arriving in the space Humphrey had just cleared.

"You have to make time for relationships," Jason said, his sword cutting through an elemental. "Time and communication."

The two adventurers they had come to support went from almost overwhelmed to completely unnecessary. Humphrey and Jason each took a side of the pair and moved around them, clearing out elementals like they were trimming a hedge.

Humphrey and Jason had very different fighting styles. Humphrey used strength and the weight of his heavy sword. Solid as a rock, his subtle but crucial footwork the foundation of his balance as he swung a sword heavier than he was. His sweeping strikes looked simple, but their power and precision were exacting.

Jason's style was more like an acrobatic dance. His sword was much smaller, smashing elementals apart not with power but with the considerable magic it had built up over the fight. The blade flickered in his hand, elementals scattering into clouds of sand on

contact. His feet moved just as fast, and not always on the ground. Launching into a spinning leap, his razor-whip boots each took down an elemental before he landed, his movement never stopping.

The vortex bomb was the tipping point of the battle, letting the group get a handle on the elementals' huge numbers. As the last one fell, the group came together, exhausted. They stood around, hands on knees, or lay down, ignoring the heat of the sand. Jason took out a fruit drink, slurping loudly to the envy of the others. Humphrey shook his head as identical paper cups appeared from his own void storage space.

"Gem berries?" Jason asked Humphrey, who nodded as he handed one of the large cups to Gabrielle. She gave him a dazzling smile before happily sipping at the juice drink.

Phoebe looked around the group with a weary grin. Only the elf and the two adventurers who fought together were injured, and nothing more than bruises. Sand elementals weren't very dangerous individually, at least not ones that small. It was their numbers that made them a threat.

"Now you know why we send such big teams when we go out into the dunes," Phoebe told the group.

"That's rough," Jason said unhappily, shifting uncomfortably on the spot. "That's really rough."

"We did warn you that we would be going into the desert," Phoebe told him.

"What?" Jason asked absently, putting away his drink and taking out a bottle of crystal wash.

"Oh, not that," he said, tipping the bottle into his pants. "I meant literally rough. I have sand everywhere."

Chapter 80: It's Not Work if You Love What You Do

After half a day of trudging through the desert, the group finally spotted the spirit coin farm. From the outside, all that could be seen was a high wall. It was still some distance off, but the group appreciated a landmark in the featureless ocean of sand.

"How exactly does a spirit coin farm work?" Jason asked. "Spirit coins don't grow on trees, do they?"

"You really don't know?" Mose asked.

Mose Cavendish was the elf who fired off the vortex bomb of fire and wind against the sand elementals. The fight had instilled a sense of camaraderie in the group, with Jason acquitting himself well enough to dispel the group's earlier dissatisfaction.

"Jason is from another world," Humphrey said. "You should get used to explaining things to him."

"Another world?"

"That's right," Jason said.

"To answer your question," Humphrey said, "spirit coins do not grow on trees."

"I guess that would be a spirit coin orchard," Jason said.

"Another world, as in a whole other world?" Mose asked.

"That's right," Jason said. "So where do spirit coins come from?"

"As in, not this world?" Mose asked.

"It's an alternate universe," Jason said.

"An alternate universe?"

"It's not that big a deal," Jason said.

"Not that big a deal?"

"I think you broke Mose," Humphrey said. "He's just repeating words, now."

"Am I ever going to hear about the spirit coins?" Jason asked.

"They make them out here in the farms," Humphrey said. "They have these special moulds that cause magic to crystallise. It's a delicate process, though. Changes in the ambient magic can ruin whole batches, which is why they have the farms out here. No activity, no life. Very stable ambient magic."

"There must be interesting ramifications of pumping more and more coins into the economy," Jason said.

"The Magic Society manages all of that," Humphrey explained. "It's the main source of their political power, and the reason it's important the Magic Society stays politically neutral."

"Like the Adventure Society," Jason said pointedly.

"Yes," Humphrey said. "It doesn't always work out that way."

Gabrielle wandered closer to join their conversation.

"Did you know that spirit coins are Greenstone's largest export?" she asked. "Most people think it's the green stone, because of the name, but it's actually spirit coins. Especially the lesser ones. The farms out here in the desert produce almost three percent of the lesser coins used worldwide."

"I did," Humphrey said. "Most of these farms are operated by my family or the Mercers. Under Magic Society regulation, of course."

"Of course," she said, lightly slapping her own head. "This coin farm is Geller-something, isn't it?"

"Geller-Seven," Humphrey said.

"How does that work, though?" Mose asked. "I mean, a whole other world?"

"Get it together, Mose," Jason said.

"Get it together? Your very existence fundamentally reshapes my understanding of reality."

"Try going through that while a bunch of people trying to eat you," Jason said.

"Is that some kind of metaphor?" Mose asked.

"No," Jason said. "No, it isn't. Why is so much of the spirit coin farming done in this region? Wouldn't it be easier to have more localised production?"

"It's because of the low magic," Gabrielle said. "Most areas in the world have too high a magical density to produce lesser coins. The smallest denomination they can manage is usually iron rank, or even bronze rank in highly magical areas."

"So why not just make iron coins the basic currency?" Jason asked.

"They're too valuable," Humphrey said. "The values of spirit coins aren't arbitrary. If a farm can produce a thousand lesser coins at a time, the same size farm could only produce 10 iron coins or one bronze coin."

"And higher-ranked coins aren't very useful for everyday life," Gabrielle said. "Almost all the magic devices in a home or business run on lesser coins. Lamps, showers. Higher-rank ones would burn them out."

"Some larger infrastructure works on more powerful coins. The loop line, for example."

“The conditions in which you can locate a spirit coin farm are hard to come across,” Gabrielle added. “Finding a low-magic area with the kind of stability you get out here in the desert is rare. Somewhere as liveable as the delta, so close to the desert here is perfect. Greenstone was founded because it was such a perfect place for low-end spirit coin farms.”

“Even then, there are no guarantees,” Humphrey said. “Volatile weather can affect the ambient magic enough to ruin whole batches. Same if a monster spawns in nearby, or some adventurers runs around using abilities. That’s why we won’t actually be allowed near the spirit coin farm itself. They’ll make us wait outside the walls.”

“How do they stop monster spawns?” Jason asked.

“They don’t,” Humphrey said. “If one appears too close to a farm, you just have to eat the loss.”

“So, how did you get here?” Mose asked. “Do you have some kind of ship that can cross between universes?”

“Still with this, Mose?” Jason asked. “A cannibal summoned me by accident.”

“Are you just making things up now?” Mose asked.

Jason stopped short, his whole body frozen. His face turned pale, visibly shaken.

“You got me, Mose,” Jason said. “I guess I always knew this day would come. This whole thing is an elaborate ruse. I’m actually a failed actor using an array of magical devices to fake being an adventurer from another world.”

He shook his wearily hanging head.

“Nothing for it now but to walk off into the desert, alone.”

“What is happening right now?” Mose asked. “I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Don’t worry about him, Mose,” Humphrey said. “Just remember that if you’re talking to Jason and you get confused, he’s probably up to something. If you’re talking to Jason and you’re not confused, then he’s *definitely* up to something.”

“Well that’s just hurtful,” Jason said.

The walls of the spirit coin farm were five metres tall, made from yellow desert stone. The gates were small, clearly not designed for a lot of traffic. Outside the gate was a fairly large area of tiled ground, scattered with desert sand. The sole feature of the tiled area was a gazebo, providing shade for adventurers to wait in.

It was around an hour after they arrived and Phoebe went alone through the gates that she came back. She had another person with her, and a trio of wagons running behind.

The wagons were the non-magical, heidel-drawn variety, and were longer, wider and definitely heavier than other wagons Jason had seen. They were all constructed from sturdy metal, to the point of looking like old-timey train cars. Each wagon took eight heidels just to move at a crawl. The narrow wheels looked like the exact wrong thing to take onto sand, and the wagons seemed generally useless for desert travel. They stopped in the middle of the tiled expanse and the adventurers left the gazebo for a closer look.

“You’re going to like this,” Humphrey said to Jason.

Each of the wagons had two people on it, who got off and moved around behind them. The back of the wagons folded down into a ramp, down each of which slid a vehicle. They looked a lot like the airboat Jason had ridden on with Clive, and Jason’s face lit up with glee.

“Some kind of sand boat?” he asked.

“We call them sand skimmers,” Humphrey said. “They operate on magic, obviously, so they have to be wagoned out of the farm before charging them up.”

“Don’t want any loose magic in your spirit coin farm?” Jason guessed.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said.

As they drew closer, the people unloading the wagons paused to greet ‘Young Master Humphrey.’ Jason opened his mouth to start of about disproportionate class systems, then stopped himself, shaking his head in self-recrimination.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked him.

“It’s nothing,” Jason said.

“Really?” Humphrey asked. “Since when do you hold back an opinion?”

“Humphrey, opening my mouth wide enough to fit my foot in it already cost us a healer. It’s past time I learned to keep it shut.”

“It wouldn’t be you if you didn’t go into a rant about something,” Humphrey said. “Just let it out.”

Jason looked at Humphrey, warily.

“Look, Jason said. “It’s just that you were born as the employer of these people, and they were born to work for you.”

“Just so you know,” Humphrey said, “these men earn more money than an iron-rank adventurer.”

“Really?”

“They work in a giant money workshop,” Humphrey said. “That makes loyalty important. Also, they have to work in the middle of the desert, which deserves fair compensation.”

“Do they live out here?” Jason asked.

“While they’re working, yes,” Humphrey said. “They do stints out here, then go back to their families with all the money they made. After working the farms for a few years they gain a small part ownership. In our farms, at least. The Mercers don’t do it that way.”

“That’s the rub, isn’t it?” Jason asked. “If your family decided to screw these people over and leverage them into working for cheap while using draconian measures to keep them in line, what would stop you?”

“Basic decency,” Humphrey said.

“And there’s the real problem,” Jason said. “The line between benevolence and oppression falls wherever your family says it does. That’s real power. What happens when Thadwick Mercer is running his family operations?”

“They wouldn’t put him in charge,” Humphrey said.

“His father is grooming him for exactly that. Doesn’t say much for his father.”

“What about Cassandra?” Humphrey asked.

“She’s going full-time adventurer, like her mother,” Jason said. “Like you, for that matter. Once the next monster surge is done, she’s out of here.”

“How do you know so much about the Mercers?” Humphrey asked.

“I may have been spending some time with Cassandra. Socially.”

“I didn’t think she had much time for young men,” Humphrey said.

“Of course she does,” Jason said. “She just doesn’t have time for boys.”

The workers finished sliding the sand skimmers down from the over-sized wagons. The three vehicles were larger than the airboat Jason had been on. They were all flat bottomed, with a large ring at the back for magic propulsion. There were five seats at the front; one front and centre for the driver, with handlebar controls like a jet ski. Behind were four passenger sets, two by two. Between the seats and the propulsion ring bringing up the rear was a flat area for cargo. This space was already filled on all three vehicles with stacked metal crates.

The person who had come out of the farm with Phoebe on foot was the bronze rank adventurer taking charge of the team. It was another member of the Geller family, named Ernest. The resemblance to Humphrey was clear, with the same height and broad shoulders. Jason didn’t assume a close relation though, as all the Gellers looked like that. Phoebe was an Amazonian goddess almost a full head taller than Jason.

“If we have these things,” Jason asked, looking over a sand skimmer, “why did we walk all the way out here?”

“Because picking you up would be an extra trip to the city for our drivers and we don’t care if you have to walk all the way,” Ernest said. “We use the skimmers to take coins to the city and bring back supplies. If you want to use one yourself, go buy it.”

“That’s a fantastic idea,” Jason said. “How much do they cost?”

“You need the right essence ability to use them,” Humphrey said.

“Boo,” Jason jeered.

“Are you a child?” Ernest asked.

“Mate, we’re about to go flying across the desert in giant magic toboggans. If that doesn’t eke out any childlike wonder, then you might want to check your soul’s still in there.”

“He does have a point, Ern,” Phoebe said, patting Ernest on the arm.

“Everyone just get on the skimmers, please,” Ernest said. He shook his head at Phoebe, who flashed Jason a grin.

Ernest and Phoebe took the first skimmer, while Jason sat behind Humphrey and Gabrielle on the second. Mose and the two remaining adventurers took the last one. Three of the workers who had unloaded the skimmers took the front seat in each vehicle. Jason could sense the presence of a single essence from each driver’s aura.

A vulture-like bird came swooping out of the sky, then transformed into a sand-coloured lizard, flailing its limbs in the air as it fell into Humphrey’s arms.

“I’ve had Stash scouting as a bird,” Humphrey said. “I waved him off when we were fighting the elementals. I didn’t want anyone mistaking him for another monster.”

“My familiar wasn’t much good there, either,” Jason said. “Leeches don’t eat sand.”

The driver started feeding spirit coins into a slot next to his seat and the vehicle powered up with an audible hum. Sigils around the propulsion ring lit up and the skimmer floated half a metre into the air.

“Coin-operated,” Jason laughed. “I love it.”

Soon the skimmers were rushing over the desert sand, hot air whipping into the passengers’ faces. Like the airboat, the sand skimmers’ propulsion rings drew in air from the front to blast out the back. In the arid desert, this dried the eyes out quickly. The drivers all wore goggles, as did Humphrey, who gave an extra pair to Gabrielle.

“What happened to bros before hoes?” Jason called out over the blasting air of the propulsion ring.

“I don’t know what that means,” Humphrey called back, “but it feels like I should respect you less for having said it.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said.

As they rushed along, Jason was avoiding looking forward, to avoid the worst of the dry-eye effect. That made him the first one in the vehicle to spot a fast-moving object approaching from the side. It was another skimmer, but larger than their own. There were at least eight people aboard, with a canvas awning cover to shade them from the sun. It was veering in on an intercept course.

Jason pointed them out to Humphrey, who narrowed his eyes gravely at the approaching vehicle.

“They’re after the shipment,” he said loudly.

“Sand pirates!” Jason exclaimed with glee, breaking into a wild laugh. He threw his arms jubilantly into the air.

“I LOVE BEING AN ADVENTURER!”

Chapter 81: Crazy Desperation Move

Jason looked around and saw that multiple sand skimmers were converging on the three occupied by his group. Compared to their own skimmers, the ones pursuing them were made for passengers rather than cargo, with extra seats and awnings to shield them from the sun. Jason grinned, knowing they were about to pay for the comfort the shade offered them. The other skimmers were also faster, not weighed down by shipments of coin.

"I can't feel their auras at this distance," Jason called out. He had to speak loudly over the air rushing through the propulsion ring of the skimmer."

"Me either," Humphrey said.

Gabrielle, in the seat next to Humphrey, stood up. The speed of the skimmer didn't seem to bother her as she stood solid as a rock, head swivelling around.

"Eight enemy skimmers," she said. "Each one has seven or eight people, most of which have at least one essence, with either one or two iron rankers per skimmer. No bronze rankers."

The team's skimmers were running side-by-side, while the enemy skimmers were closing in on the back and side of their formation.

"Which one do you want?" Jason asked Humphrey.

Humphrey pointed out the pair of skimmers behind them.

"Stash and I will take one each," he said.

"I'll take the two coming in on our left then," Jason called out.

"Can you get over to them?" Humphrey asked.

"No worries," Jason said as his cloak appeared around his body. Then the cloak was empty as Jason appeared under the shade awning of one of the skimmers, where he got his first good look at the pirates. They were human, ethnically distinct from the humans that dominated Greenstone. These looked, to Jason's eyes, more like African natives, with darker skin and wild shocks of curly hair.

Jason's sudden appearance in their midst startled the passengers of the enemy skimmer. Before they could react, Jason pushed back the protective sheath on a razor tied to the inside of his forearm. He sliced the back of his hand with it and aimed the shallow cut at the pirates. Leeches sprayed from the wound, scattering over the pirates closely packed together on the skimmer. They immediately went wild with panic.

The driver hadn't seen Jason's appearance, only hearing his fellows react before feeling a couple of leeches latch onto his skull. This prompted the wild swerving that was noticed by the other nearby skimmer, which moved closer to investigate.

As sand pirates screamed panic around him, clutching at the leeches crawling onto them, Jason steadied himself by gripping one of the poles that held up the awning. With his other hand he took out one of his bandolier darts; one with a red cord grip. He saw the second skimmer closing in and tried to gauge its pace as it moved over the sand. Conveniently, it was approaching in a straight line.

Jason threw the dart, which struck the sand right in front of the skimmer. It sailed over the dart, which exploded underneath it. There wasn't enough force to do more than superficial damage, but it pushed up the skimmer's back end, tipping the front end down in turn. The front of the skimmer dug into the sand, but the skimmer's speed didn't halt the momentum. The skimmer flipped over, flying through the air before landing upside down.

Jason own skimmer was slowing down as the driver focused on removing leeches from his head and back. Jason used the leaping power of his boots to jump out as his cloak manifested around him. He drifted gently down to the sand. He glanced over at the skimmer haphazardly moving away from him, confident that Team Colin could handle a few sand pirates.

He turned his attention to the flipped-over skimmer. The poles that held up the awning were never designed to hold the skimmer's weight and collapsed. The propulsion ring had warped and was no longer blowing out air, but it maintained enough integrity to prop the skimmer up at an angle.

Some of the pirates had been tossed free as the skimmer flipped, and he could see others struggling to crawl out from under it. Jason drew his dagger and moved in to finish them before they recovered.

When Jason teleported away from his team's skimmer, Humphrey stood up, Stash the lizard tucked into one arm. He pointed at one of the skimmers behind them.

"Drop," he commanded, then threw the lizard high into the air. Stash turned into a small bird, fluttering in the direction Humphrey had pointed. As the skimmer passed under it, Stash turned from a bird into an enormous sand shab, as large as the skimmer itself.

Under the shade awning, the sand pirates didn't see the tiny bird transform into a monster that crashed down on them. They were just pressed into the bottom of the skimmer by a massive, unknown weight. The skimmer itself was built for speed rather than heavy cargo, and the magic holding it aloft was overcome. It splashed into the sand,

landing flat and heavy so it didn't flip. The propulsion ring whining loudly before cutting out as the skimmer came to an abrupt stop. Stash sat on top of it, his crustacean legs squatting over the sides.

The moment he had released Stash into the air, Humphrey turned to Gabrielle.

“Protect the skimmer?” he asked.

She nodded and he teleported away. Instead of putting himself onto a skimmer like Jason, he appeared directly in front of one. He stared at the driver, who glared back and aimed the skimmer right for him.

Humphrey's huge, wing-shaped sword appeared in his hands. Its length was the equal of Humphrey's considerable height and his feet dug into the sand as he braced to swing its enormous weight. He gathered the power within himself, ready to unleash his strongest special attack. As the skimmer came upon him at speed, he made a huge overhead swing, bringing the blade crashing down.

The sword smashed through the awning, through the driver, through two of the pirates behind the driver, through the base of the skimmer and buried itself in the sand. The skimmer stopped dead, the front half split down the middle and jammed into the ground with the sword. The propulsion ring cut out and the passengers, dead or alive, were tossed forward by momentum, sailing past Humphrey to be dumped in the sand.

The sword was buried to the hilt in sand, so Humphrey let the magically-constructed object disappear. He conjured a new sword into his right hand, this one much smaller. Like his larger sword, it was highly stylised, but instead of a dragon's wing, it looked like that of an angel, the blade assembled from feathers of razor-edged silver and gold. He levelled it at the pirates, groaning where they had fallen in the sand. From their dark skin and wild hair, he could see they were northerners, so he spoke to them in their language.

“I am now accepting surrender.”

The team regrouped after all eight of the attacking skimmers were destroyed. Humphrey and Jason took out two each on their side, while on the other, the bronze rank Ernest had dealt with three. The final pirate skimmer had an encounter with Mose's fire vortex bomb, being reduced to a shattered wreck of warped metal.

Jason stood over the bodies of the men he had killed, looking grimly down at them. Sparring with Humphrey and Rufus had given him an inflated opinion of average skill levels, and finishing the pirates who survived the crash had been contemptuously easy. Too easy, for taking a life. He tapped a boot to one of them.

➤ [Ustei Raider] has no loot.

He made his way to where the other skimmer had drifted to a stop. The pirates were all dead, courtesy of Colin. Where the corpses weren't pale and drained, they were blackened with rot. He cut his hand with the forearm razor, holding it out for the leeches to return. The cut quickly closed afterwards, as if it had never been there at all.

The cargo skimmers turned back to pick up Jason, Humphrey and Ernest, who had all left the skimmers to fight. Humphrey was the last to be picked up, waiting next to the ruins of a skimmer with four prisoners on their knees in front of him.

Jason and Gabrielle hopped off the skimmer as it pulled to a stop. Gabrielle moved to Humphrey's side, while Jason examined the wreckage of the pirate skimmer. He could see it had been split down the middle and driven into the ground with a single, ludicrous blow.

"What did this?" he asked.

"Special attack," Humphrey said. "It's called unstoppable force."

"I can see why," Jason said.

Another skimmer arrived, Ernest and Phoebe stepping off to join the others.

"Did you get anything out of them?" Ernest asked, nodding at the pirates.

"They're all northerners," Humphrey said. "Ustei Tribe nomads, from the hair and clothes. I have no idea what they're doing this far south, and they aren't talking."

"Why would they attack a spirit coin convoy?" Phoebe asked. "If they knew enough to intercept it, then they had to know it would be covered in adventurers. That's a crazy desperation move."

The four prisoners knelt in the hot sand, glaring up at their captors.

"Do they look like beaten men to you?" Ernest asked.

"No," Phoebe said.

"Could be just courage," Ernest said, "but maybe take a look around, Humphrey."

Humphrey nodded, vanishing as he teleported high into the air. Dragons wings appeared on his back, holding him aloft as he looked around. From this high, he could see the city and the green of the delta. In the other direction, some of the spirit coin farms. Closer, he saw something moving over the sand. At first glance, he thought it was an enormous monster with three heads, but he realised it was some kind of highly-stylised vehicle. Too big for any monster lower than silver rank, there was a rigidity to its motion. It moved smoothly over the sand, like a humungous sand skimmer. He let himself drop, using his wings to slow down as he neared the ground.

“Anything?” Ernest asked.

“Sand barge,” Humphrey said. “Very big. We should get ready for another fight.”

Chapter 82:

Choices

“I like the enthusiasm,” Ernest said to Humphrey, “but we shouldn’t immediately rush to battle. What do you think, Phoebe?”

“Our options are run or fight,” Phoebe said. “Their skimmers may have been faster than ours, but there’s no way a sand barge would catch us.”

“What do you think, Humphrey?” Ernest asked.

“That barge was larger than any vehicle I’ve ever seen,” Humphrey said. “I’ve heard of the nomad tribe barges, and this was everything promised. I’d be willing to bet their whole tribe is onboard.”

“How would you approach fighting it then?” Ernest asked.

“The barge will have their strongest people,” Humphrey said. “We’ll definitely be outnumbered, and we don’t have a healer. On the other hand, this first group may well have been trying to drive us into a waiting ambush. If we run, only to fall into the lap of a larger, stronger team, The sand barge will catch us up when we’re at our greatest disadvantage. If we’re going to fight, it has to be on our terms.

“Do you think that’s likely?” Ernest asked.

“I didn’t see anyone else from up in the sky,” Humphrey said, “but a shovel and some canvas sheeting can make you almost invisible out here.”

“So what action do you suggest?” Ernest asked.

“Attack the barge,” Humphrey said. “The nomad tribes get by on shock-raids with huge numbers and a reputation for atrocity. They think tactics are for cowards and equipment is for the weak.”

Humphrey bent down and picked up a claw weapon he had taken from one of the prisoners, holding it up.

“They use weapons like this, or even none at all,” he said. “The nomad tribes are fearsome to an isolated community, but every time I’ve heard of them coming up against a trained and equipped group they get torn apart. Including this time. Something made them desperate enough to come south and attack a guarded convoy, but that didn’t change the result.”

Humphrey looked out in the direction the barge was approaching from.

“We take the initiative,” he said. “Put them on the back foot, when they’re used to being on the front foot. We move fast, hit hard and take them apart before they can regroup.”

Ernest gave Humphrey an appraising look.

"You've changed, Hump," he said. "I thought for sure you'd say run."

"Did he just call you Hump?" Jason asked Humphrey.

Humphrey hung his head with a groan.

"Are we doing what Hump suggested?" Jason asked Ernest. "If we're going to follow Hump's plan the way Hump laid it out, we need to get moving, don't we, Hump?"

"I hate you," Humphrey said.

"That's alright, Hump," Jason said, slapping him on the back.

"If you're quite done," Ernest said.

"Don't worry about me and Hump," Jason said.

"Please stop saying Hump," Humphrey begged.

Ernest looked around the group.

"Staging an attack like this is outside my purview as team-leader. I will not order any of you to participate. If anyone has any thoughts, let's hear them."

Jason smiled to himself. He could see Ernest had already made up his mind and was just creating a teaching moment.

"Do we even have time to stand around discussing this?" Gabrielle asked.

"Humphrey?" Ernest asked.

"With the speed it was moving," Humphrey said, "we have five-to-ten minutes before the barge gets here."

"Do we even know they're with these people?" Mose asked. "It sounds like that barge is far away."

"We weren't making a straight line back to the city," Ernest said. "That's specifically to avoid interception. They needed fast skimmers to catch us, but they couldn't handle the weight of the coins. The most likely scenario is that the faster skimmers moved to intercept us, with the slower barge following to pick up the loot."

"That leaves the question of whether we move towards it or away," Humphrey said.

"Anyone?" Ernest asked. His gaze went over the group, who looked largely uncertain. When no one spoke up, Ernest looked to Jason, who was standing around with a casual lack of concern. He was also older than the other team members, even Ernest himself.

"Mr Asano," Ernest said. "What is your assessment?"

"The instinctive reaction might be to neutralise the threat," Jason said, "but that isn't the job. We're not out here to catch pirates or wipe out bandit clans. That'll be the job they send the next group on. We're here to escort the coins. Attacking an unknown force with

unknown capabilities significantly impacts the likelihood of the actual mission going wrong. I say we just get on the skimmers and go.”

“And if they have an intercepting force?” Ernest asked.

“Then we handle it,” Jason said.

“We did handle this lot quickly enough,” Phoebe said. “We’d most likely handle the next before the barge caught up. I vote we stay on task.”

“Same here,” Mose said. “That barge isn’t an immediate threat to anyone but us.”

“That’s true,” Humphrey acknowledged. “The only things out here are the spirit coin farms. Even if there’s a whole clan of nomads on that barge, there’s no way they’d get past the walls.”

Ernest looked around the group again.

“Alright,” he said. “Humphrey, I love that your thinking more actively, but you also have to know when to temper that drive. Everyone back on the skimmers; we’re heading for the city.”

“What about the prisoners?” Jason asked.

“They’re your prisoners, Humphrey,” Ernest said. “Your decision.”

“Leave them here,” Humphrey said. “Let their friends come for them.”

The potential interdicting force never appeared and the skimmers reached a relay station at the edge of the delta without further incident. The coins were loaded from the skimmers to heavy, armoured carriages. These were the kind driven by magic rather than drawn by animals. Clive Standish was on hand as the Magic Society representative to inspect the coin boxes for tampering and check the carriages.

With him was a team of guards belonging to the Duke of Greenstone. Most essence users in Greenstone were a part of the Adventure Society, but the largest group in Greenstone who weren’t were the Duke of Greenstone’s household guard. They would be escorting the carriages through the delta roads to the city, where they would be stored in city-controlled warehouses for distribution and export.

The spirit coin trade was the largest source of income in Greenstone, with many of the major local powers involved. The Geller and Mercer families produced the coins, the Adventure Society brought them in from the wilderness. The Duke of Greenstone saw to their dispensation, managed by the Magic Society.

“G’day Clive,” Jason said, approaching the Magic Society official.

“Good afternoon,” Clive greeted, not turning away from his work. He was bent down checking the underside of a carriage.

"What are you doing?" Jason asked.

"There was an incident several years ago where the carriages were tampered with," Clive said. "They were modified by some rather sophisticated artifice to suborn the magic that drives them. The drivers lost control and the carriages drove themselves away."

"That's kind of awesome," Jason said.

"I know, right?" Clive said, glancing up with a grin. "The perpetrator was never caught, which is a shame; I'd love to discuss how they did it. That was before my time, though."

"So why bother with all this?" Jason asked. "Why not just get someone with a storage power to stow the coins and move them."

"There have incidents in the past where the coins that went into the storage weren't the ones that came out," Clive said. "It happened enough times in enough coins farms around the world that now everyone uses secure transport crates."

"That was a long time ago," Humphrey said. "They changed the system here when my mother was still a girl."

"Are those skimmer drivers going to be alright to go back?" Jason asked.

"No, they'll stay until the barge is taken care of, then go back with another escort, just in case. In the meantime, they get some unexpected time at home with their families."

"Too bad we didn't have another driver," Jason said. "We could have salvaged that intact skimmer for some extra coin."

"The only one not destroyed was full of bodies that looked like they'd been out there for weeks," Humphrey said. "I wouldn't make someone drive that thing."

"Good point. You want to get some juice after this? I'm all out, but Arash said he'd be at the Magic Society campus."

Humphrey leaned in closer, speaking quietly.

"Actually, I was thinking I could maybe ask Gabrielle," he said nervously.

Clive and Jason shared a glance and Jason put a hand on Humphrey's shoulder.

"Good idea," Jason said. "Go with God, my son."

Humphrey frowned in confusion.

"Which god? Do you mean the god of fertility? The one with all the provocative murals? I'm not looking to take things that far."

"Wait, what god is this?" Jason asked. "Should I be checking out these murals?"

Jason wandered into Rufus, Farrah and Gary's suite, crashing down on a comfortable sofa. Farrah was at the dining table, which had a half-dozen open books on it.

She was scribbling in a notebook, occasionally looking up to read a passage or turn a page. She looked consumed in her work, so he didn't interrupt.

After a few minutes, Jason heard the sounds of books closing and Farrah joined him in the lounge area, dropping into a plush armchair.

"The furniture they have here is amazing," she said, luxuriating in the chair. "I wonder where they get it."

"There's a craftsman out in the delta," Jason said. "He uses all local materials."

"How do you know that?"

"Madam Landry told me," Jason said.

"The landlady?" Farrah asked. "How do you get along with people so well when you seem bound and determined to annoy them?"

"That's rich people," Jason said. "Aristocrats and such. Why would I mess with decent, ordinary people? Madam Landry is a small business owner who works very hard to run a quality establishment. I have nothing but respect for that."

"But you're a rich person," Farrah said.

"And am deserving of challenge, as such," Jason said. "You know Humphrey took me to task the other day. Once I cooled off, I realised that there was some insight in parts of what he said."

"Self-awareness after the fact does seem to be a pattern for you," Farrah said. "I've been on the receiving end of that myself."

"You were right then, too," Jason said wearily. "What you said about killing people."

"Did something happen on your job today?"

"We were attacked," Jason said. "I killed, I don't know. A dozen people?"

"How are you taking that?" she asked.

"Better than I'd like, to be honest," he said. "It was easy. I don't mean the fighting, although, that too, but the killing. It should feel harder, shouldn't it?"

"Adventurers have to be ready to act without hesitation," she said. "Honing that reflex to kill probably isn't good for the soul, but it'll keep you alive."

"It's not like I wasn't warned," Jason said. "Rufus told me going in there would be a price. When he said that, I thought I could be different. The guy who doesn't kill. It was breathtakingly naïve. Now, I don't know what to think. How I feel about it doesn't match what I think I should feel about it. I killed people, but I'm being honest with myself... I had fun, today."

"Everyone has to find their own balance," Farrah said. "For me, it's about deserve. If I kill someone, then they had it coming. I know you didn't like that we killed those cultists we

captured when we cleared out the Vane house, but they definitely had it coming. But that's my answer. You have to find your own."

Jason nodded.

"I think..."

He sighed.

"I want my choices to make things better, rather than worse."

"You want to be responsible for your own actions," Farrah said. "I can respect that."

"I think about Thadwick Mercer more than I should," Jason said.

"Why in the world would you think about him?"

"I've kind of shown him up a couple of times," Jason said. "He's just so witless and malevolent that I don't feel bad about using him. It's very satisfying. But an entitled guy like that, you make him feel even a little powerless and he'll take it out on the people he has power over. How many members of the Mercer household staff were raked over the coals because I couldn't help getting a few jabs in? What did those offsidiers of his have to put up with after Thadwick made them refuse a contract?"

"I don't imagine your intervention was required to get that boy to treat his people badly," Farrah said.

"But expand that out," Jason said. "Choices have consequences, and I'm making life and death choices, now. How many fathers did I kill today? How many brothers, how many sons?"

Farrah pushed herself out of the chair and sat next to Jason on the couch.

"I think that as long as you keep asking yourself those questions," she said, "then you're going to be alright."

They heard laughter coming from outside the room, and the door opened to let in Rufus and Vincent, the Adventure Society official with the enormous moustache. They were both slightly unsteady, and Rufus had a bottle of wine in hand.

"Jason," Rufus said with the happiness of drink. "How did the job go?"

"Well enough."

"That's good," Rufus said. He wandered over to the door to the balcony and went outside, Vincent in tow. Both men were normally more formal, so it was easy to spot the easy intimacy in their body language.

"When did that happen?" Jason asked.

"A while ago," Farrah said. "You've been keeping yourself busy."

"I guess I have," Jason said.

“Coming to this city has been good for him,” Farrah said. “He’s more relaxed; there aren’t as many eyes on him. It’s hard to do better when everyone is watching your mistakes.”

“Good for him,” Jason said. “You know, I might go call on Cassandra. I could use a night out.”

Chapter 83: It Makes No Difference to the Ant

Jason spotted Phoebe Geller as he was walking through the grounds of the Adventure Society campus. She gave him a wave and approached.

“There’s an expedition being set up to go after that sand barge,” she told him after they exchanged greetings. “We’re going to find out what the Ustei tribe are doing this far south and stop them from raiding any more spirit coin shipments. It’s a big group, with a silver rank in charge. Want me to get you on the list?”

“Absolutely,” Jason said.

She flashed him a pretty smile.

“I’ll give Humphrey the details; he’ll find you.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Jason said.

They parted ways and Jason entered the administration building. Albert was on the front desk, directing Jason to a part of the building he’d never been in before. He arrived at what looked like an outer office, with an official seated behind a desk, next to a door that led further on. The woman was reading a book, glancing up as Jason came in. She glanced down at a sheet of paper on her desk.

“Mr Asano?” she asked, with a friendly smile.

“That’s me,” he said.

“It shouldn’t be long,” she said. “Please take a seat.”

“Thanks.”

She gestured to a pair of chairs up against the wall, one of which was occupied by an attractive young elf woman. Her appearance was quite different from Anisa, who looked like Nazis had grown her in a lab. This elf had the same willowy figure, but tawny skin and vibrant green eyes. Chestnut hair spilled down over her shoulders. Her clothes were in the loose-fit, local style. Jason had been around enough now to spot the quality make and materials, but they were simple and didn’t flaunt their undoubtedly expensive price.

She was looking him over in turn and gave him a smile as he sat down next to her. He had met enough elves by this point to recognise her age at eighteen or nineteen, which meshed with her iron rank aura.

“Jason Asano,” he said as he sat down, offering his hand to the elf, who shook it.

“I know,” she said. “I’ve seen the recording of you taking Rick Geller’s team apart.”

Jason groaned.

"I'm not as good as that recording makes out," Jason said. "That situation was weighted very heavily in my favour. Also, I don't have evil powers."

She laughed.

"You went one against five with a Geller family team," she said. "Some would argue that no situation could be weighted heavily enough."

"The circumstances always matter," Jason said. "We have a saying where I come from: better lucky than good. Luck has saved my life more than once."

"Sounds like an exciting life," she said. "I'm Beth Cavendish, by the way."

"The excitement is a new development," Jason said. "Are you related to Mose Cavendish?"

"My cousin," she said, nodding at the door next to the desk. "I'm waiting for him now. He says good things about you, by the way."

"That's very nice of him," Jason said. "I was really impressed by that crazy vortex power of his."

"He mentioned you were a bit odd. Something about being from another world, and also, cannibals."

"That would be the exciting new development I mentioned."

"Is that how you became involved with Rufus Remore?" she asked.

"It was," Jason said. "You know Rufus?"

"He conducted my field assessment," she said.

"He didn't fail you, did he?"

"No," she said, with a confident smile. "He passed my whole team."

"Your whole team? He only gave six people a pass, right?"

"Four of which were my team," she said. "The others were those two who follow Thadwick Mercer around. Such a waste of talent."

"Rufus said the same thing," Jason said. "Is Mose on your team?"

"No," Beth said. "Mose is a little inconsistent to pass a Rufus Remore assessment. He's great when everything is going right, but needs a little help when things get sticky."

The door next to the woman at the desk opened to admit Mose Cavendish into the room, looking rather flustered. Jason and Beth both stood up.

"Jason?" Mose said.

"G'day, Mose."

"You can go in now, Mr Asano," the woman behind the desk said.

"No worries," Jason told her, nodding to Beth.

"Lovely to meet you, Beth Cavendish," he said. "Always a pleasure, Mose."

They made quick farewells and Jason went through the door. On the other side was a chamber that looked similar to a courtroom, but one that was almost empty. There was a long, high judge's bench, but all the seating for lawyers, prosecutors, plaintiffs and gallery were replaced with a solitary chair in the centre of the room.

Three people were already sitting behind the bench. In the middle was the director of the Adventure Society, the elf, Elspeth Arella. Jason had only spoken with her the once, although he had spotted her from time to time at social events. To her left was Vincent, who Jason had last seen doing the walk of shame from the suite across the hall. To her right was another elf, an elderly woman. All three of them were looking at him with blank expressions.

Jason looked around, then plopped down in the chair.

"We didn't say you could sit," the elderly elf said.

Jason gave her a casual nod of acknowledgement.

"You're forgiven," he said, her lips thinning as she heard his response.

"I have found that people in your position tend to show us respect," the woman said.

"And I find people in your position," Jason countered, "tend to confuse respect with obedience. Would you rather I come in here acting the way I think you want me to act?"

He gestured to himself.

"What you see is what you get. Do you think dishonesty is more respectful than the truth?"

Vincent was rolling his eyes, while Elspeth Arella's eyes twinkled with amusement.

The woman asking the questions remained stony-faced.

"How would you rate your performance in the group contract you undertook two days ago?" the woman asked, the others still silent.

"Critically poor," Jason said.

"Explain, she asked.

"My inability to keep my big mouth shut cost the team thirty percent of its personnel, including the healer. As such, we engaged in multiple combat situations with crucial absences."

"You acknowledge responsibility for the altercation with Thadwick Mercer that led him and his team to refuse the contract at the last minute?" she asked.

"Yes," Jason said.

"Full responsibility?"

"Yes."

"You don't lay any of this on Thadwick Mercer?"

"Thadwick is what he is, and doesn't know any better. I do, which made it my responsibility to be the bigger person for the sake of team cohesion. Instead, I chose to be small and petty."

The woman looked at the other two. The way they conversed with glances alone showed their close, working relationship. The woman turned back to Jason.

"How would you rate your performance on this mission otherwise?" she asked.

"Adequate," he said.

"Explain," she said.

"We encountered multiple combats and the team handled them effectively. There weren't any shirkers; everyone did their part, myself included."

"You argued against eliminating the threat posed by the Ustei tribe."

"The job was to deliver coins, not get in a fight against unknown odds."

"Overcoming superior numbers is a specialty of yours, is it not?" she asked. "You are aware of a widely disseminated recording of you in the Geller family's mirage arena."

"If you thought that edited recording was a valid basis on which to assess me," he said, "then you wouldn't be qualified to assess me at all."

Again the three of them shared a conversation of glances.

"You were recently assigned a contract to clear out an infestation of rats in Old City," she said.

"Stone-chewer rats, yes," Jason said.

"Your report stated that you killed all the rats," she said.

"That isn't accurate," Jason said.

"Your report wasn't accurate?"

"No, your characterisation of my report wasn't accurate," he said. "My report stated that all the rats were killed, not that they were all killed by me. A number were killed by an additional monster, a rat gorgon."

"But you are certain all the rats were killed?"

"Yes," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"I have an ability that helps me keep track of certain aspects of my activities."

"What is the nature of this ability?"

"My own business."

They locked eyes as he felt her bronze rank aura press down on him. He held her gaze as his own aura was completely suppressed.

“What if I told you that there were still stone-chewer rats being found in Old City?” she asked.

“Two scenarios come to mind as being most likely,” Jason said. “One would be a second rat colony having spawned. The other would be that you’re trying to shake my confidence that the original colony was eliminated fully. Which you have not.”

Jason spotted Vincent nodding to himself.

“You did not request a bonus payment after encountering the rat gorgon,” the woman said.

“That’s correct,” Jason said.

“You haven’t requested a bonus for any of the contracts and adventure board notices you have completed. Several of which would certainly have been approved.”

“I’m not concerned with a few spirit coins here or there,” Jason said. “If I do enough to warrant an awakening stone, I imagine someone will tell me.”

“You’ve been undertaking contracts at a rapid pace,” the woman said. “If not for money, then why?”

“I’ve been told I need to get stronger for what is to come.”

“By Rufus Remore?” she asked.

“He has been telling me to get stronger,” Jason said, “but I was actually thinking of someone I met at the temple of knowledge.”

A powerful aura washed over the room, visibly alarming the panel.

“Name dropper,” a female voice whispered, somehow both quiet enough to feel intimate and loud enough to fill the chamber.

“Do you mind?” Jason asked the empty air. “I’m kind of in the middle of a thing, here.”

With a chuckle, the aura vanished. The three panellists stared wide-eyed at Jason.

“Sorry,” he apologised, with a helpless shrug. “She has privacy issues.”

Vincent and the elderly elf turned to the director sitting between them.

“What is your relationship with the goddess of knowledge?” the director asked him, speaking for the first time since he came in.

“The same as my relationship with you, Director. She’s more powerful than I am, we had a nice chat one time and she’s apparently keeping an eye on me.”

“You seem unconcerned about having the attention of a goddess,” the director said.

“You can squash an ant with a boot or by dropping a building on it,” Jason said. “It makes no difference to the ant. Having her attention is no different to having yours.”

“You seem to be taking it calmly,” she said.

“That’s a skill I’ve developed,” he said.

"Taking things calmly?" she asked.

"No, seeming to. It's possible I just peed a little."

She looked at him incredulously as Vincent hung his head. The director glanced at the other two, the elderly elf gave a firm nod, while Vincent's was more reluctant.

"Approach the bench, please, Mr Asano," the director said.

Jason stood up and walked over. The bench came up his neck height, the panel on a raised platform behind it.

"Badge please," the director said. He took his Adventure Society badge in its leather wallet out from his inventory, reaching up to place in on the bench. The director opened the wallet and touched a black stone to it. He couldn't see what was happening, but she shortly handed it back.

"Here you are," she said, handing back the wallet. He looked down at the badge, where the single star under the adventure society emblem had been joined by a second.

"A second star means you will be held to a higher standard," the elderly elf said.

"Don't repeat the kind of mistake you made with Thadwick Mercer."

"Call it a lesson learned," he said.

"From now on you can take one or two-star missions from the jobs hall," Vincent told him. "Try not to make an idiot of yourself."

"I can do my best with the two-star jobs," Jason said, "but making an idiot of myself is kind of my thing."

Chapter 84: Injury & Death

For the first time, Jason walked past the one-star contracts in the jobs hall to the two-star notices further down. It was a much smaller section, and looking further he saw the solitary three-star noticeboard had no jobs at all.

Looking over the notices, most were regular monster hunts with some kind of complication. The most common was a requirement to avoid damaging whatever valuable thing the monster had chosen to nest in.

Jason frowned as he read a certain contract. He took it from the noticeboard and over to the desk manned by an Adventure Society functionary he didn't recognise. The man looked over the contract, then up at Jason.

"You aren't allowed to take this contract alone," the man said. "You need a team; minimum three."

"I have some people in mind," Jason said.

In an Old City alleyway, two women struggled to move. One was unharmed but weighed down by the other, who was heavily injured. Her all-black outfit had long, bloody tears across the arms, legs and torso. The black mask that had originally obscured almost her entire head was ripped, with silver hair spilling out.

The uninjured woman was not strong but she was determined. With her friend draped over her, she kept moving forward. It was daytime, and the alley was close to the Broadstreet thoroughfare. They could encounter people at any moment.

"We have to stop this," Belinda said. "It's a miracle we haven't been caught already."

"We keep going," Sophie said, her voice strained with the pain. "If we can play this out long enough, Ventress will be forced to show her hand. Once she does, that gives us options."

"Do you not realise the condition you're in right now? You can barely move!"

"But I can move," Sophie said. "The Duke's household guard laid a trap, but now we know to be ready. His bronze-rankers can fight, but they can't chase worth a damn."

"The Adventure Society has been pressuring the Duke to stay out of it," Belinda said. "I haven't been able to find out why, but it's been good for us. That's over, now. The complaints from his high-society friends must have outgrown his unwillingness to push back against the Adventure Society."

"We plan around it," Sophie said.

“Do you even understand how lucky you were to get out of there?”

“This time it was luck,” Sophie said. “Next time will be preparation.”

“Next time you’ll probably get killed.”

“The Duke getting involved buys us time,” Sophie said. “Ventress can’t accuse us of slacking if we take extra time to adapt. There’s only so blatant she can be about setting us up. Whatever she’s up to, she won’t burn her reputation to get it.”

“You do realise she’s not the only one trying to set us up now,” Belinda said. “The pressure is mounting and old friends aren’t as reliable as they used to be.”

They reached a solid metal gate in a high wall. Belinda leaned Sophie against the wall and cautiously pushed on the unlocked gate to peer inside. There were a handful of labourers in the yard, moving materials through a newly made hole in the wall to the yard next door.

“Those adventurers aren’t here,” she told Sophie, “but there’s some kind of construction happening. Just stay there, and I’ll go get him.”

She ducked inside the yard, the workers not even looking up as she walked past them and into the back of the clinic. She saw Jory escorting a patient out of his exam room.

“...just apply the salve every morning,” he was explaining, “and you shouldn’t have any trouble through the day.”

“Jory,” she called out him.

“Belinda!”

Jory’s eyes lit up as he turned around, then narrowed on the blood staining her clothes. He quickly ushered the patient through a doorway.

“Janice,” he said through the door, “no new patients for the moment. No one is to come back here until I say otherwise, understood?”

He closed the door and rushed over to her.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“Not my blood,” she said. “Sophie is out back.”

“Show me.”

In an old city restaurant, Jason was served a dish of rice dumplings in the shape of a three-sided pyramid.

“They have this shape because of how they’re wrapped in the bamboo leaves to cook,” he said, picking up his chopsticks.

"I could never get the hang of chopsticks," Humphrey said as the waiter placed bowls of dumpling soup in front of Humphrey and Clive. Cheap and easily-replaced chopsticks were the primary utensil in the delta and most of Old City, but Humphrey grew up with silverware. Jason had been amused to discover the most common utensil in the high-society was the spork.

They chatted lightly over their lunch. Their empty dishes were taken away and replaced with a tray of fried, sticky rice cake.

"So what did you really want to talk about?" Humphrey asked. "I'm guessing you didn't just call us out for lunch, excellent as it was."

"I have a contract," Jason said. "Two-star. They won't let me take it without a minimum team of three."

"Minimum team?" Clive asked. "That means the danger is either large or unknown." Humphrey's face darkened.

"Unknown usually means it's killed an adventurer already," he said.

"That's right," Jason said. "A solo adventurer took a one-star contract for something called a marsh wyrm. The tracking on his badge recorded his death mid-afternoon, the day before yesterday."

All three men looked soberly down. They were all adventurers, and even the less-active Clive knew that death was always a possibility.

"Alright, then," Clive said. "So the job is to find the body and clear the monster?"

"Yeah, that's the job," Jason said. "Kill the monster and find the body. If nothing's left, then we at least bring back the badge."

"Not much to return to the family," Humphrey said, "but better than nothing."

"I looked up the marsh wyrm," Jason said, "and whatever's out there, I don't think it's that."

"No surprise, there," Humphrey said. "Monsters don't always turn out to be what they're reported as."

"What does your ability say?" Clive asked Jason.

"It says the monster that killed him," Jason said. "Which doesn't tell us what it is, but means there should only be the one."

Quest: [Contract: Fallen Comrade]

An adventurer has fallen in the course of their duties. Complete their task and bring home their remains.

- Objective: Eliminate the monster that killed your fellow adventurer 0/1.
 - Objective: Retrieve the remains of your fellow adventurer 0/1.
-

“It could be a lot of things,” Humphrey said. “There are quite a few giant worm and serpent-type monsters that appear in the delta.”

“There are a few that could be mistaken for a marsh wurm,” Clive said. “At least by someone who didn’t really know monsters. Most people only know monsters that commonly spawn in their area, and usually by description. Most run before they ever get a good look.”

“If it took down an adventurer already, we can’t dismiss the danger,” Humphrey said. “Any monster strong enough to take down someone who went looking for a marsh wurm alone will be at the top of the iron-rank power scale, or maybe even bronze. It won’t be some lesser elemental that anyone could punch apart with sufficient determination.”

Not all iron-rank monsters were created equal. Their rank was a function of their magical density, not actual power. If bronze rank damage reduction and resistances were ignored, the most powerful iron-rank monsters were stronger than the weaker bronze examples. The difference was usually made up in numbers, with weaker monsters appearing in greater numbers.

“So,” Jason said. “Are you in?”

“Of course,” Humphrey said. Clive nodded.

“It could be any of us, someday,” Clive said. “If it’s me, I hope I’m not left at the bottom of a bog somewhere. Do you know anything about the adventurer?”

Jason nodded.

“I asked Vincent about him.”

“I’d like to hear it,” Humphrey said.

Sophie stood under the shower in Jory’s clinic. Designed to wash less-abled patients, the shower had no walls or curtains and was open to the room. Arms out in front of her, hands against the wall, she leaned forward, letting the water spray down onto the back of her head and neck. After several of Jory’s strongest potions, spaced out to prevent toxicity, all that remained of her injuries was the blood the shower was sluicing off her body.

When she emerged, wearing spare clothes provided by Jory, the alchemist shoved a large bottle full of red liquid into her hands.

“Drink it,” he said, bluntly. “Now.”

“What is it?”

“It will stop your blood from responding to tracking abilities,” he said. “I made it up while you were getting clean.”

She looked at Belinda standing behind him.

“What did you tell him?” Sophie asked her.

“Don’t tell me anything,” Jory said. “Then I don’t have to lie if it comes to that.”

Sophie looked down at the bottle in her hands.

“If I wanted to deal with you,” Jory said, “all I had to do was not help you. Drink it, before whoever did that to you arrives at my door.”

“Drink it, Soph,” Belinda said. “We need to get moving.”

She frowned at the bottle but drained it dry.

“Let’s go, Lindy.”

Sophie made for the back door, Belinda in tow. Belinda stopped at the door, looking back at Jory, still standing in the hall. Their eyes met and his hard expression softened at the apology in hers.

“Wait,” he said, ducking through a door and coming back with a leather satchel, which he handed to Belinda.

“Just some random medical supplies,” he said. “It’s all labelled.”

She gave him a sad smile as she took the bag.

“Thank you,” she told him, then walked out the door.

On the top floor of the Adventure Society’s administration building, the director’s office occupied a large space in the corner of the building, the windows giving a panoramic view of the campus grounds. The director, Elspeth Arella, was looking out those windows as one of her officials made a report. Her name was Genevieve, and Jason would recognise her as the elderly elf who questioned him during his promotion hearing.

“Lord Vordis is refusing to say what the package contained, beyond that it was very valuable.”

“And the guards who set the ambush,” Arella said. “They were from the Duke’s household guard?”

“Yes,” Genevieve said. “Six bronze rankers and triple that in iron ranks.”

“And she still got away,” Arella chuckled. “The Duke won’t like how that makes his forces look. This thief is a resourceful girl, lucky for us. Set up a meeting with the Duke. I want to be very clear that the moment he fobbed this issue onto us it became an Adventure Society concern. He can’t take it back now.”

“He’s already sent a pre-emptive response,” Genevieve said.

“I’ll bet he has,” Arella said.

“He claims that since you have failed to complete the contract after the better part of two months, and refuse to raise the contract to the bronze-rank level, then he is duty-bound as the city ruler to intervene.”

“Send our response when you set up the meeting,” Arella said. “Make it clear that he is the one that placed this issue in the hands of the Adventure Society, that the Adventure Society will handle it when and how we see fit. Should he further intervene, either openly or covertly, then the city of Greenstone will be in violation of their arrangement with the Adventure Society. All adventuring activity will then cease until a new arrangement has been negotiated, confirmed and enacted.”

“Are you certain you want to take it that far?” Genevieve asked.

“He’s not stupid enough to renegotiate terms before the original agreement runs out,” Arella said. “Not with me.”

“But do you want to draw that arrow from the quiver?” Genevieve asked. “You can only make that threat once or he’ll have grounds to go over you to the central branches.”

“I need Lucian Lamprey gone,” Arella said. “So long as he’s in charge of the Magic Society here, trying to clean up our own house is bailing water from a sinking boat. Until the hole is plugged, the best we can do is stop things from getting worse.”

“And you think this will get rid of him?”

“If things drag out for long enough. He’s a man unused to restraining his appetites. Sooner or later, he will make a mistake we can use to oust him. When his patience comes to its limit, he will act.”

“So long as the thief remains at large long enough for him to do so,” Genevieve said.

“Yes. Which is why catching her must remain the responsibility of iron-rankers, with no interference from the Duke’s people.”

“Madam Director, do you know who this thief is?”

“Of course not,” Arella said. “That would be unprofessional.”

“We’re getting close,” Humphrey called out over the sound of the airboat. He pointed at a rise of earth in the marsh and Clive steered the airboat up onto it. Humphrey was guiding them with a crystal orb that lit up in the direction of the badge they were tracking.

He stepped off the airboat onto the soggy bank, Jason and Clive following after. They followed the tracking orb onto higher, drier ground, Jason hacking their way through tight scrub with a machete. The blade was enchanted for the task, a common tool that every adventurer learned to take into the delta. They progressed until Humphrey called them to a stop.

“Oh,” he said.

All three looked at the orb in Humphrey’s hand. The indicator light was pointing straight down into the wet, heavy earth.

Chapter 85: Because I'm an Adventurer

"I couldn't find anything even resembling an entrance," Jason said as the trio regrouped. The others shook their heads, having fared no better.

"Probably some kind of extended lair," Clive said. "A lot of creatures in this environment, monster and animal both, are just as happy in the water as out. Some like to dig burrows and stash prey for later consumption. The entrance could be in any direction, and is probably underwater."

"Any suggestions?" Humphrey asked.

"We could try a simple ritual used for digging wells," Clive said. "I'm sure I have one in a book somewhere in my storage space."

"I don't know that ritual," Jason said. "Wasn't in my ritual magic skill book."

"People make skill books with knowledge practical for adventurers," Clive said, "not for farmers. It's one of many reasons that skill books aren't proper magic instruction. They only give the flimsiest theoretical grounding."

Jason groaned.

"You sound like Farrah," he said.

"Really?" Clive asked, his head perking up. "Did she say something about me?"

Jason wearily shook his head.

"Why didn't you suggest a magic tunnel in the first place?" he asked.

"My concern would be collapsing whatever underground space we break into," Clive said. "This ground is incredibly wet. Whatever lair or burrow is down there may be full of water already, or our tunnel could collapse the whole thing."

"I don't see a better option," Humphrey said.

"Time to pull out the old bag of salt, then," Jason said. "You know, I'm still on the bag I took from these cannibals I killed. I should practise rituals more."

"Don't bother with the salt," Clive said. "I'll sort it out."

Clive closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath. Nothing in the surroundings changed, but both Jason and Humphrey felt a stillness come over them.

-
- [Human] has used [Mana Equilibrium].
 - Ambient magic has entered a harmonious state.
 - The next spell cast in this area will cost reduced mana, and the harmonious state will be disrupted.
-

“That’s interesting,” Humphrey said, looking around. Jason knew that Humphrey’s perception power, dragon sight, allowed him to see magic.

“You’re smoothing-out the ambient magic to make rituals easier,” Humphrey said. “You seem very spell-oriented for a human.”

“I venerate the Celestial Book,” Clive said. “I received a blessing that triggered a racial gift evolution. It changed the human special attack affinity to a spell affinity, like the elves.”

“Nice,” Humphrey said.

“I didn’t understand any of that,” Jason said.

“Then you know what it’s like to talk to you,” Clive said and Humphrey nodding his agreement.

“What’s the Celestial Book?” Jason asked. “Is that the god of books, or something?”

“It’s one of the great astral beings,” Clive said. “They’re similar to gods, but instead of belonging to a specific world, they exist between worlds, in the deep astral. You could almost describe them as gods to the gods, although you wouldn’t catch any gods saying that.”

“So, you took a look at the gods,” Jason said, “and basically asked to see their manager.”

“That’s not even close to how it works,” Clive said.

“What about that racial gift evolution you mentioned?” Jason asked. “A lot of religious folk aren’t big on evolution, where I come from.”

Clive looked at Jason, then turned to Humphrey.

“You explain while I look up this ritual,” Clive said, pulling a book from his storage space. Unlike Humphrey or Jason, where objects were pulled from thin air, Clive’s storage space involved a floating ring of runes, in the middle of which a small portal formed.

“You must be constantly learning new things, coming from a whole different world,” Humphrey said to Jason.

“You have no idea,” Jason said. “I haven’t even learned all the fruit, yet, let alone the magic stuff.”

“Well,” Humphrey said, “every race has six racial gifts. For human like Clive and myself, that is an affinity for special attacks and our essences advance more rapidly than others. Then there are the latent powers, that adapt to our essences.”

“Yeah, I heard about the XP boost,” Jason said. “Seems OP.”

“What?” Humphrey asked, confusion creasing his brow.

“Never mind,” Jason said. “Just keep going.”

“Racial power evolution is where a racial gift changes,” Humphrey said. “Any racial gift can change. The latent human abilities are essentially blank slates that are guaranteed to do so.”

“So any of my outworlder abilities could evolve?” Jason asked.

“They could,” Humphrey said. “Usually, there's some kind of trigger, often a traumatic event. Big monster fights where you barely make it out alive would be the one you see the most. Sometimes it just happens over time, though. You do something enough that it becomes a part of you and your powers actually change so it does.”

“Habits really have a way of taking hold, then,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “Have you met anyone from the smoulder race?”

“No, but I've seen them around,” Jason said.

“Well, they have natural affinities for earth and fire,” Humphrey said. “There's a guy on an adventuring team with my parents; he's a smoulder. He has the air essence and, eventually, his earth affinity evolved to an air affinity.”

“So what about Clive and that blessing?” Jason asked.

“Gods can give their followers a blessing, which triggers a racial gift evolution,” Humphrey said. “I guess whatever that thing Clive worships can do it, too. That one was actually new to me.”

“Great astral beings,” Jason mused, remembering something he heard months earlier. “Hey, Clive.”

“What?” Clive asked, looking up from a book.

“That great astral thing you worship...”

“I didn't say worship,” Clive said. “I said venerate. There's a difference.”

“That's fine,” Jason said. “I was just wondering, though. Would you describe it as an ineffable ancient from beyond reality?”

Clive thought it over for a moment.

“That's not how I'd describe it,” he said, “but can see how someone would, if they didn't know what they were talking about. Why?”

“I heard Cressida Vane talking about it. Apparently, her son was into something like that.”

“That makes sense,” Clive said. “Landemere was an astral magic specialist, like me. We often end up paying more attention to the great astral beings than the local gods. We set our sights higher, you might say.”

“And people call me a heretic,” Jason said.

“Here it is,” Clive said, eyes back on his book. “I haven't used this book in years.”

He started waving his hand like an orchestra conductor, and a glowing diagram started drawing itself just above the ground.

“The ability I used earlier was the racial power I awakened for the magic essence,” Clive explained. “it balances out the ambient magic so you don’t need to adjust your ritual circle.”

The diagram of golden light continued to be drawn out.

“I’m drawing the circle using a rune essence ability,” Clive explained. “It lets me draw out magic circles and use any required materials directly from my storage space.”

“I can see how that would be handy,” Jason said.

“You might want to stand back,” Clive said. “I first picked this up to use on the family farm and it makes something of a mess.”

Jason and Humphrey did as instructed. Soon after, mud started shooting up into the air with a loud, wet flapping sound, scattering itself over the area. Jason conjured his cloak and wrapped it around himself, any mud that reached it sliding easily off. Clive, being much closer, was sprayed with mud, but it struck some kind of force-field and fell away. Humphrey had no such protection and ended up speckled with dark mud.

All three went up to stand around the new hole, looking down. It was a cylinder, neatly carved out of the wet earth. It was quite deep, five or six metres, Jason guessed, and a couple of metres wide. At the bottom, instead of breaching some underground burrow, the hole ended with a floor of large, neatly-fitted bricks of green stone.

“Is that a weird thing to find at the bottom of a hole we randomly dug?” Jason asked. “Everything around here seems kind of weird to me, so I can’t judge all that well. This seems like it might be extra weird, though.”

“This is definitely extra weird,” Humphrey said. “Any ideas, Clive?”

“None,” Clive said. “Anything that deep around here should be filled with water. I get the feeling it isn’t, though.”

“We have to check it out, right?” Humphrey asked.

“You mean the secret underground building we found?” Jason asked. “Of course we have to check it out.”

“Should we tell someone?” Humphrey asked. “The Magic Society, maybe?”

“If we tell the Magic Society,” Clive said, “then we won’t be the ones to explore it. Lucian Lamprey will give it to someone that buys him political points.”

“There is a safety issue, though,” Humphrey said. “Someone already died down there.”

“How about this,” Jason said. “We came out here to find the person who died. Let’s do that, and then tell people where we found him.”

“That sounds fair,” Clive said.

“Alright,” Humphrey said, clearly eager to be convinced. “How do we get in?”

“I have some acid that melts through most varieties of local stone,” Jason said and the two turned to look at him.

“What?” Jason asked.

“Why would you have that?” Humphrey asked.

“Because I’m an adventurer,” Jason said. “I have all the basic adventuring gear. Acid, rope, pitons, a tarp, some empty sacks, a ten-foot pole...”

“Why would you have all that?” Clive asked.

“...flammable oil, a couple of empty scroll cases, a rope ladder, a regular ladder, a tent, a magic lantern...”

“Can’t you see in the dark?” Humphrey asked.

“... a non-magic lantern, which was oddly hard to find, caltrops, empty vials, block and tackle, a big ball of string...”

“Can you please just take out the acid?” Clive asked.

“I could,” Jason said. “I was thinking we might need to set up a way out, though. I don’t suppose anyone happened to bring a nice, long rope ladder? Oh, wait, I did. Because I prepared. Like an adventurer.”

“I did bring rope,” Humphrey said.

While Humphrey anchored Jason’s rope ladder to the ground using some long metal stakes Jason also had, Jason started tipping acid down the hole.

“Shouldn’t you go down to the bottom for that?” Humphrey asked, looking over.

“No he shouldn’t,” Clive said, shortly before gas started fuming out of the hole, Jason and Clive both stepping back. After the fumes cleared, Jason did the same again, then a third time. Looking down, he could see a hole bored right through the bricks.

Leaving Humphrey’s familiar to guard the top of the hole, the three adventurers climbed down through the hole on the rope ladder, ending up in a brick tunnel, tall and wide. It was completely empty, with no indication of moisture penetration. Motes of starlight emerged from Jason’s cloak, floating around them and lighting up the tunnel.

“That’s pretty,” Humphrey said.

“You have that and you brought two lanterns?” Clive asked.

“Preparedness,” Jason said. “What about our guy?”

Humphrey took out the tracking stone they were following to the dead adventurer, and since he would be standing at the front, tossed it to Clive.

“That’s unexpected,” Clive said.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“The tracking stone,” Clive said. “It’s still pointing straight down.”

Chapter 86: Some Kind of Secret

“This construction completely predates the founding of Greenstone,” Clive said, examining the side of the passage they were in.

“Maybe if we look around,” Jason said, “we might even find something more interesting than a blank, brick wall.”

“The construction itself is fascinating enough,” Clive said. “Are you familiar with the Sky River Aqueduct? The building techniques are identical. There’s no mortar connecting these bricks, yet they form a watertight seal. Remember that we’re under a swamp, right now.”

“That explains the stale air,” Jason said, making a distasteful expression.

“It must have been tricky to build,” Humphrey said.

“Beyond tricky,” Clive said. “Even with powerful and sophisticated magic, it would have been an outrageous undertaking.”

“Maybe it wasn’t built under a swamp,” Jason said. “If the same people who built this also built the big aqueduct, then they might have made this place when there was no delta. Before the aqueduct, the river would have spilled into Sky River Gorge, right?”

“That’s a good point,” Clive said.

“We should get moving,” Humphrey said. “We need to find a way down if we’re going to figure out what happened to this adventurer.”

Clive nodded his agreement, taking out a recording stone and throwing it up to float over his head. It joined the other crystal floating there, which continually restored mana. Humphrey had the same essence ability, both men acquiring it through the magic essence.

“I’m going to record everything we see,” Clive said.

They set off down the corridor, the floating motes of light from Jason’s cloak illuminating the way forward. What they found was a large complex buried underground, with very little to indicate its purpose. Every room and every corridor was empty, small chambers and large halls with nothing but bare, brick surfaces.

“Everything has to have been taken away,” Clive said. “Even if this place has been here for centuries, there would be at least remnants of furnishings.”

“This complex is at least the size of a large village,” Humphrey marvelled. “We haven’t even found a way down, yet.”

“It had to be the site of some massive undertaking,” Clive said. “No one builds all this for temporary occupation.”

Their exploration brought them to a stairwell, but the brick stairs were warped and moulded together. It looked like the steps had been melted and reset from a staircase to a ramp, covered in spiked protrusions.

“Some kind of stone-shaping power,” Humphrey said, crouching to look closer. “These stairs were altered to impede anyone looking to go down them. I think this place was attacked.”

“Maybe whoever they were defending against plundered everything away,” Jason said. “It might explain why nothing’s left.”

“Do we try and use these stairs?” Clive asked. “They don’t look pleasant to navigate, and given how big this place is, there should be another way down.”

“The others might be like this,” Humphrey said.

“We have time to check,” Jason said. “That looks entirely too pointy for my liking.”

They eventually found another set of stairs, this time in their original condition. They descended deeper underground, the stairwell switching back with multiple landings before they reached the next level down. Stepping out into another wide corridor, the difference to the floor above was obvious. The walls, floor, even ceiling were marred with signs of battle. Scorch marks, long gouges torn into the brickwork. A wild confrontation of essence users had clearly taken place. There was debris scattered out, mostly stone torn from the wall. As they moved cautiously forward, they looked around at the damage.

“This is incredible,” Clive said. “Almost nothing is known about the history of the region prior to the original Greenstone Colony. There may actually be answers somewhere in here.”

Checking side rooms off the corridor, they had been stripped clean like the floor above. Some were empty and untouched, others bearing the marks of battle. In one of them they found a pair of skeletons, although with no sign of clothing or equipment.

“These are too old to be our adventurer, right?” Humphrey said.

Clive pulled out the tracking stone, which still pointed downward.

“Based on the angle,” Clive said, “I would guess one more floor down. If it’s as far below this one as we’re below the one above.”

Humphrey crouched down to examine the skeletons.

“The short, broad skeleton is a runic,” he said. “You can still see faint traces of the natural runes on their bones. The big one is a draconian, from the skull shape.”

“Draconian?” Jason asked.

“They’re a race that claims to be descended from dragons,” Clive said, “although the claim is not fully substantiated.”

“They have scales and breathe fire,” Humphrey said. “I’d call that fairly substantiated.”
He panned his eyes over the ancient skeletons.

“You’d think there would be rotted clothes or old boots or something,” he said, around. “There’s no rusty old weapons, no tools or jewellery. These bodies were stripped.”

“This whole place was stripped,” Jason said. “It’s like whoever invaded didn’t want to leave a trace. Not of who they were, or even of who they were attacking.”

“Then why leave the bodies?” Humphrey asked. “Why not just take the bodies, instead of stripping them and leaving them behind?”

“No one likes carting bodies around,” Jason said. “No one you’d want to make friends with, anyway. Maybe they were convinced that just bodies wouldn’t tell people anything.”

“It could have been due to some religious practice,” Clive suggested. “A lot of religions have taboos around corpses.”

“Perhaps there’s more, bodies deeper in,” Humphrey said. “Maybe they’ll have answers.”

They continued exploring, finding more bodies that offered no more clues than the others. They came from every civilisation-building species; humans, elves and leonids, celestines, runic, smoulder and draconians.

They were starting to get a sense of how things were laid out, based on the two floors they had explored and ended up standing in front of a wall.

“More earth-shaping,” Humphrey said. “This should be the stairwell, shouldn’t it?”

“I think so,” Clive said.

The wall was made up of warped green stone, which had clearly spent time as a fluid before hardening. They continued searching, discovering another wall of warped stone.

“I’ll try and cut through with my big sword, unless someone has a better idea,” Humphrey said. “Do you have any more of that acid, Jason?”

“I used it all getting us in here,” Jason said.

“So much for being prepared,” Humphrey said, which got a snort of laughter from Clive.

“Oh, you’ve got jokes,” Jason said. He took a sledgehammer from his inventory, letting the head drop heavily to the floor.

Item: [Stonebreaker Hammer] (iron rank, common)

A hammer designed to be effective at breaking rocks (tool, hammer).

➤ Effect: Weight increases in accordance with the strength of the wielder.

“Try that,” Jason said.

Humphrey picked up the hammer, hefting it to test the weight.

“I think I might break something this light,” he said, then frowned, hefting it again. “No, there it is.”

“You were saying something about preparation?” Jason asked.

Clive shook his head.

“This thing gets heavier based on who holds it, right?” Humphrey asked.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Then how good a preparation is it when you’re not very strong?” Humphrey asked.

“That’s why I prepared you,” Jason said.

“Are you calling me a tool?” Humphrey asked.

“Humphrey,” Jason said, placing an earnest hand on the big man’s shoulder. “You’re far more useful and versatile than some ordinary tool. You’re a complete tool.”

“I’m also holding a hammer,” Humphrey said and Jason skittered back.

“As you were, mate,” Jason said.

Clive stood next to Jason as they watched Humphrey hammer away at the wall.

“That mouth of yours is going to get the cream kicked out of you someday,” Clive said.

“Been there, done that,” Jason said. “You can live your life avoiding consequences, or accepting them. I tried the first way in my old world, and I’m trying the other here.”

“And how’s that working out?” Clive asked.

“It feels good,” Jason said. “Wouldn’t recommend it without healing magic, though. Cripes, he’s putting a dent in that wall.”

Humphrey’s hammer blows were crashing into the wall with the regularity of an aggressive metronome. The stone was covered with impact marks all clustered together, spiderweb cracks spreading out. In short order, the hammer breached a hole in the wall, which let out a wave of wet air, stinking with rot.

All three hurried away from the hole.

“That is foul,” Clive said.

“It’s not dissolving monster bad,” Jason said, “but it’s bad.”

Humphrey looked disconsolately at the hole in the wall.

“We have to go down there,” he said unhappily.

Jason nodded.

“I wouldn’t want that to be my final resting place,” he said. “We have an adventurer to bring home.”

“How did they get down there?” Humphrey pondered. “It looks like all the entrances are sealed up.”

“That smell means the water got in somewhere,” Clive said. “Best guess? Some monster burrowed all the way down here, found a hole in the lower level and made it their lair. They killed the adventurer up on the surface, then dragged them down into whatever entrance the monster made for itself.”

“Makes sense,” Jason said. “We were expecting some kind of worm monster.”

Humphrey took a deep, unhappy breath.

“Enough stalling,” he said. “I’m going to bring down that wall.”

Soon there was enough of a hole for a person to pass through and Humphrey leaned in for a look.

“Looks like the stairs were reshaped to make this wall,” Humphrey said. “Can we get some light in here?”

One of the floating motes of light drifted through the hole and Humphrey looked again.

“Yeah, we’ll have to drop down,” he said.

They took another of Jason’s metal stakes and Humphrey hammered it into the floor to anchor a rope. Jason was the first one through the hole, drifting down a stairwell now more like an elevator shaft. He stopped when he reached water flooding the level below. Taking out his ten-foot pole, he tested the depth.

“There’s water down here,” he called up. “Shallow enough to walk through.”

The others slid down the rope, ending up knee-deep in black, icy water.

“I don’t care for this,” Clive said.

“Look around,” Jason said, standing on the surface. “We might find our answers down here.”

Like the levels above, the stairwell opened onto a wide central corridor. This one was full of debris, piled up on the flooded floor. There were large clumps of mud with roots jutting out, bricks wholly dislodged from the wall, revealing holes into walls of packed earth. The battle damage was even more extensive than the floor above, and they didn’t have to look far to see corpses.

“This is barely navigable,” Humphrey said. “Where does the tracking stone point?”

“Ahead and to the right,” Clive said, stone in hand. “We’re on the right level.”

“Then stay ready,” Humphrey said. “Whatever dragged our adventurer down here is likely to be lurking about.”

They started searching the semi-submerged level, the water and debris slowing their progress. Clive had the most trouble pushing his feet through the water. Jason stepped

lightly on the surface while Humphrey's strength ploughed through it as if the water weren't even there. They stopped at the entrance to a large hall, one of the largest rooms they had seen.

"Do you feel that?" Humphrey asked.

"Iron rank auras," Jason said.

"Not people, or monsters, though," Clive said. "Some kind of enchanted objects. Do we take a look, or keep following the tracking stone?"

"I don't like the idea of leaving an unknown potential threat behind us," Humphrey said.

"Let's check it out, then," Jason said.

They moved into the hall, Jason's light motes spreading out to illuminate the space. Flooding aside, it looked like the most intact room they had encountered so far. Everything was rotted, rusted or ripped, but the walls were lined with what looked like the hall's original contents. Vertical banners, blackened with rot hung from the walls. Stone statues were covered in black fungus and erosion, while weapon racks of metal and wood had largely collapsed as their integrity gave out.

At the back of the room were what looked like strange statues; mannequins of stone with segmented body parts connected by lengths of metal. They were the source of the auras, twenty-eight of them. They were standing in what was clearly meant to be four rows of ten, like soldiers at attention but a dozen spots were empty.

"Combat dummies," Humphrey said. "If they're giving off this strong an aura, they're almost certainly active."

"I'd like to take one," Clive said. "You can learn a lot about a culture from their magic items."

"We'll have to put them down first," Humphrey said. "They'll probably attack if we get close enough or unleash our auras."

"Let me put some spells on you, then," Clive said.

He cast two spells each on Jason and Humphrey. The first made them glow briefly with a red-gold light.

"Mantle of retribution," Clive said. "Anyone that hits you will take damage."

The second one caused a ring of runes to start floating around them like a slow-motion hula hoop.

"Rune mantle," Clive said. "It consumes a random rune to trigger an effect each time you're attacked."

"Do you have anything that doesn't require a monster to hit me?" Jason asked.

"If the monsters can't hit you," Clive said, "then what do you need extra magic for?"

“He’s got you there,” Humphrey said. Dragon-scale armour appeared around him, the giant wing sword appearing in his hands. It was too big to swing in most of the complex, but the hall they were in had plenty of room.

Clive pulled back a flap on the front of his robe to revealed a surprisingly ripped torso, covered in runes of blue and green. The runes floated off his body and through the air, where they came together as a ball of light that transformed into Onslow, Clive’s rune tortoise familiar. Jason didn’t bother pulling out Colin, who would have little impact on the combat dummies.

They formed up, Jason and Humphrey in front, Clive in the rear with his familiar.

“Ready?” Humphrey asked, looking at the other two.

“Ready, Jason said, drawing his sword.

Clive pulled out a magic wand.

“Ready.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “Auras out.”

-
- You are in the area of an ally’s [Dragon Might] aura. Your [Power] and [Spirit] attributes are increased.
 - You are in the area of an ally’s [Lord of Magic] aura. You are continually gaining mana-per-second. Resistance to mana drain effects is increased.
-

The combat dummies reacted immediately, all twenty-eight moving toward them. Like Clive, they were hampered by the knee-deep water, but Clive was the first to act. His wand fired a bolt of red and silver light that blasted the arm off a combat dummy.

At his side, a bolt of lightning flashed from Onslow’s shell. It arced out to one of the peripheral dummies, avoiding Jason and Humphrey. Clive touched a hand to the rune that dimmed on Onslow’s shell, feeding mana into it. The rune started to slowly light back up.

Humphrey stepped forward, cleaving two dummies into pieces with one strike as he waded into the most clustered group. Red light flashed as the dummies lashed out, Clive’s retribution spell blasting chunks from their blunted limbs as they hammered on Humphrey’s armour.

Jason was more mobile, using hit and run strikes as he danced over the surface of the water, building up charges on his sword. Unhindered by the environment, he ran rings around the dummies. When a cluster converged on him, he tossed out a throwing dart from the bandolier on his chest, one of the darts with the red cord. It blasted a dummy apart and he escaped through the gap.

Clive focused on using ranged attacks to pick off outliers before they could swarm the other two. Along with his wand and his familiar, he made judicious use of his essence abilities. He cast a spell and a rune lit up under the water. A pair of dummies wandered over it in pursuit of Jason and with a snap of Clive's fingers, an explosion blasted them to pieces, spraying water all through the hall.

Humphrey had torn apart half the dummies alone by the time he slowed down, most of his special attacks on cooldown. Just strength and skill was enough to keep demolishing dummies, though, and his sword continued to smash them apart. Jason was getting into top gear as Humphrey was winding down, his sword now exploding the dummies on contact.

The last few dummies were made short work of. The three regrouped at the end of the fight, chugging potions and eating spirit coins.

"Good fight," Humphrey said. "I think we work well together. Get a healer on board and we have the makings of a team."

"I don't know about that," Clive said. "I've been out on the odd contract with Jason, lately, but my research and duties with the Magic Society consume much of my time."

"Look where we are," Humphrey said. "You're about to sort through what's left of these ancient combat dummies looking for secrets hidden away for centuries. Can you do that in your study room at the Magic Society?"

"No," Clive mused as he looked around the hall. "That's a not-inconsiderable point."

"Did those dummies feel familiar to you?" Jason asked Humphrey. "The way they fought?"

"They fought like you," Humphrey said. "I wasn't sure at first, because the water slowed them down, but that was your fighting style, right?"

"I think so," Jason said.

"Where did your style come from?" Humphrey asked. "I'd never seen it until you and I started sparring."

"I don't know," Jason said. "It's some kind of secret."

"Then let's look around while Clive picks up broken dummy parts," Humphrey said. "Maybe we can learn that secret."

Chapter 87: Can't Lose

"I think I've found something," Humphrey called out and the others moved over to join him.

"Look at this," Humphrey said, pointing to the wall. "See how the mould has grown in the crack between bricks, all the way down this line?"

"Secret door?" Jason asked.

"That's what I'm thinking," Humphrey said. They glanced at each other with mirrored grins.

"Let me take a look," Clive said. He started drawing in the air with his finger, a magic circle appearing in the air in glowing golden lines. When he was done, the circle vanished and runes started glowing on the wall, in the shape of a door.

"There you have it," Clive said.

"Nice one, Clive," Jason said. "How do we open it up?"

Clive looked over the runes, then reached out to touch several in quick succession. He stepped back as a section of wall swung out. They all stepped into the room beyond, which looked to be some kind of book repository. Unfortunately, most of the room's contents had been taken by rot. There was a breach to open earth in one of the walls, exposing the room to untold years of destructive moisture.

"This is a real shame," Clive said as they started looking around.

"I'm seeing a lot of residual magic," Humphrey said, picking up the leather cover of a book whose pages had long since turned to wet pulp.

"Me too," Clive said. "I'm guessing these were all skill books."

"Would have been worth a fortune, intact," Humphrey said.

"It also might have given us some idea of who inhabited this complex," Clive said. "Sometimes a storage room like this will keep the most important items sealed away, so there may still be something to find."

They searched through long-rotted shelves until Humphrey uncovered a group of metal boxes. Three of the five had been breached, but two looked to be still intact. They were large enough that each could contain several skill books.

"We shouldn't open them here," Clive said. "The contents are definitely old and may be fragile. I have tools back at the Magic Society that would let me open them more carefully."

"Sounds good," Jason said. "Bag them for later and we'll go find this adventurer."

Clive carefully lifted the boxes with Humphrey's help and stowed them in his storage space.

"I'm a bit worried about the state we'll find this adventurer in," Jason said as they left the training hall and its hidden storeroom behind. "What if he's just been eaten and all we find is his badge inside a monster."

"Then that's what we bring back," Humphrey said.

They continued exploring the flooded and debris-filled lower level. Rather than continue on through the filthy, icy water, Clive was now sitting atop his tortoise familiar. Not long after leaving the training hall, something came shambling slowly toward them.

"Zombies?" Humphrey said. "How can there be zombies?"

There were dead bodies making a slow, stumbling path in their direction, looking like skeletons stuffed with mud. Humphrey lunged forward, using his smaller sword in the confines of the tunnel. He still made short work of the animate corpses. Clouds of mist rose off them as Humphrey cut them to pieces.

"Why wouldn't there be zombies?" Jason asked as Humphrey walked back to them, coughing from the zombie mist. "Honestly, I'm surprised it took them this long to show up in a place like this."

"The delta is flush with vital energy," Clive explained. "The water coming out of the astral space that feeds the river is full of it. All that life-force prevents undead monsters from manifesting anywhere in the delta."

"Then how are there zombies here?" Humphrey asked, still coughing.

"You don't sound so good," Jason said. He held his hand in front of Humphrey and chanted a spell.

"Feed me your sins."

➤ You have cleansed all instances of [Corpse Fungus] from [Human].

"Corpse Fungus?" Jason asked.

"What's that?" Humphrey spluttered as he escaped the cloud.

"It's a fungus that uses corpses to propagate itself," Clive said. "It takes over a corpse, makes it ambulate like a zombie, then blows spores over any living creature it comes across. Not a zombie at all; just a regular dead body being moved about."

"What do those spores do?" Humphrey asked.

"They grow inside you," Clive said. "Kill you, eventually, but there's plenty of time to find a healer or an alchemist. If you don't have Jason on hand."

They waited for the spore cloud to settle before continuing on, Jason cleansing Clive and Humphrey again, just in case. They followed the tracking stone, closing in on the dead adventurer's badge. It led them to the most ruined part of the complex, where large sections of brickwork had been torn out of the walls, mud encroaching on the rooms and tunnels. At the end of another large hall, all the brickwork from the back wall was gone, with what looked like a giant, burrowed tunnel beyond.

"What needs a hole that big to get around?" Humphrey asked.

"Nothing good," Clive said.

They set off down the earthen tunnel, still knee-deep in water. It didn't seem to bother Onslow, with Clive riding on his back, or Jason, who walked along the surface. Humphrey was left to trudge unhappily through water and mud. The tunnel turned out to be fairly short, breaking back into another room of the complex. It was another large hall, very much demolished. In addition to the breach they entered through, much of the brickwork had been torn out. In its place, recessed alcoves looked like they had been dug out by claws, each one stuffed with a dead creature. Most were swamp creatures, although there were a few dead people as well.

"This one," Clive said, tracking stone in hand. He led them to one of the bodies, an elf in tattered armour. Jason took a casket from his inventory, supplied to him by the Adventure Society.

➤ **Objective complete: Retrieve the remains of your fellow adventurer 1/1.**

While he and Clive placed the body inside, Humphrey was looking around with a concerned expression.

"We should take it and go," Humphrey said. "Fast."

"What is it?" Jason asked. The contract wasn't just to retrieve the body but also kill the monster. If Humphrey wanted to bail out, it was probably bad.

"A swamp-dwelling monster whose appearance could be mistaken for a wyrm, burrows deep into the earth and builds elaborate larders to fill with prey," Humphrey said, and Clive's eyes went wide.

"Yes, we should go," he agreed. "Now."

Jason looked down as a ripple of water came from the corner of the room, spreading over the water that covered the floor. It suddenly occurred to him that he had no idea if all the water was knee-deep. Something bulged up from the surface in the corner of the room. Water poured off its huge mound of a body as it rose up from a submerged tunnel. The

creature was a brown, fleshy mass, with five serpentine necks ending in heads like that of a snake, if snakes had a lot more teeth.

“Marsh hydra,” Humphrey said breathlessly.

None of them had felt its aura approach, but now it washed over them with bronze-rank strength. It moved to block them from the tunnel they had entered through. Its thick legs ended in webbed claws poorly-suited for land movement. Humphrey could have escaped, but seeing Clive and Jason would be cut off, he moved away from the tunnel to join them. The creature, apparently satisfied at boxing them in, eyed them patiently with its five heads.

“Marsh hydras heal fast,” Humphrey said. “Combined with bronze rank toughness, our only chance is that you can pile up enough afflictions to kill it, Jason. Clive and I will try and distract it so you can get close.”

“No need for close,” Jason said. “I’ve got some new tricks; just keep it off me and I’ll get it done.”

Four tree-trunk legs supported the fleshy mound of the hydra’s body, the long necks rising off it like trees on a hill. The creature lumbered towards them and Humphrey went to meet it. Clive patted Onslow on the shell and pulled a long staff from his storage space. It had a large, clear crystal set into the end, and vibrant red-orange runes that shone like fire carved down the full length. Aiming it at the hydra like a gun, a blast of flaming energy launched out, striking one of the hydra’s heads. The runes on the staff dimmed as the struck head shrieked. Its skin was blackened, but the damage appeared superficial.

Jason slit the back of his hand with his wristband razor, sending leeches splashing into the water. They quickly made their way across the room to crawl up the hydra’s trunk legs and swarm over its body.

-
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Bleeding].
 - [Bleeding] does not take effect.

 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Leech Toxin].
 - [Leech Toxin] does not take effect.

 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Necrotoxin].
 - [Necrotoxin] does not take effect.
-

“That’s not good,” Jason muttered. Even with his aura that penalised resistances, almost every affliction his leeches piled on was shrugged-off by the bronze-rank monster.

Fortunately, Colin offered both quality with quantity, and some of the afflictions were getting through. Jason followed up with spells.

"Your fate is to suffer."

-
- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Inexorable Doom].
 - [Inexorable Doom] does not take effect.
-

Jason cast the spell a second and third time, each resisted.

"I'm going to need some time," he called out.

Jason would have liked to toss Humphrey his dagger, which inflicted poison and ignored bronze-rank resistances. Humphrey hardly had time to switch out weapons, however, and trading the enormous sword that was barely holding its own for a small dagger would likely get him killed.

Humphrey's huge sword, dragon-scale armour and incredible strength were a terror to iron-rank monsters, but they were barely keeping him alive as heads the size of his torso snapped at him. Even his strongest attack, the unstoppable force, was significantly more stoppable against the power of the bronze-rank hydra. Only the added attention of Clive and his familiar allowed Humphrey to hold out. Through their combined efforts, Humphrey was finally able to cleave off one of the heads.

"Watch out for the head growing back," Clive called out, but to his surprise, there was no sign of it doing so. From what he had read about the creature, its heads should grow back fast enough to see it happening.

-
- [Marsh Hydra] has regenerated enough health to negate [Bleeding].
 - [Leech Toxin] has been consumed to reapply [Bleeding] on [Marsh Hydra].
-

In the meantime, Jason was casting spell after spell.

"Your fate is to suffer."

-
- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Marsh Hydra].
-

"Yes!"

With inexorable doom in place and the leeches making slow but constant progress, the afflictions would stack up. Jason raised his hand again and cast one of his new spells.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

-
- Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Sin].
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Mark of Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Mark of Sin].
 - [Mark of Sin] does not take effect.
-

His sin curse was one of the keys to his escalating damage combination. His new spell allowed him to apply it at range, so long as it wasn't resisted. It was the first of Jason's two new spells. The broker he went to had taken a while to find a good trade for the rat essence, as it was not popular with anyone who could afford to be choosy. He could have traded it for a half-dozen awakening stones of the fish but instead went with two stones of the magus. It was a common awakening stone, especially with humans. It almost guaranteed a spell, which humans rarely awakened, with an outside chance of a coveted summoning or familiar power.

Ability: [Castigate] (Sin)

- Spell (curse, holy)
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Burns a painful brand into the target, inflicting slight transcendent damage and the [Sin] and [Mark of Sin] conditions. The brand cannot be healed so long as the target retains any instances of [Sin].

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

 - [Mark of Sin] (affliction, holy): Prevents aura retraction. Cannot be cleansed while target retains any instances of [Sin] or [Legacy of Sin].
-

"How's it going?" Humphrey called out.

"It's coming along," Jason called back.

"If it could come any faster, that would be really, really great!"

Jason kept casting spells until his mana ran low, chugged a mana potion from his belt and started casting some more.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

-
- Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Mark of Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Mark of Sin].
 - [Mark of Sin] does not take effect.
-

Jason let out a whoop of triumph. The mark of sin effect was of little use in the current battle, so it didn't matter if it was resisted. With inexorable doom, sin and Colin's necrotoxin in place, the damage would increase exponentially.

"Everything's done," Jason called out. "Stay strong and we have it!"

"I'm not sure if waiting is an option," Clive said, his voice enervated. He drank a mana potion even as he poured his mana into his familiar. One of the runes on Onslow's shell lit up, then dimmed immediately as a cloud rose up out of his shell. Water bullets erupted out of the cloud, pounding into the hydra.

In front of the hydra, Humphrey was bloody and exhausted but defiant, pushing on through sheer force of will. The hydra was doomed now, but it could still take them with it. Jason resumed casting spells, trying to hasten its demise.

"Bleed for me."

- Spell [Haemorrhage] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] is already affected by [Bleeding]. [Bleeding] is refreshed.
 - Spell [Haemorrhage] has inflicted [Sacrificial Victim] on [Marsh Hydra].
-

"First time," Jason cheered. "Good stuff."

The affliction reduction from Jason's aura had limited effect at the start of the fight, but it penalised resistances further for each instance of the sin curse. With the curses now stacking up, afflictions from both Jason and Colin were becoming more reliable, including those from Jason's other new spell.

Ability: [Haemorrhage] (Blood)

- Spell (wounding, unholy)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Inflicts or refreshes the [Bleeding] and [Sacrificial Victim] afflictions.

- [Bleeding] (affliction, wounding): Deals ongoing damage by causing or increasing blood loss. As a wounding effect, this condition absorbs and negates an amount of incoming healing, after which this affliction immediately ends.

- [Sacrificial Victim] (affliction, unholy): Any drain attacks or blood afflictions suffered have increased effect.

The sacrificial victim affliction would help bleed away the hydra's health, but the massive monster had a lot of health to bleed. Clive had a huge amount of mana, most of which he had thrown at the monster. He no longer had enough to recharge the powers of his rune tortoise familiar.

With his afflictions applied, Jason could do little else without wading into melee range. He was confident that would lead to his near-immediate death, probably getting Humphrey killed trying to save him. He had one more spell, but the thirty seconds between casts felt like an eternity.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 1 (06%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.

Despite the afflictions built-up on the hydra, it's resistance to iron-rank damage prevented the spell from taking full effect. Jason had nothing left to contribute.

Humphrey's will was strong, but he had been going full power from the beginning. The hydra was finally fading, but Humphrey was fading faster. He staggered back one

step, then another. It looked like he could barely lift his sword, but he did so again and again.

“I don’t think I can hold it,” Humphrey called back, despair in his voice.

Jason let out a reluctant groan, then steeled his shoulders.

“I’m coming in,” he yelled.

“You’ll die!” Humphrey said as Jason appeared behind him.

“Then I guess you’d better protect me,” Jason said.

Humphrey glanced at Jason, seeing nothing but determination. He turned back to the monster, letting out a wild yell. His wavering stance straightened, waning arms renewed. Where he had been reduced to only defending, he once again went on the attack. Light started shining out of him, the blue-grey of iron rank. He didn’t notice Jason stepping back into safety.

“I was just trying to get him pumped-up,” Jason said, looking at the light shining from Humphrey. “What is that?”

“Racial gift transfiguration,” Clive said in wonder. “It seems his drive to protect is so strong it literally changed who he is.”

Clive gave Jason a wild grin.

“If he can manage that, how can I not make a full effort?” he asked.

Clive glared at the hydra with renewed determination. The red glow of life-force emerged from his body and started turning blue as he burned life-force to restore his emptied-out mana. Clive’s skin turned pale and he gritted his teeth against the pain, but kept pushing for more mana.

Clive dropped his staff into the water and held both hands out in front of him, palms facing out. A magic circle appeared in front of them, turning in the air. It grew and changed, becoming more complicated as Clive pumped more mana into it, then chanted out a spell.

“Feel the annihilation of reality unmade.”

A beam of rainbow light blasted out of the circle in front of Clive, locking onto one of the hydra’s four remaining heads. The rainbow colours started fading, one by one, until all that remained was black. The beam vanished and the hydra’s head was annihilated as a vortex of darkness replaced it. The vortex sucked in air, causing the hydra’s severed neck to flap like a streamer in the wind as the vortex sucked at it.

The spell ended, the dark vortex fading into nothing. The neck dropped limp, as did Clive, who fell to his knees in the water. Onslow gave him a concerned nudge and Clive supported himself on the tortoise’s neck.

Jason looked at Clive, who had burned himself out to contribute. He looked at Humphrey, who had given up escape to be the shield between the monster and his companions.

“I don’t know what kind of person deserves friends like this,” Jason muttered to himself, “but I’m pretty sure it’s not me.”

A blue-grey light lit up from within Jason, just as had from Humphrey. Jason looked at the glow shining from underneath his skin.

-
- Outworlder racial ability [Interface] has evolved to [Party Interface].

Ability: [Party Interface]

- You have access to a contacts list. You can form a party by sending invitations through the contacts list.
 - Party members can access interface features so long as they remain in the party.
 - Party members have access to party chat and voice chat. These functions have limited range.
 - Quests from the [Quest System] can be shared with party members. Quest only remains available to party members while they are in the party.
-

“You too?” Clive asked wearily, still draped over Onslow’s neck. He watched the light shine out of Jason.

“I’m not sure it actually helps, right now,” Jason said.

Clive’s spell claiming the monster’s second head had marked the turning of the tide. Necrosis was turning the hydra’s flesh to rot as its blood, black with venom, spilled into the water. Humphrey’s sword claimed a third head and the hydra moved to flee, heading for the submerged tunnel.

As the monster was about to plunge into the water, a huge shab rose up from the depths, gaping shark mouth biting savagely into the hydra’s flesh. The shab then turned into a colourful parrot, flying over to land on Onslow.

“Nasty, nasty,” it said, spitting out black fluid.

The injured hydra was confused long enough for Humphrey to come up behind it and bury his sword in a rear leg. Jason followed, digging into the other rear leg with his dagger. The wound wasn’t deep compared to the size of the creature, and his special attack, punish, only dealt a small amount of necrotic damage. However, every instance of the sin curse amplified that damage and the hydra had been accumulating them for a while. The

flesh blackened and withered, shrinking away from Jason's slicing blade. Side-by-side, Jason and Humphrey laid into the crippled monster until it fell still.

Quest: [Contract: Fallen Comrade]

- Objective complete: Eliminate the monster that killed your fellow adventurer 1/1.
 - Reward: [Awakening Stone of Absolution] (Jason Asano).
 - Reward: [Awakening Stone of the Champion] (Humphrey Geller).
 - Reward: [Ring of the Hydra] (Clive Standish).

 - Quest complete. All party members receive:
 - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins].
 - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins].
-

Humphrey went over to Stash the parrot, who was hopping up and down excitedly on Onslow's shell.

"Stash chase worm! Stash chase worm!"

The parrot flew toward Humphrey, transforming into a puppy mid-air and landing in Humphrey's arms. Humphrey was covered in hydra blood, but Stash didn't seem to mind the mess as much as Humphrey's armour. Humphrey dismissed the hard scale armour and Stash snuggled into his chest as Humphrey scratched him behind the ears.

The three adventurers stood exhausted, looking at each other and the dead hydra.

"Clear eyes, full hearts," Jason said.

"What?" Clive asked.

Jason waved a dismissive hand.

"Ah, we'll deal with that later," Jason said.

Chapter 88: The Nature of Absolution

Rufus was at the Geller Estate, discussing property development for the Geller family/Remore Academy joint training facility. In a conference room, he sat across a table from three members of the Geller family, while he was alone.

“There is plenty of unclaimed, undeveloped territory adjacent to the Geller Estate,” Rufus said. “Just give us a location that works best for the changes you want to incorporate, and we can go from there.”

“I know you have a good relationship with Danielle,” the man across the table said. “That doesn’t mean we’ll just acquiesce to your every need.”

Rufus ran a hand over his face.

“What exactly is it you think I want you to acquiesce to?” Rufus asked. “This joint venture has already been agreed to, and as for the details. I literally just said that we will adapt to your needs.”

Rufus got to his feet, placed both hands on the table and leaned toward the man on the opposite side.

“Clearly you are part of whatever internal faction within the Geller family that was against this agreement from the outset, and you ended up negotiating the details as part of whatever deal got your faction to accept the proposal at all. I don’t care about that; I have no interest in playing these games and I’m not going to be a pawn in your family’s internal politics.”

Rufus stood up straight and adjusted his light jacket.

“I know you want to drag this on as long as possible, so let me be explicit. When I come here tomorrow, I want to talk to someone who will actually work on this project instead of stalling it out. If that doesn't happen, then the Remore Academy will undertake the venture without Geller family involvement.”

The man in the middle of the Geller family representatives gave Rufus a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

“Are you sure you have the authority to make that decision, Young Master Remore?”

“I’m not an aristocrat,” Rufus said, “so that’s Mr Remore, to you. If you think I have anything less than full authority over this undertaking, then keep pushing and see what happens.”

Rufus took his unopened document satchel from the table and headed for the door.

“Mr Remore...”

“I’ll listen to what you have to say when you have something worth listening to,” Rufus said without turning around and walked out the door.

Rufus was unhappy as he left the building but calmed down walking through the Geller Estate. The fresh air and smell of verdant plant life improved his mood with every breath. He stopped short as something strange appeared in the air in front of him.

➤ You have received a voice chat request from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

“What?”

The whole way back through the delta, Clive had been pulling items from his inventory to look at them through Jason’s interface ability. After he almost crashed the airboat into the side of an embankment road, Jason kicked him from the party so he would concentrate on driving.

“Can I see that new ability of yours?” Jason asked Humphrey. They had learned that they could give party members permission to see each other’s abilities, which had Clive setting up plans to use Jason as a cataloguing tool.

“Sure,” Humphrey said.

Ability: [Hero’s Drive]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Human Ambition].
 - Essence abilities advance at an accelerated rate.
 - Enemies to not gain additional resistance and damage reduction against your abilities for being higher rank.
 - When fighting higher-ranked enemies or when significantly outnumbered by enemies of the same rank or higher, time before abilities can be used again is reduced.
 - Gain [Mana] and [Stamina] over time while this ability is active.
 - When this ability is triggered, gain an immediate burst of stamina and mana. This can exceed normal mana and stamina limits so long as the ability remains active.
-

“That’s not bad,” Jason said. “I wouldn’t start running around looking for bronze-rank monsters to fight, though.”

“No fear on that front,” Humphrey said.

“You say that,” Jason said, “but I can’t help but think you’ll go diving in every time someone needs help.”

“That does seem like exactly what you’d do,” Clive agreed.

“There is one more thing I’d like to try out,” Jason said. He opened up his new contacts list. Most of the names were listed as out of area, his eyes lingering on the names of his family.

“Very out of area,” he muttered to himself.

Moving through the delta on an airboat, they weren’t too far from the Geller family estate. That placed several names on the list within range, including Rick, Phoebe and Danielle Geller. Rufus was also in range, which meant he was probably at the Geller Estate himself. Jason tapped on his name.

-
- You have sent a voice chat request to [Rufus Remore].
 - Voice chat with [Rufus Remore] has been initiated.
 - Party member [Humphrey Geller] has joined voice chat.
-

“Jason?”

Rufus’ voice had a slight distortion, like he was using a low-quality microphone.

“G’day, Rufus. Not sure if you can hear me over the sound of the airboat.”

“I can’t hear any airboat. What is this?”

“I had a racial gift evolution,” Jason said. “Humphrey too.”

“Uh, hello,” Humphrey said.

“What happened?” Rufus asked.

“We fought a bronze rank monster,” Jason said. “Well, I say we, but Clive and I mostly watched Humphrey do it.”

“That’s not the case at all,” Humphrey said.

“I don’t suppose you’re in the market for a funky bronze-rank whip?” Jason asked.

“We looted it from the monster and decided to sell it and split the proceeds.”

“What were you thinking, taking on a bronze-rank monster?” Rufus scolded. “Tell me everything.”

“You’re breaking up, Rufus,” Jason said. “Looks like we’re about to go out of range.”

“What does breaking up mean?” Rufus asked.

“What’s that Rufus?” Jason asked. “Ksht ksht ksht.”

Jason closed the connection.

“So,” he said, turning to Humphrey. “What do you think you’ll get from your awakening stone?”

“Should you have cut off your power like that?”

“It was bad reception,” Jason said.

“I’m not sure what that is,” Humphrey said, “other than an obvious lie.”

“I can do the ritual of awakening for those stones you got,” Clive said, “although maybe you should do it, Jason. You could probably use the practise.”

“Works for me,” Jason said.

“Do I get a say in this?” Humphrey asked.

“A ritual of awakening is basic stuff,” Clive said. “It’ll probably be fine.”

“What do you mean, probably?” Humphrey asked.

Clive’s study at the Magic Society campus was like an old second-hand book store combined with an antique shop, neither of which had been organised very well. Stacks of papers were stopped from falling off chairs by stacks of books piled on them; strange curios were placed absently on shelves, stands or inside glass cabinets.

“Is this safe?” Humphrey asked, looking around. His eyes could see the invisible magic Jason couldn’t.

“There’s a system,” Clive said unconvincingly as he shuffled through papers. “You know, Jason, the Magic Society would definitely pay you to use your ability for the cataloguing of items and abilities.”

“How much?” Jason asked

“Not adventurer money,” Clive said. “Decent, though.”

“I’d rather fight monsters than bureaucrats,” Humphrey said.

“I think I might be with you, there,” Jason said.

“The Magic Society does important work,” Clive said, still searching through the room for something. “You both have monster record tablets, don’t you? What about the essence list tablet? You think they just happen? People work hard to provide the information you rely on to stay alive, but adventurers just dismiss them as dull functionaries.”

Jason and Humphrey looked at each other and shrugged.

“That’s a fair cop,” Jason said.

“I never thought about that,” Humphrey.

“No one ever does,” Clive said unhappily. “Ah, I knew it was around here, somewhere.”

He dug out a magic wand from what looked to be a basket of sticks and led them to a door. Beyond was a room as sparse as the one outside was overstuffed. The only thing in it was a plain metal table in the middle.

“Close the door behind you, please,” Clive said.

From his storage space, he took out the two boxes they had retrieved from the underground complex, placing them on the table. Using the wand he had dug out from his study, he began moving it over the first box. Untold years worth of muck started rising off of it, right down to the oldest filth that had ingrained itself into the metal. The muck drifted through the air to the side of the room, collecting into unpleasant spheres. Leaving the spheres floating in the air, Clive carefully opened the box. Inside, the contents had been kept intact by the box's remnant magic. Clive took out three identical skill books and sat them the table.

“The condition is good,” Clive said, opening the cover of each to look at the title inside.

“The Way of the Reaper,” he read. “Form one, Way of the Hierophant. A martial art skill book?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “My martial art. Part of it, anyway. There are five forms in total.”

“There were five boxes,” Humphrey said.

“Just this one is the size of a normal skill book,” Clive said. “No wonder they split them up. A collected work would be huge.”

“No kidding,” Jason said.

The second case had another three books, this time the third form of Jason's martial art.

“You said you don't know where your martial art comes from, right?” Clive asked Jason.

“That's right,” Jason said. “My friends know, but they're keeping it secret for now. Something to do with a contract they took before I met them.”

“I'll do some digging, see what I can find,” Clive said. “In the meantime, how about we get an awakening ritual going?”

Inside one of the Magic Society's dedicated ritual rooms, Humphrey was standing in the middle of a magic circle, holding an awakening stone in his hands.

“Good,” Clive said approvingly. “You did well, Jason.”

The awakening stone disappeared into Humphrey's hand. His eyes glowed with swirling blue and gold light as the magic settled into him, then dimmed.

-
- Party member [Humphrey Geller] has awakened the dragon essence ability [Spartoi]. [Humphrey Geller] has awakened 5 of 5 dragon essence abilities.
 - Party member [Humphrey Geller] has awakened all dragon essence abilities. Linked attribute [Recovery] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank dragon essence ability.
 - Party member [Humphrey Geller] has completed essences.

Ability: [Spartoi] (Dragon)

- Ritual (summon)
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
- Effect (iron): Summons three dragon-tooth warriors.

“Finally,” Humphrey said.

“Finally?” Clive asked.

“My storage space power. It equips anything I summon with iron-rank magic equipment, but I didn’t have a summoning ability. My mother kept telling me it would come, but it’s a relief it finally has.”

“Spartoi,” Jason said. “That’s unexpected.”

“You’ve heard of them?” Humphrey asked.

“They’re part of a myth from my world,” Jason said. “Oddly enough, about a guy named Jason. He was on a quest, and to complete it he needed to pass these trials set by a king. One of the trials was to sow dragon’s teeth, and a bunch of soldiers sprung up. He threw a rock at one of them and they got confused and killed one another.”

“Was he the person you were named after?”

“No,” Jason darkly. “I was named after a footy player.”

“I guess you just hope no one throws a rock at them,” Clive said. “Want to try summoning them now?”

“I’ll wait until we’re outdoors,” Humphrey said. “I want to see what Jason gets.”

“Yes,” Clive said, turning enthusiastically to Jason. “The no-ritual awakening. I’ve been looking forward to this.”

“It’s really not that exciting,” Jason said. “Let me clean this up, first.” Jason took a cleaning cloth and some alchemical solution from the ritual room’s supply cabinet and wiped the residue of the magical circle off the smoothly-polished, stone floor.

“Now,” Clive said eagerly, as Jason put the cleaning supplies away.

Jason shook his head, taking out the awakening stone. It glowed with a white-gold light, like a holy object.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Absolution] (unranked, epic)

An awakening stone containing the power of redemption (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.

- You have 5 unawakened essence abilities.
- You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Absolution]. Absorb Y/N?

The stone vanished into Jason’s hand and his eyes started shining with golden light, which darkened until they were black orbs before returning to normal.

-
- You have awakened the doom essence ability [Blade of Doom]. You have awakened 3 of 5 doom essence abilities.

Ability: [Blade of Doom] (Doom)

- Conjunction (unholy)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Conjures [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation]. Attacks made with Ruin will inflict an instance of [Vulnerable] and refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by Ruin require more healing than normal to negate. Ruin is an unholy object.

- [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.

The others were in Jason’s party and could see his ability description. They were all quiet for a moment as they looked at it.

“Uh... Jason?” Humphrey asked, breaking the silence.

“Yes, Humphrey?” Jason asked.

“That was an awakening stone of absolution,” Humphrey said.

“Yes it was,” Jason said.

“Didn’t it say something about containing the power of redemption?”

“I think it did, yes,” Jason said.

“And it gave you the power to conjure a cursed weapon,” Humphrey said.

“Strictly speaking,” Clive said, “it’s unholy, not cursed.”

“My mistake,” Humphrey said. “You used the power of redemption to create an unholy weapon.”

“It, uh, it does look like that, yeah,” Jason said.

“How did you manage that, exactly?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m not entirely sure,” Jason said.

“I don’t want to go accusing anyone of being evil,” Humphrey said.

“Very fair,” Jason said.

“I feel compelled to ask, though,” Humphrey said. “Jason, are you evil?”

“I think everyone has dark urges,” Jason said defensively.

“Yes, but not everyone has the blade of doom,” Humphrey said.

“I only had unawakened ability slots from the dark and doom essences,” Jason said.

“It would be a bit odd if I could conjure the wand of sunshine and rainbows.”

He held out his hand and an elaborate dagger appeared in it, made of black obsidian and blood-red crystal. The blade was jagged, slightly curved, and the single most sinister object Jason had ever seen.

“How did you get that?” Humphrey asked. “The awakening stone was absolution.”

“Well,” Jason said, turning the knife over in his hand. “I’m absolutely going to mess up some monsters with it.”

Chapter 89: Anti-Pirate Operations

Cassandra Mercer awoke to the sound of crockery and cutlery being laid out in the next room. She swung her legs out of bed and got up, stretching. She didn't want to put on fresh clothes before she had a shower, so she put on the only article of clothing she could see at a glance; Jason's shirt she had tossed aside the night before.

She stepped out onto the balcony to look out on the guild district street, busy with early morning traffic. Her normal routine was to start the day with physical training, but with the sand barge expedition, she would get exercise enough.

"Morning," Jason said, carrying a large tray onto the balcony, pausing to take in the sight of her leaning against the balcony rail in his shirt. Her delicate features were fresh-faced, despite having just woken up. Her long, dark hair was slightly mussed, which somehow was all the more appealing. A pair of toned, athletic legs emerged from the bottom of his shirt. She turned to give him an inquisitive look and he set out breakfast on the table under the shade awning.

"This is what you look like first thing in the morning?" he asked unhappily as they sat. "You realise the rest of us don't look that good even when we try our best?"

"I didn't hear you get up," she said, ignoring his question. "Are you an expert at sneaking out of bed in the morning?"

"Breakfast the next morning is my signature move," Jason said. "It's how I convince people they haven't made a horrible mistake."

He started lifting the covers off the trays he had laid out on the table, introducing them one by one.

"Scrambled egg hash brown nests; stewed apple oatmeal; cream cheese pancake balls with butter and syrup."

She picked out a pancake ball and bit into it. Her little moan of pleasure crawled into Jason's ear and gave his hind-brain a coquettish wave.

"Just keep bringing the pleasure?" she asked.

"That's the basic idea," Jason said.

"And how many people have you tried this signature move on exactly?" she asked, teasingly. "Am I not the first girl to visit the Asano lodgings?"

"You're the first woman," he said. "Girls don't interest me."

She let out a low, sultry laugh.

"You really are good at people, aren't you?"

"I have my moments," he said.

"How about back in your world?" she asked.

"Nothing you haven't heard before," Jason said. "Heart-shattering first love, followed by a series of empty, self-pitying encounters. A few real relationships, here and there, but I didn't leave anyone behind, if that's what you're asking."

She smiled, finishing off the pancake ball and reaching for one of the hash brown nests. He poured two glasses of spiced milk from a pitcher. They took to the food, conversing in glances as they ate.

"You're not going to ask after my sordid past?" she asked.

"You're here now," Jason said. "I don't see how the rest matters."

She tilted her head, considering him, curiously.

"I'm still trying to unravel you, Jason Asano."

"I'm not going anywhere," Jason said, then glanced at the clock on the wall.

"Actually, not true," he said. "We have to be at the marshalling yard in about an hour and a half. I should jump in the shower."

"Oh," she said with a smile, "I think we can figure out something much better to do in the shower than jump."

The Adventure Society campus was only a short walk from Jason's lodgings, so they walked in the late-morning sunshine. She had her adventuring gear in her storage space, so she didn't need to detour home. There were around two-dozen people assembled for the expedition, and they were not the last to appear. Their arrival at the marshalling yard together did not go unnoticed. Cassandra went off to speak with friends, while Jason headed for a clump of Gellers. Cassandra's gently brushing over his arm as they parted likewise caught the attention of prying eyes.

Jason walked across the marshalling yard under the unhappy glare of several young men. He felt several bronze-rank auras press rudely down on him, but ignored them as he greeted Humphrey, Phoebe and Gabrielle, the acolyte of knowledge. Others he recognised from his time in the mirage arena.

"I think you just made a lot of enemies," Phoebe said. "Do you know how many of the bronze-rankers have designs on her?"

"You can't live your life afraid of who won't like you," Jason said. "Speaking of which..."

Rick Geller and his team joined them. They exchanged greetings, although the healer, Claire, was giving Jason a spiteful look. Her twin, Hannah, cast a gaze in the

direction of Cassandra Mercer, who was chatting with her own friends. Cassandra glanced their way, eyes twinkling, then turned back to her own group.

The big man, Jonah, had squared himself in front of Jason.

"I have to admit," Jonah said, "you can fight. You know we would have pasted you in seconds on open ground, though, right?"

"That's hardly an incentive to fight on open ground then, is it?" Jason asked. Jonah let out a boisterous laugh, slapping Jason on the shoulder.

"That's a pretty good point," Jonah acknowledged. "How do you think you'll do on open sand, though? Sand pirates sound like a lot more fun than yet another bog monster, but it doesn't seem like your kind of terrain."

"Oh, I imagine I'll muddle through," Jason said.

"Jason took out two skimmers full of them," Humphrey said.

"I took one," Jason said. "My familiar took the other. I was pretty pleased with myself until I saw the aftermath of what Humphrey did. He halfway buried a skimmer with the pirates still in it. One swing of his sword."

"Everyone will get their chance today," Ernest Geller said, approaching the group. He had been in charge of their expedition when they first encountered the sand pirates, but today he was just one of the crowd. There were a couple of other bronze-rank family members with his as they joined the assembled Gellers and exchanged greetings.

"Hey, it's Mose," Jason said, spotting another member of their last expedition. "He's with his cousin; I might go say g'day."

"You know Beth Cavendish?" Humphrey asked.

"We've met," Jason said. "You know her?"

"When people talk about the potential of iron-rankers," Phoebe said, "she's the reason Humphrey comes in at number two. She leads her own team; all locals, unlike us."

"Good to know," Jason said, heading over. "I'll say g'day for you too, Humphrey."

The huge expedition had more than forty people. They were divided into teams of six iron-rankers, plus one bronze-ranker per team. Leading the expedition was a silver-ranker, an elf from the Cavendish family, plus Vincent as the Adventure Society representative.

Once the groups were organised, the plan was explained. What they had been calling the sand pirates, after their attack on the spirit coin convoy, were actually the Ustei Tribe, a group of nomads from a region to the north. The expedition was a show of strength, to bring the tribe into negotiations.

The best outcome was to peacefully convince the Ustei to either return north or agree not to attack any further spirit coin convoys. Failing that, they were to be captured by force and brought to the city for interrogation on what had brought them south in the first place.

A train of magically-powered carriages took the expedition to the edge of the delta, where each team boarded one of a half-dozen prepared sand skimmers. Jason spotted Clive, tapped as one of the skimmer pilots for another team.

Jason was placed in a group with the four members of Beth Cavendish's team, plus her cousin, Mose. Leading them was a bronze-ranker Jason didn't know but guessed to be from one of the lesser families in Greenstone. He was only twenty or twenty-one, and was eager to defer to Beth.

One of the members of Beth's team was a huge human named Hudson. He looked like Humphrey with twenty percent bonus person, to the point of being almost as large as Gary.

They boarded their skimmer and set off. They sailed over the sand, rushing through the scorched, desert air. Jason noticed the huge man looking at him.

"Something I can help you with?" Jason asked him.

"Aren't you that guy with the evil powers?" Hudson asked. "The one from the recording?"

Jason sighed.

"That's me," he said.

"You don't seem evil," Hudson told him.

"Then you have to ask yourself," Jason said. "Was I pretending to be evil then, or am I pretending to not be evil, now?"

"Which is it?" Hudson asked.

"Finding out would probably cost you more than you're willing to pay," said Niko, another member of Beth's team. Niko was a smoulder, a race Jason had only met a few of. They had dark skin, glowing red eyes and jet-black hair. All he really knew about them was that they had powerful earth and fire affinities, and that in spite of their sinister appearance, the few he had met were quite easygoing.

The skimmers paused to meet up with an adventurer assigned to keep track of the Ustei sand barge. He was a bronze ranker with the sand essence, completely at home out in the desert. He could move over the sands faster than a skimmer.

“As instructed, I didn’t hide that I was watching them,” the adventurer told the expedition leader. “They tried chasing me off a few times, but didn’t have anyone that could outpace me.”

"Any indication they'd be willing to talk to us, or do you think they'll attack on sight?" the expedition leader asked.

“Well, they might have been chasing me out of the desperate desire to have a nice chat,” the adventurer said. “I didn’t stick around to find out.”

“From what we know of the Ustei,” Vincent said, “so long as we show strength, they should be willing to talk.”

“I wouldn’t go into this expecting to come out unbloodied,” the expedition leader said.

“All we can do is our best,” Vincent said.

A ballista bolt from the sand barge penetrated the canvas canopy on the sand skimmer, pinning Mose to the base.

“Negotiations went badly, it seems,” Niko said, pulling the bolt out of Mose. Blood came with it, but Beth was already chanting a spell.

“Let the waters make whole that which has come to harm.”

Water appeared in front on Mose, flowing into the wound. It washed away the blood to reveal clean, repaired skin. The skimmer came to a stop and Hudson jumped out. The big man knelt to the ground, both palms flat in the sand. Suddenly a wall surged out of the sand to shield them from any further attacks.

“This is our regroup point,” Beth said. “If you get turned around or isolated, or the fight goes badly, get back here. Otherwise, everyone use Jason’s ability to stay in contact.”

With Jason’s new party interface ability, the group could stay in voice contact, even in the midst of battle.

“We’re going to move on the sand barge,” Beth directed, completely disregarding their bronze-ranker. “Hudson, front and centre. Emily and Niko flank, me and Mose, in the middle. Jason, you’re our roaming scout. If there’s any group looking organised and heading in our direction, warn us and sow some chaos. Is that something you can handle?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Beth turned to the bronze-ranker.

“You, uh... Clarence, was it?”

“Terrence,” the man said.

“You bring up the rear and keep a clear extraction path,” Beth instructed. “Losing is acceptable; failing to escape is not.”

They moved around the wall, The huge body of Hudson in the lead. As he moved, his body transformed from flesh to sandstone, which didn't slow him down at all. All around them, the other skimmers had come to a stop and the groups were moving on the sand barge, which had likewise pulled to a halt. People were pouring out of it by the dozen, charging wildly as they raised their weapons in the air.

Jason noticed some of the groups on his side were more organised than others. The two groups made up mostly of Gellers were moving in formation, much like Beth's team. Others seemed no better organised than the whooping Ustei charging in their direction. These less-controlled adventurers were already launching arrows, spears and bolts of magic, to limited effect with the groups were still at a distance.

Behind the charging Ustei, small but fast-firing ballistae were going to work. A bolt came sailing out of the air, only to be intercepted by an arrow shot by Emily, the archer from Beth's team. She was a celestine, with fair skin and golden eyes that matched her pixie-cut hair. She easily picked out the approaching bolt and fired an arrow that exploded on contact.

-
- You are in the area of an ally's [Invincible] aura. You have increased damage reduction against normal and iron-rank damage sources.
 - You are in the area of an ally's [Life-Bringer] aura. You recover health-over-time and healing abilities used on you are more effective.
-

Jason unleashed his own aura as his cloak of night appeared around him. Looking ahead, Ustei were charging at them in clusters.

“Watch your balance,” Hudson warned, and a large, flat block of sandstone rose from the sand under the team's feet. It started carrying them forward like a quick-moving raft.

Jason looked forward to the Ustei drawing closer.

“Sow some chaos, yeah?” he said to Beth.

“If you're up to it,” she said.

“I'll take a gander and see what I can do,” he said.

He took one of the throwing needles from the bandolier on his chest; one identified by a black cord. He pulled his arm back and tossed it in a long arc to land amongst the Ustei, engulfing a patch of them in a sphere of shadow. Jason stepped into Beth's shadow, falling through it like it was a hole in the ground. Shortly after, the group heard screaming mixed into the battle cries of the Ustei.

Chapter 90: The Path to Bronze

The sphere of shadows was short-lived, but Jason made the most of it as he danced among the blinded Ustei.

-
- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Ustei Warrior].
 - Weapon [Ruin] has inflicted [Vulnerable] on [Ustei Warrior].
 - Weapon [Ruin] has refreshed [Bleeding] on [Ustei Warrior]. [Bleeding] will absorb more healing before being negated.
-

His cloak and rapid teleportation made him impossible to pin down, even as the shadows faded. By the time they finally got a good look at his shadowy form, Beth and her team were crashing into the scattered cluster of Ustei. Some had fallen to slit throats or a dagger to the back of the neck, while others had poisoned blood streaming from non-lethal wounds. Some had no wounds at all, yet were bleeding from the eyes and nose from Jason's haemorrhage spell.

Only a fraction of the Ustei warriors were iron-rankers, with most having only one or two essences, if that. The results of clashing with a small army of adventurers were very bad for the nomads. Despite their numerical disadvantage, even the least capable adventurer teams were carving a path through the enemy.

Most of the teams had a bronze-ranker at the front, cutting down sand pirates like wheat in a field. Only as the adventurers neared the sand barge did the bronze-rank Ustei captains go out to meet them. Beth had her team's bronze-ranker at the back, but she didn't call him up as an Ustei captain bore down on them.

The stone raft they had been riding on sank back into the ground. It was replaced by a smaller block under the feet of Hudson, the huge man with the sandstone body. It carried him forward as a stone shield appeared in his hands, while the Ustei captain launched into some kind of charging special attack.

The captain's bronze-rank charging power shattered the stone shield and sent Hudson staggering back. The captain's own momentum was halted, however, and iron chains whipped up out of the sands to ensnare him. The chains started burning red hot, causing the captain to scream with rage. An arrow with a glowing head struck him and exploded. He surged forward, wrenching himself out of the chains.

Hudson, recovered from their initial clash, lunged forward as a huge stone hammer appeared in his hands for a powerful downward swing. The captain met the hammer with an upward swing of his large axe, shattering the hammer into shards. He turned his gaze on Hudson, not noticing the razor-sharp shards were not falling to the ground but instead floating in the air. Realisation came when the sharp fragments shot in to slice at his body.

The captain was on the back foot and Beth's team pressed hard, unleashing a barrage of attacks. Niko conjured an iron harpoon with a chain on the end, throwing it at the captain who deflected it with a bare hand. Other team members unleashed arrows charged with energy and magic bolts of fire and wind. Beth cast a spell that fired a thin jet of water, cutting like a bandsaw. The Ustei captain fell under the onslaught and the group reached the barge, alongside several other teams.

The sand barge was a terrifying edifice. First was the size, easily the equal of a passenger liner from Jason's own world. Jason had heard the entire Ustei tribe lived in it, and seeing it for himself, had no doubt it was true. After the sheer size, the next thing to be noticed were the giant bones that made up the basic structure. It looked like many leviathan creatures had their skeletons taken apart and reassembled as the framework of the vessel. Three giant skulls, each the size of a house, adorned the flat-nosed bow. The result was like a giant, undead chimera, stalking the desert.

The structure was akin to a passenger ferry, with multiple decks towering up into the air. Ramps had opened up in the side to disgorge the Ustei and were still doing so as the adventurer teams approached. Emily, the archer of Beth's team, fired an arrow that duplicated itself over and over as it sailed through the air. One became two, two became four, four became eight. It happened over and over in the short time the arrow was in flight until a storm of arrows rained down on the closest of the ramps. Ustei fell away, those waiting inside given pause as their fellows dropped away.

Hudson ploughed up the ramp, crashing into the people inside and making space for the others. They weren't the first to board. Other teams had made similar progress with other ramps, and Jason had noted the silver-rank expedition leader simply leapt through the air onto an upper deck. Jason followed Beth's team onto the lower decks, where he could make his home in the shadows.

Once onboard, things quickly devolved into a chaotic melee. The calibre of each Adventure Society team quickly started to show. Beth and Rick Geller's groups were both built around permanent teams, and the experience of working together became clear as their formations held, the whole stronger than the sum of the parts.

Other teams were quickly swept up in the chaos. Even Humphrey's group, made up of strong individual members but not a fixed team, had their formation split up. As for the less elite teams, the smaller confines started costing them casualties. Jason's power made him freely mobile, and he didn't gel with Beth's team who were used to one-another. Unneeded as part of the formation, Jason gave Beth a head's up as he moved to try and help the more overwhelmed individuals.

Colin proved to be an absolute menace after Jason sprayed him out over a crowd of Ustei. Jason instructed the leeches to go wild, knowing they shared his understanding of who was friend or foe. He suspected the occasional ally would suffer a nibble, but trusted Team Colin to largely stay on task.

Jason himself used a hit and run approach, doing his best to alleviate the pressure on other adventurers. Harassment and disruption were the goals as he was more interested in turning an ally's fight than finishing it for them. He did land lethal blows, when he could, but was satisfied with a savagely bleeding wound. Timed well, another adventurer could use the distraction to finish the job.

Auras were running wild through the barge, making it hard to pick out the rare iron-rankers among the teeming Ustei. When he found one he would pounce, leaving a full suite of afflictions before moving on. More and more he found people who had suffered the attentions of Colin and would find a dark space cast a spell. His cloak hid him away, while there was more than enough noise to mask a quiet chant.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

His punishment spell dealt instant damage for every affliction Colin had left on the victim. There was no indication of the spell other than the effect it produced, which startled the surrounding Ustei as one after another of their number withered and died without any apparent cause.

Other times he would instead use his feast of absolution spell to replenish stamina and mana. The stream of energy flowing from and enemy into his hand gave away his position, but having just been topped off he could teleport away freely, leaving confused enemies in his wake.

The adventurers slowly but surely gained control of the bottom deck. The bronze-rank Ustei captains held the various stairways leading up as they commanded the tribesmen to retreat up them. The bronze-rank adventurers started regrouping their teams, scattered in the melee. There had been a few casualties, but most were still alive and the healers went to work. Jason took the chance to gather up Colin, although many of the leeches were carried upstairs by the Ustei.

“Good work, team,” Jason told the leeches as he crouched down for them to enter a cut on the back of his hand. As he did so, the bronze-rankers gathered to discuss the next push.

“It’s going to be hard to establish a position on the higher decks,” Ernest Geller said. With the silver-ranked expedition leader somewhere in the upper decks, he asserted control of the gathered forces.

“We should gather all of our bronze rankers and force passage up one of the stairways and push through from there,” he said and the other bronze-rankers agreed. There was no strict chain of command, but Ernest’s confidence brought the others into line.

A team was assigned to watch their backs for an Ustei counter-strike from the other stairwells, then the attack on the next deck began. The tribesmen still had the numbers, but the essence disparity was the defining factor and the deck was soon wet with Ustei blood. After the organised surge up the chosen stairwell, the teams spread out from their foothold on the next level and things once again became chaos.

Jason spotted one of the weaker teams that had managed to stick together but were being hemmed in by Ustei. Their bronze-rank team leader went down, taking an Ustei captain with her. One of the iron-rankers took charge.

“Everyone use your coins!” he shouted out, and Jason watched them all slip silver-coins into their mouths.

“Oh, crap,” Jason muttered, looking around. He spotted Humphrey’s team through the wild melee and teleported over, arriving in front of their team leader, Ernest. The Gellers knew his cloak well, but he still pushed back the hood to prevent friendly fire.

“I just saw a team lose their leader and wolf down silver coins,” Jason said. “They’re going to need an extraction.”

“Idiots,” Ernest said. “Point the way.”

Jason did, sticking with Ernest’s team as they fought their way forward.

“You alright?” Humphrey asked Jason as they pushed forward.

“It’s a grim job,” Jason said and Humphrey nodded agreement.

They were closing in on the other team. Their burst of silver-rank power had overwhelmed the Ustei around them, but that fleeting strength was giving way to weakness as the power of the coins left them. Seeing their enemies flag, the Ustei pushed harder, but reinforcements arrived for the weakened adventurers in the nick of time.

Humphrey exploded into the Ustei like a cannonball, a single, sweeping stroke cutting three of them clean in half at the waist. His team capitalised on the momentum to surge

into the tribesmen. Jason appeared behind the largest cluster, once again unleashing a spray of Colin. The adventurers took control, Humphrey's team surrounding the coin-weakened adventurers. Their healer was going to work on the fallen team leader, who was badly hurt. An iron-rank healer wasn't enough to get a severely-injured bronze-ranker immediately back into the action.

"We'll get them out," Ernest told Jason. "You go back to making a mess."

Jason nodded, flicking his hood back up.

Eventually, the adventurers claimed full control of the great sand barge. While the main force was fighting below, the expedition leader had leapt straight to the upper decks. After crashing his way through the Ustei leadership, he confronted the only silver ranker they had, their tribal chief. Demonstrating the difference between a fully-trained adventurer and a nomad, the battle between silver-rankers was punishingly one-sided.

Once the clan chief fell, the surviving Ustei leadership gave up. It took time to filter down the decks of the sand barge as fighting continued, but the now-decimated Ustei tribe surrendered.

Jason was glad he had no part of the post-battle organisation. Imprisoning the Ustei in their own barge was a logistical nightmare, especially with some of what they found on board. The women and children had been locked away like slaves, which was borne out when they found the actual slaves in essentially the same conditions.

Waiting around with the other iron-rankers not roped into assisting, he sat down to meditate in the shade of the sandstone wall Hudson had made in the beginning.

The battle had been long, wild and quite unlike anything he had experienced. Rather than carefully choosing his moments he had been flickering through the battle, seizing chances as he found them. His familiar proved incredibly powerful, and Jason's abilities saw plenty of use. He had even taken the chance to use his new spells as much as he could.

Humphrey found him, saw him meditating, and sat down to do the same. The battle was as new an experience for him as it was for Jason, and he had his own insights to consolidate. Beth's team spotted them as they returned, the wall being their team's regrouping point. They looked at Jason and Humphrey, sitting cross-legged in the sand.

"They're training now?" Mose said.

"We are too," Beth told him, drawing a groan from Hudson.

“No slacking,” Beth told him. “You can have all the natural talent in the world, but dedication is what makes you the best.”

At her command, the others joined Jason and Humphrey. Not all of them were able to transition to a meditative state right after the battle, but at the very least they worked on clearing their minds.

Caught up in meditation, Jason was shaken out of it by a feeling of pressure in his body. He got up and staggered to the sandstone wall, using it to support him as a wave of weakness overtook him. He started coughing up gelatinous phlegm into the sand, speckled with blood. Then a blue-grey light started shining out of him and his body surged with strength.

-
- Ability [Haemorrhage] (Blood) has reached Iron 0 (100%).
 - Ability [Haemorrhage] (Blood) has reached Iron 1 (00%).

 - All [Blood Essence] abilities have reached [Iron 1].
 - Linked attribute [Power] has increased from [Iron 0] to [Iron 1].

 - Progress to bronze rank: 1.25% (2/4 essences complete).

Jason pushed himself off the wall, feeling slightly dizzy. He noticed the others had all broken their meditations and stood up. They were looking at him with smiling faces.

“That first attribute bump is a little rough, isn’t it?” Beth asked.

Jason nodded, uncharacteristically silent.

“Congratulations,” Humphrey said, giving Jason a slap on the back that almost sent him sprawling into the sand.

“You’ve taken your first step,” Beth said, giving him a pat on the arm. “Welcome to the path to bronze rank.”

Chapter 91: Life & Death

Jason let out a contented sigh.

“This is nice,” he said, then picked up a sandwich and bit into it.

The picnic at the Island’s park district had plenty of people. Danielle Geller was at a picnic table, which she was sharing with Thalia Mercer, Rufus and Vincent. Jory was sitting at another table with Clive and the brother-sister pair of Rick and Phoebe Geller. Gary was sitting in a folding chair with a sandwich the length of Jason’s arm.

“You know you could cut that into smaller pieces, right?” Farrah asked him.

“Then it wouldn’t be an enormous sandwich,” Gary said. “It would just be a bunch of sandwiches.”

Cassandra was sitting next to Jason on a blanket. Humphrey and Gabrielle had their own blanket, like Jason and Cassandra, but Humphrey kept shooting nervous glances at his mother watching over them.

“It feels like it’s been all work and no play lately,” Jason said. Sand pirates, underground lairs, sand pirates again.”

“There’s been a little play,” Cassandra said, lips curving in a tantalising arc.

“You are a beacon of luminous delight in a dark sea of obligation,” he said and gave her a gentle kiss.

“See?” Gabrielle said. “It isn’t that hard.”

Humphrey looked nervously at his mother again.

“Uh...”

Rufus stood up from his position at the picnic table, raising up a glass.

“Here’s to our iron-rankers and their first bronze-rank monster,” he said. “Not to mention two racial power evolutions.”

As the others raised their glasses, Jason smiled, Humphrey looked embarrassed and Clive looked surprised to be involved at all.

“Jason,” Rufus said. “You’ve come a long way from the confused, half-naked man we met in basement in a cannibal’s cage.”

“You say that like we weren’t in cages too,” Gary interjected.

“Thank you, Gary,” Rufus said, then turned back to Jason. “Even then, you were something special. Something strange, certainly, but also special. Some of us wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for your actions that day. Now, look at you. Taking down bronze-rank monsters; terrorising Danielle’s poor trainees. We’re all adventurers here and, I think,

rather good ones. You may have come to us from very far away, but you belong here, just as much as any of us.”

Jason rubbed a hand over his mouth, misty-eyed. He got up to his feet, glass in hand and looked over the assemblage of friends.

“Thank you, Rufus,” he said. “Thank you all. I’m a stranger in a strange land, and I know I can be... difficult, even at the best of times. You’ve all helped me, guided me, taught me, challenged me. Put up with me, more often than not.”

“No kidding,” Farrah called out.

“Quiet, you,” Jason admonished. “I’d just like to express how grateful I am to all of you. I’ve built a better life here in months than I did in my old world in years, and I have all of you to thank for that. I couldn’t ask for better people to be stuck down a hole with, which is lucky, because I recently was.”

He raised his glass.

“Here’s to all of you.”

“That’s right!” Gary yelled out, hoisting a goblet the size of Jason’s head. “We’re pretty great.”

“You haven’t regaled us with the story of fighting the marsh hydra yet,” Farrah said. “By the time we got back from our own contract, Cassandra had already whisked you away.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “Clive, Humphrey, get over here; we have a tale to tell.”

They left out the part about the skill books. Jason suspected it intersected with the confidential mission that brought Rufus, Gary and Farrah to Greenstone, and after some consideration, asked Humphrey and Clive to stay quiet. He decided not to put the adventurers in a position where they had to ask Jason to stop investigating, although it was Clive doing the actual investigating.

At the end of the tale, Jason pulled out the item they had looted from the hydra. It was a bronze-rank, five-tailed whip with biting mouths at the end of each tail. The whip tails seemed to have a life of their own, waving madly and snapping at people as Gary waved it around. Jason had handed it over to demonstrate, as he couldn’t use bronze-rank items himself.

Humphrey had his own news, having been promoted to two-star, which drew another round of toasting. By this point people were starting to get woozy, especially with Gary trying to get people to toast to day-drinking. Even Jason was in his cups, sharing the same bronze-rank liquor as his freinds to get past his resistances.

“Why didn’t we all get awakening stones?” Jason asked Vincent, the only Adventure Society official present. “Killing that hydra was super-hard. It almost ate my boy Hump!”

“As a rule,” Vincent said, “we don’t give out awakening stones to people for killing monsters above their rank. It would just incentivise people getting themselves killed trying to jump ranks.”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “Jumping ranks isn’t something to take lightly. A good adventurer should be able to jump ranks, but only against the right monster.”

“Don’t tell them that,” Vincent scolded.

“I think I should give it a try,” Rick said.

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” Vincent said. “Iron-rankers rushing off to their deaths.”

“I’ll do it in the mirage chamber,” Rick said, getting unsteadily to his feet. “Come on, Jason, you can come to.”

“Sit back down,” Danielle told him. “How many times do I have to tell you children about using the mirage chamber while drunk?”

“I’m fine,” Rick said, unconvincingly.

“Such a lightweight,” Phoebe said, shaking her head at her brother.

“The mirage chamber is booked today anyway,” Danielle said. “The bronze-rankers are practising sandy terrain encounters.”

“They have a whole desert for that!” Rick complained.

The drink continued to flow and the conversation roamed. The wiser iron-rankers went easy on the drinks to try and catch any loose-lipped reveals from the bronze and silver-rankers.

“...a committee,” Danielle was saying. “All silver-rankers who spent decades buying up monster cores while they sat on their backsides. Thalia, do you remember when we were the age of these kids? Crazy, we were; knocking out contracts faster than they could post them. Now they’re all sitting around like fonts of wisdom, deciding what to do about pirates that they never would have gone out to catch in the first place!”

“Your Mum seems to like the sauce, Hump,” Jason said.

“She can get a bit boisterous when Father isn’t around,” Humphrey said. “Or when he is, for that matter.”

“Hump takes after his father,” Phoebe said to Jason. “His Dad is the straight line to his Mum’s squiggles. Kind of like Hump is for you.”

“There you go, Hump,” Jason said, throwing an arm around Humphrey’s broad shoulders. “Jeez, you’re a biggun.”

“Please stop saying Hump.”

Later, Rufus was addressing all the iron-rankers in a group.

“Don’t go rushing off to fill all your awaking stone slots. There’s an opportunity coming up. I can’t tell you about it, but in about a month there will be a... thing.”

“What kind of thing?” Jason asked.

Rufus drunkenly frowned at Jason.

“It’s a thing. Shut up.”

Drink and the soporific afternoon sun left most of the group aggressively lounging. Jason was laid out on a blanket with Cassandra, Humphrey and Gabrielle and the one next to them.

“It sounds like your problem is the butter,” Jason said to Gabrielle. “You want to take it out of the cooler box and let it stand for fifteen minutes; no more, no less. Oh, and get a stand mixer instead of creaming it by hand. You can get good ones from Artifice Association.”

“Maybe you can show me?” Gabrielle asked.

“Sure,” Jason said. “Madam Landry gives me free run of the kitchen, and learning about biscuits is very important. There’s this whole country where I come from that call scones biscuits. They’re all lunatics.”

The memorial service was held at the Adventure Society campus. The mausoleum occupied a portion of the campus abutting the north shore of the Island. The shore of the artificial island was raised up from the water, with lawn seeded atop. The service was held overlooking the water.

The adventurer’s remains had been cremated before the service and were stored in an urn kept by the family. The adventurer’s badge was presented to them by Humphrey, while the tracking stone they had followed to his remains were ceremonially placed within the Hall of Fallen Heroes. The mausoleum held not the remains of adventurers, but the stones held by the Adventure Society that marked their lives.

Jason and Clive stood by solemnly throughout the service. After it was done, the family thanked them for bringing their son home. It was widely known what Humphrey, Clive and Jason had faced to do so, and they were looked on with respect. They were invited to a private gathering, but Humphrey had warned them that it was correct etiquette to be asked, and correct etiquette to respectfully decline.

The gathered adventurers made their way to a bar where they took part in a traditional adventurer wake. It was an informal ceremony where a drink was shared in

silence to the fallen, then a drink was taken to Humphrey, Jason and Clive for brining him home. Then those who knew the dead adventurer shared stories as the mood shifted from mourning to a celebration of life.

The adventurer was not from a famous family, or well known for his accomplishments. Many were grateful that someone as well-known as Humphrey was willing to go out and find their friend. Even if the Adventure Society didn't have rules against sending an adventurer's friends and family to retrieve their body, they all knew they would have fallen too. Jason discovered even he was building something of a reputation among adventurers. It was no match for Humphrey's, but he took many a respectful handshake and offered drink.

As the night grew late, Humphrey, Jason and Clive left with most of the adventurers, only the dead man's closest friends remaining. The Island streets were brightly lit by street lamps as they walked side-by-side in silence.

Chapter 92: Unusual Contract

The Adventure Society campus was an unusual bustle of activity as Jason made his way to the jobs hall. It was normal to see people wandering about, but there was a preponderance of Society officials moving about in a harried fashion. The marshalling yard was normally an open space where groups would meet up, but it was now covered in tents and surrounded by temporary fencing.

Outside the jobs hall, he found a notice that the marshalling yard was temporarily off-limits. It directed teams and expeditions to use the space in front of the administration building to assemble. As he was reading the notice, he felt a familiar aura, turning to spot Beth Cavendish approaching.

“Quite the debacle, isn’t it?” she said, nodding at the notice.

“Do you know what it’s all about?” Jason asked. “I’m assuming this is something to do with all those tribesmen we captured. Did your uncle let anything slip?”

The silver-rank leader of the expedition had been Beth’s uncle, Jason discovered. He was the one who had defeated the Ustei chief and accepted the surrender of their leadership.

“The Adventure Society wants to find out why the Ustei came south in the first place, then put them on their barge and send them back,” Beth said. “It isn’t going smoothly.”

“They don’t want to go back?” Jason asked.

“No,” Beth said, “and Uncle Ephraim won’t say why. What he did tell me was that if I did pick anything up, I should keep it to myself. To prevent any potential unrest, is what he said.”

“That sounds serious,” Jason said.

“What he did tell me is the other problems the Ustei have caused. For one thing, they take their defeat and surrender seriously. They’re claiming that their war barge and everything in it belongs to Uncle Ephraim, now.”

“Is that a problem?” Jason asked.

“It is once you realise that includes all the women, children and slaves,” Beth said. “We didn’t fight our way up high enough to find where they were all chained up.”

“Slaves,” Jason said. “That’s never a good sign. Wait, they want to give up all the tribe’s women? Won’t the tribe die out?”

“It’s their culture, apparently. The idea is that now they have to go raiding for more women.”

Jason shook his head.

"It just keeps getting worse," he said.

"You're right about that. Remember I said they don't want to go north?"

"Yeah."

"They want to go east. The nomad tribes follow a circuit around the northern oases. The eastern desert isn't as harsh as the north, and there are more oases."

"With towns and villages around them, not to mention everything in the delta they would chew through to get there." Jason said. "Do they serious expect us to unleash a literal horde of men looking to kidnap women and slaves on a bunch of small, isolated populations?"

"It's their way, and they say we should kill them or let them be."

"I'm all for freedom," Jason said, "but that does not include the freedom to take people as slaves."

"You know they hit up one of the coastal villages, the day before we attacked?"

"I didn't hear about that," Jason said.

"Those villages make a living from fishing and collecting water quintessence. The raiders rely on water quintessence for survival in the desert, so they raided a village. Losing food and quintessence is one thing, but they took all the people."

"We got them back right?" Jason asked.

"The ones who survived. Nasty business."

"What are they going to do with all these tribesmen?" Jason asked. "Doesn't sound like we can let them go, but we can't just lock them all in a prison somewhere."

"I have no idea what they're going to do with them," Beth said. "Someone floated the idea of taking the Ustei men as slaves, which would at least be something they understood."

"That's insane," Jason said, face creasing with anger. "Slavery isn't allowed here is it? Have I been seeing people and not realising they're slaves?"

"We don't have slaves," Beth said. "We have indentured servants. A lot of criminals are sentenced to indenture, then their indenture is sold or auctioned to recoup the cost of their crimes."

"You sell criminals?"

"What do they do with them where you come from?" Beth asked.

"We lock them in boxes for years and treat them like animals," Jason said, then shook his head. "I think we both need better systems."

“You don’t need to worry about taking the Ustei as slaves, at least,” Beth said. “The idea died completely when someone pointed out that the Ustei wouldn’t accept it. Their culture doesn’t allow warriors to be made slaves. For them, capture means release or death. It’s the only thing they’re willing to accept.”

“They aren’t talking about executing the whole tribe, are they?” Jason asked.

“I’m not sure,” Beth said. “Uncle Ephraim was only willing to tell me the ideas they’ve already rejected.”

“It sounds like an absolute mess,” Jason said, then tapped a finger on the notice. “Which I guess it is. Admin must be a mad house with every team assembling on their front steps.”

They went into the jobs hall and checked at the front desk. Since neither had any assigned contracts waiting, they went to the noticeboards. They were both two-star adventurers, so they went to the same one.

“You’d be after the big-ticket items, with a whole team behind you, right?” Jason asked as they perused the notices.

“That’s right,” Beth said. “Mostly I’m after something that can push the team, but also something that still pays out well, split four ways. Fortunately, they tends to be the same jobs. You work mostly solo?”

“Yeah, but I’ve been picking up some group work here and there,” Jason said. “I’ve worked with Humphrey Geller a bit, and a friend from the Magic Society.”

Jason plucked a notice off the board, frowning at it.

“Find something good?” Beth asked.

“Something interesting,” Jason said. “It reads like a one-star mission, but it’s two-stars.”

“Probably means it was one-star but some complication cropped up. Once a couple of people try and fail, they kick it up. They tend to be annoying contracts, so most of us avoid them.”

“I’m more about learning things the hard way,” Jason said. “I’ll see you around, Beth.”

She sent him off with a wave and a smile, turning back to the notices as Jason took his to the front desk. It was listed as a straightforward monster hunt, for a monster called a fergax. Jason looked it up on his monster archive tablet, seeing it listed as a highly-aggressive, bear-like creature. High strength, moderate speed and fortitude, no exotic abilities.

“Morning, Bert,” Jason greeted Albert at the contract registry desk.

“Good morning, Mr Asano,” Albert said. “Quite the kerfuffle we have going on today.”

“So I’ve seen,” Jason said. “I don’t suppose you’ve heard anything about it?”

“Oh, I’m a bit low on the ladder to know about that, Mr Asano,” Albert said. “I imagine you’d know more than I. Weren’t you part of that expedition out in the desert?”

“I was,” Jason said. “They didn’t tell us grunts much, which I’m realising isn’t something I’m comfortable with. I’ll need to be more judicious in what I’m willing to participate in.”

Albert nodded at the notice in Jason’s hands.

“Speaking of choosing contracts, Mr Asano,” he said. “What have you got there?”

Jason handed over the notice.

“Can you tell me why this one is two-stars?” he asked.

Albert gave it a glance.

“Ah, I know this one,” he said. “It’s a bit of an unusual contract. Do you know anything about the fergax, Mr Asano?”

“Just what’s in the Magic Society archive,” Jason said.

“Well, there isn’t much else to a fergax,” Albert said. “Simple creatures, not too bright. Very aggressive, which makes them easy to find. Usually they spawn in the driest parts of the delta, where it’s actually possible to grow some lumber-worthy trees.”

“That’d make it some of the most valuable land in the delta, right?”

“Indeed it would, sir,” Albert said. “People get real fastidious when it comes to land rights, out there. Most times the laws are whatever the richest person nearby says they are, but the land rights for the lumber region are heavily regulated.”

“What’s different about this contract?” Jason asked.

“There’s a fellow who owns a lumber mill out there,” Albert said. “Been around long enough to know a fergax when he spots one. Every time we send someone out there, though, no fergax. No deaths, no damage which is pretty much how you track a fergax. The mill owner has registered a sighting eight times in three months, even pushed a nice incentive on it. People keep taking the contract, going out, and not finding a thing. It’s reached the point where the Society is about ready to black-mark him.”

“Black-mark?” Jason said.

“That means he won’t be able to register contracts.”

“I can’t imagine that would be good for someone who relies on land out in the delta.”

“I don’t imagine so. Might even be legal repercussions; those regulations I mentioned. Couldn’t say for certain, with it not really being my area.”

Jason frowned, thoughtfully.

“Whose area is it?”

Bert thought it over for a moment.

“I guess that would be the folks at the Civic Records Hall,” he said.

“Thanks, Bert. Put me down for the contract; I’m taking it.”

Jason didn’t immediately set out for the delta. His first stop was the Civic Authority Records Hall & Library in the guild district. After paying small fee for access and a moderate bribe for assistance, he was able to find what he was after. As he was about to leave, he turned to his bribed functionary.

“Oh, and Miss?” he said. “Do be sure not to tell anyone that I was here, or what I was here for. Only you and I know that, so if I find out that someone else knows, I’ll know it was you.”

He walked right up to her, pushing down on her aura with his own. She stood there, shivering slightly as he leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

“It doesn’t matter who you tell, because they can’t protect you from me. The Mercer family can shield you if I try to get you censured for having loose lips, but that isn’t what’s going to happen. One day, all your colleagues here will wonder why you didn’t turn up. Your family will wonder where you’ve gone, but they’ll never find out. Do you know why?”

“Be... because you’ve killed me?”

“I doubt you have any idea what my powers do, so I’ll explain the portions that are relevant to you. First, your body will die. Not of anything; it’ll just stop being alive. Then, I’ll suck all the moisture out of your corpse. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but life force is a beautiful, vibrant red. I’ll be taking any that your body has left, which will dry out your remains, nicely. Then I’ll collect you in a cask. Not a big one, because there won’t be much of you left, but I have a dimensional storage space, so it’s fine either way. Whatever remnants there are, I’ll clean off the floor with crystal wash. Are you familiar with it? Marvellous stuff, but hard to afford if you’re not making adventurer money. Suffice to say, it will clean up any residual stains of what used be your body. Then, on my next trip out to the delta, I’ll scatter what’s left of you, scoop by scoop, into the bogs and marshes, until your final resting place is just sticky patches of mud.”

He stepped back, flashing her a friendly smile.

“So let’s just make it our little secret, yes?”

“Absolutely not,” Clive said. Jason had found him in the chaos of his disorganised study.

“It’s for a contract,” Jason said.

“I don’t care if it’s for the god of generosity,” Clive said. “Those records are anonymous, and they stay anonymous. Even Lucian Lamprey wouldn’t violate that, and he’s as rotten as three-week meat.”

“Who?” Jason asked.

“Lucian Lamprey,” Clive said. “Branch director of the Magic Society here in Greenstone.”

“Never met the man. I guess I shouldn’t complain about your reticence; I should applaud integrity wherever I can find it.”

“There’s no telling if we would have a record of the power you’re looking for, anyway,” Clive said. “Not everyone records their powers with the Magic Society.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “What about a ritual that shows me if a summoning was used in an area?”

“A regular, essence ability summoning?” Clive asked. “I can do you one better. How does a ritual sound that not only shows what was summoned, but takes an aura imprint of the summoner and puts it on a tracking stone? You’d need to be right on the site of the summoning, and within maybe half a day of the summoning, though.”

“Clive, I could kiss you.”

“Please don’t.”

“How about this,” Jason said. “If you can’t tell me who has the ability, can you tell me everything the Magic Society has about an ability?”

“I could,” Clive said, “but why would I bother? Don’t you have the magic tablet that can access all the Magic Society’s public records on powers? You know we sell them, right?”

“Oh yeah,” Jason said. The same list that showed restricted essences had records on everything the Magic Society knew about individual powers. Jason looked up the power he was interested in on his tablet.

“Standard salt circle,” he read. “No worries. Hunt me up a copy of that tracking ritual, Clive, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Why would you be in my hair?” Clive asked as he started looking through bookshelves.

“It’s just a saying,” Jason said. “It means I’m tangled up in your business in an annoying manner.”

“You don’t need my hair for that,” Clive said. “You have a natural talent.”

“Harsh,” Jason said with a wince.

“Did you hear anything about what’s coming next after capturing all those sand pirates?” Clive asked, still looking for a copy of the ritual.

“Not much,” Jason said. “Apparently everything is under wraps until they figure out what to do next.”

“Well, I hope they don’t need as many drivers, whatever they do,” Clive said. “I’ve been trying to figure out who that ancient complex belonged to. As I thought, I’ve been cut out of the investigation in favour of Lamprey’s favourites. Of course, the skill books we extricated may have slipped my mind.”

Jason chuckled.

“How’s that going?” Jason asked.

“It’s odd,” Clive said. “It’s like there’s a ‘whatever it is I’m looking for’ shaped hole in the historical records, as if someone went through and purged it. I’m putting a puzzle together by connecting around the outside, working in, until I’m left with a gap the same shape as the weird piece I started with.”

“I love puzzles,” Jason said. “Farrah had me doing speed runs as mental training.”

“I like them too,” Clive said. “Do you have one of the magic sets where the picture and the pieces change? Back when I was studying to join the Magic Society we’d get drunk and try to solve them.”

“Oh, we’re definitely doing that,” Jason said. “Hey, you should talk to Gabrielle about the missing knowledge thing. You know; Humphrey’s lady friend.”

“The acolyte of knowledge,” Clive said. “That’s a good idea. Destroying knowledge is the biggest sin they have. Can you pass me the book on that table?”

Jason took a book out from under a potted plant and handed it to Clive.

“I’m fairly certain that ritual is in here,” Clive said, flipping through it. “I’ll make you a copy and you can be on your way.”

“Finding high salt content?” Jory said. “Yeah, I have something for that. Come with me.”

Jason followed Jory into his new store room, practically an alchemical warehouse.

“With the clinic closed all week for the final renovations,” Jory said, “things have been completely mad. The big re-opening is in a couple of days. Will you be in town?”

“Not sure,” Jason said. “I have this contract and I’m not sure how long it’ll take.”

“You know you’re the one who made all this possible,” Jory said, gesturing to the building around him. “It’d be nice to thank you, publicly,”

“On second thoughts,” Jason said, “I’m pretty sure that contract will keep me out in the delta. I’d rather be a silent partner, thank you very much.”

“I’m not sure that works, with you having been healing sick people with your magic powers for months, but sure.”

Jory took a bamboo watering canister down off a shelf, giving it a shake.

“Should be about four cubic metres of water in there,” he said.

“A dimensional bag watering can?” Jason asked.

Jory chuckled.

“Just clean it out and top it off before giving it back,” he said. “Those things aren’t cheap.”

“Will do,” Jason said.

Jory opened a cabinet, taking out a large glass bottle with a teal liquid inside. He tipped half the bottle into the watering canister before putting the bottle back. Then he took out a small vial of liquid, before handing the vial and the canister to Jason. He gave Jason the instructions to use, clean and refill the canister.

“Not sure what you’re up to,” Jory said, “but good luck.”

Chapter 93:

Truth

The lumber region was on the south side of the river, in the eastern parts of the delta, furthest from the city. Jason had long been refining his long-distance running style, that employed the weight-reducing power of his cloak. It was really more like a series of floating, horizontal hops over whatever surface he was crossing, be it land or water.

He'd been through enough of the delta that he had most of it mapped out and he could save time by taking direct routes instead of following the embankment roads. He could walk on water and teleport past obstacles, so while he might not match the speed of airboat travel, his straight-line navigation outpaced an ordinary mount. It required occasional replenishment from mana and stamina potions, but Jory's low-cost options were easily worth it. Their moderate effects might not have the kick required for intense combat, but they were perfect for Jason's travel needs.

The days were growing shorter as summer moved into autumn, and the sun had just set as Jason arrived in the town of Leust. It was one of the largest and richest towns in the delta, with paved roads and stone instead of mud-brick for the buildings. Mostly it was the cheaper, yellow desert stone, but there were green stone buildings as well.

The interior coolness afforded by the water affinity of green stone was appreciated by everyone who could afford it. In the muggy heat of the delta, it was often the difference between a good night's rest and a sweaty, sleepless night. For that reason, Jason selected a large, green stone inn to stay the night. Pausing outside the door, Jason stopped to put on his game face.

His posture shifted and tightened, face and shoulders both scrunched up in annoyance. He threw open the door and marched inside, face full of aggravation. Striding across the room, he parked himself angrily on a barstool.

"Drink," he demanded of the barman. "Best you have, and same for food, after."

The barman reached for a bottle of amber spirits behind the bar.

"Not that bitter crap," Jason said. "Do you have any Norwich Blue?"

"Uh, yes sir, we use it to make blue juice-jumpers."

"Blue juice jumpers?"

"It's a mixed drink, sir, but..."

The barman leaned in close.

"...usually we serve to our female patrons."

"If someone has a problem with what I'm drinking then I'll be happy to clean them off my sword."

Jason was in full adventuring gear, weapons at his hip and bandolier of throwing darts on his torso. He turned and took in the busy common room at a glance, no one willing to meet his gaze.

"That's what I thought," he said, turning back to the bar.

"If I may ask, sir," the barman said as he made the drink, "are you an adventurer?"

"That's what the badge says," Jason grumbled. "Some bloody adventure they've sent me on, though. Do you know how many people they sent out before me after this imaginary frigging monster? Eight! I'm the ninth, and I'll be the last, one way or another. You can believe that. If this monster isn't out here this time, I'll personally see to it that the prick sending out these notices gets black marked. A fergax that doesn't kill anyone or break anything? What a load of crap."

"That would be the Lindover Lumber Mill you'll be heading out to, then?" The barman asked.

"Probably," Jason said. "They gave me a map; I don't care what the place is bloody-well called."

Jason had trouble grumbling through what turned out to be a delicious drink and a quite excellent dinner, but he did it anyway, resisting his normal urge to seek out the recipe. He retired angrily to his room, performing a simple ritual to shield himself from surveillance magic before dropping the act.

The next morning he left the inn, as irritably as he arrived and set out for the lumber mills. The lumber region was more solid ground than marsh, like most of the delta, but not dry and hard or dead and empty like the desert. It was like walking through a forestry reserve, with straight, earthen roads passing between trees lined up in neat rows. Sometimes it was akin to a natural, if neatly-arranged forest. Other times he was walking past a sea of saplings or the devastation of a recently deforested field. Wagons went past on a regular basis, wheeling loads of lumber to Leust.

Jason passed several large, wooden archways with signage declaring the name of the lumber mill the road behind them led to. When he reached the one labelled Lindover, he walked through it. He followed the road through the trees to a large lumber mill, but it was still and devoid of people. Jason kept going past the mill and up to a sizeable farmhouse.

Knocking on the door, he was met by the most lumberjack-looking man Jason had ever seen and they made introductions. Kyle Lindover was a leonid even larger than Gary, with a red plaid shirt, tough worker's pants and huge, thick boots. He looked like he could knock down trees by punching them.

"If I was a tree and saw you coming my way," Jason said, "I think I'd just surrender. Do you like pressing wildflowers?"

"No," Kyle said. "Why do you ask?"

"Just something I heard about lumberjacks," Jason said.

Kyle showed Jason around. Kyle had shut down the mill after the repeated fergax sightings, not wanting his workers to get hurt. His business was lucrative enough to sustain the downtime for a while, but his reserves were falling short and most of his workers had taken up with other operations, having their own families to feed.

"My wife and kids are staying with her parents in Greenstone," Kyle said. "I've been maintaining things here, but every time I look at starting back up, the monster appears again. I keep getting adventurers out here, but they don't find anything. I'm afraid I'm going to be black-listed."

"We'll have to see what we can do about that. I'd like to start by seeing all the places the monster was spotted."

Kyle did exactly as asked, taking Jason all around the property. There was the lumber mill, the farmhouse, and a dormitory for the people working the mill. There was also a small farm, producing food for Kyle, his family and the workers. Kyle was doing his best to keep everything in order, but he was clearly getting overwhelmed.

Jason said he wanted to look around for himself, leaving Kyle to go back to the farmhouse. Jason made his way around the property until his map ability had fully unveiled everything. Afterwards, he sat down with Kyle at the farmhouse, enjoying some fruit punch Kyle made while Jason was roaming about.

"This is really good," Jason said. "Can I get the recipe?"

Looking over his map, Jason marked out the areas the fergax had been spotted. He could just tap a finger to the map and set a marker, or drag his finger to mark a whole zone. Kyle watched curiously as, from his perspective, Jason was wagging his finger in empty air.

"Invisible magic map," Jason told him, not looking up.

"I figured it was something of the like," Kyle said.

Looking at the map, the general area the monster was coming from was quite clear. Jason marked out a grid pattern to search, then left the farmhouse to get to work. He took out the watering can Jory lent him, complete with extra-dimensional water storage, and started sprinkling it over the area marked on his map. Kyle looked on with curiosity.

"What exactly are you doing?" Kyle asked.

"Looking for salt," Jason said. He kept moving from spot to spot, sprinkling little bits of water as he went.

"Salt?" Kyle asked.

"That's right," Jason said. "When you use an essence ability to summon a monster, the first step is to make a summoning circle. It isn't complicated, but you do need to use the

right material. I have some friends who use obsidian dust and iron filings, but exotic materials like that are generally for the fancy summons. Most people just need a circle of good-old salt, including people who summon a fergax. I'm betting the summoner just kicked it into the dirt, after, rather than collect it up."

"You think someone is summoning the monster?"

"I do," Jason said.

"You think someone is trying to drive me off my land?"

"I do," Jason said.

Kyle hung his head.

"Why us?" he wondered allowed.

"You're independent," Jason said. "You don't have a backer in Greenstone to push back with."

"How am I meant to prove what's going on?"

"You're not," Jason said. "I am. Adventure Society, at your service."

"I've had the Adventure Society out here before," Kyle said. "How are you going to prove any of what you're talking about? We don't even know who's behind it."

"Sure we do," Jason said. "This investigation is taking a two-pronged approach. Best of both worlds, you might say. What we're doing here is using some local ingenuity to follow the magic. That's one prong. The other is a method we use where I come from called following the money."

White smoke started rising from where Jason had just sprinkled water.

"That's our first hit," Jason said.

Jason took out a metal stake with a bright red ribbon tied to it and shoved it into the ground. Then he went back to moving through his grid pattern, sprinkling more water.

"There isn't a lot of business regulation, locally," Jason said. "That's what happens when the people who make the rules are the ones who own the businesses. When I took this contract, however, I discovered the lumber industry is a notable exception. The industry and its attendant land rights are very regulated."

"That's why I'm in danger of losing my land," Kyle said. "There are production requirements for landholders, and we haven't been producing since this monster started showing up."

"Well, good news," Jason said. "Since investigation here seems to consist of finding the first guy that can throw fireballs and asking him to take a look, no one seems to have invented shell companies. I found where all the records were kept, spent a few hours to poke around and found everything I needed. With a little help from a bribed official."

"You bribed a city official?"

“Not to do anything illegal,” Jason said. “Just to help me navigate a less-than-helpful records system. That’s how I know who’s behind all this and why.”

“You already know?”

“Yep,” Jason said. “Now I just need some corroborating evidence, by which I mean whoever they’re actually paying to come out here and summon the monster. I get that person to talk and we can get you back up and running.”

“You think they will?”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “Even if they don’t, we’ll get something we can use.”

Jason searched out his whole grid, putting down a stake each time Jory’s water-potion mix found high salt content. When he was done, Jason took stock. His stakes with the eye-catching ribbons were clustered in a small area.

“About what I thought,” he said. “I checked the whole are to make sure, but it looks like our summoner comes out here and summons his monster in more-or-less the same spot, every time. Then he has it wander about until you see it. I take it you never chased the creature.”

“A huge aggressive monster?” Kyle asked. “No, I didn’t.”

“Eminently sensible,” Jason said. “When was the last time you saw it?”

“Five days ago,” Kyle said.

“Probably too long to track it from the last summoning,” Jason said. “I’ll give it a go, though.”

Jason conducted the ritual Clive had given him at each of the summoning sites he had found. Ghostly images of a bear-like creature appeared briefly, but there wasn’t enough residual magic to imprint the summoner’s aura on a tracking stone.

“Yeah,” Jason said as he kicked the salt he used for the circles into the dirt. “We’re going to need a fresh monster siting.”

“That last appearance was less than a week ago,” Kyle said. “That could be some wait.”

“No worries, Kyle,” Jason said. “I’ve already laid some groundwork.”

Jason returned to the inn as the sun ducked below the horizon, unhappier than when he left that morning.

“Food and drink, same as before,” he demanded of the barman. “I’m out of here at first light. I’m not staying a moment longer than I have to.”

“No luck?” the barman asked.

“It’s not a matter of luck when some idiot is making things up,” Jason said bitterly. “I swear, if one more report comes in from Lindover, I’m not coming back. I’ll have him black-marked on the spot and let the damn bureaucrats sort it out.”

As promised, Jason departed at first light down the road to Greenstone. He passed through the next town as well to make sure before he cut back cross country to the Lindover Property. The trees made stealth easy on the occasions he saw workers on the properties he passed through.

It was three days before the fergax appeared. With his aura fully restrained, he followed it with a recording crystal active as it roamed around for several hours. Kyle came out and spotted it, running when it roared at him, but it didn’t give chase. It didn’t do anything but roam about until it vanished when the summoning duration expired. All the while, Jason quietly stayed out of its path, watching it as the image was captured by the recording crystal floating over his head.

“The problem is we have bears around here,” Kyle said as he and Jason looked at the tracks left behind by the fergax. “Sometimes they get curious and come in close, and their tracks are pretty much identical. Some of the other adventurers that came out thought I was seeing bears and getting rattled.”

“Well, we have the recording now, so at least we can demonstrate there really is a monster,” Jason assured him. “That means a black-mark is off the table, at the very least. Next, we see if we can’t do a little better than that.”

Using the watering can again, Jason found a large salt reaction and performed the tracking ritual. This time an aura imprint found its way onto his prepared tracking stone. As expected, it led him straight in the direction of the neighbouring Clementson property, which Jason had anticipated before ever arriving.

It was laid out much the same as the Lindover property but was in full operation. There were workers everywhere, and the magically-driven saws could be heard loudly cutting into wood in the mill. The other big difference was the farmhouse. The Lindover farmhouse was large but functional. On the Clementson property, the farmhouse was both larger and more ostentatious.

Jason didn’t bother to hide, striding through the property as if he owned the place. He got a few glances from workers, but the combat robes and the weapons said adventurer, which no one wanted to mess with. A man came out to meet him and was forced to follow along as Jason didn’t slow, letting the tracking stone lead him to his quarry. Where the lumber workers had practical attire like Kyle, this man wore city fashions.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” the man said, “what brings you to my property?”

“Monster hunt,” Jason said, without so much as looking at the man. “You’re Clementson?”

“Eustace Clementson, yes sir. You think there’s a monster on the property?”

“I’m sure you’re familiar with the troubles your neighbour is having,” Jason said. “A monster appeared there several hours ago, and I’ve been tracking it to the source.”

“Tracking it?” Clementson asked, unable to hide the panic in his voice. It might have been at the idea of a monster on his property, but Jason didn’t think so.

“I managed to get an aura imprint. That imprint led me directly to your property.”

Clementson was starting to sweat, his eyes darting nervously in the direction Jason was heading.

“You’ve obviously been working hard,” Clementson said. “Why don’t you let me offer you some hospitality? You can have some refreshment and I can tell you about the property. It might help you find what you’re looking for.”

“This tracking stone is all the help I need,” Jason said, continuing his rapid stride.

“I’ll leave you to your business, then,” Clementson said and started moving ahead of Jason at a half-run.

“Stop,” Jason ordered. His aura came down hard on Clementson, who staggered and stopped.

“Sir?” He asked, feebly.

“I think it would be best if you stayed with me,” Jason said. “For safety.”

Withering under the force of Jason’s aura, Clementson reluctantly nodded, falling in behind Jason as he resumed his path through the property. They quickly came on a building detached from the main residence, made from stone and an indulgent amount of wood. On a porch swing, a man was sitting up, rubbing his eyes as if just having woken up. He gave the approaching pair a bleary-eyed look, focusing on Clementson.

“Eustace,” he said, “what was that aura I just...”

The man trailed off as he realised the source of the aura was standing next to Clementson. Then his gaze locked onto Jason’s face and his eyes went wide.

Chapter 94: Consequences

The Temple of the Healer in Greenstone was one of the central temples on the Divine Square. Inside, a man named Neil Davone was making a stand.

"I won't be a part of this," he declared to the Chief Priest. "This isn't about serving the Healer. I spend my days following around the most petty noble in Greenstone, so I know what power and ambition look like."

The Chief Priest had all the temple clergy arrayed behind him, ready to move out. He looked at Neil with a dismissive sneer.

"Be thankful that your powers come not from our god, for he would take them from you. If you would stand against us, then you are no longer welcome in this church. Begone from this place, and never return."

Neil steeled himself, his expression hard. He turned around and strode out of the temple.

On the Clementson property, Jason was confronting the man the tracking stone had led him to.

"Asano!" the man uttered, causing Jason to frown. He recognised the face from somewhere, but couldn't place it, at first. Then revelation struck.

"You're one of the people that attacked me in Old City."

"I didn't attack you," the man said quickly, his voice rising in pitch. "That was Dink! We all left, just like you said."

"And now you're here summoning monsters," Jason said. "Stay where you are, Mr Clementson."

Clementson had been slinking away while Jason's focus was on the other adventurer, but stopped short at Jason's command. He looked back, seeing that Jason hadn't turned back to look.

"Yes, Mr Clementson," Jason said, without taking his eyes off the man in the other direction. "I am watching you."

Jason had Clementson under the strict watch of his aura sense, the normal-rank mill owner having no way to hide it.

Jason kept his eyes locked in the iron-ranker.

"I don't know anything about summoning any monsters," the man said.

"If you don't want to tell me things, then don't tell me," Jason said. "Lying is just going to make things worse."

The man looked up at the crystal floating over Jason's head.

"Is that a recording crystal?" he asked.

"It is," Jason said. "Why don't you tell me your name?"

"Why?"

Jason's hard expression broke into a chuckle.

"Well, if nothing else," Jason said, "it can't be worse than what I'm calling you in my head. What's your name?"

"Tuckell," the adventurer said warily. "Dean Tuckell."

Jason gave him a sympathetic smile, his body language shifting from harsh confrontation to loose and relaxed. Jason casually strolled up to the porch, where the man had been napping on a long, swinging chair. The man tensed at Jason's approach, giving a startled jerk as Jason casually plonked himself down next to the man on the long chair.

"Nice to meet you, Dean. I'm Jason, but you knew that."

Jason looked out from the porch. This back building didn't look out over the lumber mill, but instead at the crops grown to feed the workers.

"This isn't bad," Jason said, taking it all in. "If I recall correctly, Dean, you were the one that tried to talk Dink out of attacking me. Is Dink his real name?"

"That's his nickname," Dean said hesitantly, wary of the man sitting next to him. "His real name is Jared."

"I'd definitely take that over Dink," Jason said. "Was he the one who picked Dink?"

"Yeah," Dean said.

"Clearly, some people are beyond help. Alright, Dean; this is quite a pickle you've got yourself in. The way I see it, things are going to go one of four ways from here. I'm just going to come out and tell you that I know what you're doing, who you're doing it for and why."

"Don't listen to him," Clementson said, from where he was still standing, in front of the porch. "He's just trying to get information out of you."

Jason turned his gaze unhappily to Clementson.

"That's quite enough out of you, Mr Clementson," Jason said. "If you're going to be a nuisance, then you may as well run along, after all."

The mill owner required no further encouragement, scuttling away as quick as he could.

"Now," Jason said, "where were we? Right, I was just explaining that I already know everything."

"Do you, though? Its sounds like Mr Clementson is right and you just want me to talk."

“Oh, I certainly do, but want isn't the same as need. This is more about tying things up neatly than me requiring anything from you. Dean, let's go through the four ways I see this situation potentially playing out. In scenario one – which is my personal favourite and I hope will be yours as well – you tell me everything. That gives me what I need to make sure this all gets handled quietly and without too much of a fuss. Are you a member of the Adventure Society, Dean?”

Dean nodded.

“Alright, then you definitely want to talk to me. With your cooperation, and me putting in a good word, then you shouldn't expect more than a slap on the wrist. It lets me settle everything nice and quiet, and the Mercers don't have to dump all the blame on you when everything goes public.”

Dean started when Jason said the name Mercer and Jason felt the hook set in.

“Dean, this is an opportunity for you. A chance to get out of doing shady jobs for other people and stand on your own as an adventurer. My guess, and what will be my recommendation, is that you get put on a road contract. A bit of travel, helping some people who need it. Most importantly, it gets you out from under everything while the situation gets settled. Then you can come back having proven that you can do your job.”

Dean looked uncertain.

“You don't do a lot of monster fighting, do you, Dean?”

Dean shook his head.

“That's alright,” Jason said. “On a road contract, you'll have people to back you up. Wouldn't you rather have someone better than Dink watching your back? You have all the tools you need to make it in life, Dean. You don't have to be the greatest adventurer in the world. You can live a good life just being an okay one.”

Jason kept his own expression under control as Dean looked thoughtful.

“That's scenario one,” Jason said. “They gradually get worse from here. In scenario two, you keep your mouth shut, but don't make a fuss. I don't know all the details, so things get messy as what I do know starts loudly clashing with what I don't. The Mercer name gets loudly bandied about, and not in a good way. They'll be fine, of course, but I don't think you're the one they'll be looking to protect in this situation, do you? Especially given that they'll need someone to push all the blame onto. Best guess, they'll come down on claiming the whole plot was you and Clementson.”

Jason knew that Dean didn't even realise he was nodding as he thought it over.

“That's how things go if I just walk away now. Scenario three is where you kill me keep everything covered up, but that's a rough one. I have friends and connections that will be out here going over everything. It won't just be me you have to get rid of. Clementson,

everyone on the property who saw me head in this direction. Lindover, a few people in Leust, even. Or you could run, but where are you going to go? Greenstone's out. Probably the delta, too. Are you going to go out to one of the desert towns? The veldt? You have a full set of essences, so you could make a life for yourself, out there. If my friends don't find you."

Jason slapped Dean on the back.

"All of that assumes you could even kill me, which I think we both know is a sketchy proposition at best. I'm fully armed and equipped for combat, here; you're armed and equipped for a relaxing nap. Scenario four is that you try to kill me and fail. I don't need to explain the consequences of that one, do I?"

Jason sat back in the chair.

"It's all up to you, Dean. Except for the one where you kill me, my contract gets completed whichever way we go. That first scenario works out best for both of us, but I can live with any of the ones where I, you know, live."

Dean looked at Jason, reclining comfortably as if he didn't have a care in the world. He was spent a long time thinking in silence as Jason quietly waited.

"Alright," Dean said. "It was Thadwick Mercer. He set all this up."

"Just Thadwick?" Jason asked.

"Yeah. He's been pulling in some of the less successful adventurers over the last year. He even pulled some strings to get some of us an easy ride through the assessment."

"You?"

"No," Dean said. "I didn't do all that well, but I got through on my own. But it shook me, you know? Putting your life on the line. It's not easy for adventurers who don't want to fight monsters. People look down on you, you know? We come from decent enough families, so working under someone like Mercer is better than working for some crime lord or gang boss. At least, that's what I thought."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"That thing where Mercer sent us after you? Kicking the crap out of you and recording it? How is that any different from working for a criminal?"

"Thadwick sent you after me?"

Dean nodded.

"He knew about the contract you'd been assigned and that you were meeting a contract in the Townhouse. We just had to hang around, waiting for you to pass through."

Jason sighed. Using and abusing Thadwick had been a mistake from the beginning, and now he was paying for it.

“What about this whole thing?” Jason asked, gesturing around them. “The land-grab deal.”

“I don’t know what it’s about,” Dean said. “Every couple of weeks I was told to come out here and spook Lindover with my summon. Then I lay low here in Clementson’s guest house and quietly go back a few days later. A couple of days ago I was told to get out here and do it again, and he said it was probably the last time.”

“And by ‘he’ you mean...”

“Thadwick Mercer; it was all him. He’s always going on about how this is all his deal. How he’ll show his father what he’s really capable of.”

Jason sat up straight and took a deep breath.

“Alright, Dean. You did well. We’re going to Greenstone to get all this settled. I said I’d look out for you, and I will.”

Jason stood up, then held a hand out for Dean to shake.

“Are you ready to stand on your own feet, Dean?”

Dean stood up and shook Jason’s hand, looking like a weight had been lifted off him.

“You know what? I think I am. There’s something you should know, though.”

“Oh?” Jason asked.

“I didn’t come out here by myself. One of Thadwick’s other people came with me. I don’t think he’ll let us leave quietly.”

“You’ve got that right!”

Both men turned in the direction of the intruding voice. A burly human was storming in their direction, Clementson following behind.

“Looks like I have to put both of you down,” the burly man said.

“Not going to happen,” Jason said as darkness manifested around him, speckled with stars. “Dean, you’ll want to stay out of this.”

Neil Davone rushed down Broadstreet Boulevard. There was a crowd gathering outside the newly-refurbished Broadstreet Clinic, which was about to have a grand re-opening. Neil pushed his way through the crowd and rushed up to the doors, made of reinforced, magic-wrought glass. They were designed to open and close themselves, but the clinic was not yet open and they remained shut. Neil and started hammering on one of them with his fist.

“Friend, they’ll be open soon,” an older man assured him. “Just be a little patient.”

The man chortled to himself.

“Patient,” he said. “That’s funny.”

Neil ignored him and kept hammering away until a young woman appeared on the other side of the glass.

“Sir,” she said loudly through the glass, “if you can’t wait quietly for the clinic to open, then you will be turned away when it does.”

“I need to see Jory Tillman,” Neil yelled. “I need to see him right now.”

The woman looked Neil over. Compared to the bulk of the crowd, his clothes spoke to more than enough money to find medical help elsewhere.

“Go around to the back gate,” she said. “I’ll see if Mr Tillman is willing to speak to you.”

Neil groaned his frustration but nodded, fighting back through the crowd to go around to the rear of the building. There was a yard enclosed by a wall that he couldn’t see into, but found the gate wasn’t locked when he pushed on it. Inside was a yard tiled with colourful tiles and lush greenery in wall planters.

The yard was occupied by three adventurers with bronze rank auras. A huge leonid man and a small human woman were both hoisting heavily-laden barbells in each hand. The third adventurer Neil recognised. Rufus Remore was meditating on a woven mat, eyes snapping opening as Neil came into the yard.

“Neil Davone,” Rufus said. “What brings you here?”

Rufus had administered Neil’s field assessment for the Adventure Society. Given Thadwick’s reaction, he almost would have preferred a fail to a pass. Neil had no idea what Rufus was doing there, meditating in the courtyard of an Old City clinic.

A man came out of the building, dressed in clean and simple white linens.

“Who are you and why do you want to see me so urgently?” the man asked. “I’m more than a little busy right now.”

“You’re Jory Tillman?” Neil asked.

“Yes,” Jory said irritably. “What do you want?”

“The Chief Priest of the Healer is coming,” Neil said. “He’s bringing almost everyone.”

“What for? Jory asked.

“He thinks your new clinic is a usurpation of the Healer’s authority,” Neil said. “They’re coming here to tear it to the ground.”

Chapter 95: Punishment

The glass doors at the front of the clinic opened up. Deftly using his aura, Rufus pressured the crowd away without distressing them. He led the way outside, flanked by his adventuring companions, Jory, and Neil Davone. They stood in front of the doors and waited. Jory explained to the crowd that there would be a delay with the clinic opening. People started asking him to make exceptions, and Gary stepped out.

“It’s an unfortunate situation,” he said, daring anyone to disagree. “It might be a good idea for everyone to leave and come back later.”

“What for?” some yelled out. The crowd could smell a spectacle.

“That,” Gary said, pointing an arm along the boulevard. All eyes followed, seeing a multitude of robed clergy making their way down the street. People were scrambling to get out of their path. The crowd outside the clinic moved well away, although not so far that they couldn’t see what was happening. Their numbers even grew as others gathered to spectate.

At the head of the approaching religious expedition was the Chief Priest, blasting out his silver rank aura. The group came to a halt in front of the clinic making an impressive sight. The Chief Priest was flanked by bronze-rankers, with iron rankers and lesser clergy arrayed behind them. The basic robe of the Healer’s clergy was simple brown, but these all wore opulent silks of white and gold, with only brown embellishments.

Facing the Chief Priest was Rufus, flanked by Farrah, Gary, Jory and Neil. Panning his eyes across them, the Chief Priest sneered at Neil before his gaze came to rest on Rufus.

“Rufus Remove,” the Chief Priest intoned, his sermon-practised voice reaching all the gathered onlookers. “I’m not sure what brings you here, but is it your intention to stand with heretics?”

“I’m not sure what you mean by that, Chief Priest,” Rufus said.

“This place seeks to set itself up as a temple of healing, taking that which is the right of the Healer, and the Healer alone.”

“I’m not one to speak for the gods,” Rufus said. “I will say that Jory, here, is an alchemist, not a priest. So far as I can tell, he mostly advocates that people read the little labels he puts on the medicine bottles. He certainly isn’t claiming to be a priest. He’s just trying to help people by healing them. Surely your church would take no offence at someone doing precisely what you advocate.”

“The only truth in your words,” the Chief Priest announced, “is that it is not yours to speak for our church. Do you think that you, better than I, can interpret the will of the Healer?”

“I do,” a voice said softly, yet everyone present heard. Carried on a wave of aura that was benevolent yet overwhelming, the two quiet words somehow crashed into the crowd like thunder.

Dean Truckell watched Jerrick approach the guest house where he and Asano had been talking on the porch. The burly man was the toughest of the thug adventurers Thadwick Mercer took under his auspices; the strongest of Thadwick’s lackeys, outside of the noblemen who followed him around in public. Unlike most of them, he was an active adventurer, regularly hunting monsters. He followed Mercer as a way to overcome his own humble beginnings, having no backing of his own. He had earned his essences through years spent in the Greenstone fighting pits.

“Dean, you’ll want to stay out of this,” Asano said.

“Mr Asano,” Dean warned, “watch out for...”

His warning came to late as Jerrick launched like a ballista bolt, crashing into Asano and through the door of the guest house. The door of woven reeds and bamboo smashed apart at their passage. Dean turned to look inside, seeing the pair already moving. They were both on the floor, Jerrick seeking to pin Asano down, but all he got was a handful of empty cloak. It vanished in his fingers, revealing Asano was already gone.

“YOU THINK YOU CAN HIDE FROM ME?” Jerrick called out as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Actually, yes,” Asano voice came from deeper in the house. Clementson’s detached guest house was generously-sized, with plenty of rooms to hide in. The outer rooms were well lit, but the interior of the brick building had plenty of shadows.

Jerrick threw a gaze at the door, pointing a finger at Dean.

“Don’t even think about running,” Jerrick said as iron plates started magically appearing around his body to encase him in heavy armour. Once it was in place, he started storming through the building.

Dean backed off the porch, winding up next to Clementson. Clearly the man had rushed off to fetch Jerrick the moment Asano had dismissed him. They stood side by side as they listened to the noises coming from inside. Mostly it was loud crashing, Dean easily able to picture Jerrick tossing around furniture. It was occasionally punctuated by Jerrick’s shouting.

“YOU THINK I WON’T FIND YOU?”

“YOU CAN’T HIDE FOREVER!”

“YOU THINK A SCRATCH CAN HURT ME? YOUR HIT AND RUN TRICKS WON’T LAST YOU LONG!”

“You should never have gone against Mercer,” Clementson told Dean. “Derrick is going to tear that adventurer apart.”

Dean frowned, then went back up to the porch with determined steps. He grabbed his dimensional bag from where he left it by the swing chair. Coming back down, he paused in confusion when he saw Asano standing behind an oblivious Clementson, even as Jerrick’s shouts continued to stream from the building. Asano was eating a sandwich.

Clementson saw the odd expression on Dean’s face and followed it to looked behind him, stumbling away in surprise on finding Asano there.

“Come on, Dean,” Asano complained. “What kind of a poker face is that?”

Asano’s sandwich vanished and a magical cloak of darkness and stars manifested around him. Clementson called out to Jerrick that Asano was outside and Jerrick’s armoured form came stomping out the door. He launched forward with incredible speed once more, but this time Asano seemed to bounce off, like a scarf tossed into the wind, his cloak fluttering around him as he drifted back to the grass some distance from where Jerrick had stopped.

Asano held up a hand toward Jerrick, chanting a spell.

“Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast,”

Red light lit up from inside Jerrick, some of it siphoning off in a trail to be absorbed by Asano’s hand. As this was happening, Jerrick charged forward. It didn’t match the pace of his charge special attack, but was still fast for someone wrapped in that much metal. As he moved, Jerrick waved an arm, sending a wave of metal spikes ahead of him. Asano shielded his body with his cloak, but let out a grunt as most of the spikes punched through.

Jerrick conjured a huge metal pole with a spiked metal sphere on the end, an oversized morning star. He swung it down like a hammer and Asano danced back lightly from the crude swing, the sphere digging into the ground. He cast another spell.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

Jerrick let out a painful yell as he let go of his weapon and staggered before righting himself. Dean couldn’t see the results of the spell under the armour, but he’d never actually heard Jerrick make a sound of pain before. Jerrick walked back to where his weapon was half-buried in the earth, yanking it out. Holding it horizontally, in spite of what

must have been enormous weight, the sphere shot away toward Asano, trailing a chain that linked it to the pole in Jerrick's hands.

The sphere shot through Asano's cloak, but he was no longer in it. Rising up behind Jerrick from his own shadow, Asano jabbed his ornate dagger into a gap at the bottom of Jerrick's thick breastplate. Jerrick whirled around, but the unarmoured Asano was much lighter. Almost comically, he moved to stay behind the spinning Jerrick's back. Jerrick stopped and Asano dropped through his shadow, vanishing just as myriad spikes shot out of Jerrick's armour.

While he was keeping an eye on the fight, Dean had taken a sack of salt from his dimensional bag and was pouring out a circle on the grass. Clementson saw what he was doing and tried to interfere, but Dean's forearm grew large, hairy and clawed, grabbing Clementson by the throat. He lifted Clementson into the air.

"I may not be the adventurer they are," Dean said, "but that doesn't mean I'll let the likes of you treat me like I'm nothing."

Dean tossed Clementson to the ground, where he scrambled away on all fours before getting to his feet at a safe distance.

"Mercer will make you pay for this," Clementson said, all but spitting his words at Dean. Dean looked over at Asano, dancing around Jerrick. Other than the two noblemen who followed Mercer around, all Mercer's lackeys were terrified of Jerrick, Dean included. He squared his shoulders, held up his hand and snapped his fingers.

The circle of salt glowed with a green light, then lines within drew out the shape of a pentagram. Runes appeared between the lines, then the lines and symbols turned gold as the circle filled with green light. Out of the light rose a bear-like creature, with savage claws and a body covered in bony protrusions. Dean pointed at Jerrick.

"Kill."

Dean refocused his attention of Jerrick. The big man seemed unsteady, but still whirled the sphere on its chain around himself, holding onto the pole at the base. The sphere sailed through the air, shooting out spikes as it did. Asano easily avoided the sphere itself but the spikes where landing hits. With the strange way Asano's cloak flowed, drifting on the air, it was hard to tell how many were ameliorated by Asano's cloak and armour.

The fergax came up behind Jerrick, clutching him in a bear hug. If it weren't for the heavy armour, the bony protrusions on the monster's body would have pierced flesh in a half-dozen places. Instead, spikes shot out of the armour, puncturing the fergax's flesh. It staggered back and Jerrick turned on it as the sphere, snaked back down to slam solidly

onto the pole. Jerrick lifted the pole up and brought it down on the monster. The weapon buried itself in the fergax, which fell dead at a blow. As it did, Asano chanted out a spell behind Jerrick.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

A horrifying groan came out of Jerrick, who dropped his weapon and started stumbling around. The plates of his armour fell away, vanishing before they hit the ground. The skin of his arms and face revealed black veins and patches of dead, withered flesh. Thick, dark blood trailed down from his eyes and nose.

Dean and Clementson recoiled at the sight while Asano moved closer. No longer able to stay upright, Jerrick toppled to the ground. Asano held his hand out and channelled another spell.

“Feed me your sins.”

Red light again glowed out of Jerrick, now massively discoloured with blue, purple and sickly white. All the discolouration flowed out and into Asano’s waiting hand as he absorbed the afflictions, leaving only the feeble, flickering red of Jerrick’s cleansed life force. The black veins visible through his skin had vanished, but Jerrick was beyond resuming the fight.

“Help me with him,” Asano said to Dean, and they pushed him into a sitting position. Asano took out an iron collar and snapped it onto Jerrick’s neck, before feeding him a potion and lowering him back down.

“He’ll live,” Asano said. “He’ll need a few more potions, but he’s a tough one.”

“Is that a suppression collar?” Dean asked.

“That’s right,” Asano said. “They’re supposed to be restricted, but the bad guys seem to get their hands on them anyway. This one was used on a friend of mine when some cultists tried to sacrifice us. I borrowed it in case you turned out stropo.”

“You’re not going to kill him?” Dean asked.

“That was my inclination,” Asano said, “but when a man turns his dog on you, you can’t really blame the dog. Is he an adventurer too?”

“Yeah,” Dean said.

“Well, not for long, I’m guessing. Sorry about your monster.”

They looked over at the dead fergax, Jerrick’s weapon already vanished from it.

“It’s a summon,” Jerrick said. “A new one manifests each time I use it.”

“I see,” Asano said. He turned to Clementson, who was cowering off to the side.

“Do you think this guy will lend us a cart?”

The god appeared in front of Jory's clinic without fanfare; a small, middle-aged man, with ordinary features and plain, brown robes. Nonetheless, power radiated of him, affecting the crowd gathered on the street. Sicknesses were dispelled and injuries healed. Everyone in front of Jory's clinic fell to their knees as silence washed over the crowded street. Into that silence came the clattering of a wooden object falling onto stone, and a single, startled voice.

"My foot grew back!"

The god laughed, looking over at the man who spoke out.

"You have a new foot," Healer said. "Please, stand upon it."

A scrawny man stood up in the middle of the crowd, looking immensely nervous.

"You came to this clinic," the god said, "but the alchemist here could not regrow your foot."

"No, er... your goodness, sir. He helped me with the pain, and found someone to make me a wooden foot. It worked pretty well. Enough to get me back working, at least."

"Did you go to my temple?" The god asked, as if he didn't know exactly what happened in his holy places.

"They said I didn't have the money to grow a foot back."

"Yes they did," the god said, his gaze turning to the Chief Priest.

"It is my way," the god said, "to give those who follow me the freedom to do what is right. If doing what is wrong is not truly an option, then doing good isn't a choice; it's just obedience."

The god moved forward until the knelt-down Chief Priest was looking at the bottom of the god's robes.

"My ways have allowed my followers to go astray in the past, particularly in these outlying regions," the god said. "Rarely, however, has one of my temples fallen so far, and so completely. You should be not only ready but eager to help those in need. Instead, you use the gifts I have given you to garner power and line your pockets."

The god turned to look at the sign for the clinic, then back to the Chief Priest. As he continued talking, his voice was rising to an angry pitch,

"The fact that the proprietor of this establishment was forced to step in where you fell short was miserable enough. But to then turn around and try and stop him from the good works that should have been yours?"

The god gestured and lights started floating up out of the bodies of his assembled clergy, Some were cubes of various colours, others smaller spheres. The people they flew

out of collapsed to the ground, moaning in pain. The cubes and spheres continued to float over them, connected by a tendril of light.

“Many of you have taken what I offered, yet turned so far from my will that you travel in the other direction! These gifts I take back, for there are none among you worthy. Those who are, you have driven or cast out. Those who looked only to serve, to give help to those who needed it. As we speak, I am bringing the true faithful from distant lands to take your places in my temple. Those who you once shunned will now be welcome.”

The god turned to looked at Neil Davone, giving him a warm smile.

“This includes you, young man. I know you have your struggles, but you bear them as well as any could ask, including me. Let any who would bar you from my holy places again answer to me.”

“Thank you, Lord,” Neil said.

“Lord...” came the Chief Priest’s voice, weak and pained.

“...mercy,” he begged.

“That you are not shunned from my temples and their services, as you have shunned others is mercy enough,” Healer said. “You may not serve me again, but we will see to your ills. If you have the coin to pay.”

“With our essences gone,” the Chief Priest begged, “we are crippled.”

“For that, I shall give you no salve,” the god said. “But you may turn to another.”

A second god appeared next to the first, being very different from his fellow. His dress was regal, with a long cape, a sceptre and a crown. He was young and handsome, but with a look of disdain and faint cruelty behind the eyes, not than anyone was looking. His aura washed over the crowd like a wave of fire.

The newcomer nodded acknowledgement to the other god.

“Healer,” he greeted.

“Dominion,” healer said back, cordially, then gestured to his clergy. “These are of no use to me. I think, perhaps, they are more temperamentally suited to your worship.”

Dominion crouched down in front of the Chief Priest, rubbing a portion of the priest’s robe between his fingers.

“Very fine,” he said, standing back up. “You have some seekers of power and privilege, here; not your sort at all. I’ll take them off your hands, if they’re willing to submit. I can replace those essences and awakening stones.”

“Yes!” the Chief Priest exclaimed. “I’m willing to serve!”

“There is no service in my church,” Dominion said harshly. “Choose carefully before you enter into it. I am not Healer. There will be no freedom to choose the right path. There

will be no freedom at all. Under me, you will obey or suffer. Or both, as I choose, because you will not enter my service. You will belong to me.”

The now-former Chief Priest gulped, but nodded. The other behind him mostly did the same, although some did not. With a wave of the god’s hand the spheres and cubes floating over those who capitulated shifted in colour before returning to their bodies. With another gesture, Dominion summoned an arched gate, through which could be seen the interior of one of his temples.

“Go!” he ordered. The former clergy of the healer got up and scrambled through the gate, which closed behind them. Dominion turned to the group gathered in front of the clinic door behind Rufus.

“Your friend Jason isn’t here,” Dominion said. Rufus, Gary, Farrah, Jory and Neil were all still kneeling, but looked up, startled.

“You know Jason?” Rufus asked, uncertainly.

“I love that guy,” Dominion said with a grin. “The ones who won’t kneel are always the most fun. Seeing what it takes to make them capitulate, to put that knee down.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Gary asked. Dominion turned his gaze full bore onto Gary, who trembled under the force of it. Gary defiantly kept his eyes locked on the god, forcing himself onto his feet. Dominion laughed, and the pressure vanished.

“That is where monarchs come from,” Dominion said. “I love them most of all. I’ll be keeping an eye on you, Gareth Xandier.”

Dominion turned to Healer, nodding a farewell and then vanishing, as if he had never been there are all. Healer turned to those who had not accepted Dominion’s offer. One of them spoke out.

“Lord! Please allow this humble sinner to seek atonement in your service. I was led astray.”

“You blame others for your failings?” the god asked.

“I was weak, Lord! The failing was mine!”

The god looked over the remaining people, then gave a slight nod. Heads bowed, they couldn’t see it, but they felt their god’s assent.

“The path to redemption will not be easy,” Healer said. “A lifetime of humility and service.”

The essences and awakening stones floating over them returned to their bodies.

“I have restored those powers I gave you in the past, but sealed them away. They will not be available to you, and may never be. This you must accept.”

“Thank you lord!” they chimed out.

Healer turned to Neil.

“Neil Davone,” the god said. “Please lead these penitents back to my temple. You will find good people waiting to greet you.”

“Thank you Lord!” Neil said, getting to his feet. He was soon leading away Healer’s remaining clergymen.”

The god then turned to Jory.

“Stand and see me, Jory Tillman,” the god said. Jory got nervously to his feet.

“I am moved by what you have done here,” Healer told him. “If you are willing, I will give this place my blessing and declare it a sanctuary for healing.”

“Um, that would be amazing,” Jory said, then his face plummeted.

“Uh, Lord Healer... there are some things we make here that you might not entirely approve of. I’d stop, but they pay for a lot of the healing research.”

Healer chuckled.

“I’m not going to begrudge people a little... togetherness jelly,” Healer said.

Jory led out a nervous noise, then nodded.

“Thank you, Lord.”

“Very good,” Healer said. “I will have people come to this place for rituals of sanctification. They will be careful not to disrupt your alchemy. And if you are willing, I will maintain a healer here. Your friend had not been as present as in the past, due to his adventuring commitments.”

“Thank you, Lord,” Jory said.

“Then we are done here,” Healer said, and turned to the gathered crowd.

“Good people,” Healer said. “Know that this place has my blessing.”

A golden wave shone out of him, passing through the crowd and spreading to the city beyond.

“All in Old City are healed,” Healer said. “Jory Tillman, you have no need to open your clinic today. Rest, and take people in tomorrow.”

Healer vanished, leaving silence in his wake. Some time later, a shell-shocked Jory, Gary, Farrah and Rufus were sharing a drink in the clinic.

“I’m going to need new labels,” Jory said absently.

“Labels?” Farrah asked.

“For the Rumpy-Pumpy Good Time Ointment,” Jory said. “I’m definitely calling it Togetherness Jelly now.”

Chapter 96: You Don't Get a Third

Jason's path back to the city was a long one. The lumber region was on the far side of the delta and he had Dean alongside him, as well as the suppression-collared and manacled Jerrick shuffling behind. Jason considered commandeering a cart from Clementson but decided he'd rather walk than deal with the heidel he would need to pull it. As for Clementson himself, Jason left him behind. Another person would be unmanageable, and Clementson wasn't going anywhere. Without his lumber mill, he was nothing

Jerrick made some trouble early in the journey. On the first day, he tried to sneak-attack Jason from behind, but without his powers, he quickly came to regret it. The first night he tried to sneak out the inn, which he came to regret far more. Jason had not used his familiar when fighting Jerrick, and Jerrick was unaware Jason had left bunches of Team Colin suckered to the wall above every exit.

Jason also slowed their progress with his usual routine of healing people in the towns and villages they passed through. He also took some notices from the adventure boards if anything seemed like a threat.

Leaving Jerrick in the middle of a leech circle, Jason took Dean to show him what actual adventurers did. His fergax summon was a powerful, but singular threat. Jason quickly identified Dean's problem while on a notice for a small humanoid monster called a pixelax. Quick creatures with emaciated limbs and long, sharp fingers, they were around a metre tall and appeared in large groups. They swarmed over Dean's summon, which occupied many of them, but others made straight for Dean, who started to panic.

Jason swept in to handle them, sword flashing. His afflictions were of little point against the frail monsters, so he didn't bother. Their pointed fingers made little headway against his armour and they fell to a well-placed sword stroke. Between Jason and the fergax, the pixelaxes were made short work of.

"Who names these monsters?" Jason wondered aloud as he used crystal wash to clean himself off.

"I don't know," Dean said, still shaken.

"Someone overly-enamoured with the letter X, apparently. We had a phase like that where I come from."

Dean gave Jason a strange look and Jason realised it probably didn't translate well.

“The good news,” Jason said, “is that the problem keeping you from being a decent adventurer is quite evident. I know someone at the Adventure Society who can get you assigned to the right contracts to work through it. If that’s still what you want.”

Dean nodded, hesitant, but forcing himself to be determined.

“I can’t go back to what I was doing,” he said.

“Good man.”

As they drew closer to the city, Jason was surprised to find church of the Healer members in multiple towns and villages. It was a pleasant surprise, letting Jason hasten his journey without leaving sick people untreated behind him. Finally, they reached Greenstone and started making their way through Old City.

“I have to assume that Clementson got word ahead to Thadwick,” Jason said. “We didn’t exactly make great time through the delta. You have family here in Old City, right?”

“That’s right,” Dean said. “We build and maintain devices that use water quintessence. It’s a decent living, which is how they managed to afford a full set of essences for me.”

His head fell.

“I haven’t seen them in a while. I let them down pretty badly.”

“Take it from someone further away from family than you can imagine,” Jason said. “Don’t let pride keep you away. If I leave you and Jerrick there until I sort things out, will that be alright? Can you handle him?”

“I can do that,” Dean said determinedly. “We may not be one of the big-time families, but our compound is secure enough. Thadwick’s people wouldn’t move on it unless Thadwick himself was with them, and the whole point of him using us was to keep his hands clean.”

Dean guided them through Old City toward his family’s compound. They went through one of the main market districts and into a vast arcade. It had high, vaulted ceilings, stores on either side and was an obstacle course of stalls and shoppers.

That changed as a group of twelve, heavily-armed thugs started marching down the arcade, pushing over people and even small stalls that were in their path. The arcade started clearing quickly as people scattered. Seeing them coming, Jason handed Dean a recording crystal.

“Use it,” he said. “We’ll probably need the evidence, later.”

“Evidence of what?” Dean asked as he threw the crystal up to float over his head.

“Stay here and watch everything,” Jason said instead of answering and walked forward to meet the group.

One of the men was clearly the leader, walking front and centre.

“So you’re Asano,” he said. “I’m not impressed.”

Jason panned his gaze over the group. A dozen men, all with iron-rank auras. Every aura was uncontrolled, either through lack of training or a lack of aura powers altogether.

“I see some familiar faces,” he said. He spotted Dink, far less brazen than their last encounter. He was hovering at the back with the others who had slunk away after witnessing Dink’s beating at Jason’s hands.

“I’ve become a big believer in seconds chances,” Jason said. “This is yours. Leave now.”

He pointed out the ones he recognised.

“Except for you, you, you and you,” he said as he pointed each one out. “You all had your second chances. You don’t get a third.”

The leader laughed.

“Do you not see where we are?” he asked. “These are our streets. See how they all scuttled away like little bugs? That’s because they know what’s coming. Do you really think you can take us all?”

“Yes,” Jason said, his voice dismissive. “I just don’t know if I’ll be able to leave any of you alive.”

The leader laughed again.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “Either I’m overestimating myself, or I’m not. Decide which you think it is, then act accordingly.”

“You’re relying on that rigged fight to make people scared of you,” the leader said.

Jason looked around. The skylights in the ceiling left plenty of shadowy nooks in the arcade. Even the open space had plenty of stalls and carts to cast shadows. The people were already gone.

“I hope you let me keep doing so,” Jason said. “I’d prefer that to having it based on what I do to you.”

The leader grinned and stomped the ground with his foot. Stone erupted from the ground, flying at Jason in shards. His ability to aim the power was clearly not good, most of the shards being intercepted by one of the fruit carts in between them. Gobbets of pulped fruit flew as the stone tore into the cart. Jason was unconcerned by the attack, having already dropped into a shadow on the ground.

“Where did he go?” the leader yelled, looking around. Blood from a slashed artery sprayed over them as they looked behind and realised one of their number had already

fallen. His body dropped to the ground, falling at the hands of a shadowy figure in their midst.

Spattered with the blood of their companion, the thugs were startled into a brief, but critical moment of inaction. Jason's wicked-looking red and black dagger didn't stop as he moved like a ghost, finding the back of a neck, a throat and then burying itself in the side of a head before Jason vanished into the shadow of a dropping corpse. None of the spooked, bottom-feeder adventurers reacted effectively in the few startled moments it took Jason to appear, kill and vanish. In the aftermath, some of them realised the dead were Dink and the others Jason had pointed out.

"Last chance," Jason's voice came from the darkness.

"Leave now," his voice came again, from the opposite direction.

The group looked at each other nervously and the leader slapped one across the head.

"Don't let him get to you. It's just games because he's scared to fight us straight-up!"

His own voice didn't sound completely convinced, and the others looked at the dead bodies at their feet.

"No way," one of them said and started running. There was a rip of cloth as a huge rat tail emerged from the leader's back. To Jason, watching from the shadows, it looked like the prehensile tail of the rat gorgon he had fought. It wrapped around the fleeing man's ankle, tripping him over and dragging him back to the group where the leader savagely stomped on his head.

"NOBODY RUNS," the leader announced fiercely. "Everyone their keep eyes out. He can't pick us off if we see him coming."

They all started looking around them, peering into every shadow.

"Don't forget the shadows at your feet," the leader said. "Catch him quick and you can drop him while he's disoriented from appearing."

As they watched the shadows, they neglected to realise that not every patch of darkness in the tall arcade was at ground level. None of them saw Jason floating down until Jason let his weight return, using the weight of the fall to plunge his dagger through the startled man's eye. Their leader slid off Jason's blade and dropped to the ground, dead. The others stared at the shadowy figure standing in front of them like deer in headlights. Even though he was right in front of them, out in the open, none of them made a move.

Jason looked down at the man whose head had been stomped on by the now-dead leader. He was in a very bad way, but still alive. Jason walked closer to the group, who flinched at his approach. Jason took a potion from his belt and held it out.

“Heal this one and go,” he told them, gesturing to the hurt man on the ground. The thugs looked at the potion like it was a venomous snake, but finally one of them reached out to take it. As if that movement was a starter’s pistol, the others all ran. The one who took the potion knelt down to feed it to his fallen companion. It didn’t bring about a full recovery, but with his friend’s help, he got to his feet. The thug who had taken the potion from Jason gave him a look of wariness and confusion.

“Thank you,” he said. “For the potion.”

“You won’t thank me if we meet like this again.”

The pair hurried off, one supporting the other. Soon after, Dean cautiously approached with the recording crystal still over his head. Jerrick was walking behind him.

“Give me that,” Jason said and Dean nervously took down the recording crystal and handed it over. Four of the five dead men on the ground had been beside Dean himself when they first confronted Jason. If Thadwick hadn’t needed Dean for his summoning power, and if Jason hadn’t needed Dean to use against Thadwick, then Dean himself could have easily been one of those bodies.

Jason looked at Jerrick, who was also staring down at the bodies.

“You’ve had your two chances,” Jason told him. “If you and I run into each other again, after all this is done, I hope you’ll be smart enough to run.”

“Are these all adventurers?” Jason asked.

“What?” Dean asked, looking up from the corpses, distracted. “Oh, uh, yes. Those who couldn’t pass the assessment themselves, Thadwick had slipped through. That was a while ago, though. It’s harder since the new director came in.”

Jason started shuffling through the pockets of the fallen, eventually digging out their Adventure Society badges.

“I’m a little surprised they carried them,” Jason said. “It’s not like they do any adventuring.”

“We all carry them,” Dean said. “It gives you some weight to throw around.”

Standing up, Jason looked around the arcade.

“What’s the local civic authority here?” he asked.

“The what?” Dean asked.

“Who’s in charge here,” Jason said. “Who do we tell about the killings?”

“This is Dorgan’s territory,” Dean said.

“Dorgan? He’s one of those three crime lords, right?”

“The Big Three,” Dean said. “They run Old City because people from the Island don’t care so long as the money keeps coming.”

“What about some kind of local government authority?” Jason asked.

“There’s the Duke’s guard,” Dean said, “but they only come over if there’s some kind of threat to Island interests. The Big Three makes sure there isn’t.”

“Five dead adventurers is a long way from nothing, though,” Jason said. “The Adventure Society will be looking into it.”

“So what do we do now?” Dean asked.

“Stick to the plan,” Jason said. “Get you to your family and I get things settled. This is just one more thing to settle.”

Chapter 97: Integrity is Sexy

With Dean and Jerrick stashed with Dean's family, Jason decided he had time to stop at his lodgings before getting to business. He was weary, heavy with the blood of the men he killed, even after the crystal wash had cleaned it away. He took a long, luxurious shower and, with a fresh change of clothes, went for lunch with Farrah, Gary and Rufus in their suite.

Madam Landry sent lunch up in the dumbwaiter and they went out to the balcony. Since Jason became an adventurer they were seeing less of each other, and eating lunch in the sunshine as they looked out over the ocean was something they did whenever they had the chance.

"You missed a lot," Farrah said to Jason as they sat down.

"Oh?"

"Gods showed up at Jory's clinic," Gary said. "It was something to see. Dominion asked after you by name."

"What?" Jason asked, half-standing in his chair. "Dominion as in the god?"

"That's the one," Farrah said.

"That's bad," Jason said, settling back down. "That's really bad."

"He seems to like you, if that helps," Farrah said.

"No, it does not help," Jason said. "That makes it worse."

The others recounted to Jason what took place outside the clinic.

"Good for Jory," Jason said. "He deserves recognition for what he does. And that Davone, guy. Turns out he's alright?"

"He's wasted following around that idiot, Thadwick," Rufus said.

"You should tell him about the other thing," Gary said to Rufus, who looked over at Farrah, who shook her head in resignation.

"Cowards," she said. "Jason, we're going away for a while. There's a big expedition, and we're on it."

"Oh?"

It finally came out why the Ustei Tribe came south. You remember that waterfall that shut off briefly, with monsters coming out?"

"Of course," Jason said.

"Well, there have been other instances around the desert. Close by, it's only been brief, isolated instances. Up north it looks like the problem is much worse. Enough that the oases connected to the astral space were no longer able to support all the nomad tribes."

"Something is going on with the astral space?" Jason asked.

"That's what we're going to find out," Rufus said, picking up the narrative. "We're going to relocate the Ustei back to the north, enter into one of the apertures and investigate the astral space."

"That doesn't sound like a small expedition," Jason said.

"It isn't," Rufus said. "It's massive. Danielle Geller is leading it, along with a handful of other silver rankers. Dozens of bronze-rankers, hundreds of iron. People who haven't been on a contract in years. The chance to explore the desert astral space, under the watchful protection of silver rankers? The city's most prominent families are falling over themselves to be involved."

"I can imagine," Jason said. "Why am I getting a sense of hesitation from you all?"

The others looked at each other, all shaking their heads. Finally, Gary groaned capitulation.

"You don't get to go," Gary said. "This isn't just a matter of you not being invited; you were specifically excluded. Which is a load of crap, if you ask me."

"Specifically excluded?" Jason said, his voice ramping up. The other braced for an explosion, but Jason let out a long, calming breath, instead.

"I guess I can see that," he said.

"You can?" Rufus asked, looking at Jason like he was a grenade that unexpectedly didn't explode.

"Look, it's no secret that I can be contentious when it comes to the upper-classes. I've caused problems before. And I've been rising up very high and very fast, socially, for someone with no background. I'm guessing this is a test. If I show that I can take this quietly, miss an opportunity without kicking up a stink, then I pass."

Jason turned his attention back to his meal as the others stared at him in silence.

"What?" he asked them.

"We kind of thought you'd have a bigger reaction," Farrah said.

"Making a noise in the face of authority is kind of a thing for you," Gary said.

"Yes, but I'm coming to realise it doesn't get me anywhere. The snake slithering across the lawn gets shot. The one waiting for the toddler to wander near the tall grass gets fed."

“That’s a horrifying analogy but welcomed, measured response,” Rufus said. “We might make a decent adventurer out of you yet.”

Jason frowned.

“Sometimes I wonder about that,” he said, his voice heavy. “I need your advice on how to handle something.”

“Of course,” Rufus said and they waited for Jason to speak. They showed concern at his uncharacteristic hesitation.

“I killed five adventurers today,” Jason said.

“What?” Gary asked immediately.

“Let him get it out,” Farrah told Gary.

“Yes,” Rufus said. “Start at the beginning.”

Jason nodded, absently.

“It started with this contract I took at the jobs hall...”

Unlike the Geller family, whose seat of power was a sprawling estate in the delta, the Mercer’s main residence was a manor on the Island. A feat of magical engineering, it was a series of five towers set out in a ring. Built from a combination of the finest grade of green stone available and magic-wrought glass, each tower was five storeys tall, interconnected by a network of glass walkways. One set of the walkways was curved, linking the towers in a circle. Another set of walkways were straight, connecting every second tower in such a way that seen from above, it would form the shape of a pentagram.

Each of the walkways had a clear glass ceiling and colour-tinted glass floor, with a different colour for each walkway. The sides were open, but with invisible, magic barriers in place. The barriers let in fresh air while shielding from inclement weather, as rare as that was. It also prevented Mercer’s children and pets from running off the sides.

In the space between the towers was a park, with trees and lawns showered with colour as sunlight passed through the walkways above. In the centre of the park was a pond where waterfowl swam happily about. Children were playing as parents or family servants watched on. They ran around, climbed trees and tossed torn-up pieces of bread into the water to be gobbled-up by ducks.

Thalia Mercer was passing through one of the walkways when she felt a familiar aura from the park below. She moved to the side of the walkway to look down and then vanished, reappearing on the ground. She arrived next to a bench in the park where a man was eating a large sandwich.

“Jason,” she said, sitting down next to him. “Your ability to restrain your aura is quite developed for someone of your rank.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I’ve been working quite hard at it.”

“It shows.”

Jason placed his sandwich in his inventory, dabbed at his face with a napkin, then put it away as well.

“Lady Mercer,” he said, once he was done.

“I’ve told you, please call me Thalia. I’m afraid you’ve missed Cassandra; she’s out preparing for the big expedition.”

“Sadly, this isn’t a social visit,” Jason said. “I’m here about a contract.”

“I wasn’t informed of your arrival,” Thalia said. “Have you been using my household guard to practice your stealth techniques?”

“Your household guard only has a few bronze-rankers,” Jason said, “and they all seem to project their auras as imposingly as possible. Not that hard to avoid. I wouldn’t be able to get into the buildings unnoticed, though. Too many high-ranking Mercers in residence.”

“That’s the problem with having essence users as guards,” Thalia said. “Anyone with the skill to excel is unlikely to work as a guard, while anyone without essences can’t be an effective one.”

“I imagine you have a few quality staff nestled away,” Jason said. “I’ve recently been learning about the Mercer name’s ability to attract people into service.”

“Oh?”

“I assume you have a recording crystal projector we can use?”

“Of course,” she said. “Please follow me.”

“Looks like I have to put both of you down,” Jerrick’s voice came out of the projection. Jason reached out and tapped the projector, bringing the playback to a stop. They were seated in Thalia’s personal study, a recording crystal projector on the table between them.

“After that is something of a mess,” he said. “A fight from my perspective makes for a disorienting recording. Lots of darkness and teleporting about. Suffice to say, I took the man into custody.”

“He’s alive?”

“Yes.”

“And this witness of yours?” Thalia asked.

“Also fine,” Jason said. “I didn’t want him mixing with his old crowd, so I sent him to stay with his family. They seemed quite happy to see him.”

“It can be that way, with the lower-end adventurers,” Thalia said. “A family can work for years, generations even, just to get an adventurer in the family. Adventuring is a dangerous life, though, and not everyone has the training, temperament or talent. Add on the family pressure and it’s hardly a surprise when many fall short. Some end up in the household guard of families like mine. Others end up working for criminals in Old City.”

“Or a bit of both, when they end up in your son’s employ.”

Thalia frowned.

“It seems we have been a little too loose with the reins when it comes to my son. His father wants to give him the room to come into himself, while I prefer a more guided approach. We raised Cassandra my way, and Thadwick his. Marriage is a matter of compromise, after all. This recording of yours lays my boy’s follies out on a slab.”

“I have another recording,” Jason said. “Has word got around about the dead adventurers in Old City yet?”

“From this morning?” Thalia asked. “Not widely, but yes. That was you?”

“Your son sent his lackeys to keep me from revealing everything. I have it all recorded. They don’t mention Thadwick at all, which I imagine was a point quite specifically made to them. If someone were to go round up the survivors, though, I doubt getting them to talk would be tricky. Especially with my corroborating witness from the recording you just saw.”

“Is he safe, this witness?” she asked.

“Safe enough,” Jason said, “So long as your son is prevented from taking revenge.”

Thalia sighed.

“That boy,” she muttered. “I think his father and I need to have a very long talk. What are your intentions?”

“For your son? Nothing. Regardless of what he’s done, I know you’ll protect him from anything within my power to do. I could kill him but I’d know I’d quickly follow him to the grave.

“Then you’re willing to forgive?”

“That’s asking a bit much. I’m willing to be patient. My desire to stay in your daughter’s good graces is a better shield than he could hope for. The most I can hurt him is to collect more than enough evidence to give your family a headache for which he is directly responsible. In addition to the recording you saw, I have copies of all the relevant

documents and another recording of finding them all. In case something mysteriously happens to the originals.”

“What inspired you to look into the hall of civic records?” Thalia asked.

“Where I come from, we don't investigate with magic,” Jason said. “When it comes to business fraud, you follow a paper trail. Once I heard about a monster known for death and destruction that keeps turning up without either, plus the highly-regulated and valuable nature of the lumber territories, it seemed obvious what was going on. All I had to do was figure out who stood to profit, then prove their involvement.”

“You must have needed help to find all that. I’m surprised that records official didn’t come to us. It’s widely known that we’ll double any bribe.”

“I didn’t offer a bribe,” Jason said. “I told her a story.”

“It must have been some story. You’re thorough, I’ll give you that. The question is, what will you do with all this information? Frankly, I’m surprised to find you here. I’ve had you looked into quite thoroughly, and everything I’ve heard suggests you would start shouting this information from the rooftops. You seem to have a dislike for aristocratic power structures.”

“I’m just some iron-ranker,” Jason said. “If I lay out an exploitative land-grab by your family, then all that does is demonstrate your power when you face no real repercussions. All you would suffer is the reputation hit of bumbling the affair to the point it went public. A headache, but one easily endured.”

“You may be underestimating the damage to our reputation,” Thalia said.

“Greenstone is a productive city, with decent work for those who want it. If our reputation suffers too much, then we have to start paying more or people will move into the service of other families. We may have power, but there’s always a balance.”

“Yes, but the scales are rigged.” Jason said. “Be that as it may, this won't start some populist revolution. I need to go up a few ranks before I can start changing the world. In the meantime, all I can do is go for the best outcome I can see.”

“Oh?”

“If I make a big fuss, then your family pushes back. I’ll suffer; the lumber mill owner, Lindover will suffer. Poor Dean, who I promised to shield from all this will definitely suffer. And when everything is said and done, you’d probably end up with the land, anyway.”

“You’re not exactly painting my family in a positive light,” Thalia said.

“You have power,” Jason said. “That’s the nature of power. So, for now, the best way to go is to see this quietly brushed under the rug.”

“And what do you want in return?”

“Here’s how I see it going,” Jason said. “I make a discreet report to the Adventure Society to close out the contract. Straight to the office of the director, to help keep a lid on the details. Your family compensates Lindover for the months of stalled production, and all the preparations Clementson made in preparation for a takeover get rolled back. Dean doesn’t suffer any blowback for having come clean and Jerrick is quietly struck off the Adventure Society roll.”

“You don’t want him punished for trying to kill you?”

“If he were put on trial for trying to kill me, the reason why would be an inevitable question. Also, I’m not the kind of person that kills the minion when he can’t kill the master. Losing his Society membership is enough.”

“What about the men you killed this morning?”

“The ones I killed already had their chance,” Jason said with flint in his voice. “I let most of them go.”

“Most of them? You killed five; how many people did you fight?”

“Elspeth Arella will have the recording. I imagine she’ll show you when she’s leveraging your family.”

Thalia gave a wry smile.

“I daresay you’re right. So, you’re willing to leave Thadwick to my family?”

“We both know he’s out of my reach,” Jason said. “But regardless of how powerful your family is, and my affection for your daughter, there is only so far I’m willing to be pushed. I’m running out of mercy for your son.”

“You know, my husband won’t be happy about this outcome. He’s been waiting to see some initiative from Thadwick.”

“Then he should wait to see some morals,” Jason said, his expression turning hard.

“He won’t like compensating the mill owner, either.”

“He doesn’t have to like it,” Jason said. “He just has to do it.”

“I thought the whole point of you taking this approach was to avoid provoking us?”

“And you need to recognise that I’m not a doormat you can just walk over. I have my bottom line, Lady Mercer. You would do well not to cross it.”

“Is that a threat?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

She smiled.

“Mr Asano, you have some backing, but you are ultimately an iron-ranker lost in a world he does not know.”

Thalia’s silver-rank aura pressed down on Jason.

"You pose no threat whatsoever to me or my family," she told him.

"I imagine a thought very much like that was one of the last to pass through Cressida Vane's head before it was smashed open."

Thalia laughed, breaking the tension.

"You really don't flinch, do you? My daughter certainly knows how to pick them. Alright, Jason. Lindover will be duly compensated and Thadwick will be suitably chastised. I'll see to it my husband doesn't kick up too much of a fuss. He dotes on Cassie, and her approval of you will go a long way."

"In my world, fathers often don't care for their daughters' gentlemen friends."

"The gods know my husband has his failings," Thalia said, "but a failure to trust his daughter's judgement isn't one of them."

They stood up.

"Very well," Jason said. "I imagine you'll be pushing all this onto Clementson? Making out that he was behind everything as a way to ingratiate himself with his aristocratic backers?"

"Are you alright with that?" she asked.

"The man was clearly complicit, and fetched one of your son's lackeys to kill me, so yes. Don't be too harsh on him, though. Not many can say no when the Mercers tell them what to do."

"You make us sound like tyrants," Thalia said.

"That's the thing," Jason said. "You are if you want to be."

Jason was sitting on a bench in the park district, speaking into a recording crystal floating in front of him.

"...it was sort of a business fraud kind of deal. There was a lot of waiting around, but it gave me a chance to catch up on my reading. I was stuck at this abandoned lumber mill for three days with a guy named Kyle. Nice enough bloke, but really only likes to talk about wood. I suspect he's very good at his job, but not much of a conversationalist. My friends Farrah and Clive, I'm sure you've seen them on some of these recordings, they've been foisting a lot of magical theory texts on me, so I was able to get stuck into those. It's pretty fascinating, but I can't tell them that. They're rabid enough as it is."

"Hello, handsome," a sultry voice came from behind. Jason grinned as Cassandra sidled onto the bench, leaning into him.

"Is this one of the recordings you're making for your family back home?" she asked, looking at the crystal.

"It is," Jason said. "Family, this is Cassandra. We've been seeing each other socially."

"Is that how you describe it?" Cassandra asked cheekily.

"That's how I describe it to my mum," Jason said, taking down the recording crystal.

"Well, you impressed my mother," Cassandra said. "Dad, not so much. And I'd watch my back around Thadwick."

"One of his henchmen tried to kill me, so yeah, I'll be watching out. What about you?"

"Mother said you barely mentioned me," she said with a pout.

"I can't go around making decisions based on dark, gorgeous eyes," he said.

"Besides; integrity is sexy."

He reached out for her hand as they sat side-by-side, intertwining their fingers.

"You'll be away for a little while," he said.

"I don't like that you're not coming," she said. "We could have had a fun little trip away."

"We can do that when you come back," Jason said. "I assume your family owns an obnoxiously large boat. We could have a little sailing trip. A picnic basket, some wine... a small army of nautically adept servants."

She laughed, resting a head on his shoulder.

"Something to look forward to," she said.

"You can tell me all about your exciting adventures in the astral space."

"Deal," she said. "Maybe you should round out your awakening stones while we're gone," she said. "take the chance to blitz some one-star contracts, get moving towards bronze. You have to get there before I hit silver, you know."

"My friends told me not to do that," Jason said. "It seems there might be an unusual opportunity not long after they get back."

"Oh?" she prompted.

"They're still not giving me any details," Jason said. "It's something to do with why they came here in the first place. They're expecting another adventurer to arrive. A gold-ranker, apparently."

"I've heard rumblings about that. Maybe you should catch that thief giving everyone so much trouble. My uncle and the Adventure Society director have been quite contentious about it, behind the scenes."

"The whole thing seems sketchy to me," Jason said. "High-profile jobs; the Duke and Elspeth Arella taking such an interest. The whole thing smells of politics."

"You know, she was almost caught a few days ago. A group of adventurers almost pinned her down, but they were attacked."

“By who?”

“No one knows,” Cassandra said. “They just slowed them down for long enough for her to escape, then fled themselves. Dressed all in black. They weren’t even iron-rankers.”

“I told you,” Jason said. “Politics. There’s a mess of undercurrents running through the whole business.”

“You don’t want to catch her?”

“She’s robbing from rich people,” Jason said. “I can appreciate that.”

“Aren’t you rich?”

“Not compared to you.”

Chapter 98: The Point of Money and Power

The Adventure Society campus was a sea of chaos as the grand expedition prepared to depart. With the Ustei detained in the marshalling yard and being prepared to move, the adventurers were gathering in front of the main administration building. Neither space was designed for that many people or that kind of activity, so people were spilling out all over the campus.

Jason navigated the commotion-filled campus, leisurely eating an apple. He watched absently as an Ustei made a run for it, a couple of Adventure Society officials in pursuit. He reached the administration building, where a crowd of people swarmed around the carriages that would take them out to desert relay stations. The humungous Ustei sand barge was going to be used, along with smaller sand barges supplied by the Magic Society.

It had been a good choice to make his farewells to Gary, Farrah and Rufus at the inn rather than at the assembly point. Looking at the huge mess and hearing the harried shouts, Jason was somewhat happy that he wasn't a part of it. He was disappointed he wouldn't get to see the inside of the astral space, though.

"One of these days," he consoled himself.

He approached the space in front of the admin building where the adventurers were gathering. He paused as he felt the wild storm of auras crashing together in a maelstrom. Not everyone had the control that came from just having an aura power, let alone the kind of training Jason had received from Farrah.

He used that training to suppress other auras in a very small space around his body, allowed him to move closer without being overwhelmed. He noticed a lot of iron-rankers looking woozy because they couldn't do the same. Farrah's emphasis on the importance of aura training was once again borne out.

It took him a while to track down anyone he knew in the crowd, as they were all restraining their auras to avoid adding to the mess. He found Danielle Geller busily directing the loading of supplies, pausing only long enough to point Jason in the direction of the main mass of Gellers.

If he had come at the crowd from the other side, he quickly realised, he would have had no trouble. The Gellers were gathered en masse, looking like a modelling agency that formed an Olympic team. Surprising Jason not at all, they were already packed up and ready to head out. He nodded to those he knew as he made his way over to where Rick

and Phoebe were talking, while Humphrey was saying goodbye to Gabrielle. Rick's team was also there, Jonah laughing at Humphrey.

"You're going away for a few weeks," Jonah jeered. "It's not like you're going off to war."

"Leave them be," Jason said as he approached. "They're sweet and earnest. The world could use more of that."

"I'm glad you think so," Cassandra said, suddenly standing next to him. He smiled as she slipped her hand into his.

"Oh, hey," he greeted, voice softening with pleasure. "Can you teleport?"

"Maybe," she said. "A girl has to have some secrets," she said.

"I have secrets, too," he said. "My fried chicken spice mix is better than my essence abilities."

She laughed and nodded in the direction of her own family.

"Are you going to come to see me off?" she asked.

"Of course," he said, and waved at Humphrey with the hand Cassandra hadn't claimed.

"See you in a few weeks, Hump!"

"Go die in a bog!" Humphrey called back. He winced at the startled look this earned from Gabrielle, which caused him to glare at Jason's laughing face all the more.

Cassandra led Jason through the chaos to where her own family were preparing. No one could match the numbers of the Geller family, who drew from branches all around the world, but the Mercers still made an impressive showing.

"What do you think you're doing, Asano?" came Thadwick's, voice, drawing a sigh from Jason.

"You need to get away from my sister," Thadwick said, marching up to Jason. "You need to stop sticking your nose into business that isn't yours. You had to go and ruin my deal, didn't you?"

"Thadwick..."

Jason was about to point out that with all the ways his family had to legally exploit people, Thadwick still managed to find one that was against the law but stopped himself. Instead, he took a slow, cleansing breath.

"You know what, Thadwick?" Jason asked. "You have a good trip."

"What does that mean?" Thadwick asked suspiciously.

"Just wishing you well," Jason said. "I'm going to try and put more positivity into the world."

“You're weird,” Thadwick said, giving Jason a wary look. His mother walked over to them, placing a hand on Thadwick's shoulder.

“Do go finish stowing your gear on the carriage, dear.”

“Why didn't we bring servants for that?” Thadwick complained.

“There aren't servants where we're going, dear, and you may have noticed that things are crowded enough.”

Danielle Geller's voice boomed over the crowd through some form of magic amplification.

“All non-expedition members please clear the area, as we are getting ready to depart!”

Jason leaned in to gently kiss Cassandra, only for her to forcefully latch onto him. After a lingering kiss, they stood leaning into one-another, foreheads together.

“You're being naughty,” he told her softly.

“A naughty genius?” she asked.

“You've certainly got me figured out.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” she told him.

Soon Jason stood off with other well-wishers at the huge train of carriages rolled away. In the empty space left behind, Jason was about to leave when he was approached by Vincent.

“You're not on the expedition?” Jason asked. His brain started turning over, and he laughed. “I get it. Everyone wanted in on this expedition, so Arella let all the people who aren't wildly on-board with her agenda go. That gets her some bureaucratic capital, and while they and most of the city's big power-brokers are gone, she can institute a few sweeping changes.”

“You got that just from my still being here?” Vincent asked.

“Just postulation, but it's what I'd do.”

“Well, the director is going to be quite busy for the next few weeks, so she wanted to get something out of the way first. If you'll follow me?”

Vincent led Jason into the administration building.

“The director is hoping that you can resume the pace of handling contracts you demonstrated when you first joined the Society,” Vincent said as they walked. “Most of our best adventurers just left.”

“No worries,” Jason said. “Most of the people I know just left town, so I figured I'd throw myself into it. I was expecting there to be more trouble over killing those adventurers.”

“The recording makes it quite plain what they were there for,” Vincent said. “What really clinched it was that most of them hadn't taken a contract in months. Some hadn't taken one at all. The director hates that kind of adventurer with a passion. Something to do with her upbringing, I've been told. She was more than happy to just push it under the rug.”

“I've heard she isn't from one of the big families,” Jason said. “That she made her way up out of Old City.”

“That's about as much as anyone has heard,” Vincent said. “She doesn't talk about her past, at least to me.”

“She respects privacy,” Jason said. “Unlike someone I know. I'm having a barbie tonight, if you'd care to join.”

“A barbie?”

“A barbecue, mate. Nice and casual. A few mates still in town, they're all bringing people. You can bring some Adventure Society people if you'd like. Clive's bringing some Magic Society people, plus their families. We've got enough meat to sink a ship, and Norwich Distillery is putting on the drinks. Fair warning, though; leave your social stratification at the door. Duke or dunny-cleaner, everyone's a mate at an Asano barbie.”

“I'll think about it,” Vincent said. “Norwich Distillery, you say?”

“Yep,” Jason said. “Norwich'll be there himself, along with some of his workers. They're bringing a few barrels along.”

Vincent led them into what turned out to be a magical elevator. Jason knew they were in some of the Island's taller buildings, but it was his first time using one. The ride was swift and smooth, depositing them on the top floor. Vincent led Jason to a door with a plaque proclaiming it to be the office of the branch director. Vincent led them in without knocking.

Jason and Vincent went in to find the director, Elspeth Arella sitting behind a paperwork-covered desk. At another desk was the elderly elf who had assessed Jason for his promotion. They were both busily writing and Vincent gestured for patience.

Looking around, Jason noticed several desert landscapes hung on the walls. They were all by the same artist who painted a similar work Jason favoured at the concert hall.

“I like your taste in art,” he said to the director. “You have a lot of Moher's work.”

“He's a friend of the family,” the director said absently. “I'll be with you in a moment, Asano.”

Vincent gave Jason an admonishing frown, and they waited until the director and deputy director finished their work. Once the papers they were working on were signed and filed, they turned to Vincent and Jason.

“G’day,” Jason said, offering his hand over the desk to the elderly elf. “We haven’t been properly introduced.”

“Genevieve Picot,” she said, curtly shaking his hand. “Deputy director.”

“We’re quite busy, Mr Asano,” Arella said, “so I’ll be brief. First, thank you for not making a fuss about being excluded from the expedition. I know you have enough connections now that you could have.”

“Plenty of people did,” Genevieve said unhappily.

“Second,” Arella said, “I was very impressed at your handling of the lumber mill contract. You could have been loud about it, but you weren’t. The thoroughness with which you investigated and collected evidence gave me some much-appreciated political capital.”

“I didn’t do it that way to give you another stick to whack the Duke with,” Jason said. “I did it because that’s where the contract took me.”

“Yet your response demonstrated an awareness of the political realities,” Arella said.

She opened a drawer on her desk and took out a small bamboo box, handing it over to him. He slid off the top to see a round crystal inside and tapped a finger to it.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Judgement] (unranked, rare)

An awakening stone containing the power of adjudication (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.

- You have 4 unawakened essence abilities.
- You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Judgement]. Absorb Y/N?

“Judgement,” Jason mused.

“It seemed appropriate, given that’s what you’ve demonstrated,” Arella said. “We’re rather understaffed right now, so if anything unexpected arises, we’ll need people to take on leadership roles. At iron rank, you will be one of those people. Hand over your badge, please.”

Jason frowned as he took out his badge and handed it over.

“You’re promoting me?” Jason asked. “Days after I killed a fistful of adventurers?”

“They weren’t adventurers,” Arella said darkly. “They were the filth clinging to the side of a boat in desperate need of righting.”

She took out a wedge-shaped stone and tapped it to Jason's iron badge. The metal shifted as the two stars embossed on it were joined by a third and she handed it back.

“No big, imposing room?” Jason asked. “No officious questioning?”

“The rules only require three officials present, including at least one of director or deputy-director level. We have a lot to do, Mr Asano, and such proceedings aren’t as valuable with some members as they are with others.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “You know, if you need to wind down after work, I am having a barbie tonight...”

The turnout for Jason's barbecue was larger than he expected. They had staked-out a section of the park district, bringing out picnic tables with colourful tablecloths. Jensen Norwich had set up a long bar. There was a whole array of grillers, covered in sizzling meat, fish wrapped in bamboo leaves, vegetables and fruit.

“Good thing I overdid it on food,” Jason said. “Thanks for wrangling the extra grills, Jessica.”

“It was my absolute pleasure,” Madam Landry said.

People in the park district had wandered over and were invited to join in. There was some kind of three-way ball game happening, the participants having marked-out a triangular field. The teams were Magic Society versus Adventure Society versus the people that were both. The mixed team had Clive as captain.

Jason spotted a pair of elves looking on at a remove, standing under a tree. Jason teleported through the tree’s shadow to join them.

“You made it after all,” he said to them.

“You’ve created quite a commotion in the park district,” Arella said. “You did get permission for this, right?”

“As you know,” he said, “Thalia Mercer owed me for not throwing her crappy son under the bus. Her brother-in-law is the Duke, so it wasn’t hard to get.”

“This is how you spend your political capital?” Genevieve asked.

“What’s the point of money and power if you don’t enjoy it?” Jason asked. “I don’t suppose either of you ladies can explain the rules of that ball game?”

“You don’t know tri-ball?” Arella asked. “You really are from another world.”

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.

-
- Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Iron 0 (100%).
 - Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Iron 1 (100%).
-

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%.
-

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.
-

"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.
-

"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.
-

“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.”

Chapter 100: Legwork

Danielle Geller and Thalia Mercer looked at the water pouring out of the astral space aperture. It was within a crevice in a rocky outcropping but was itself a free-floating circle of shimmering blue. The water streamed out of the aperture, the source of a small creek they were currently standing in. It wasn't the overwhelming torrent that some apertures had, which is why they had chosen this particular one; there wasn't so much force that people couldn't push their way against the water to enter. The other reason being that the first two apertures they tried had already failed and vanished.

"You've been in the astral space before, haven't you?" Danielle asked.

"The last monster surge," Thalia said. Monsters were spawning out of an aperture out in the desert, so we set up a defence point just inside.

"The advantage of having our family seat in the city," Danielle said. "I spent the whole time defending the estate."

Danielle turned back to look at the expedition arrayed out behind her. The order of entry had already been organised, with the silver rankers heading through first to scout and deal with any immediate trouble. She turned back, took a deep breath and pushed herself through the water streaming out.

She emerged underwater, disoriented. She thrashed around, finding a sandy bottom and using it to push herself up. She breached the surface, finding the water was not very deep. She swam away from the aperture in the water, taking a look at her surroundings. She was in a lagoon of turquoise water, under a clear cerulean sky. The lagoon was mostly bounded by rocky rises with scrubby trees growing up the sides, but she spotted a small, sandy beach. Behind it were trees and tropical plants.

Thalia emerged from the aperture and likewise quickly surfaced.

"Nice," Thalia said, swimming away from the aperture to give the next person space. "It'll be good to explore instead of just staying near the aperture and fighting monsters."

Clive entered the office of the Magic Society director. As normal, the director was absent, while the deputy director, Pochard Finn, was at work behind his own desk. Pochard barely glanced up at the intrusion, continuing to write as he spoke.

"What is it, Standish? I don't have a lot of time with all these people off on the expedition."

"I'm aware, sir," Clive said. "I've been very busy myself, but I've managed to get things reorganised, so I'd like to take some time on another project. As you know, I also have Adventure Society membership."

"Yes, I heard about the marsh hydra," Pochard said. "I can't imagine your contribution was all that much but well done."

"There's an open contract with the Adventure Society," Clive said. "A friend and I want to take a crack at it."

Pochard paused his writing to look up at Clive.

"You want to slack off so you can go to social events in the hope this thief shows up?"

"Actually, sir, we're going to take a different approach. Something that will hopefully have more success."

"Who is this friend of yours?" Pochard asked.

"He's another iron-ranker. Jason Asano."

"The one who handled the lumber mill affair," Pochard mused thoughtfully.

"You know him?"

"I like to keep apprised of goings-on," Pochard said. "You're sure your duties will be covered?"

"I won't be completely absent, sir. I'll be checking in each day to make sure everything is running smoothly."

"Then take what time you need, so long as you still feel your chances of success are reasonable."

"Really?" Clive asked.

Pochard turned back to his work.

"Learn to take yes for an answer, Standish."

Clive called on Jason in his lodgings. Jason had papers scattered over the refreshment table, picking some up to read from the comfort of a lounge chair.

"How did it go?" Jason asked.

"Surprisingly well," Clive said, still registering the surprise. He nodded at all the papers.

"What's all that?"

"A copy of the contract of service between the Adventure Society and the City of Greenstone. If the Duke of Greenstone and the Adventure Society director are playing some kind of game with this thief as the central piece, I thought I should get a look at the board."

“And?” Clive asked, sitting down.

“It’s possible this whole thing is about trying to get the Duke to violate the terms of the agreement. It gives local authorities a lot of influence in Adventure Society affairs. It would make sense, given that Elspeth Arella’s driving goal is to eliminate that influence. I’m inclined to think that isn’t it, though.”

“Why not?”

“The agreement is up for renegotiation in a couple of years, and the director doesn’t strike me as an impatient person. If she were to violate the terms herself, trying to provoke the Duke, he could appeal to the core branches of the Adventure Society, maybe even get Arella replaced. Given her proclivities are a direct threat to aristocratic power, having almost anyone else in her seat when the negotiations come up is a win for him. I don’t think she’s willing to take that risk when all she has to do is wait for her chance to renegotiate terms.”

“Then what is it all about?” Clive asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jason set. “There’s some third factor beyond the Duke and Arella’s basic agendas. Arella wants something, and she’s willing to push the boundaries to get it.”

“How does that affect us?” Clive said. “We’re just trying to catch the thief.”

“It’s the knife you don’t see that stabs you, Clive.”

“What next, then?”

“We turn off the filter, pinch one off in the pool and see who comes to clean it up.”

“What?” Clive asked.

“We catch the thief, and see who tries to stop us.”

“What if they do stop us?”

“Have some self-confidence, man.”

Jason started gathering the scattered pages.

“There were a few interesting things in the agreement,” Jason said as he put them away in a leather folder. “The Adventure Society has quite a lot of say in civic affairs when it involves a Society contract. Interestingly, it puts that power with the individual adventurers executing the contracts, rather than the Society itself.”

“What does that matter?” Clive asked.

“The loosened adventurer standards, have allowed more-or-less the entire aristocracy to be nominal members of the Adventure Society, so decentralising power is another means for the aristocracy to circumvent the authority of the Adventure Society’s higher officials. I’m starting to understand what Arella is up against, now. It’s something worth knowing; another trick to have up the sleeve.”

“What now, then?” Clive asked. “I know we won’t be randomly attending social events, hoping they get robbed. People have been trying that for months and it hasn’t worked.”

“Then what do you think should be the first step?” Jason asked.

“Figure out what they’re doing, and how, right?” Clive asked.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jason said. “We need to go talk to all the victims, learn as much about what was taken and the thief’s methodology as we can.”

“Are these people going to talk to us?” Clive asked.

Jason chuckled.

“These are people used to having the power, not being the victim, and there isn’t anything they can do about it. Don’t underestimate how much that will eat at them. They know that the Adventure Society isn’t letting anyone other than iron-rankers in on this, so a three-star is the best they can hope for. Add in an assist from a Magic Society official and it will seem like a ray of hope. They’ll cooperate.”

“And if they don’t?” Clive asked.

“We’ll talk them into it,” Jason said.

“You say that like it’s going to be easy.”

Jason and Clive left the townhouse of Lord Vordis and started heading toward the closest loop line transit station. Lord Vordis was a minor noble, but one known for making useful connections between the upper and lower echelons of society.

“Are you sure you should have done that?” Clive asked, glancing back nervously.

“Done what?” Jason asked innocently.

“Told him the Mercers sent you.”

“I didn’t do that,” Jason said.

“I was there!”

“But were you really listening? I never said the Mercers sent me. Yes, the conversation happened to go in such a way that certain connections between myself and the Mercer family came to light. And I suppose I can see how that particular topic of conversation, in proximity to other topics, may have led some people to assume that the Mercers sent me, but I made no such assertion. I’m not responsible for other people’s assumptions, Clive.”

“It really seems like you are.”

“We got what we were after, and that’s the important thing.”

"I can't believe he told you he was smuggling sump coil rods," Clive said. "They're restricted by the Adventure Society and the Magic Society, but he told an adventurer and a Magic Society official."

"Lucky this town's so corrupt," Jason said. "He figured there wouldn't be any major repercussions."

"Because he thought the Mercer family sent you."

"I told you that I'm not responsible for the assumptions of others. What are sump coil rods, anyway?"

"They're used to create very small areas that are invisible to magical senses," Clive said. "Auras, tracking abilities, seeking rituals. Nothing short of gold-rank ritual or ability stands a chance. Very small spaces, though. About the size of a laundry basket."

"What are they used for?"

"The big things about them, is they don't trip warnings. A lot of detection magic, be that abilities, rituals or items, give back a negative reading if they hit a zone they can't penetrate. Use sump coil rods the right way, and most things won't even register the negative space."

"You think maybe they took them to create a hideout they can't be traced to?" Jason asked. "Use a bunch of those rods to stack the spaces?"

"That wouldn't be practical, and they didn't take enough of the rods."

"Well, we just keep collecting puzzle pieces," Jason said. "Eventually we'll have enough to figure out the picture."

Jason and Clive were in Jason's lodging, poring over notes. Jason's were scattered over the refreshments table in the lounge area, while Clive laid claim to the dining table. More than a week into their investigation, Jason's lodging were so deep in notes, maps, lists and magical tool design documents that Madam Landry refused to have her staff clean around it.

"You just tell me when your done and I'll send people in," she had told Jason. "Just don't leave it too long, or I'll send people in anyway."

In almost three months, the thief had done seventeen jobs. Every day Jason and Clive would go from victim to victim, scene to scene, gathering information.

"They're basically doing two kinds of jobs," Jason mused. "The first type is public, usually some kind of snatch-and-grab of valuables. These jobs are in open places with plenty of escape routes. The loot is frankly, not worth the risk. It tends to be highly specific, which would make fencing it tricky."

“A lot of adventurers have been taking that angle,” Clive said. “The Magic Society has sold a lot of appraisal tools in the last few months.”

“The other type of job tends to be specialised magic equipment. Rare, valuable, sometimes restricted. They’ve taken much bigger risks for these jobs, as well. Every time they’ve come close to being caught it was on this type of job.”

“Whoever this thief is,” Clive said, “they either have an interesting understanding of magical tools or are working with someone who does. Aura masking, material deconstruction, bypassing magical protections. Her methods speak to an eclectic magical knowledge, most likely specialised for this kind of work.”

“A professional thief,” Jason said. “That’s hardly a surprise, at this point.”

“I’d love to meet them,” Clive said. “Their unorthodox approach to magical study would be fascinating to discuss.”

“The whole point of this is so you can do exactly that,” Jason said, sorting through the piles of paper in front of him. He frowned, looking at them all.

“There’s a lot of paper in this city for a place with such a small lumber industry.”

“This is all reed paper,” Clive said. “There’s a local reed that grows prolifically in the delta,” Clive explained absently, not looking up from his own notes. “It’s a fairly easy process to produce paper from it. Pulp it, a little bit of magic and here you go. It’s one of the local exports.”

“Reed paper,” Jason said, running a sheet between his fingers. “I wouldn’t have guessed that. This high-quality stuff.”

Clive started reorganising all the papers in front of him. Some he placed into neat order on the table, others he stacked in haphazard piles on the chairs around it.

“The snatch-and-grabs are obviously some kind of distraction from their true intention,” he reasoned.

“Agreed,” Jason said. “Clearly their true intention is all these magical supplies they’re taking on the other jobs.”

“If I can figure out what all of it is for, then maybe we can figure out their ultimate objective.”

He stood up, rubbing his temples.

“I need a break to clear my head.”

Jason glanced at the clock on the wall. Like everything in Madam Landry’s inn, it was tasteful and understated in design and worked perfectly.

“It’s almost time we headed out, anyway,” Jason said. “There’s something that should be worth seeing.”

“Is it something to do with the mysterious group taking over the expedition to explore that complex we found?” Clive asked. “Word came down from on high to let them take over, which didn’t impress Lucian Lamprey.”

“Who?” Jason asked. “Oh, the director of the Magic Society. Haven’t had the pleasure, yet.”

“Pleasure isn’t the word I’d use,” Clive said. “Still, it was gratifying to see it taken off him the way it was taken off me.”

“Well, you can meet the man who took it off him,” Jason said. “He’s scheduled to arrive this afternoon.”

Chapter 101

Fantasy World Goodness

Jason and Clive made their way to the northern side of the Adventure Society campus, which occupied much of the western side of the Island's north shore. They passed a grey, stone tower that Jason now recognised as the prison tower. The Society was only allowed to hold prisoners taken as part of a contract, while others went to the courthouse gaol. It had briefly held the man who attacked him at the lumber mill, Jerrick, before he was stripped of his Society membership and sent packing.

Getting closer to the north shore, they skirted around the memorial grounds where they had attended a solemn service three weeks earlier. They both gave sober glances to the mausoleum as they went past. The memorial grounds occupied a good chunk of the shoreline, while the private dock took up most of the rest.

"Isn't this a bad place for a dock?" Jason asked. "It'd be very exposed to the elements."

"It's rarely used," Clive said. "Usually by prestigious visiting adventurers, who get dropped off before the ship moves on to the ports. Sometimes vessels with important cargo for the Adventure Society or Magic Society."

The Adventure Society's private dock had few buildings nestled into garden grounds where the plant life was chosen for its resilience to salty sea winds. Clive pointed them out explaining their purpose to Jason. The largest was a service building, right up against the dock. The smallest was a processing building for ships' crews. The middle-sized building was nicer than the others; an arrival and departure lounge with space for lavish functions.

As they went inside there was no elaborate function set out, but the small crowd looked like all the prestige Greenstone could muster, at least while so many luminaries were absent on the expedition.

As Clive's gaze wandered over the assemblage, he became increasingly startled. He recognised the directors and deputy directors of both the Magic Society and the Adventure Society. There was the Duke of Greenstone and his brother, Beaufort Mercer.

"It's Cassandra's Dad," Jason said.

"You've met him, then?"

"There was a brief, stilted encounter. Reserved respect isn't really my strongest play."

"You might want to consider what that says about you," Clive said.

Along with nobility, there were representatives of the various temples. That including Gabrielle Pellin, who had been helping Clive with his investigation into the underground

complex. She was standing with one of her church's more high-ranking members. Given how many of the city's elite were off on the expedition, it was an absurdly high-class gathering. Jason led Clive away from the group gathered near the doors. The lounge was spacious with glass, dockside frontage, so they easily found some isolated seats that still afforded them a view of the ocean.

"Jason, what is this?" Clive whispered as they sat down. "That's my boss and my boss' boss. The Duke, a bunch of silver rankers..."

A few curious glances were thrown their way. Jason sensed, as much as saw the look Elspeth Arella gave him, with the weight of her silver-rank aura behind it. It wasn't a suppressive force but made itself unmistakably felt.

"Let's just keep our distance," Jason said. "I'm not sure I can be around that much wealth inequality without going on a socialist rant."

Jason looked out over the water.

"I always meant ask what the tides are like with two moons," Jason said.

"What?" Clive asked, still distracted by the crowd, then turned around to Jason with a confused frown. "What do tides have to do with the moons?"

"The moon has a huge effect on the tides," Jason said. "I can only imagine it's bigger with two. What is it you think causes tidal action?"

"It's not really my field," Clive said, "but the prevailing theory is that is a function of ambient magic. We just can't test it because we would have to monitor the whole planet's magical field for an extended period. Or a good-size chunk of the planet, at least."

"No, that's all wrong, mate. What you're dealing with is... Gabrielle?"

"I'm dealing with Gabrielle?" Clive asked, then noticed Jason looking past him. Gabrielle had left the group and was approaching them as swiftly as her formal robes would allow.

"Jason," she insistently hissed, wanting to be forceful without being loud. "You can't tell people that."

"I can't tell people what?"

"About that thing you were about to tell him about. Hello, by the way, Clive."

"Acolyte Pellin," Clive greeted her.

"I can't tell people about gravity?" Jason asked.

"No, you can't. Some things people have to figure out for themselves."

"This is your boss telling you this, then," Jason said.

"Yes," Gabrielle said. "She said you can't just go around telling people about fundamental aspects of physical reality. Especially not someone like Clive."

“Fundamental aspects of physical reality?” Clive asked. “Wait, why not someone like me?”

Gabrielle gave Clive a friendlier look than the forceful one she had been giving Jason.

“Because you’ll run around telling everyone,” Gabrielle told him. “My Lady quite likes you, by the way.”

“Really?” Clive asked. “She knows who I am?”

“She knows who everyone is, Clive,” Jason said. “She knows everything except what a private conversation is, apparently.”

“Jason,” Gabrielle said. “She says the people of this world have to learn important things for themselves, instead of from some dimension-hopping loon.”

“Did she tell you to say that?” Jason asked.

“She was very explicit. She said that if you keep your mouth shut for once, she’ll give you a gift.”

“Bribery?” Jason said, thinking it over. “Yeah, alright.”

Gabrielle nodded and turned back for the group, some of whom had been looking on with curiosity. Many of them had the perception of a silver-ranked spirit attribute and could have easily eavesdropped.

“Gravity?” Clive asked.

“Did you not just hear me get bribed not to tell you?” Jason said. “She’d know immediately.”

A look of contemplation crossed Jason’s face.

“She knows when you’ve been naughty,” he mused. “She brings gifts, apparently.”

Halfway back to the group, Gabrielle wheeled around and stormed back to Jason, waving a finger in his face.

“I don’t know what a flirty Santa Claus is,” she scolded, “but my goddess definitely isn’t one.”

“Does she have a big temple to the north where elves make toys?”

“What?” Clive and Gabrielle asked.

“Look,” Jason said, pointing out to sea. “I think it’s kicking off.”

Their eyes followed where Jason’s hand was pointing until they spotted what looked like a mass of cloud on the horizon.

“What is that?” Clive asked. “It’s magical, but I can’t make anything out at this distance.”

“You don’t know?” Gabrielle asked. “Why are you here?”

“Jason wouldn’t tell me.”

"I thought it would be a fun surprise," Jason said defensively.

"What are you up to?" Clive asked Jason warily.

"Actually, it should be kind of a fun surprise," Gabrielle conceded.

They watched as the mass of cloud moved closer.

"It's a ship," Clive said excitedly. "It's a ship made of clouds."

The cloud ship, sailing through the water, was not as close as it first seemed. Its enormous size made it seem that way, growing bigger and bigger in their vision as it approached. It was proportioned like an ocean liner, crafted from fluffy white clouds. Sunset shades of blue and orange delineated the dimensions of the ship that floated over the water at a goodly speed, in spite of no visible propulsion.

"That's some proper, fantasy world goodness, right there," Jason said.

By the time it pulled into place at the dock, it was clear how overwhelmingly humongous the vessel was. Over three hundred metres long, sixty metres wide and high, even the silver-rankers were agog at the sheer magnitude of it.

The ship drew to a gentle stop in the dock and a walkway of cloud started emerging from the side. When it connected to the shore, a hole appeared in the side of the ship to reveal Emir Bahadir. Seeing him in daylight, he looked the same as when Jason had met him in the dark. Sleek clothes, midnight skin and dark hair woven with colourful beads. Jason had been uncertain in their previous encounter, where he could seemingly evade his ability to see through darkness.

He walked across the platform to the shore, meeting Elspeth Arella who came out to greet him. She led him inside to be met by the assembled welcoming party, but Clive was uninterested. He had stood up out of his chair, his eyes roaming the side of the ship. His vision power allowed him to see at least some of the otherwise-invisible magic.

"This is amazing," he said.

Gabrielle had remained with them to watch the ship appear and suddenly remembered she should be with the larger group. She was about to hurry away when Bahadir vanished from where he was standing to appear in front of them in a single step.

"Mr Asano," Emir greeted.

"Mr Bahadir," Jason said, standing up to shake hands.

"This is Gabrielle Pellin," Jason introduced. "You'll know Danielle Geller, I presume. Gabrielle is currently attached to her son, Humphrey. She does have accomplishments outside what man she's hanging around, but she called me a dimension-hopping loon, so I won't bother with them."

“A delight to meet you,” Emir said. Gabrielle’s eyes shot daggers at Jason, before turning back to Emir with a smile.

“A pleasure,” she said, shaking his hand. “I’m an acolyte with the church of knowledge.”

“He knows that from your robes,” Jason said. “You might as well have worn a white sack and painted ‘church of knowledge’ on it.”

“You will pay for this, Jason,” she said.

“Facing up to consequences is the making of a man,” Jason said, gesturing to Clive, still looking out the window. “This is Clive. He’s the deputy something-something at the local Magic Society, and more interested in your boat than meeting a gold-ranker, it appears.”

“What?” Clive said, turning his gaze from the boat for the first time. “Oh, um, wait. A gold ranker?”

“Emir Bahadir,” Jason introduced, “meet Clive Standish.”

“I’ll see you get a tour,” Emir said, shaking a flummoxed Clive’s hand. “It won’t be a ship anymore, but I’m confident you’ll find it just as impressive.”

“It won’t be a boat?” Clive asked.

As they chatted, more people had come across the wide gangplank made of cloud.

“My staff,” Emir said. “The ship can be crewed by only a few people, as you will come to see, Clive, but I have various other needs. There seem to be some necessary social duties planned, so I will have to go back, but first...”

The people finished disembarking, around fifty of them.

“Come along,” Emir said and walked back outside, Jason and the others trailing behind.

As they swept past the nonplussed welcoming committee, Gabrielle glanced nervously at her high priest, who nodded the affirmation to continue. Outside, Emir’s staff were gathered haphazardly. They were a wild collection of races and ethnicities within those races. Their attire ranged from neat and subdued like Emir and Rufus preferred, to the wild and colourful clothing that Gary and the Greenstone locals preferred.

Emir walked over to a woman dressed in a similar style to himself, with a one-button jacket, neat slacks and practical dark shoes. Where Emir was dark-skinned, she was pale. Her dark brown hair dropped simply down to neck length in a cut that, like her clothes, was simple and stylish. She had a subdued, but not wholly restrained, silver-rank aura.

“This is Constance,” Emir introduced. “She is the single most indispensable person in my world. Constance, this is Jason, Gabrielle and Clive. They are always welcome.”

Constance nodded.

“Understood.”

Jason sensed something of a kindred spirit in Emir’s easy persona, which he knew had strengths and weaknesses. The professionalism he read in Constance gave him a sense that she was the one who kept the clocks running.

“Everyone’s off?” Emir asked Constance.

“They are,” She said.

"Alright then," Emir said, reaching into his jacket. From it, he pulled what looked to Jason like a round-bottomed chemistry flask, with Emir holding it by the neck. It was certainly too large to fit in a pocket.

“Is that a dimensional jacket?” Jason asked.

“It is,” Emir said.

“Stylish and practical,” Jason said. “I like it.”

“If you ever find your way to Vitesse,” Emir said, “I’ll introduce you to my tailor. He only takes new clients by referral.”

Emir shook the flask, then took out the crystal stopper. Four thin streams of mist emerged, gathering in the air to form four shapes that floated in place. Like the ship, they were made of clouds with sunset colours giving definition. One looked like a model of a sprawling estate house, the next like a bus or recreational vehicle with no wheels. The third was a sprawling palace, and the fourth was a small replica of the ship floating in front of them. That final image was glowing with an internal light.

Emir pushed his hand into the image of the palace, which started to glow as the light in the ship began fading. After a few moments, The cloud images streamed back into the bottle and Emir put it away.

The sheer magic power of the ship gave it a potent, gold-rank aura, and Jason felt that aura start undergoing a shift.

“I need to go back to my welcoming party,” Emir said, “but I think you might enjoy staying to watch. The transformation is something to see.”

Emir held out his elbow for Gabrielle.

“Care to join me, young lady?”

“Certainly,” she said, and they departed.

Left behind with Emir’s staff, they watched as the huge ship morphed into a palace of clouds, floating on the water. It took around ten minutes, which was, as promised, quite something to see. It was even more so to Clive, who could see some of the magic as it transformed.

"This is crazy," Clive said. "I can barely understand what's happening with these gold-rank processes, but just that little is amazing. Mostly I'm just seeing the structural changes, with the external security measures stopping me from looking deeper, but even that much is incredible."

"Security measures?" Jason asked.

"Oh yes," Clive said. "I would very much advise against trying to get in uninvited. It'd be harder to break into than..."

Jason looked at Clive after he trailed off. Clive was no longer focused on the transforming ship, instead taking up what Jason recognised as his thinking pose. His eyes were closed, his expression stern. His hands were held loosely in front of him, fingers wagging. Jason watched, waiting quietly until the fingers stopped moving and Clive opened his eyes, nodding.

"That adds up," he said absently to himself, then turned to Jason.

"I know what the thief is after."

Chapter 102: You Fight Like Me

In Old City, the wealthiest area was the canal district. Once the home of aristocratic power, migration to the Island left it open for those who ruled Old City with money and power. It was strictly neutral territory for the Big Three, due to a preponderance of Island interests based around the canals and water trade flowing in from the delta.

In a less-used area of the canal docks were a cluster of buildings, not well-placed and too small to service the water traffic that had built up in the years since their construction. Mostly the buildings were used to store items that were rarely, if ever used. One housed small watercraft awaiting repairs that never came, the cluttered space untouched for years, or so it seemed.

Sophie had judiciously placed some of the clutter and quietly moved the rest to the other buildings. Add in some rituals by Belinda to muffle noise and display some simple, static illusions and the seemingly abandoned building had become a well-hidden lair. Belinda quietly made her way inside, where Sophie was already waiting.

"The last item on our shopping list just came up," Belinda said without preamble. "We need to move fast, though."

"Good," Sophie said. "It was getting about time to do another distraction job, or Ventress would call open season on us."

"Now we don't have to," Belinda said. "Once we have the tilting stones, we'll have everything we need for the last job."

"And we'll finally get out of the city," Sophie said, shoulders slumping wearily.

"How's the preparation for that?"

"I've got maps and supplies enough to get us through the delta, into the Veldt and then south to Hornis," Sophie said. "After hitting the spirit coin vault we'll have enough money to buy our way past any influence the Big Three have there and leave this whole continent behind."

"Let's not go making assumptions until we're on open ocean," Belinda cautioned. "We have two jobs and a long journey between us and there. We have to move fast on this next one."

"Tell me."

"There's some big project out in the delta, some ancient ruin or something. The Magic Society was crawling all over it, until some out-of-towners showed up and took over."

"Out-of-towners?"

“They arrived on a ship made of clouds, if you can believe that.”

“A ship made of clouds?”

“Sounds incredible, right?”

“Sounds made up.”

“Nope,” Belinda said. “The ship turned into a cloud palace and is floating off the north end of the Island. I’ve seen it for myself. It’s so big you can spot it from any rooftop on the north side of the city.”

“Please tell me you don’t want us to rob it.”

“No,” Belinda said with a laugh. “That ruin they’re excavating; it was originally a Magic Society project, but these people took over.”

“That’s some serious clout.”

“Yes, it is. The important part is that the Magic Society is still providing supplies and support. One of the things on the supply list is the tilting stones we need. I’ll be getting a head’s up when they’re scheduled to move, but it’ll be sometime this week. We grab the stones during transit.”

“That’s not a lot of time to prepare,” Sophie said.

“We shouldn’t need it. The supply shipments move out from the supply complex at the Magic Society campus with minimal protection. The shipment isn’t high-value, so they have a heavy guard until the Duke’s guards meet them at the bridge to Old City.”

“If it’s not high-value, then couldn’t we just have bought these tilting stones we need?”

“They’re restricted,” Belinda explained. “Not dangerous, but they have some specific uses in certain activities.”

“Like the one we want them for?”

“Exactly.”

“So we hit it on the island,” Sophie said.

“Exactly. All the supplies will be in dimensional-storage crates. You just need to grab the right crate and get out.”

“You have the route?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, then,” Sophie said. “Let’s go scout some locations.”

One of the largest and busiest areas of the Magic Society Campus was the magical supply complex. In addition to the space requirements, operations were complicated by the sometimes volatile nature of magical materials. Care had to be taken to store various goods correctly while keeping apart materials that would affect one another in proximity.

This caused a number of fundamental problems for the smooth running of the supply complex.

The first problem was structural. Purpose-designed, the complex was a nest of interconnected buildings, linked by secured walkways at ground level and above. There were warehouse structures, towers, domes, and in one case, a spherical building secured by a cubic frame of support struts.

Storage and record-keeping were even more of a mess. Because of the nature of the stored materials, magical requirements took precedence over the practical requirements of space efficiency. This, in turn, made inventory management and supply a nightmare.

In the central loading and distribution centre, the supply manager was named Thel and the distribution manager, Drew. They were having several busy weeks at a run. First, the Magic Society started up some operation out in the middle of a swamp, which was already a logistical nightmare. Then the whole thing was taken over by some out-of-town group. The Society was still giving logistical support and supply, which meant meeting the different needs of the new group while adding a whole extra layer to supply management because they weren't Magic Society. Amid a busy day, Thel brought out a new supply order to give to Drew.

"This just came in from the big building," she told Drew. The big building was what they called central administration, out of which the Magic Society officials operated.

"Great," Drew said as he unenthusiastically took the paper with the supply order and started reading it over. "One more idiot who doesn't think twice about messing up our schedules."

He glanced at the authorising officer box on the order to see who dumped it on him.

"Adjunct Assistant to the Deputy Director of the Magic Society, Greenstone branch," he read. "What is the gods' names does that mean?"

"Sounds like a position that was made up for some rich prick's useless kid," Thel said.

"Doesn't it just."

"This one's a little odd," Thel said, gesturing at the order. "The guy who delivered the order said he was told to be very clear it was a low-priority order."

"Low priority?"

"That's right. He said he was given specific instructions that we don't break schedule and just fit it in when we can. He just wants us to let him know when it's going out."

"That's weird, right?" Drew asked.

"Very weird. I've seen plenty of demands from the high-ups to rush an order, but being told to take our time is a first."

“Sounds shady,” Drew said. “Since when did you see anyone with authority show any consideration or decency?”

“Never,” Thel said. “Think we should look into it?”

“Gods, no. The order isn’t a do-up, is it?”

“No, the order’s for real.”

“Then it’s not our problem. We get the piece of paper and we do what it says. Anything more than that is someone else’s problem.”

Jason and Clive were walking through Old City, in the direction of Jory’s clinic.

“Are you sure just organising the shipment was enough?” Clive asked. “Maybe I should have leaked some more information.”

“No,” Jason said. “This thief clearly has solid information sources. If she kept hearing about this shipment from too many places, she’d get spooked and not take the bait. As long as you made sure the shipment won’t out until they’ve had time to hear about it. You are sure this is what she needs, right? These tilting stones?”

“Jason, I’m one of the few people with a complete understanding of the security measures around the city’s spirit coin vault. Once we scratched the distraction items off our list, everything she’s stolen as part of this spree can be used to circumvent one of the security measures. Bronze-rank sopor gas for the guards, sump coil rods for the alarm matrix, dodec crystals for the vault door...”

“The magic D12s,” Jason said. “They’re my favourite.”

“I don’t know how this thief got such a complete rundown of the security, but looking at what she’s been stealing, she clearly has it.”

“And you’re worried she won’t find out about the shipment?”

“That’s a good point.”

“You just have to swap us out for the regular drivers at the very last minute so she doesn’t catch wind.”

They went in through the new self-opening glass doors of the clinic.

“Nice,” Clive said, looking them over as they went through. “That’s some clean, simple magic.”

“They were my suggestion,” Jason said.

They walked up to the receptionist.

“Morning, Janice,” Jason greeted her. “Can he spare a minute?”

“For you, Mr Asano? Always. Things have been a lot more manageable since the initial rush, and having a healing priest here full-time really makes things easier. We miss

having you around, though. You're always off having exciting adventures, these days. I'm surprised you aren't on that big expedition everyone was talking about."

"They need someone to keep things running while everyone else is gallivanting about," Jason said. "You haven't met Clive, yet, Have you?"

They chatted, waiting for Jory, but a different person emerged instead. It was a runic, with the dark skin and glowing runes typical of his people.

"Mr Lange," Janice greeted and made introductions. Donal Lange was the priest of the Healer assigned to Jory's clinic for the moment. He had arrived in Greenstone through a portal created by the Healer to help replace the excommunicated clergy.

"Jory has good things to say about you, Mr Asano. Confusing and contradictory at times, but with much praise. Healing people for nothing is a fine calling, although I may be biased in that opinion."

"Don't go praising me too much," Jason said. "It was an easy way to train my cleansing power, so it wasn't exactly selfless."

"Jason!" Jory said, entering the waiting room. "Come on back."

Jason and Clive shook hands with Donal, then followed Jory. In one of the back rooms, Jason quickly got to the point.

"I need something that can change our faces and something that can mask our auras. Knock it down to normal rank, if possible."

Jory rubbed his chin, thoughtfully.

"Changing your face is easy enough," he said. "Frankly, I'm surprised it took you this long to ask."

"What's wrong with my face?"

"I've had some reports that the face-changing ointment is a bit unreliable," Jory said, ignoring Jason's question. "Moving your face reduces the effective duration, so try not to talk and keep your expression blank as much as you can."

"That should be fine," Clive said, Jason nodding agreement.

"Changing your aura is trickier," Jory said. "If you just wanted to mask it at your own rank, that would be one thing. I could give you something for that now. Dropping it down a rank is another matter. This is for a contract?"

"It is," Jason said. "Clive and I have been working this one for a little while."

"I heard you're a big, three-star adventurer now," Jory said. "How did you swing that?"

"With your watering can and a little discretion," Jason said, causing Jory to laugh.

"That makes sense," he said. "They must have been so startled to see discretion from you that they handed over the star from sheer startlement."

Clive burst out laughing.

"I'm starting to feel put upon," Jason said. "Can you help with the aura?"

"I think I can make up what you need," Jory said. "It'll be precarious though. How's your aura control?"

"It's coming along," Jason said.

"It'll have to be. If you can't keep it suppressed, it'll breach the aura mask. So will using any essence abilities."

"That's fine," Jason said. "It's just an extra precaution that Clive suggested."

"Our quarry is cautious and resourceful," Clive said.

"Probably best not to share any unnecessary details," Jason said to Clive.

"He's right," Jory said. "I can't spill porridge that's not in my bowl. I can have that for you tomorrow, or tonight if you're really in a rush."

"Tomorrow is fine," Clive said.

"We'll let you get back to it," Jason said. "How are those church of the Healer people working out?"

"Fantastic," Jory said. "Mostly it's been Donal, and he's terrific. It's like having you on full-time, without the ominous overtones. Oh, before you go; Jensen loved that barbeque you had. It drummed him up a whole lot of business. He wanted me to ask you if you had any interest in doing it on the regular. Your connections, his booze."

"Jenson?" Clive asked. "Was he the guy running the bar?"

"That's right," Jory said. "He has a distillery a couple of streets over."

"It's not a terrible idea," Jason said. "I'm a little busy just right now, but tell him I'm interested."

A wagon was making its way through the streets of the Island. It had no animals pulling it, being driven by magic. There was a driver, plus another man next to him on the driver's bench. In the early afternoon, there were people out and about. It remained uncrowded, though, with the wide streets and generous footpaths. The men on the wagon didn't even glance as it rolled past a young woman with short hair, wearing a light jacket over a dress decorated with dark flowers.

After the wagon passed her by, Belinda opened her jacket to look at the crystal plate sewn into it. It showed the aura of the wagon's dimensional-storage crates and the normal-rank auras of the two men riding it. She took a small tube from her jacket pocket, holding it vertically as she peeled a paper cap off the top. She felt a blast of heat and air, but the

magical flare would be invisible and silent to anyone without a special viewing item or certain essence abilities.

Another of the Island's streets had a row of trees planted down the middle of the two-lane thoroughfare. Sophie had been hidden in the upper branches of one of the trees since before dawn. She was dressed in shades of dark green to blend into the foliage. The clothing was the ideal balance of fitted and loose to provide optimum mobility, but their protective value suffered somewhat.

When she saw the flare rise into the sky, Sophie took off the spectacles that allowed her to see it and put them in a case which she returned to a pocket. Shortly after, a wagon passed under the branch she was perched on and she dropped down behind it, barely making a sound as she landed in a crouch on the street. She moved swiftly, clambering over the back of the covered wagon. It was filled with metal crates, just as promised, and she quickly found the one with the markings she was looking for. When she grabbed it, though, a rune appeared and explosive force blasted her out the back of the wagon as it activated.

She rolled on the ground, head spinning. By the time she recovered, the wagon had stopped and the two men on it had gotten off and were rushing toward her. She hopped quickly to her feet just as the first one reached her. She lashed out with a series of attacks but every move in her flurry of blows was blocked. He looked as surprised as she felt.

"You fight like me," he said.

She didn't respond and resumed her attack. She had never met anyone who knew her father's fighting style before, but she adapted quickly. After a rapid exchange, she winded him with a palm strike to the torso and sent him tumbling with a kick to the side of the head.

She was moving before he hit the ground, sprinting for the wall of a nearby property. She zigzagged her movement, not presenting an easy shot, which proved wise as a bolt of magic shot past her. A glowing rune appeared in her path and she neatly side-stepped it, almost having reached the wall. Behind her, she heard a spell being chanted.

"Carry the mark of your transgressions."

Sophie felt a burning on the side of her face but didn't let it slow her down. She reached the wall and ran up it as if it were flat ground. Reaching the top, she pulled herself over and out of sight.

Chapter 103:

Silver Hair

Sophie vaulted a wall from one private residence into another, sprinting across the grounds. She did this twice more, avoiding public streets and the people on them. Finally, she ducked into a large brick shed full of landscaping supplies.

Jason chased after Sophie, relying not on his eyes but his aura sense. One of the afflictions he marked her with made her aura radiate like a beacon.

-
- [Mark of Sin] (affliction, holy): Prevents aura retraction. Cannot be cleansed while target retains any instances of [Sin] or [Legacy of Sin].
-

Using weight-reduction to vault walls, he pursued until her aura suddenly vanished. He didn't have an exact lock on her location, so was forced to start searching around.

"Excuse me!" an affronted voice came in Jason's direction. He flashed his adventurer badge to the angry resident.

"Adventure Society business, sir."

"Is this to do with the person who just ran across my lawn?"

"It certainly is," Jason said. "I don't suppose you could point out the direction they went?"

"Gladly," the man said.

"What's that on your face?" Belinda asked. She had cleared a space on a bench in the shed, now covered in magical tools.

"Not sure," Sophie said. "Some kind of tracking magic, probably."

Belinda moved close to examine it. It looked like a word from a symbolic language she didn't know. She picked up a thin metal rod, waving it in front of Sophie's face.

"Not tracking," She said, swapping the rod for a small plate made up of crystal fragments. She looked at what appeared when she held it in front of Sophie.

"It looks like it forcibly projects your aura," Belinda said. "Not as bad as a tracker, but I don't have anything here that can deal with it, the way I could with tracking magic. Like this, aura masking won't work and disguises won't be much better. You'll stick out like a turd in a punch bowl to anyone with aura sense."

"Good thing we're here on the Island, where all the people with aura senses are."

“The protection I set up in here will hide your aura so long as you’re in this shed, but you can’t stay here. The usual trick of blending into the crowd won’t work with your aura like that.”

“Any good news?” Sophie asked.

“Unlike a tracker, you can only be followed so long as you remain within their aura sense. If you can outrun them and get to our fallback point, we can take our time with whatever that thing is affecting your aura. And no one can run like you.”

Sophie nodded, regret on her face.

“I didn’t get it,” she said. Belinda put a reassuring hand on Sophie’s shoulder.

“One step at a time. We can work on what comes next after we get ourselves out of this mess. Now, you need to go.”

“You need to be careful too,” Sophie said.

“My aura isn’t shining like a beacon in the night, remember? You play distraction and I’ll slip away.”

“Bloody hell, she’s fast.”

Jason had sensed it the moment the thief’s aura re-emerged and he immediately gave chase. He caught sight of her sprinting through other people’s properties. They were in the north marina district, which had the Broadstreet Bridge to Old City, marinas on the Island’s eastern shore and was otherwise mostly private residences.

The thief moved incredibly fast on the ground, the walls and hedges barely slowing her down. Her mottled green clothing covered her entirely, with even her head wrapped up like a ninja. If he didn’t have her aura to track, she could probably vanish into one of the gardens she was passing through.

He was unable to match her speed. In the end he resorted to a desperation move. The bright sun cast large shadows from the uniformly big houses. This allowed Jason to shadow jump into the air, three storeys up, next to a wall. Spotting the thief, he teleported to the shadow of the next building, then the next. With the combination of weight reduced-floating and shadow teleporting, he pursued in something of an awkward flight.

The thief was making a beeline for the marina. She crossed the busy esplanade at a sprint, startling passers-by. Jason teleported onto the covered balcony of the yacht club, but it was the last of the easy shadows. He watched the thief pelt down the pier faster than he could match, until she reached the end and vaulted onto the water. She landed on the surface like it was solid ground and kept running.

Jason could likewise walk on water, but by the time he chased her across to Old City, her speed would have left him behind. He ran to the edge of the balcony and looked around for options.

“Well, there’s that,” he told himself.

Using the parkour skills Gary had taught him, he jumped out to grab the edge of the roof and pull himself on top of the building. He was grateful for the ostentatious size of the four-story yacht club, which gave him a high vantage. He glanced down at the figure sprinting across the water, then up at the opposite shore, some two kilometres distant.

When he was still training, he had conducted various long-distance teleporting experiments. The key seemed to be seeing a shadow to teleport to. Teleporting to the shadow of a large, distant object didn't work, as his ability required a more discreet shadow to use as a portal. He tried magnifying items to pick out a distant shadow, but viewing through these magical devices made him unable to form a connection with the distant shadow.

In the end, since he couldn't find one to purchase, Jason commissioned a craftsman to make a high-quality, non-magical telescope. The unusual request had taken time, however, and by the time it was completed, Jason was living the busy life of an adventurer. As such, he'd picked up the item and left in his inventory with the ten-foot pole, the rope ladder and his various other pieces of adventuring kit.

"No time like the present," he said, pulling out the telescope. It truly was a fine piece of craftsmanship, but he didn't stop to admire it, putting it directly to his eye. First, he picked out the thief, moving across the water. Once he spied where she was heading, he looked to the far shore, in search of a shadow.

Clive looked around the interior of the brick shed. His ability to see magic let him pick out what were the otherwise invisible magical marks, drawn onto the bricks of the wall to shield it from magical detection. It had taken him time to seek out, using flaring rituals to find the magical dead-spot. If Jason hadn't told him the right area through his voice communication power, he likely wouldn't have found it at all.

Examining the work, he saw the principles involved were basic, making of use of fundamental magical theory. The application, however, showed a comprehensive understanding and was highly innovative in execution. If it weren't for criminal purposes to which it had been put, he would admire it.

“Who am I kidding?” he asked the empty shed. “I do admire it.”

The shed clearly didn't see a lot of use. Almost everything had a thick layer of dust, except a section of the bench and a pair of stools. Jason and Clive had considered whether or not the thief had one or more accomplices, and it seemed she did.

Whoever this accomplice was, they had taken their tools but didn't have time to clear off their magical workings. Presumably, they were relying on the magic being invisible and the distraction of the fleeing thief. That left Clive with a good chance to extract an aura trace from the magic.

Moving outside, he balanced out the ambient magic with his mana equilibrium racial gift, then took out a book and used his enact ritual essence ability to start placing out a magical circle around the shed. Where his finger pointed, a line of shining gold energy appeared as he drew out a sophisticated circle, referencing the book as he went.

"What are you doing on my lawn!" an affronted voice called out.

"Adventure Society business," Clive said, not looking away from his work.

"Again? Who do you people think you are?"

"I'm Adjunct Assistant to the Deputy Director of the Magic Society, Greenstone branch," Clive said.

"Is that something important?" the man asked uncertainly.

"Do you really want to find out?" Clive asked.

The magical circle completed. From inside the shed, the previously invisible magic lit up in blue and red. A vaguely human image appeared, flickering in and out in the middle of Clive's circle. Clive took a tracking stone from his storage space and shoved it into the middle of the image. The image was drawn into the stone, like being sucked into a void. The gold light of Clive's ritual and the red and blue from the shed then dimmed to nothing. Clive looked at the tracking stone in his hand, which now had an internal light pointing in a very definite direction.

"Got you."

Sophie's singular essence ability made her fast, and by spending mana she could run up walls or over water. The breakwaters at each end of the straight between Old City and the Island made the space between calm and easy to run over. Reaching the Old City port, she ran right up the side of the dock and onto dry ground. For a fleeting moment, she thought she was free and clear. Then she saw a shadowy figure standing in her path.

The person was shrouded in what looked like the night sky; not just black but dark and deep, with distant stars twinkling within. Inside the cloak were dark, flowing robes, with

a sword on one hip and a dagger on the other. A bandolier with what looked like throwing knives went from left shoulder to right hip.

The port was busy, as always, and the two unusual figures staring each other down caught the attention of the dockworkers. Sophie looked around as people quickly gathered.

“Don’t make me go through you,” she told the dark figure.

“Don’t make me use my abilities,” the figure said. “They’re for killing, not catching.”

It was the same voice as the person who ambushed her when she tried to rob the wagon. The one who fought like her. She launched herself forward, confident that she was better. They clashed, then broke away inconclusively. This repeated a second time and a third. She was landing hits, but nothing conclusive. She absently noted that the dockworkers had started taking bets.

Their fighting styles were the same, but they used them very differently. She was all speed and efficiency, using the versatility of the style to adapt and pressure opponents. He was deceptive and manipulative, seemingly full of openings but more than once she thought she almost had him only to realise it was just the opposite. He also used his cloak to mask his movements, making him hard to read. She had some near misses, but the more she pressured him, the more she figured him out. His methods were dangerous, but he didn’t have a complete handle on them yet. So long as she was cautious and stuck to fundamentals, she knew she could take him down.

So, apparently, did he, taking the dagger from his belt. The bone blade, with its slight curve, made it look like a fang. She knew it was almost certainly magical. She drew the knife strapped to her thigh, not magical, but well-crafted.

“We can still end this here,” he said. He sounded earnest but resigned. She lunged in again.

A knife fight was a messy business; fast hands, fast blades too quick to intercept. Even against an amateur, accepting a knife fight meant accepting wounds, if only superficial ones. The difference in outcome between Sophie and the shadowy man was a matter of equipment. Her knife slid off his thin-but-strong cloth armour, while his knife cut through her camouflage clothes to leave shallow cuts on her arms as she used them to guard more vital points. Breaking off again, she realised he wasn’t even going for real hits, satisfied to inflict minor injuries. Either his dagger or his abilities most likely inflicted poison.

“Now you see your situation,” the man said, having noticed her realisation as she looked at her wounds. “Your choices now are to come with me, or die.”

Sophie glanced back, considering leaping back off the dock. In her moment of distraction, he made the first move for the first time in their confrontation. She evaded, but his free hand grabbed at her. She slipped away, but his fingers closed on her mask, pulling it free. As her silver hair spilled out, he saw her face. His own was hidden in the hood of the cloak, although she had seen it back at the wagon.

The situation suddenly shifted as a half-dozen people broke through the circle of onlookers. There were dressed all in black, with masks like she had been wearing. The shadowy figure said a word she didn't recognise and was immediately attacked. She took the opportunity and ran. Even as he fought off these new opponents, she heard him chant an ominous spell behind her.

"Your fate is to suffer."

Belinda was in line at the Broadstreet Bridge, waiting to hand over her permit before crossing to Old City. In both dress and manner, she was indistinguishable from the many servants likewise heading to Old City on household errands. She noticed a slight commotion in the line, looking back to see a man walking down the line, looking at something in his hand. He was tall and lanky, with the uniform of a Magic Society functionary. The men on the wagon Sophie had attempted to rob had the same uniforms, but this wasn't one of those men. Unless they changed their faces with magic. Sophie and herself had tried that from time to time, but it was unreliable and prone to wearing off early.

Belinda couldn't run like Sophie and had always relied on secrecy and deception. Even if she could, there wasn't much place to run. The Duke's guards manning the crossing booth might be casual to those departing the Island, but that would quickly change if she made a break for it. The best she could do was keep in character and hope that the man was trying to flush people out with security theatre. Her hopes were dashed when the man stopped right in front of her.

Jason was startled to see silver hair spill out, forming a corona around the thief's dark beauty. He froze in that fleeting moment, then recognised her as Jory's celestine friend. She also froze, looking cornered as her eyes darted around. Then out of nowhere, a group of attackers came barrelling at Jason, dressed head-to-toe in black.

"Ninjas?" he said, and they were on him. He evaded, seeing the celestine taking the chance to run. He had to send her where he knew he could find her.

"Your fate is to suffer."

She would have to run to Jory if she wanted to stay alive but casting the spell cost Jason as he was overrun by attackers. They dropped him to the ground and gathered over him, laying in kicks. Jason evened the odds and then some by sending a geyser of leeches spraying up into them. The attackers reeled, screaming as they pulling off leeches who took gobbets of flesh with them in rings of burrowing teeth. The watching dock workers backed off, but not so much that they couldn't keep watching.

Jason got to his feet and held a hand out at one of the men yanking leeches off his body.

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

Jason siphoned-off the man's life force to heal the beating they had got in. They all had essences, but he could tell from their auras that none had a full set.

"You won't survive long if you don't tell me who sent you," he told them.

"You can kill us," one of them said, "but the man who sent us will kill our whole families."

Jason frowned at that.

"Encircle," he commanded, and the leeches dropped off the men to form a ring around them. They were all bleeding and poisoned, but Jason used his feast of absolution power on each in turn. It replenished his mana and kept them alive, as they would probably survive one bleed affliction. They stood in place, unsure and unsteady. Jason moved forward and ripped the mask off the one who had spoken. Jason didn't recognise him.

"The person who sent you will kill your family if you talk?"

"That's right," he said, scared but looking back with defiance. "You might as well let us go. We won't talk, even if you kill us."

"Let you go?" Jason asked. "After you attacked me? If you're not going to talk, then you're no use to me alive."

Jory was seeing out a patient when he heard a crashing sound from the back room and rushed back there. Donal, the priest of the healer, was likewise coming to check the commotion. Together, they found a woman who had apparently staggered in the back and knocked over a rack of alchemy implements as she collapsed. She was now laying amongst shattered glass.

"Silver hair," Donal said. "A celestine."

Jory's troubled expression got worse when they turned her over and it was, as he feared, Sophie Wexler. They picked her up out of the glass and carried her into one of the

new treatment rooms laying her out on the examination table. Seeing darkened flesh under the rips in her clothes, Jory cut away her outer garment, revealing a tight sleeveless top and cuts on the arms that weren't from the broken glass. Ominous black veins traced out from each of the wounds, clearly visible through the skin. The wound themselves were already showing signs of necrosis.

"Some kind of necrotic poison," Jory said. Donal was already chanting a spell.

"Make clean that which has been tainted."

The black veins retreated somewhat, but then visibly started crawling up her arms once again.

"It's like the poison is replicating itself," Donal said.

"I'll work on the poison," Jory said. "You stop it from killing her. If we can beat it back enough you can try a longer spell."

Jory started grabbing supplies from cabinets as Donal chanted another spell.

"You're not going to kill us in front of all these people," one of Jason's attackers said.

"Are you kidding?" one of the others asked. "Look at that cloak. He's the cloak guy!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" the first attacker asked.

"The one who killed five adventurers in a shopping arcade in the middle of the day," the second attacker said. "Not just regular people, but actual adventurers! And you know what they did to him? They promoted him! You think he won't kill us because some dockworkers saw it?"

Jason, taking in the exchange, turned to the second attacker.

"You seem to know a lot," Jason said, walking over and pulling off the man's mask.

"You won't tell me who sent you?"

"I can't."

"Then tell me why. That's your live-or-die question."

"I don't know," the man said, voice almost begging. "I really don't. We were just meant to slow you down and run, like with the others."

"Shut up Jacob," one of the others barked. Jason pointed at the man who spoke.

"Mount," he ordered, and the leeches crawled up the man's legs and over his body, but without sinking their teeth into him. Then Jason turned back to Jacob.

"By others, you mean the other adventurers trying to catch the thief?"

The man nodded, and Jason started pacing as his brain ticked over. The now terrified attackers watched, unmoving, as they awaited their fate with bated breath.

"How did you know to intercept me here?"

“Keep your mouth shut, Jacob!”

“Screw you guys! I don’t have a family, and I ain’t getting eaten by leeches. There’s some silver-ranker, tracking the thief. Abilities too high for the thief’s friend to spot.”

That would be the one Jory has a thing for, Jason realised.

“Go on,” Jason said.

“That’s all I know. He tracks the thief, then we get a signal and a location if we have to intervene. I don’t even know why they bother with us if they have someone like that.”

“To keep it low-key,” Jason said absently. “Who do you work for?”

“What I told you already gets me hurt,” Jacob said. “Telling you that gets me killed.”

“I know that guy,” one of the dockworkers called out. Jason turned and flipped him a bronze spirit coin.

“Jack-Jumper Jacob,” the dockworker said. “He’s one of Dorgan’s.”

Jason didn’t know more than the basics about the Big Three. Dorgan was the quiet one, while the ambitious Ventress and the impetuous Silva worked their schemes against one another.

“Things are coming together,” Jason said absently, “but there’s a connection missing.”

“That’s enough, Asano,” a harsh voice said, and a man approached through the crowd of dockworkers. He was human, with well-made, sandy coloured clothes. Jason could sense no aura, but the workers instinctively moved out of his way. Jason was willing to bet the aura he couldn’t sense was silver.

“Your quarry has escaped,” the newcomer said, “and you’ve got all you’re getting out of these men. Time to give up and try another day, Asano.”

Jason tutted.

“She won’t be happy you had to show up in person,” he said and the silver-ranker flinched. Jason chuckled.

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “I have somewhere else to be, anyway.”

Sophie was unconscious but alive, still on the examination table but now with a sheet over her. Jory and Donal were exhausted; Donal was sprawled in the room’s only chair while Jory was on the floor, leaning against the wall. On the floor were dozens of empty vials that Jory had used to treat Sophie, or that Donal had emptied to replenish his mana.

“It was some kind of curse,” Donal said. “Two curses, really. One was making the poison worse, while the other was adding more poison and the first curse. The curse that

kept making more of the other two couldn't be cleansed until the other curse was cleansed, and she had so much of it in her when she arrived."

"Too bad Jason isn't here," Jory said. "He'd have eaten it all like it was nothing."

"Eaten?"

"He can be a little sinister," Jory said, "but he's a good man."

"I hope you still think so, after today," Jason said from the doorway.

"Jason!" Jory said. "We could have used you here a while ago. Something happened to my friend a while ago. I don't know what, but it was bad."

Jory and Donal pushed themselves to their feet.

"Curses and poison," Jason said, looking at Sophie.

Jason was decked out in his adventuring gear, spattered with blood.

"Are you chasing what did this to her?" Jory asked.

"I'm chasing her," Jason said. "I am what did this."

Chapter 104: An Outcome That Satisfies

“This is bad,” Jory said, pacing back and forth. “That’s what they’ve been doing? Ripping off the rich and powerful?”

Jory, Jason and Donal were in one of Jory’s treatment rooms, with an unconscious Sophie on the treatment table. She was mostly covered in a sheet, except for her head. Her silver hair hung off the side of the table in a tangled mess.

“Who is this woman?” Donal asked.

“Donal,” Jason said. “Janice is probably becoming concerned that no one is taking patients. Can you cover for Jory for a bit?”

“Do I get an explanation about all this later?”

“Yes, but I’ll probably lie,” Jason said. “Thanks for keeping her alive.”

Donal frowned, but made his way out.

“Lord, you were right about him being trouble,” Jason heard him mutter as he closed the door behind him.

“What about Belinda?” Jory asked.

“Remember my friend Clive? He caught her.”

“Where is she now?”

“We set up a discrete location to hold the thief while we figured out the politics. Hang on a bit and I’ll check up on her.”

Jason used his party interface to open voice chat with Clive.

"She's trouble," Clive said, his exasperation coming through loud and clear. "Using an old Magic Society storehouse for our makeshift cell may not have been the best idea. The resourceful little minx almost broke out of the binding circle using random magic supplies. That shouldn't even be possible. It's all random, leftover trash."

“You said she’s resourceful,” Jason said.

“I caught her decoding a barrier-ritual with half of a magic wand and a broken device for assessing the freshness of fish!”

"I wouldn't have thought there was a lot of crossover between a magic barrier and a fish."

“There isn’t! This woman is a complete... hey! Put that down! I saw that.”

“I need you to bring her to Old City,” Jason said. “That clinic on Broadstreet Boulevard we visited the other day, but bring her around the back.”

“What? Old City? How do I explain to the bridge guards why I’m taking a woman I have in custody to Old City? They’ll definitely think I’m going to do something bad.”

“Yeah but you’re a Magic Society official, so they’ll let you through anyway.”

“What?”

“Look, Clive. Her name is Belinda. Tell her that... hold on. What was this one’s name, Jory?”

“Sophie,” Jory said.

“Tell her that Sophie was badly hurt and she’s at Jory’s clinic.”

“What else?”

“Just be honest. I don’t think lying’s your thing.”

“Don’t I have to lie to the bridge guards?”

“Yeah, but they’ll just think you’re nervous because you’re a sexual predator.”

“What?”

“See you when you get here,” Jason said, ending the chat.

“What now?” Jory asked, almost jumping on Jason in anxiety.

“Obviously,” Jason said, “I have to turn in Sophie.”

Jory opened his mouth to protest, but stopped and nodded reluctantly.

“If it ever came out that you completed a contract and then uncompleted it,” he said, “that’s your Adventure Society membership gone. Mine too, for that matter, just for knowing about it.”

“We do have some room to move,” Jason said. “For one thing, the contract calls for the capture of a thief, not thieves. We caught them both because we were being thorough, but now we know they’re friends, we can cut Belinda loose.”

Jory let out a sigh of relief, although he still had stress to spare.

“I’m having Clive bring Belinda here,” Jason explained, “because I don’t want her running around causing trouble before I have a solid plan in place.”

“So, what is the plan?”

“We have to hand Sophie in,” Jason said. “That’s something we just have to accept. I’m going to need you to convince her friend not to do anything stupid. You need to keep them both here, without them running, while I fill in the gaps in the political landscape. Once I know how everything fits together, we can work something out.”

“Like what?”

“Have you ever read the service agreement between the city and the Adventure Society?”

“Of course I haven’t.”

“It has some interesting provisions,” Jason said. “Until I understand the political context, though, I’m stumbling in the dark. When Clive gets here with Belinda, just try and keep a lid on things until I get back.”

“Get back? Where are you going?”

“To get some context,” Jason said. “Do you know where Dorgan lives?”

“Dorgan? As in, the crime lord, Dorgan?”

“That’s the one.”

“Are you insane?”

“Probably,” Jason said. “I heard the Big Three all live pretty large, so it can’t be that hard to find.”

“They all live in the canal district,” Jory said. “Safe and neutral territory because of the Island interests that operate out of there. I don’t think wandering into his compound is a good idea.”

“Come on, Jory. Where’s your sense of adventure?”

“Where’s your sense of self-preservation?”

Jory groaned.

“Look who I’m asking,” he said. “The day we met, you picked a fight with a couple of priests and got knocked out cold. Fine. All of the Big Three live in huge compounds that used to belong to families who moved to the Island. Go to the Cavendish side of the canal district and look for the big walls with the big guards at the big gate.”

“Thanks,” Jason said. “I’ll be back soon.”

“If you live,” Jory muttered.

No one knew how physically vast the astral space supplying water to the desert was, as it had never been mapped. The goal of the expedition was to find whatever was causing the apertures to become unreliable. They found the closest stable aperture within the thickest cluster of unstable ones and had gone through.

The terrain inside the astral space was tropical rainforest; very beautiful and very wet. There was a smell of life to it, wet leaves and earth. There was no night, the sun just moving around on a circuit in the sky. The expedition made camp by a river and the expedition leaders, led by Danielle Geller, set out a search pattern. Multiple teams, splitting up to follow streams and trails through the wet, tropical forest. What they found was that they were on one of a sprawling chain of islands, close enough to see one another from shore.

Traversing the short distance to the next island was a trivial task, given the assemblage of powers in the expedition. They started systematically searching one island after another, sending out individual teams for the smaller ones. The most difficult aspect of the environment was not the verdant growth or the thick, humid air. It was the endless daylight. As what should have been days passed without the respite of night, the less disciplined members of the expedition became increasingly disgruntled.

Many of the expedition's members had come along not for work, but because they felt it was their right to not miss out. Danielle would not normally accept such a team, full of spoiled incompetents and people who were only adventurers on paper. Elspeth Arella already had a list of participants when she offered leadership to Danielle, whose instincts told her it was a bad bet. She accepted anyway because when something inevitably went wrong, she could save lives by being there that couldn't.

The driving schedule laid out by Danielle Geller to advance their goal was being increasingly spoken-out against, largely by the wealthy young iron-rankers who were the most novice among the expedition's number. Danielle herself had no time for their complaints. She knew that a problem with the astral space potentially posed an existential threat to the region, and was determined to find it and crush it.

Adris Dorgan's aura senses weren't as powerful or well-trained as someone like Thalia Mercer's. Where she had detected Jason's when he was still in the grounds, Jason penetrated the heart of Dorgan's home. Dorgan found him in front of one of the many paintings that adorned the library walls. He was dressed in neat casual attire, for all the world as if home invasion was a simple outing. He didn't turn from the painting as Dorgan made his way across the library.

"Mr Asano, isn't it?" Dorgan said. He recognised the face, having seen it in several recordings. There was the widely disseminated recording of the man fighting the Gellers, and the less-widespread one of him beating down thugs in Cavendish. The men in question had each been using a recording crystal, a copy of one had found its way into Dorgan's hands. He had even seen a recording of Asano killing those same men, in the largest arcade in Dorgan's own territory. That recording was far from just floating around, yet had still come into Dorgan's possession.

"Mr Dorgan," Jason greeted, turning with a friendly smile and looking him up and down. The elven man was handsome, with slender features, tawny skin and shoulder-length, chestnut hair. There was an air of sharpness about him, although that may have just been his aura.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, but I’m a little surprised to find you in my library,” Dorgan said.

“You know, I was just recently discussing the problem of home security with Thalia Mercer.”

“Did you break into her home as well?”

“More like snuck onto the grounds,” Jason said. “No offence, but your people are not the equal of the Mercer household.”

“I could summon my bronze-rankers now,” Dorgan said. “Or deal with you personally. You realise I’m bronze rank.”

“I can see that,” Jason said. “Not a lot of time to work on aura control with a criminal empire to run.”

Jason gave him an easy smile.

“I recently had a problem,” Jason said, “where I was unable to deal with a certain individual due to his connections.”

“Thadwick Mercer.”

“I’m flattered you’re paying attention.”

“You dropped five dead adventurers in my territory, Mr Asano. Not paying attention would be foolish.”

“That kind of ties in with what I want to say, given that I now find myself on the other side of the privilege coin. If I don’t walk out of here, you won’t like who comes to ask why.”

“Are you sure about that? Perhaps I have connections of which you’re not aware.”

Jason laughed and gestured at the painting he was standing in front of.

“Before you came in, Mr Dorgan, I was just admiring your art collection. There is a desert landscape by Moher in the grand concert hall that I very much admire, and I see you have quite a number of his works. I’m envious.”

“Perhaps I can help you add something to your own collection. He’s a friend of the family.”

“So I’ve heard,” Jason said and Dorgan stopped cold.

“You know,” he said, his voice half a whisper.

“I do,” Jason said. “I came here with a question and found the answer hanging on the walls. Is she your daughter?”

“I kept it a secret so her future wouldn’t be caught up with criminal entanglements,” Dorgan said. “A father’s wish for his child to go further than he.”

“I can respect that,” Jason said. “I have no interest in telling tales. I came here to find out why your people were interfering with my contract.”

"I believe it's an open contract, Mr Asano."

"I'm closing it, which makes it mine."

"You caught the thief?"

"Of course. When your men intervened, I sent her where I knew I could find her."

"How did you manage that?"

"In an unpleasant manner. But sometimes life requires unpleasant things."

"Doesn't it just," Dorgan said. "It seems you're a resourceful man, Mr Asano."

"Thank you. My problem is that I don't quite grasp the entirety of the political landscape. I obviously understand the connection with your daughter, now, but what is she after in keeping the thief at large? It seems like she wants a point of contention between her and the Duke, but that's a stupid move and she's not stupid. She's taking risks, which is the only reason she was sloppy enough that I found out about you and her."

"What are the chances of someone visiting her office and my house both?" Dorgan asked. "Not high."

"The paintings in your daughter's office didn't bring me here," Jason said. "They just made it easy for me once they arrived. Anyone who really looked at the connections would figure it out soon enough."

"I don't know about anyone."

"What is she after, Dorgan?"

"Why does that matter?"

"Because I have my own concerns. I don't want her squashing me like a bug because I ignorantly blundered underfoot."

Dorgan nodded.

"Very well, he said. "Her goal is Lucian Lamprey."

"The director of the Magic Society?"

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I've heard he's a crate full of rotten eggs," Jason said, "which explains why she wants him gone. Having a corrupt Magic Society makes cleaning up the Adventure Society all the harder, but what's Lamprey's connection with this thief?"

"He's fixated on her. He's the kind of man who sees being told no as a challenge to his power, and he's become obsessed with possessing this thief. She is ostensibly under the protection of Clarissa Ventress, one of my contemporaries, but Ventress has her own well-known obsession; her reputation. As she made it known the girl was under her

protection, she couldn't just hand her over. Instead, she has leveraged the girl into a position where she would fall into Lamprey's hands."

"So he's a perv," Jason said. "That's why the thief was hitting such insanely dangerous targets. Ventress was pushing her into it, under threat of withdrawing her protection. If she refuses, Ventress can throw her to the wolves, and if she's caught, Lamprey can throw his weight around with the inevitably corrupt civic justice system."

"Yes," Dorgan said. "That's my understanding."

"But Ventress never expected it to take this long to catch her," Jason reasoned. "Meanwhile, Lamprey is climbing the walls while your daughter waits for him to do something stupid she can hang him out to dry with."

"Yes," Dorgan said. "I don't suppose I can convince you to let the thief go?"

"And hand you a great big lever on me? No thanks. Besides; if I let her go, then my ability to control how this ends goes with her."

"You think that's something you can control?"

"Enough for an outcome that satisfies me, yes."

"You may be overestimating your limits, Mr Asano."

"I have a friend who says pushing our limits is how we grow beyond them."

"Then what now?" Dorgan asked.

"Now I complete the contract. I'm sorry it will interfere with your daughter's plans, but she should really be thanking me. It had far too many potential failure points."

"You aren't going to ask why the daughter of a crime lord is trying to excise corruption from the Adventure Society?"

"That's obvious," Jason said. "She gets rid of Lamprey and the Magic Society becomes less corrupt because almost anything would be. She moves on to smoothly cleaning up her branch of the Adventure Society. She culminates that time by capping it off with the renegotiation of the city's service agreement in a couple of years. Cleaning up one of the Adventure Society's rotten provincial branches gets her promoted up and out of Greenstone, putting her secrets behind her. That promotion lets her climb the ladder instead of just moving on. Is that more or less it?"

"Yes," Dorgan said darkly. "Mr Asano, let me make something clear. If you do anything to derail my daughter's ambitions, I will see you dead, consequences bedamned."

Jason held out his hand for Dorgan to shake.

"I think we understand each other, Mr Dorgan. Sharing your daughter's secret is worthless to me. Only keeping it has value."

Dorgan shook Jason's hand.

"Do let me show you to the door, Mr Asano."

Chapter 105: You Aren't in Control of What Happens Next

Sophie woke up. Unfamiliar ceiling, something around her neck. She moved and there was a clink of chains as she realised her wrists and feet were manacled. Her body was under a soft, thin sheet. Memories came rushing back as her head cleared. The chase. Getting clear, only to feel the poison eating into her. Fighting a body desperate to close its eyes, knowing they wouldn't open again. Pushing past her limits to reach the clinic and stumble in through the back. Falling onto the rack of glassware as she finally succumbed.

Sitting up was awkward in the manacles, her leg irons connected to her wrist irons by a length of chain. Her eyes were crusty and blurred. She probed the thing around her neck with her fingers. A thick metal band, padded just enough to not dig into her neck, but not enough to be comfortable. It felt enervating to the touch, as if it was draining her, somehow.

"Power suppression collar," a male voice said. It was casual and friendly, which seemed sinister in the circumstances. She rubbed the accumulated gunk from her eyes and looked around.

She was in a white, tiled room on a padded table. There was a man in a chair in the corner, observing her from over an open book. It was that friend of Jory's, whose name she didn't remember. He used a bookmark to keep the page and shoved the book into the air, where it vanished. Dimensional storage space. She had heard he was an adventurer.

"Good morning," he said. "Sorry about the manacles, but you're very good at running. It was your friend who changed your clothes and cleaned you up while you were asleep. If she left any sharp implements on your person, I'd appreciate not being stabbed."

"Belinda's here?" she croaked. Her mouth was gluggy.

"She's upstairs," he said. He stood up and walked over to her, plucking a glass out of thin air to offer it to her.

"Juice," he told her as she eyed the glass warily. "If I wanted to dose you with something, I had all the time in the world."

She took the glass and sipped. The juice was icy cold, sweet and delicious. She gulped down the rest and he took the glass from her hand. There was a sink in the room where he walked over and started washing out the glass.

"The others wanted her to be the one here when you woke up," he said with his back to her, "but I need you to understand that you aren't in control of what happens next."

“Who are you?”

Darkness started rising off him like shadowy flames, engulfing him. It was like a void, with stars twinkling in the depths. She hadn't taken a good look during his pursuit and their brief fight. It was beautiful but also gave a sense of hidden dangers. It was odd to see on a man doing the washing up.

“Jason Asano,” he introduced himself, and the darkness vanished again. He dried the glass with a cloth and returned it to his storage space before retaking his seat across the room.

“I didn't realise who you were until the mask came off,” he said, “which is how I knew you'd come here. If you lived that long. You were already recovered when I arrived but quite thoroughly unconscious. Apparently, when you get healed up from comprehensive injury, it takes a while to sleep it off.”

“How did you catch Belinda?”

“Like you, I wasn't working alone. My friend, Clive, tracked her from the staging point you two set up.”

“She's not easy to track.”

“Also like you, I'm the fast one, while my partner is the one with the know-how. I have some good news for you, though. We caught your friend out of thoroughness, not knowing who you were, but the Adventure Society contract stipulates catching a thief, not thieves. We're going to let her go.”

“But not me.”

“No,” He said. “You, we're turning in. We, that's me, my partner and Jory, have been discussing what to do next. We need you to convince your friend Belinda not to try something reckless to get you out of this. That ship has sailed and now the only way out is through.”

“So, what now?” she asked.

“My friend, Clive, figured out that your goal was to hit the city's spirit coin vault. He even thinks you had a chance at succeeding, which is impressive. Not a good chance, but still. I assume the point of your foolhardy scheme was to net you enough money to buy your way out from under Clarissa Ventress.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know she put you up to these robberies. And I know why, which your friend tells me you don't.”

“Island politics,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, “but it didn't start that way. Do you know who Lucian Lamprey is?”

“Some kind of Island big-shot,” Sophie said. “Likes to spend his time at the fighting pits.”

“Yes,” He said. “Your friend told me a little about your issues with Cole Silva, another member of the Big Three. You play dangerous games.”

Sophie frowned.

“Sometimes, all your options are bad. It sounds like my friend has done a lot of talking.”

“You and I fought two days ago,” he told her. “You’ve been asleep a long time, which gave me time to do some digging around.”

“Two days?”

“Yes.”

“Then people already know we’re here. Ventress, Silva.”

“Dorgan too,” Jason said. “The Big Three trifecta.”

“What’s Dorgan’s interest?”

“We’ll get to that. With all the eyes on you, right now, it would be best if your friend occupies Jory’s guest room for a while. Between his affiliations and his recent acknowledgement by the Healer, no one will try anything. Not so long as she stays here.”

“You brought up Silva,” Sophie said. “Why? Ventress didn’t send us to provoke the Island over him. Too big a risk.”

“No,” he said. “My understanding is that Silva has a very strong interest in you. Can you tell me about that?”

She looked at Asano, lounging casually in the chair, not knowing what to make of him. She didn't recognise where he was from, ethnically speaking. His skin was lighter than the local humans and much lighter than hers. His features were a little too sharp to be handsome, but his short hair had an appealingly silky lustre.

He waited patiently for her to respond as if he didn't have a care in the world, which she was confident wasn't the case. This had to be a big deal for him. He might seem casual and in control, but he wanted something from this conversation, leading her to his objective like a heidel to water. She decided to let him, for now. If she knew what he was after she might find some leverage, or at least learn some things along the way.

“Silva and I kind of grew up together,” she told him. “My father worked for his. He wanted what all young men want, but I very much didn't. His father indulged him too much, which had turned him into a little dictator.”

“I know the type,” he said. “Insecure about their power, they become fixated on obtaining or destroying anything that challenges it.”

“Exactly. He wasn’t used to hearing no, but his father protected me.”

“Until his father died.”

“That was when we sought-out Ventress for protection. It was fine, at first. Then she had me fighting in the pits to provoke Silva into doing something stupid. I could live with that. Then came this. Stealing from the wealthy and powerful. You said you knew why.”

“It’s interesting,” he told her. “The story you just told me has been playing out again, but with bigger stakes. The reason I asked about Lucian Lamprey is that he was the one that prompted Ventress to send you off, thieving. Like Silva, Lamprey took an interest in you, but Ventress had promised to protect you.”

“Reputation means everything to her,” Sophie said.

“That’s why she sent you off on jobs that would get you caught. Once you were in the system and out of her reach, Lamprey could swoop in using his own influence to get his hands on you. The problem is, Lamprey turned out to be very much of a type with Silva. He isn’t used to being told no, and you became the symbol of his denial. As time moved on, his inability to have you became an obsession, leading him to increasingly pressure Ventress. You seem to attract a certain kind of man, unfortunately.”

“We were in hiding from Ventress. She was quietly trying to find us, even while publicly, we were under her protection. Even her reputation won’t matter if someone that powerful is bearing down on her. But what you said about the story repeating itself; someone wants to provoke Lamprey, the way Ventress was provoking Silva?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“I’m not going to tell you that.”

Sophie fell silent as she thought it over.

“Dorgan,” she concluded. “That wasn’t the first time someone has interfered to help me get away. Those people who attacked you at the docks had to be his. Ventress or Silva’s people would have gone for me, not you. That was because they wanted me to not get caught, so Lamprey would keep stressing?”

“Yes.”

“Whoever it was had to know who we are, and what we were doing. Someone from the Island using Dorgan’s people as a cut-out, to keep their hands clean.”

“Yes.”

“So all that we did. Our plan. We were just dancing in the hand of some rich prick on the Island.”

“Yes.”

“But you messed that up. And now I’m going exactly where Lamprey and Ventress wanted from the start.”

“Not exactly,” he said.

“Are you joking? You think I don’t know how this goes? I’m sentenced to indenture, except instead of getting auctioned off, the court makes a deal to hand me over to an upstanding member of the community.”

“That’s where I intervene,” he said. “I can’t stop the indenture, but I’ve recently been reading the agreement between the city and the Adventure Society. One of the rules tucked away in the small print is that anyone who completes the contract gets right of refusal on anyone sentenced to indenture as a result of that contract.”

“So I end up in your hands, instead of Lamprey’s.”

“Yes.”

“How do I know that’s any better?”

“You don’t. I could be making all this up to manipulate you into quietly capitulating to my arrangements.”

She stared at him and he gave her a friendly smile in return. They sat in silence while she thought things over.

“Why?” she asked, finally.

“Why what?” he asked.

“Why take my indenture. Won’t that pit you against Lamprey?”

“Yes.”

“You work for the person who wants to provoke him, don’t you?”

“If that were the case, I wouldn’t have caught you at all.”

“You say that, but there could be plenty of reasons. Those people they sent to interfere, they didn’t seem to stop you. That might just be cover. They were afraid mine and Belinda’s plan might actually work, or maybe that we’d get caught carrying it out. So they send you to catch me and still keep me out of Lamprey’s hands.”

He smiled.

“That makes sense,” he said, “assuming that anything I’ve told you is true. Lamprey may not be involved at all. There may be no mysterious figure from the Island, masterminding events. We may not have your friend upstairs and this might not even be Jory’s clinic. Have you been inside since the renovations? This could all be a game I’m playing. The man with lascivious intentions could be me.”

“Then why bother with all his?”

"Who knows? Maybe I need you to go along with my plot due to some nuance of local laws that would put you in my power. Maybe I'm just a twisted maniac who likes to play with his food. I told you in the beginning that you aren't in control of what happens next."

"I'm starting to think you're twisted, whatever the truth is," she told him. He chuckled.

"Quite probably," he said, and stood up. "I'll go get your friend. You can talk things over."

He opened the door and left, then it opened again immediately and he stuck his head back in.

"Please don't try to break out."

Chapter 106: Something Shady

Jory's kitchen table was covered in magical diagrams, with Belinda taking Clive through how they worked.

"Obviously, the lock is impervious to ordinary intrusion," she explained. "I re-sequenced the magical bursts into an irregular pattern. It doesn't throw-off any individual element, but..."

"...it accumulates small errors that cause the whole thing to break down," Clive finished. "That brilliant. How did you come up with that?"

"I was working on something a while back. I was stuck using low-quality sequencing rods and I didn't realise what was happening until the misalignment crashed the whole rig. I came up with this while troubleshooting."

"Brilliant," Clive said. "Adversity driving innovation."

Jory's assistant, Janice, knocked on the door as she came in.

"Mr Asano says she's awake. You can go and see your friend now."

They all went back downstairs, Janice heading back to reception while Clive and Belinda went to the treatment room where Sophie was locked up. Jason was outside, leaning against the wall. He was watching an image being projected onto the opposite wall by a small crystal.

"How is she?" Belinda asked.

"She's trying to pick the lock right now," Jason said, "so I'm guessing fine."

Clive gestured at the wall opposite and they saw Sophie, from above and behind, hunched over the door lock. The three of them stood looking at the door as five runes lit up around the doorknob.

"Five-element lock," Belinda said. "Not bad for an internal door."

"Jory keeps some expensive supplies in these rooms," Jason said.

"Good to know," Belinda said.

"Please don't steal them," Jason said.

"I don't think she'd do that," Clive said.

"No, I would," Belinda told him.

The runes on the door moved until they formed a straight line and the lock clicked. The door opened just enough for Sophie to look out.

"Didn't I ask you specifically not to do that?" Jason asked her.

Sophie groaned in dissatisfaction, but Belinda threw the door wide to ensnare her friend in a huge hug.

"I'm so glad you're alright."

"You too."

Jason gestured at the room Sophie had just broken out of.

"You can talk in there," he said. "Clive, can you do something to the door to stop them opening it up again?"

"To stop her," he said, nodding at Sophie, "probably."

Then he gestured at Belinda.

"To stop her, probably not."

Jason groaned.

"Just go in and talk," Jason said.

Belinda gently pushed Sophie back into the room, closing the door behind them. She looked around until she spotted the far-seeing crystal Jason had been using to watch the room, floating unobtrusively near the ceiling. She stood up on a chair to take it down and shove it in a drawer.

"What was that?" Sophie asked.

"He was watching you."

"What a creeper."

"You did try and break out."

"I didn't try; I did break out."

"How are you?" Blind asked.

"I feel alright, Sophie said. "A bit withered on the vine. Has it really been days?"

"It has."

Sophie sat down on the chair, shuffling to find a posture where the manacles didn't bother her too much. Belinda hopped up to sit on the treatment table.

"So," Sophie said. "What did they tell you?"

"Ventress, Magic Society guy, indenture."

"The same for me. What are they after?"

"I'm not sure. According to Asano, he only came after us because someone asked him to. People at the Adventure Society were getting pressured over how long it was taking to catch us."

"Do you believe him?"

"I'm not sure. He seems to be in charge, or at least, the others are taking cues from him. He's hard to read, but his partner, not so much."

"That's the one that caught you?"

"Yeah. He's all book smarts; more interested in how we did the jobs than the fact that we did them. I've been playing along for a couple of days, taking him through stuff as I

tease out information. I think Asano knows I'm doing it, but hasn't let the guy know for some reason. Which means he's either on the level or is playing a game his partner doesn't know about."

"Could be either," Sophie said. "When I was talking to him, he knew I wouldn't trust him, so he cranked up the shadiness until I didn't know what to think."

"So, what's the move?"

"I don't see any good angles," Sophie said. "The deal with Ventress is burned, so even if we get away from these people, the streets aren't safe. We could try the plan to leave the city, but we'd have not much more than food and a map."

"Then what?" Belinda asked. "Going along with this guy's plan puts us right into his hands. No way out if he's playing us or any of a dozen other things go wrong."

"Did they tell you they would let you go?" Sophie asked.

"Yeah. They said I should stay here, where Ventress and Silva wouldn't dare come for me."

"What do you think?"

"I think the one I'm worried about is you, Soph."

Sophie sighed.

"We've been running further into the fire for a while now, to escape being cooked," Sophie said. "It could be that all we have left is to choose who bakes us, if we can choose even that much."

Belinda nodded.

"I think maybe we take a risk with this guy. Jory and Janice have known him for months. The whole time he's apparently been coming in and healing people for free."

"Sounds like he's running some kind of scam."

"I know. But Jory sees him as a friend, as does that partner of his, Clive. I know Jory's alright, and I like Clive. He's refreshingly straightforward."

"That's not a lot to bet the future on."

Belinda hopped down off the table and walked over to Sophie, giving her a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder.

"You know why I like Jory? Most people I've met, us included, are out for themselves. Those that don't have are trying to get. Those that have are trying to get more. Jory could have set up shop on the Island, selling his alchemy to rich folks, but he didn't. He came here, and he helps people."

"He can't be doing too badly," Sophie said. "The money to rebuild it all came from somewhere."

“It came from Asano,” Belinda said. “At least according to Janice. Asano just gave Jory the money. No loan, no questions asked.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I think, and I’m just guessing here, that Asano looks at Jory the way I do.”

“With girlish affection?”

“Shut up. I think he sees someone who helps people. Even the god of healing sees him like that, so why not this guy? And if his response to that is to give Jory money to do it more, how bad can he be?”

“That’s a lot of ifs and guesses,” Sophie said.

“If you have anything more to work off, this is the time for sharing.”

Sophie ran her hands over her face.

“It’s not much to put myself in the hands of a stranger over.”

“I think we’re already in his hands,” Belinda said. “It’s just a matter of how much we struggle.”

“So, what do we do?”

“I think we go along for now,” Belinda said. “Those tracking bracelets they give to indentures can’t be that hard to beat. But I won’t be the one wearing it, so you decide what we’re going to do. I’ll back you, whatever it is.”

“Enter,” Arella’s voice came through the door and Jason showed himself into her office. Jason was a little surprised to find the deputy director also present, sitting behind her own desk.

“You met my father, then,” Arella said as soon as Jason closed the door. He glanced at the deputy director before turning his gaze back to Arella.

“I did,” he said. “I like him. He seems to care about you a great deal.”

“What is it you want in return for silence?” she asked.

“I’m not a blackmailer, Director. I would like to avoid any bureaucratic roadblocks in securing the indenture of the thief, but since that will aggravate Lucian Lamprey, that’s exactly what you want. And you owe me that much.”

“I owe you?”

“You sent people to interfere with my completion of a contract you posted. That’s unprofessional.”

Arella reluctantly nodded.

“I’ll acknowledge the point,” she said. “Who told you about that clause in the service agreement?”

“I found it myself.”

“You read it?” Genevieve asked. It was the first time the elderly deputy director had entered the conversation.

“That’s right,” Jason told her.

“Nobody reads it.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Jason said. “You should see legal documents where I come from.”

“You know placing yourself between Lucian Lamprey and his objective may not be the safest position,” Arella said, pulling the conversation back on track. Jason turned to look at her.

“If I don’t, who will?” he asked.

“Does it really matter?”

“I put this woman in a situation where Lamprey can potentially get his claws into her. That makes it my responsibility to see that he doesn’t.”

“Your responsibility?”

“Yes.”

“You realise people are placed in horrifying situations every day?” she asked.

“They aren’t my responsibility. Not until I have the power to really change things.”

“And when you do, what makes you think you know best?”

“Some things are just obviously wrong, whatever world you come from.”

“So you’re going to come here and tell us right from wrong?”

“It’s easy to excuse away doing nothing,” Jason said. “It’s our tradition, our culture, our values. That does not make it acceptable to hand someone over to a predator.”

“You’re naïve,” Arella said. “It’s easy to do more harm than good, bumbling around with no idea of the realities.”

“I’ve seen the realities, Director. I covered up crimes by a man who tried to have me killed. I did that because the only people who would be hurt if I tried to do something about it would be the victims. Yet this woman I just had locked up in the tower has been hunted for months. Why? For taking things that didn’t belong to her? That’s the easy excuse that lets a pervert with power claw after her. Thadwick Mercer tried to have me murdered and the best I can hope for is that him Mum tells him off. Every time I kill people in job lots, I get a promotion. But gods forbid a poor person take a rich person’s stuff. That’s pretext enough to hand them over to whatever filthy lech has the power to demand it. This whole thing was over hunting down the victims and you’re going to tell me I don’t know right from wrong?”

“Are you quite done, Mr Asano?”

Jason let out a tension-relieving sigh.

“You did ask,” he said.

“I think we’re done here. You can have your thief, Mr Asano. The agreement with the city is quite clear on this point, and I will see it is enforced. Try not to make more trouble than you have to.”

The Adventure Society holding facility was a stone tower. Not the usual Greenstone, but a dark grey. It saw little use and had little capacity, which is why the Ustei had been penned up in the marshalling yard. Only the Ustei leadership had been held there. An adventurer entered, shoving two surly men in manacles ahead of him. Inside the only door was a small administrative area, where an Adventure Society functionary sat behind protective glass.

“I need to put these two in lockup,” the adventurer told Albert, the man behind the glass.

Albert regularly worked the jobs hall a lot and had an eye for faces, but he didn’t recognise this adventurer. That had been happening a lot lately. With so many people on the expedition, the director had been pressing the more nominal members of the Society into service. This adventurer looked more rough and tumble than the usual noble fop, though.

“I’ll need to see a copy of the contract they were taken under,” Albert told him.

“No contract,” the adventurer said. “These two idiots tried to mug the wrong guy.”

“If it isn’t contract related,” Albert said, “then we can’t keep them here. Take them to the courthouse gaol.”

“I’ve got stuff to do. Just let me stash them here and we can sort the rest out later.”

“This isn’t a hostel,” Albert said. “We’re not taking them.”

“You’d rather I let two hardened criminals loose right here?”

“If you like,” Albert said. “We’re in the middle of the Adventure Society. If they have half a mind, they’ll run like there’s a fire behind them.”

The adventurer threw Albert a sneer, but dragged the two men away. Around an hour later he was back. Along with his two prisoners, he had brought Guy Spalding, the Adventure Society official that was Albert’s supervisor.

“Bertinelli,” Spalding scolded Albert. “This adventurer’s prisoners need to be taken upstairs.”

“Sir, he didn’t have a contract.”

“I don’t care,” Spalding said. “Have them sent up, right now.”

Albert frowned.

“If you insist, sir, but I’ll need to process them first.”

“Don’t bother with that; just send them up. On my authority.”

“With respect, sir, you have the authority to tell me to do my job. You do not have the authority to tell me not to.”

“What? If you know what’s good for you, you’ll do as I say.”

“With respect, sir, I strongly suspect what’s good for me is not factoring heavily into your reasoning.”

“Are you going to do it, or not?”

“No, sir, I’m not. It’s quite obvious something shady is happening and I suggest you give it up before you do something that comes back on you.”

Spalding glared at Albert through the glass, then turned on the adventurer who had brought him there.

“Let’s go,” Spalding barked.

“You’re joking,” the adventurer said to Spalding.

“I said let’s go!”

Shaking his head, the adventurer followed reluctantly. Outside, the adventurer turned on Spalding.

“What the hell was that? I did what you said and you messed it up twice. Now there’s no way to get to the girl quietly.”

“Don’t talk at me like I’m another one of Silva’s lackeys,” Spalding warned.

“A man who gambles as hard and as badly as you,” the adventurer said, “should be concerned when he can’t keep his promises.”

“Don’t threaten me,” Spalding said. “Look where you are.”

“And how would it go for you if your new director found out how deep in you are? The world’s changing, Spalding. Being on the take isn’t as easy as it used to be. You have to know what you’re doing, these days, and you’ve had it too easy for too long. Silva isn’t his father, willing to indulge your whims. You need to show us you can adapt to the times, or things are going to get very nasty for you.”

Chapter 107: All the Good People We Can Get

The expedition was going Island by Island, searching for traces of what was disrupting the astral space. They made their first discovery on the third island; a five-sided column, about as tall as a person and covered in magical engravings. One of the adventurers, who was also a member of the Magic Society, was examining it while Danielle Geller hovered nearby.

“Well?” Danielle asked.

“Definitely some kind of astral magic,” the man said. “We could have used Landemere Vane, if someone hadn’t gone and killed him. He was a dab hand at this kind of thing. Even Clive Standish would have been a good pick. He’s only iron rank, but he knows his astral magic.”

“I didn’t pick the expedition members,” Danielle said. “Complaining about what we don’t have isn’t productive, in any case. What can you tell me?”

“Not much,” the man said. “It’s a relay for a larger effect. Some kind of astral magic on a very large scale but I’d need to find a central node to get more. Even then, this isn’t like anything I’ve seen. We need an astral magic specialist.”

Danielle scowled. The makeup of the expedition was an absolute mess. Every prominent family in Greenstone wanted to go along and Elspeth Arella had accepted them all. It was too many people with too little ability, to the point Danielle had wanted to pull out her family’s participation entirely. She couldn’t convince enough of the family leadership for that, so she ended up agreeing. When things went inevitably wrong, she could at least mitigate the damage if she was present. She did lodge a formal protest over Elspeth Arella’s head, however, directly with the Adventure Society’s Continental Council.

“Large scale,” she said unhappily. “Large enough to disrupt a massive, desert-spanning astral space?”

“I would say exactly large enough. If we can find some more of these, I might be able to pinpoint a central node. That might lead us to whoever set all this up.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Danielle said, patting the man on the shoulder. “Good work.”

Jason and Vincent rushed through the Adventure Society campus toward the prison tower. With them were Jory and Belinda, who had hurried from Jory’s clinic after Jason sent an anxious message through his voice chat power. The four of them were walking swiftly, not breaking into a run only to avoid attention.

“I’m an idiot,” Jason said as they marched. “I was so impressed with myself. Pure hubris. I stupidly forgot that the most fundamental aspect of corruption is working around the rules, not within them.”

“I don’t know why the director is doing this,” Vincent said.

“She has a number of compelling reasons. Leverage on the Duke, to start with. If one of his judges makes a shady ruling regarding the service agreement between the city and the Society, the director gets another arrow in her quiver. Then there’s Lucian Lamprey. I bet he was willing to cough up some reforms he couldn’t care less about in return for the director going along with it.”

“But getting rid of corruption is her whole agenda,” Vincent said. “I don’t understand her turning around and using it herself.”

“I warned you this had the stink of politics,” Jason said. “She doesn’t actually care about eliminating corruption. Cleaning up this branch is just her ticket into the upper ranks of the Adventure Society.”

“You were right,” Vincent said. “We just ended up pieces in someone else’s game. You only got involved because I asked you.”

“You were coming from a decent place, unlike Elspeth Arella. We need to look forward; there’s no point fretting over what’s done.”

“I’m still unclear on what’s happening,” Belinda said. “Jory just said we had to go and brought me here.”

“You didn’t explain it to me, either,” Jory said.

They spotted the tower. It would have been faster to cut straight across the grass, but Jason steered them onto the more meandering walkway.

“Stick to the paths,” Jason said. “We don’t want to draw Arella’s attention.”

“She can tell if people are walking on the grass?” Belinda asked.

“No, but rushing across the grass to the prison tower is something people might pay attention to. The longer before Arella finds out what we’re up to, the better.”

“What are we up to?” Jory asked. “You said we had to hurry a lot, but never actually said.”

“Sophie’s sentence-dispensation hearing is today,” Vincent said. “She’s already been sentenced to indenture, and today is when that indenture gets assigned.”

“I thought it was being assigned to you,” Belinda said to Jason.

“The rules are very clear on that,” Jason said. “Unfortunately, rules only matter so long as they matter to the powerful.”

“I could have told you that,” Belinda said.

“Lucian Lamprey has a legal advocate who will move that because the contract was an open one, the clause in the service agreement with the city doesn’t apply,” Vincent explained.

“Is that how it works?” Jory asked.

“Not even a little,” Jason said. “The argument is worthless.”

“Then what’s the issue?” Jory asked.

“That’s where I come in,” Vincent said. “The Adventure Society director is powerful, but she rose up very quickly and doesn’t know all the old networks. The Adventure Society’s legal advocate she ordered not to contest Lamprey’s court argument gave me a heads-up. The magistrate had also been handled, but that’s nothing new. I just don’t understand why Arella is working with Lamprey when she’s been trying to get rid of him.”

“Ousting Lamprey was always a means to an end,” Jason said. “If she can get him to fall into line, that serves her just as well. The sham court ruling is just gravy.”

“Is the court ruling that bad for the Duke?” Jory asked. “Can’t he just point out that the Adventure Society didn’t fight it?”

“There’s a hundred ways around that,” Vincent said. “Arella could claim the Adventure Society didn’t see the point of challenging over a minor case. She could throw the advocate under the wagon, claim incompetence or corruption.”

“She could have him killed off and claim no one knows what his motivations were,” Jason added.

“She wouldn’t go that far, would she?” Vincent asked.

“Her father is one of the Big Three,” Jason said. “She’d have her dad do it.”

“Dorgan?” Belinda said. “He’s the father of the Adventure Society’s director?”

“She’s been keeping it under her hat, for obvious reasons,” Jason said.

“Should you even be telling us this?” Jory asked.

“She lost discretion privileges when she lied to my face,” Jason said. “She told me she would help, then stabbed me in the back as I was congratulating myself over being such a political genius.”

They reached the prison tower, Jory and Belinda waiting outside while Jason and Vincent went in.

“Mr Asano,” Albert said. “Come to check on your prisoner?”

“I’ve come to check her out of prison, Bert,” Jason said.

“Since it was an open contract,” Albert said, “there’s a little extra paperwork. I can release her into the custody of the contracted agent, but with an open contract, you only count as the contracted agent if you’re the one that closed it. I’ll need the documentation that confirms your status.”

Vincent took a folder from his leather satchel, taking out a short stack of documents. He put them down in front of the security screen, pushing them under the narrow slot at the base.

“Copy of contract,” Albert checked off, leafing through the documents. “Confirmation of contract closure, registration of contract closure. Please hold your badge up against the security screen, Mr Asano.”

“No worries,” Jason said, taking his badge out and pushing it against the glass window between himself and Albert. Albert pressed one of the documents against the other side of the glass and it pulsed briefly with a yellow light.

“All in order,” Albert continued and turned back to the papers Vincent had given him. “Finally, order of release into custody of contracted agent. Which is now officially you, Mr Asano.”

Albert stamped the various forms.

“I can hand her over to you, then, sir.”

“Quickly would be ideal,” Bert,” Jason said.

“I will have to fit her with a tracking bracelet,” Albert said. “Wouldn’t want people just running off. Especially a pretty girl like that, sir. You could see how she might turn a man’s head. Get him to let her loose against his better judgement.”

“Perish the thought,” Jason said. “Fast as you can would be really appreciated.”

It was only a few minutes later that Albert, accompanied by an iron-rank guard, brought out Sophie. Around her wrist was a simple metal hoop.

Jason took out a bottle of the Norwich Distillery’s finest, handing it over to Albert.

“By way of apology,” Jason said.

“What for?” Albert asked.

“For what’s going to happen later.”

“Well?” Danielle asked as Thalia entered the command tent.

“Still nothing,” Thalia said. “That’s two hours overdue.”

“Then our scouting team is likely either captured or dead, and we still have no idea who by. How is camp readiness?”

“Still on alert but this is a large and undisciplined group. Too many people used to being captain and not enough willing to be crew. They’ve been on full alert since the team was due back and trying to keep them focused for hours at a time is making them inattentive and rebellious.”

“Damn Arella for handing me all this dross,” Danielle said. “All our good people are wasted keeping an eye on the bad ones. With half the number we’d be twice as effective.”

“You’re too used to only dealing with Gellers,” Thalia said. “You know better than to complain about what you want instead of dealing with what you have.”

Danielle flashed her a tired smile.

“You’re right. Thank you.”

“So what do we do? We have a missing scout team and fractious troops.”

“We give them focus,” Danielle said. “Get ready to mobilise in full force; we’re going to find out what happened to our people.”

“Heading into unknown territory, potentially against an unknown enemy?”

“Better than waiting for them to come to us. At least it gives us the initiative.”

Suddenly there was an explosion in the camp, followed by yells and screams.

Danielle and Thalia went outside to see some kind of automaton army storming the camp. The enemies were not flesh and blood but built of from wood, steel and stone. The majority were the size and shape as people, but there were towering golems standing two or three times the height of a person, and even stranger constructions. There was a huge, steel spider on, which a figure with robes could be seen. Other robed figures rode similarly outlandish creations, but there were only around a dozen robed figures in total, all at the rear of the enemy forces.

The pair were nonplussed for only a moment before they started loudly barking orders.

“The girl’s tracking bracelet?” Arella asked.

“Not showing up,” the deputy director, Genevieve, said. “The last location shown was in front of the cloud palace.”

“He’s hiding her with Emir Bahadir,” Arella mused. “No surprise the tracker won’t work in there. How strong is that tie?”

“Asano with Bahadir? Superficial, from what I’ve been able to gather. The connection is Rufus Remore.”

“Can Bahadir be convinced to hand her over?”

“Unlikely. My read is that Bahadir will keep showing Asano courtesy at least until Remore gets back and he can make another assessment. It might be different if we had something to offer but that’s unlikely. For a gold-ranker in this city, wanting and having are the same thing.”

Arella tilted her head, her aura senses picking something up.

“Trenslow is in the elevator. He may storm out, so go out the side door and be waiting for him when he leaves.”

Genevieve nodded, taking the second door into the conference room instead of straight back out to the hall.

Vincent arrived outside the director's office, taking a steeling breath.

"About time, Trenslow," Arella's voice rang displeasure through the door. "Get in here."

"Madam Director," Vincent said as he entered. She was seated behind her desk.

"Where were you, Trenslow?" she demanded. "Did you stop to wax your moustache?"

He had, in fact, done exactly that. The long, familiar process calmed him, and he felt better equipped to face the world with it in best condition.

Arella didn't wait for an answer, waving a piece of paper at him.

"Would you care to explain why I'm holding in my hand an order placing a prisoner into the personal custody of Jason Asano, issued by you?"

"You will find that all rules and procedures were followed, Madam Director."

Vincent was putting on a better show of steadfastness than he thought he would manage, but had no illusions the director didn't see through it. Arella took a breath and sat back in her chair.

"I had thought you were my man, Vincent," she said softly. "I thought you agreed with what I was doing."

"I did," Vincent said. "But then you started cutting corners; hurting the people who wanted to help you. I couldn't understand why, but I was willing to be patient. Now you've shown yourself to be everything you claimed to be fighting against. Selling a woman to someone like Lucian Lamprey? Don't even try and tell me you don't know what fate awaits her in his hands. With a father like yours, there's no pleading ignorance."

"Asano told you," Arella said. "I wondered if he would."

"He said it won't really hurt you. The things you've done will outshine where you came from. He even thought that you chose eradicating corruption as your project for advancement because it plays to the story of rising above your criminal origins."

"He's not unintelligent, although far from as smart as he thinks. Where is he now, Vincent?"

"I don't know. He said he wasn't going anywhere."

"Of course he did; he's arrogant and reckless. Running around, believing himself some master manipulator. If it weren't for people not wanting to anger Rufus Remore and Danielle Geller, he would have been put in the ground months ago. He stood, right where you are, and told me how things were going to go. It never even entered his head that he

was being played. You know I'm going to take his membership if he doesn't produce the girl. I hope you told him that."

"I guess Lamprey won't keep his end of the deal unless he gets her," Vincent accused.

"I'm not looking for your perspective on my affairs, Vincent. You no longer work here. Genevieve is waiting outside to take your official's pin and other accoutrements."

Vincent knew it was coming before he set foot in the building, but it didn't lessen the sting. Without bothering to respond, he turned and walked over to the door.

"I didn't tell you to leave," she told him. He opened the door and paused, without looking back.

"You just gave up the right to tell me a damn thing," he said. "I thought you were different. That you had integrity. Just so you know, I don't care who your father is. You're worth hating all on your own."

He closed the door behind him to find the deputy director waiting in the hall as promised. Vincent had always liked the elderly elf. She was stern but fair in her dealings, at least the one's he was privy to. It saddened him to know she was aware of the director's activities.

He was taking off his Adventure Society pin and handing it over when a flustered functionary came stumbling out of the elevator and rushed down the hall.

"Deputy director!" the winded woman greeted. "Something's happening with the expedition!"

"Tell me."

"The tracking stones connected to their badges. They're marking people as dying. A lot of iron-rankers, but also bronze and even a silver."

Genevieve frowned as she considered briefly, then threw open the door to the director's office.

"Inside," Genevieve commanded and the functionary scuttled in. She looked at Vincent and pressed the pin back into his hand.

"Why?" he asked.

"It sounds like we'll need all the good people we can get."

Chapter 108: You Don't Have the Strength

Emir Bahadir's cloud palace was a sprawling, monstrous edifice. Floating just offshore on the north side of the Island, it was fully exposed to the waves and currents, yet remained as immovable as solid ground. The entire structure was made from cloud, dyed in colours of blue, purple, orange and gold. Laid out in multiple wings and towers, it was a fairy tale brought to life.

Just walking on the cloud floors gave a sense of serenity, gentle and floating, yet supportive at the same time. Jason and Emir were strolling down a great, long balcony, looking out over the Adventure Society campus.

"I can't thank you enough," Jason said. "There's no place in the city I can hide her from Elspeth Arella."

"This is why I like outworlders," Emir said. "You have a knack for drawing a large amount of trouble in a small amount of time. Something to do with not recognising the dangers, perhaps, or simply an unwillingness to waste a second life on caution and worry. It has been my experience that helping an outworlder in their moments of early need pays off handsomely down the road. Ten years from now, I have no doubt that being owed a favour by you, Mr Asano, will be a valuable commodity indeed."

"You haven't earned a favour here, Mr Bahadir. You've made a friend, and friends don't count favours. If you need me, I'll be there."

"I'm starting to see what Rufus was talking about. I am curious as to why you're throwing away so much for a pair of thieves that, if I'm not mistaken, you hardly know."

"I don't really see it as a choice," Jason said.

Following the balcony to a terrace, they sank into the welcoming embrace of a pair of chairs made of clouds. Jason let out a contented sigh.

"I don't think I'll handle going back to regular furniture well."

Emir chortled.

"It is easy to become accustomed to the finer things," he said. "We must always remember, though, what we do to get them. You were saying that you didn't feel you had a choice."

"I was the one who caught this young woman, which makes her disposition my responsibility."

"I'm not sure I agree," Emir said. "She set out on her own path."

“Yes, because orphans with a debt to a crime lords have so many options in life. If you placed someone in the hands of a filthy degenerate, would you feel that your own hands were clean?”

“I suppose not. I’m not sure I’d go so far to protect them, though.”

“A responsibility isn’t just a responsibility so long as it’s convenient,” Jason said. “I can live with burning bridges, if the bridges are rotten. If I lose my Society membership, so be it.”

“My understanding is that you did everything according to the rules,” Emir said. “Outside of ‘losing’ the young lady in your custody, of course, but incompetence is not grounds for expulsion. I would expect a demotion, however. Do you have your second star?”

“And a third,” Jason said, “but I’m wondering how much of that was to keep me distracted. I imagine I’ll be left with just the one when this is over.”

“I think, perhaps, it is coming on time to put Greenstone behind you, Mr Asano. Has Rufus broached the idea of joining him when he returns to Vitesse?”

“He has,” Jason said. “That said, he still has work to do, here.”

“Yes he does. I will be here a little while, and he should be returning with me. Allow me to extend that invitation to you and the young women taking sanctuary here. I believe a new city, far away, is exactly what they need.”

“From what they’ve been willing to tell me, that was very much the plan. Until I intervened. I did have another thought about how to keep Miss Wexler out of Lucian Lamprey’s grasp.”

“Oh?”

“Elspeth Arella can hand Lamprey a thief and no one will care less. If she tried to hand over an adventurer, though...”

“You want to make this girl an adventurer?”

“Why not? She a lot more ready for it than I was. She’s probably more ready than I am now. I’ve pooled together money enough that I can afford some low-rarity essences at auction. There’s one in a few days, and hoping the absentees let me get a good price.”

“Finding the essences is not the largest obstacle to that course of action.”

“But it an obstacle. You go through walls one at a time, Mr Bahadir.”

“You mean *over* walls.”

“I use my words with care, Mr Bahadir.

Emir laughed.

“You certainly run full-speed at a problem, Mr Asano. The perspective of youth.”

At a glance, Emir didn't look to be more than thirty years old. There was an agelessness to him, however, that Jason had seen to a lesser degree in Danielle Geller and Thalia Mercer. Most of Greenstone's other silver-rankers showed more of their age.

"I would hold off on that auction," Emir suggested. "With patience, opportunity may find you."

"That's right," Jason said, remembering something. "Farrah told me not to rush to pick up my last awakening stones. I got the impression it was something to do with what sent them here in the first place, but they wouldn't tell me more. I assume that's why you're here as well."

"Indeed I am. I've been looking for something for some time, across seas and continents. It's what I do. People know that something exists, somewhere, and they pay me to find it. And they pay well. Usually it's long-time gold or even diamond-rankers. The interests of those who live for centuries are far-reaching, sophisticated and esoteric."

"You work for diamond rankers?"

"I do. Not many people have met so many as I, let alone be given the chance to perform a service. They pay in more exotic currency than mundane coins."

"Like castles made out of clouds?"

"Exactly like that. You know, Mr Asano, if your attempts to convince people to kill you don't pan out, I think I can find some work for you, once you rank up once or twice."

"I'm not sure I'm willing to wait around for months while you check false leads. Rufus and his team are convinced what you're looking for is here. Presumably somewhere more intact than that complex out in the swamps."

"Yes, it was disappointingly empty of content. "Did you happen to take anything?"

"We took some combat dummy parts. My friend wanted to try and reassemble them."

"Did he?"

"Not yet. So what is this mysterious event you have coming up? Another complex, like I found, but more intact? I imagine going untouched for centuries would mean a good chance at essences and the like, with no one wandering through to nab them. Clive said we were unlucky not to find any in our find."

"I really shouldn't say more at this point, but you are very much on the right track. There are some unusual nuances to the exploration that mean I will require local assistance, which should be lucrative for everyone involved. From what I've been able to put together, anyway."

"Tantalising," Jason said. "You're certain I can't tease more out of you?"

“I’ve said more than I should already. After all, don’t they say the anticipation is better than the meal?”

“Only if all the cooks they know are terrible,” Jason said.

One of Emir’s staff approached them. From Jason’s limited experience, Emir’s people were an eclectic and casual bunch, but that did not extend to his chief of staff, Constance. The silver-ranker was Emir’s right hand, and exuded professionalism each time Jason encountered her.

“Sir. Elspeth Arella is at the entrance and has asked to see you.”

“She’s here personally? Not a messenger?”

“In person, sir, yes.”

“I’ll be right down, then.”

Constance nodded and left, Emir wistfully watching her depart.

“I’m rather desperately in love with that woman,” he said wistfully. “She wants nothing to do with me, of course. She’s seen me at my worst.”

“She’s aware of your affections?”

“Oh, yes.”

“She’s still willing to work for you, which is a good sign. I imagine she would have no problem making her way in the world outside of your employ.”

“Very much so; I have no idea why she stays with me. Except for the pay. And the travel. And the accommodations.”

He sighed.

“I’d best go see to the branch director,” he said. “Care to come along? You haven’t seen her since before you absconded here, have you?”

“I haven’t,” Jason said. “I don’t see the problem with tagging along.”

Sophie and Belinda were in an opulent, two-bedroom guest suite. The entire wall in front of them had turned into mist allowing them to look out over the ocean as they relaxed in plush cloud chairs.

“I don’t understand what’s happening anymore,” Belinda said. “Those cloud beds. I’ve never slept like that in my life. A week ago we were wondering if we’d still be alive right now, and look at this.”

“It’s nice,” Sophie said, “but what is Asano’s goal? What does he get out of bringing us here?”

“Maybe he really is just trying to help us,” Belinda said, drawing a flat look from Sophie.

“Yeah,” Belinda said. “It sounded stupid as I was saying it.”

Constance was waiting for Emir and Jason at the palace exit that connected to the shore by a cloud path. Emir matched across the walkway with Constance and Jason flanking him. Elspeth Arella was waiting on shore, alone.

“If your goal is to convince me to disgorge my guests,” Emir said without preamble, “then I’m afraid you’re wasting your time.”

“That can wait,” Arella said, not sparing Jason so much as a glance. “The expedition your fellow Vitesse adventurers are on. There’s been a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Emir asked.

“Less than an hours ago, its members started dying. All we have is their tracking stones, so we don’t know anything else, but we’ve lost a silver ranker, multiple bronze-rankers and a slew of irons. Everyone we could use to send support in time is already on the expedition, so I’m here to ask if you or your people can help.”

Emir frowned unhappily, Jason matching his expression.

“Constance?” Emir asked.

“Hester has been to a number of areas in the region. I can see how close she can get us.”

“Do it, and ready the field team,” Emir ordered. The usual undertone of casual amusement absent from his voice. Constance immediately marched back toward the palace.

“I want to be part of this,” Jason said.

“You don’t have the strength,” Emir said. “Protecting you would cost us more than having you would help.”

“I know an alchemist with a stockpile of medical supplies and connections with the Healer. We could set up a recovery station outside the astral space while you go in and get them.”

Emir gave Jason an assessing look, then nodded.

“How fast can you get things together?”

“I can lend him some Adventure Society authority to speed things along,” Arella said. “I’ll have your friend Vincent meet you.”

“He still has a job?”

“He does today.”

Chaos reigned as the expedition campsite was attacked. There were very few living people amongst the attackers, all of whom were silver or bronze rank. Their features couldn't be seen under sandy-coloured robes, not even race. Only their auras gave away their nature as living beings.

The bulk of the enemy force were construct creatures that varied wildly varying in design. There were creatures like wooden puppets, awkward but numerous. Lumbering, stone golems walked amongst them, as much as two or three times the size of a person. There were strange creatures made of complicated, interconnecting parts. Some were the size and shape of people, others were more animal like, sometimes serving as mounts for the robed people. Behind them all was a towering behemoth of stone and metal; a ten metre tall, spider shaped, steel behemoth. It apparently had been held back so as not to alert the camp before the surprise attack. As such, it was still making its way forward from a distance.

Danielle quickly discovered there was no ordering the chaos. All she could do was find key people and try to direct them where they were needed most. In between, she stepped onto the field herself. She wanted to go after the robe-wearers she assumed were controlling the construct army, but too many people needed help against the artificial horde.

She paced herself, knowing her own limits. In a short fight, she was confident against any opponent, but her powerful abilities would exhaust her mana quickly. Aside from conjuring her dimension blade, she relied on skills and silver-rank attributes to mow through weaker enemies. She saved her most exhausting powers for critical moments, when the difference was life and death.

Around the battlefield, the more capable adventurers had reached similar conclusions to Danielle and were doing their best to help the others. Those that knew their abilities well and how to use them picked their targets accordingly. Thalia Mercer ploughed through crowds of constructs like a bowling ball, enemies bouncing away without slowing her down. She focused on the golems, which were big, slow and either bronze or silver rank. The bronze ones barely slowed her down, exploding into stone shrapnel as she literally smashed through them with shoulder charges. For the silvers, three times her height or more, she would rip off a limb and break the rest of the body apart by using it as a club.

Farrah and Gary had recruited Beth Cavendish and her team. Farrah had encased herself in obsidian armour and conjured a huge, obsidian sword. The blade was not a blade at all, but a pillar of jagged segments, like horrible teeth. The segments could break up and whip around on a cord of glowing magma. She swept it around, burning and

breaking apart the constructs. Mixing in devastating lava spells, she used her abilities to create space for weaker expedition members to fall back.

Into that space, walls of metal and stone rose out of the ground to form barricades. This was the combined efforts of Gary and Hudson, the human front-liner who was almost as large as Gary. The other members of Beth's team cleaned up any loose ends while Beth used spell after spell to keep feeding mana to Farrah. Her potent abilities were costly and hard to maintain as the battle dragged on, while Beth desperately replenished her as fast as she could.

Rufus, in the meantime, was flickering through the enemy like a ghost. He appeared and disappeared in rapid succession, moving unhindered. In his hand was a silver sword, under which constructs fell as he passed. These were simple humanoid forms, mostly wood on a metal frame. They were essentially combat dummies without the safety features. These were only incidental targets, however. His primary targets were the less common construct creatures, which were many and varied. They were larger than the humanoid, for the most part, and had been built to mimic various animals and monsters. As well as larger and tougher than their wooden, humanoid brethren, they were also faster and smarter. Where the others shuffled along with zombie-like shambling as they sought out living enemies, their forms very much followed function.

Rufus was tracking a specific one; a giant tiger made of intricate steel cogs. The bronze-rank clockwork cat was faster than its simpler brethren, wreaking havoc amongst the expedition's panicking iron-rankers, even claiming some of the bronze.

Rufus stopped his rapid, vanishing run. He dropped the conjured silver sword and a golden one appeared in its place. The cat locked its unliving gaze on him and launched into a high pounce. Its speed, so terrifying to the iron-rankers, was as good as standing still to Rufus.

As Rufus activated his speed of light power, the world seemed to freeze in time around him. The creature was stuck mid-pounce, hovering in the air. The power only afforded Rufus two seconds of accelerated time and he wasted none of it. He ran under the creature, pushing his peak, bronze-rank reflexes to the limit as he lashed out four times with his golden sword. Every movement left a trail of golden light in his wake.

Rufus returned to the normal passage of time and the cat was once again hurtling to the spot Rufus had just disappeared from. The golden trail showed every movement he had made in accelerated time, but it did the cat no good. It landed, helpless on the ground, each of its limbs cleanly severed. The severed limbs all glowed with golden heat where Rufus' sword had passed through.

The creature landed helpless on the ground, limbs scattered around. Rufus plunged his sword into its head, sinking it to the hilt. Then he ran the sword down the length of its body, leaving a trail of hot metal as he sliced it clean in half. He left his sword buried in the clockwork cat, conjuring a new silver one and vanishing.

Danielle kept an eye on the battlefield as a whole. They weren't turning the fight but their key people were sending the unintelligent automatons in to an increasing state of disarray. It was enough that she could start organising a withdrawal. In one corner of the battle, some of her people had erected barricades she could use as a launch point for the retreat. The trick would be holding the rest of the line as she wrangled those behind it. She spread out her aura senses, looking for the expedition leaders she would need to make it happen.

Chapter 109: The Tyranny of Rank

The retreat was going worse than Danielle had hoped, but better than she feared. The iron rankers had been pulled back behind the bronze and silver-rankers holding the line. Luckily, the other side had only a few essence users, their number made up mostly of constructs. The artificial creatures were not the match of an equal-rank essence user, but there were so many as to make up the difference. The enemy essence users were also reluctant to risk themselves by engaging directly, which helped Danielle's attempts to pull circumstances under her control.

They were not out of danger as the enemy continued to press, but the constructs were paying for their aggression. Pushing mindlessly against the increasingly-ordered withdrawal formation, they were being rapidly ground up. They were unrelenting, however, the unliving constructs having no morale to lose. There was not a lot of open space in the rainforest, but a battle line had managed to form in the now-destroyed remains of the expedition camp, which had been cleared of trees using essence abilities. That made for a relatively open field in which the defence was holding, while the rest of the expedition retreated into the tree line.

The battlefield situation was slowly shifting. The initial attack had sown chaos and death amongst the adventurers, most of their casualties coming in those early minutes. The battle slowly started to shift as the strongest adventurers came to the fore and the expedition leadership managed to give the defences some semblance of order. Once a rough-but-definite battle line was established, the construct creatures were being ground to pieces against it.

The rescue expedition formed up in the marshalling yard. Emir gave out directions, breaking the group into an incursion team and a support team. After that, he directed one of his people, a woman named Hester, to open a portal. She traced a circle in the air which started shimmering, revealing an image of a city on the far side. Emir stepped through with only a handful of others before the portal collapsed.

Hester was the closest Jason had seen to another Asiatic person in this world. He chatted with her as they waited for her portal ability to become available again. She told him she could only open the portal to places she had previously visited, which was normal for long-range teleport abilities. The closest place to the aperture the expedition had travelled was a city to the north called Boko.

The first task of the expedition had been to return the Ustei to the northern territories in their monstrous sand barge. The city of Boko was where Adventure Society decided to return the Ustei slaves, along with any women and children that had wanted out of the tribe. Many had been seized from small communities in the region in the first place.

The time between uses for Hester's power was based on range. At the distance between Greenstone and Boko, it would be available again after an hour, one of several limitations. The more powerful the people going through the portal, the fewer people could use it before it collapsed. Hester was silver rank, but her portal ability had already reached gold. This was the only reason her portal could transmit the gold-ranked Emir at all.

Emir and the silver-rankers that had gone through first would spend the hour requisitioning vehicles from the local Magic Society branch. Everyone else would go through the second portal Hester raised, including the silver and bronze-rankers Arella had rounded up. Unlike the initial expedition, these were the best Greenstone had left to offer, the top people from every family. They were all ready to go and rescue their family members, with no shirking or hesitation among them.

The support team included Jory, a number of priests from the church of the healer, plus various other volunteers with healing abilities. Rounding out the numbers were Adventure Society functionaries and officials going along to provide general support and assistance. Unless there were a lot of afflictions going around, that would be Jason's role as well.

The defensive formation of the expedition's retreating forces was built around key people who served as anchors for the less powerful. Silver-rankers had arrayed themselves against the strongest opponents but there were not enough silver-rankers to go around. The rest of the line had to make do with groups of more powerful bronze-rankers. One such location had Farrah, Rufus and Gary working in synergy to keep the enemy at bay as other adventurers withdrew. Farrah wreaked havoc on the main mass of the enemy, while Gary and Rufus intercepted the more powerful threats trying to stop her. Farrah had conjured for herself obsidian armour that glowed with internal heat. Gary conjured something similar, made of iron, becoming an immovable bulwark. Rufus was the unstoppable force to Gary's immovable object, dancing around stalled enemies as his golden sword carved through them.

The enemy leadership had thus far remained at a secure distance, riding their strange construct mounts and hidden under hooded robes. Finally, they acted as the battlefield conditions started to shift. They simultaneously leapt into the fray, striking out at

crucial points in the defensive line. The enemy leaders were all bronze and silver-rankers and their intervention pressured several critical points in the line.

A figure covered in robes moved on Farrah. Rufus saw it coming, gesturing at Gary and they rushed to intercept. It had a silver rank aura and its robes were filled with a strange bulk. Its movements were strange, its arms hanging limply at its sides. It lunged forward with a kick, Gary stepping up to intervene. He had a huge hammer in one hand and a shield in the other, which he raised in front of him.

Expertly, Gary angled his shield to deflect most of the kick's force. In spite of his huge strength, he was still sent stumbling backwards with a large dent in his shield. Gary's speed and strength were at the very peak of what a bronze-ranker could achieve, being the equal of most low-ranker silvers. Their enemy was as high in silver as Gary and Rufus were in bronze, so even Gary was heavily overmatched.

Rufus moved in to attack, quickly recognising that the arms hanging at its sides seemed to be crippled. It fought with kicks alone, moving and spinning with a speed bordering on gold-rank. Kicks alone were not an efficient means of fighting, however, and as Gary came back to the fore they teamed up to attack.

As they battled the silver-ranker, Farrah was hard at work holding the line. The adventurers around them were bronze and not as strong as her and her companions. They did not make up for holding the line in place of Gary and Rufus, giving the pair a wide berth as they battled the silver.

The robed enemy was being pushed by Gary and Rufus, largely due to using neither essence abilities nor its arms. Their attacks seemed to have little impact, however, as the bulk in the robes was apparently due to some kind of armour. It seemed to shrug off every attack that landed.

There was a brief balance, Gary and Rufus with all their abilities against the robed figure that only kicked. That balance was abruptly broken with a powerful kick getting past Gary's shield and landing square on the torso of his heavy armour. The armour deformed into his chest as he was sent tumbling across the ground, ribs shattered. Only his bronze-rank toughness as his heavy armour kept him alive, but he wasn't getting back up.

When their turn came, Jason and Jory walked up to the portal. They glanced at each other and stepped through. There was a rushing sensation that came with moving through the portal that felt just like his teleport ability. After they emerged, Jory staggered off and fell to his knees, throwing up. Looking around, Jason saw that Jory wasn't alone; many people had been unsettled by it. Jason noticed others that, like him, were unaffected, and

most of them were members of the celestine race. He remembered that his astral affinity racial gift was one he shared with celestines, which apparently gave a tolerance for teleporting.

The city of Boko reminded Jason of Old City, with plenty of desert stone in evidence. The air was drier here, without the proximity of the delta and the ocean; just breathing was drying out his mouth. He didn't have time to look around though, as there was work to be done. Emir had used his hour head start effectively, leaving sand skimmers waiting to carry them into the desert.

Rufus was now facing the silver-ranker alone. He didn't have Gary's reflexes but his skill was a level above their enemy. The robed figure followed the kick to Gary with one aimed at Rufus, who read the move in time to narrowly avoid it.

Rufus used his speed of light power, one of his strongest trump cards. Everything appeared to freeze around him, even his incredibly fast enemy. In this brief moment of grace, he lashed out multiple times against the robed figure. Even with his enemy at a standstill, Rufus' golden sword had little impact on the armour hidden under the enemy's bulky robes. Even a strike straight to the head bounced off, eerily without a clang in the time outside of time. His power lasted only a scant pair of seconds, Rufus inwardly cursing as it was wasted on cutting holes in the enemy's robe.

Time started moving at normal speed once again. The robes were torn and burned by Rufus' glowing golden sword, the rents revealing some kind of metal underneath. The remains of the robes were suddenly shredded as something burst from within, giving Rufus his first look at his attacker's true form.

The protection Rufus' blade had struck was not external armour, but metal grafted directly into flesh. Steel pushed into skin, heavy bolts using bones for anchor points. It was an abomination of living tissue and cold steel; even its head had plates bolted into the skull. Barely any flesh was visible under all the metal, just the jaw and some patches around the joints. There wasn't even enough living flesh to tell if it was a man or a woman.

There were four, wholly artificial arms emerging from its back. Long and inhuman, they were articulated at multiple points and were crafted from razor-sharp metal. They ended in oversized hands, each finger tapered to a point like a cluster of spearheads. The arms had been wrapped around the enemy's body, the source of the bulk under its robes. It was releasing these arms that had torn the robes asunder. The enemy's natural arms continued to hang limply as their metal equivalents flexed powerfully before stabbing out like spears.

Rank for rank, the only person who could match Rufus' skill on the battlefield was possibly Danielle Geller. Rufus' enemy certainly couldn't, but they were not rank for rank. Now the enemy had given up on hiding its true form, its speed and strength were backed up by powerful abilities and its uncanny metal arms. Rufus' skill allowed him to barely hold on in the face of a suddenly more powerful enemy but every moment was a desperate scramble to stay alive.

It was a clash of unsurpassed skill and overwhelming power. Perfectly executed attacks met defences that were no more than adequate, but so powerful that they were up to the task, regardless. What little damage Rufus manage to inflict was quickly guarded by a conjured metal shield. It only occupied one arm, leaving three to attack. The enemy's other abilities could rapidly repair the grafted armour, or even heal when Rufus' blade dug into flesh.

Like most humans, many of Rufus' abilities were special attacks. He used all his skills to maximise their effectiveness, every trick he had. Feinting to land an attack on a blind spot; moving to expose a weakness. The unprecedented threat drew out every scrap of capability. If their advancement as essence users were closer, the bizarre foe would have been utterly outclassed but this was not the case. There was no escaping the tyranny of rank.

As Rufus chained each attack into the next, the enemy was counterattacking. Its essence powers allowed it to transmute the arms into other forms, allowing for its own special attacks. It began by changing them into lance-like weapons for simple but powerful attacks. Rufus was able to predict the linear attacks and effectively dodge. It changed to ball-and-chain weapons but Rufus likewise anticipated their movement. Their weakness was the recovery time after attacks, which Rufus baited out before ducking out of range, then came back to counter.

The enemy changed tack again, moving back itself when Rufus was pulling away. Its arms became needle launchers spitting streams of tiny but deadly needles at him and forcing him to close in again. As he did, the arms became razor whips that slashed about wildly. They weren't as powerful at the ball and chain weapons but were relentless and unpredictable.

Every moment of the battle, Rufus was running on a knife-edge. Even glancing blows from his more powerful enemy meant serious damage and he was being ravaged by the increasingly tricky attacks. He was forced to stay close or even more needles would pincushion him, but that left him open to the lacerating whips, now dripping with his blood.

It was the ground under his feet that finally betrayed him. The rainforest of the astral space was full of wet ground, churned into mud by first the expedition camp and then the battle. Rufus slipped, just slightly but he had been fighting with no margin of error. A metal arm transformed into a blade and slashed upwards, and severing Rufus' sword arm. Stumbling in shock, Rufus was done. Another kick launched him away like Gary, but even in that state, his training-honed instincts kicked in. He threw himself to cushion the blow, which saved his life but only barely. Crippled and near dead, he was sent tumbling helplessly through the mud.

Chapter 110: Help Arrives

Emir and his people had already left the city by the time Jason and the others arrived. They were travelling over the desert on sand skimmers, although the desert was more rocks than sand. Once they reached the aperture to the astral space, they could use the tracking stones they brought with them to find the group quickly. They had every tracking stone from every member of the expedition packed into a dimensional bag.

It would take time to cross the desert and reach the aperture to the astral space, but Emir had a trump card. One of his people specialised in magical tools and could periodically push their skimmers to speeds well beyond their normal capability. The whole vehicle vibrated under him as it raced at a pace it was never designed for, but Emir was unfazed. All that concerned him was arriving in time.

Not every adventurer had managed to join up with the main formation as it withdrew. Whole teams had been cut off from the main force, isolated individuals falling quickly. Those that managed to remain in groups fared better but most paid a price in blood for their escape.

Humphrey was with Phoebe Geller, her brother Rick and his team. They were fighting their way out through a hell of magical automatons stained red with the blood of adventurers. Beset from all sides, Humphrey's huge sword carved the team a path. The big man, Jonah, bore the brunt of the enemy's attacks at the rear. Phoebe and Rick held the flanks, completing the cordon around the twin elf sisters. Just as it seemed like they were making progress, a new wave of construct monsters appeared and started moving in.

While Rufus and Gary were tied up with the silver-ranker, Farrah had been fending off every other enemy. Without their support, she was being pushed to the edge. Barely holding on against the encroaching horde, there was now nothing between her and the abomination.

On top of everything else, she was running low on mana. Dealing with the press of enemies had left her exhausted at the worst possible time. She was reduced to relying on her heavy armour and sword-whip, neither of which were a match for the abomination now bearing down on her.

The retreating forces reeled from the impact of the enemy leadership entering the fray. They had leapt from the strange constructs they rode as mounts and moved forward to attack the defensive line.

Danielle rushed around barking orders, personally intervening as needed. The line buckled in places, but was yet to breach. Spotting one of the silver-rank leaders, Danielle dove into the melee personally. She fought with a weapon conjured from her dimension essence called dimensional blade. It looked like a sword made of black lightning, limned in silver. It hissed and sizzled, the blade wild and flickering. There was no weight to it but it could cut through almost anything and caused destructive harm to anything it touched.

Quicker than lightning she launched a sneak attack, putting the robed figure onto the back foot. The enemy reacted by bursting out of its robes to reveal a hideously monstrous form.

The bulk of the construct army were similar to magical combat dummies; segmented section of limbs, head and torso, threaded onto a skeletal metal frame. Casting aside its robe, the enemy was revealed to be similar to such a dummy but with a horrifying difference. Instead of limbs of wood or stone, each wholly separate segment – hands, feet, arms, legs head – were all made of living flesh. Like a dummy, the limbs were carried on a human-like skeleton of steel rather than bone. Danielle only paused for a moment at the disgusting visage before resuming her attack.

They couldn't take the skimmers through the aperture, so once they arrived in the astral space, Emir and his people were on foot. Not all had the movement abilities to keep pace with Emir, but he didn't wait. Only two of his people, specialised in mobility, were able to keep up as they dashed in the direction the tracking stones were pointing them. They quickly discovered they were on some kind of island chain, but the water didn't slow them down. On the contrary, they moved faster over the calm water than the crowded terrain of the tropical islands.

Danielle drove the freakish enemy into retreat but she chose not to follow. The fight had drawn her attention from the larger battle and she needed to stop and reassess. Leaping high in the air, she used one of her time powers to slow herself down, floating as she scanned battlefield.

She looked for potential weak points in their formation, and people she could send to reinforce them. On a distant flank she spotted a second bizarre silver-ranker overwhelming

Rufus. It was another disgusting fusion of metal and flesh, half construct creature and half living being.

Even as she turned her full attention to the action, Rufus slipped and the fight was over. His arm was severed and his opponent kicked him away. Seeing the abomination turn to Farrah, Danielle teleported directly into the fray.

In the chaos of battle, Thadwick and his two offsidiers, Neil and Dustin, had been separated from the main force. Dustin had used his powers to protect them while Neil had kept them alive with his healing. Thadwick had been blasting powers blindly into the enemy at range, exhausting his mana.

“Replenish me,” Thadwick demanded.

“You can’t just keep throwing attacks into the pack,” Neil said. “We have to find a way to rejoin the group, not draw more enemy attention.”

Thadwick’s essences were lightning, wind, potent and storm, and he had used a preponderance of awakening stones of the magus to get more spells than the human affinity for special attacks would normally produce. His essence powers were all simple, straightforward and powerful, with an attendant high mana cost. What they were not was subtle.

Thadwick looked around, only now realised how isolated they were, in spite of warnings the others had given him.

“You need to hold them off so I can get back,” he told the other two, immediately running away from the enemy.

Neil and Dustin looked at each other.

“Dusty, did he just...?”

“Yeah, he did.”

“I am so done with that little turd.”

Danielle had seen Jason fighting in her mirage arena enough to envy the freedom with which he teleported. Even after years using her own ability, there was still a moment of disorientation on arrival. That moment proved to be everything as she arrived close to Farrah and the monstrous silver-ranker attacking her. That fleeting confusion was all too costly as four metal arms pierced into Farrah’s body like spears. Neither Farrah’s blade nor her armour were enough to block them, one of which buried itself in her head. Farrah’s corpse was still falling to the ground as Danielle recovered and attacked.

The four arms were fast, but like her enemy, Danielle was at the peak of silver rank. Her confluence essence was time and everything seemed to slow around her as her dimensional blade cut into her enemy again and again. It was in many ways a reflection of Rufus' fight. She was more skilled than her enemy and used expert technique to strike out with her conjured blade. She even had a power, similar to the one Rufus possessed, to briefly accelerate to a so fast where the world around her seemed frozen.

The difference between her fight and Rufus' was that she was not overpowered by the enemy. Instead of bounding off seemingly impervious metal, her weapon left savage gouges in steel and flesh both. She did not have to compensate for lesser strength and speed, instead easily outpacing her enemy. When she was struck, the injuries were much less dangerous to her silver-rank armour and toughness.

Suddenly she seemed to make a mistake, overextending as she lunged for her opponent's main body and leaving an opening for all four arms to lance into her body. It did not miss the brief but crucial chance, metal limbs piercing through her armour. Unexpectedly, they stopped dead as they hit her flesh, like they had struck an impervious wall. The enemy realised it had been baited even as she placed her hand on its chest. The wounds that it should have inflicted on her were instead unleashed on its own body by her power.

Heavily injured, the silver-ranker scrambled to escape. Danielle wanted to give chase but in the absence of Farrah, enemies were encroaching. No silver-ranker would go down easy and she didn't have time to press the fight so she reluctantly allowed it to flee. She moved to hold the line, calling for more people to assist. Once things had stabilised, she took stock. Gary was on his feet again but barely, staggering forward with a face full of fury. Danielle picked up Rufus' severed arm and pushed it into his chest.

"Rufus needs you now," she said firmly. "Farrah is past help."

Gary's face crumbled in agony and for a moment it looked like he would try and shove past her, but instead he nodded and turned to Rufus. Rufus was still on the ground, disoriented and in shock. His eyes darted back and forth unfocused, his face confused. Still holding the severed arm, Gary dismissed his conjured armour, picked Rufus up and headed for the backlines. He tried to yell for a healer but it came as a loud croak, his own torso having been savagely pummelled.

People were coming in to hold the line and the enemy leadership was pulling back. Whether from an unwillingness to lose all their constructs or from almost losing part of their leadership, it was enough that they started withdrawing from the engagement. Danielle retrieved Farrah's body, whose conjured armour had vanished on her death. Under the

feet of swarming constructs it had mangled unrecognisably and she sealed it away in an Adventure Society casket, which she then placed into her storage space.

Danielle wasn't happy with their position, having the water at their back. Organisation was still a mess, certainly beyond organising a crossing between islands under battle conditions. The advantage was that the beach was an open enough space to regroup and take stock. The only other open area was cleared ground of the camp, which they had paid such a price to escape from. They had lost another silver-ranker and some of the bronze, but most of those left were solid. The major loss was Farrah. Not only had she been a massive factor in the large-scale combat, but her companions were almost as valuable and her loss had gutted their morale.

The group still had their silver-rank healer, so reattaching Rufus' arm hadn't been a problem. The brutal kick that had sent him out of combat had ended up requiring more healing. Aside from the tiredness that came with the extensive healing, Rufus and Gary were physically good as new. Emotionally, they were wrecked, especially Rufus. Left sitting in the sand with other recovering adventurers, he just stared into space, saying nothing. Gary paced back and forth next to him; a volcano that could erupt at any moment.

The eruption, however, came from elsewhere. Thalia Mercer, who Danielle needed calm and collected, was exploding on a pair of iron-rankers.

"YOU LEFT HIM OUT THERE ALONE?"

"We didn't leave anyone," Neil said, standing up to Thalia's fury. "Your son told us to hold them back while he was already running for it. It's not our fault your..."

Thadwick's other lackey thumped Neil on the arm to shut him up. Venting a decade of frustration at that moment would likely get them both killed by Thadwick's furious mother. It looked like it might happen anyway until Danielle arrived, placing herself between Thalia and the pair.

"We need to go find him," Thalia told Danielle, the other pair vanishing from her consideration. Thalia regained some composure as she looked at her friend's face.

"I'm sorry," Danielle said, "but we're still taking stock. People who were isolated are still drifting in; he may well too. Sending more people out before we have headcounts is borrowing trouble when we already have a surplus."

"He's my son! If it were Humphrey still missing, would you be sending people out?"

"Humphrey is still missing," Danielle said, her face as hard as granite.

"Oh," Thalia said helplessly, after a lengthy pause.

"Did Cassandra come through alright?" Danielle asked.

“She’s taking a headcount of the family, right now.”

“I’m glad. I need your best right now, Thalia. Or at least your good enough, which is still better than most people’s best.”

Thalia nodded.

“Good. Now let’s start getting things under control.”

Humphrey eventually turned up, accompanied by Gabrielle and the brother-sister pairing of Rick and Phoebe Geller. The survivors of Rick’s team were with them, having lost two of their number. Henry Geller, their flame-wielding damage dealer, had died. Their big front-liner, Jonah, had held back the enemy to let the others escape, his ultimate fate unknown.

Emir and his people finally arrived. They were too late to intervene in the battle, but were a boost to the makeshift camp’s crippled morale. Once word passed that a gold-ranker had arrived to assist, hope was resparked in hearts full of fear. He alone was enough to prevent a repeat of the battle they had just escaped, and there were more silver-rankers on the way.

Emir met with Danielle, getting a rundown of events. There were still people unaccounted for, but the tracking stones in Emir’s possession allowed them to sort the missing from the dead. They organised teams to retrieve the living, with every recovery team having a silver-ranker for safety.

With the initial organisation done, Emir sought-out Rufus, Gary watching over him. Rufus’ blank eyes taking a moment to register Emir’s presence.

“I failed her,” Rufus said, his voice barely audible.

“No,” Emir said softly, moving to place a hand on his shoulder. “She died as well as any of us could ask. Comrades behind her, enemies in front of her and friends beside her.”

Chapter 111: Strange Star

Most of the ill-fated expedition was extracted back through the aperture that had been their entry point. On the other side was a recovery camp, ready and waiting. Only silver rankers and bronze-rankers stayed in the astral space, and not all of them.

Every member of the new, streamlined expedition had either arrived with Emir or been hand-picked by Danielle and Thalia. They drew back to the island that had their underwater aperture just offshore, using it as a staging point. As preparations were made to track down their missing people, a steady stream of departing expedition members waded into the water and through the aperture just below the surface. The tricky part was managing the people still unconscious after being healed from extreme injury. The adventurers with water powers were employed to see them through.

With the withdrawal from the astral space organised, the next priority was to retrieve the adventurers who had become separated from the group. Teams led by silver rankers set out, using tracking stones to find them. Only once that was done would they turn to finding and destroying the enemy.

With only the cream of the expedition remaining, bolstered by Emir's people, Danielle was confident of eradicating the construct army and its masters. Her greatest concern was actually finding them. The follow-up attack she had been fearful of never arrived, and the search teams hadn't run into anyone but missing expedition members.

"There's a problem," Emir said. He was in the command tent with Danielle and Thalia.

"You'll have to narrow that down," Danielle said without humour.

"We still have nineteen missing people are still alive, according to their tracking stones," Emir said. "The problem is that for five of them, their stone indicates they're still alive, but can't track them.

"Could they have lost their badges, or had them taken?" Thalia asked

"If they lost them, we'd still be able to track the badges. The best explanation we can hope for is that the astral space has regions that naturally mask tracking. I've seen it in astral spaces before, although they were all less stable than this one."

"Not unheard of," Danielle said.

"It could be racial gift evolution," Thalia said. "Our lost people certainly have the right conditions to trigger it."

"We know ability evolutions change an ability to meet immediate needs," Thalia said. "An ability that prevents them from being tracked would make sense."

“But five people, all getting skill evolutions at once, and all the same or similar abilities?” Danielle asked. “It would be great if that’s what happened and they’re all fine, but we can’t anticipate that being the case.”

“The alternatives get worse from there,” Emir said. “Something may have happened to them that changed their aura so much that they no longer match the aura imprint on their badges, which would break the tracking magic. Which would suggest the enemy found them and did something to them.”

“Who are the five?” Danielle asked.

Emir looked at Thalia with sympathy.

“I’m sorry, but they include Jonah Geller and Thadwick Mercer.”

Thalia’s face twisted but she kept herself under control.

“What are we going to do about it?” she asked.

“Once we have the ones we can track,” Danielle said, “we need to sweep this whole place anyway. The goal is still to find out what is happening to the astral space and stop it. If our people are still out there to find, we’ll find them.”

“And how long will that take?” Thalia asked.

“We’ve surveyed enough to know the astral space is only a fraction of the size of the world it’s attached to,” Danielle said. “We don’t leave until we retrieve all our people, living or dead.”

“Quite right,” Emir said. “And as it happens, my people are specialists at finding things over large areas that are often hidden with magic. Hope is by no means an outlandish choice.”

Thalia nodded.

“I want to hear as soon as we find anything”

“Of course.”

The support camp outside the aperture was an array of large tents set up near the aperture. The aperture was in a crevice in a rocky outcropping and people were coming out in a steady stream. On the astral space side, the healers were in triage mode, healing people up just enough to send them through the underwater aperture. The soaking wet adventures were then sorted into two groups. Those in need of further healing were taken to the recovery tents, while the rest were sent to the dormitory tents.

Vincent was in charge of the camp and had roped Jason in as his assistant. There wasn’t much call for Jason’s cleansing ability, just the occasional infection. Vincent was in

charge of making the actual decisions, with Jason's job being to sort out any problems with enacting them.

Jason's biggest responsibility was dealing with people who weren't happy with the arrangements and keep them from bothering Vincent. It was, Vincent claimed, the entire reason he chose Jason to assist him. Even after escaping the horrors of battle, there were some who felt the need to complain about the accommodations. These were the ones who never saw the frontline and were evacuated first.

"You expect me to stay in a tent with all these people?" a nobleman asked Jason.

"You were in a tent during the expedition," Jason said.

"A private magical tent! This is just a tarp with poles, and as for what you generously describe as beds..."

"Listen, mate, you've got three options. Option one is taking the accommodation and shutting your damn mouth. Option two is you sod off into the desert and find your own way home. Option three is you hang about making a nuisance of yourself and your mouth gets shut for you."

"You think you can treat me like this? You have no idea who you're..."

"Fellas!" Jason called out loudly, over the top of the nobleman. "We've got another option three."

A pair of adventurers came into the tent, their bronze-rank auras visibly impacting the nobleman, who they led away. After a very thorough talking to, he would be placed with the other troublemakers in an isolated group of tents with people watching over them.

Rufus and Gary were sent back with the other bronze-rankers Danielle deemed unreliable. Gary gave a brief explanation of Farrah's absence before Jason sent the pair to the healers for further treatment. Afterwards Jason was sleepwalking through his duties in a daze until Vincent had someone take his place. Suddenly free, Jason went looking for Gary and Rufus.

He found them in the dormitory tents, having been sent there after their healing was completed. Rufus sitting on a cot bunk, staring blankly into nowhere. He wasn't alone. Everyone in that tent had lost friends or family. It was a cluster of misery and shock.

Jason sat next to Rufus, not saying a word as Gary told the story in detail. Afterward, the three sat in silence for a long time, other adventurers bustling around them. Finally, Jason stood up, patted Rufus on the shoulder on shoulder and went back to work.

Emir and his people quickly rounded up the scattered adventurers. Even the five who couldn't be tracked were recovered in short order, found so badly injured that their auras barely registered, to even silver-rank senses. The search teams stumbled across all five while tracking the others.

Emir watched Thalia fussing over Thadwick. He was still unconscious after being healed and she was arranging Cassandra to take him back through the portal. Walking back into the command tent, Danielle was already present. There was a troubled frown on her face.

"Something the matter?" Emir asked. "Beyond the obvious, I mean."

"It was too easy," Danielle said. "Our search teams found all five without even looking. That makes the back of my neck itch."

"You think they were left for us?" Emir asked.

"How often does an adventurer's aura shift so much their tracker doesn't work?"

"I don't know," Emir said. "I've heard of it happening after intense trauma, and you saw the condition they were in."

"Have you seen it before?" Danielle asked.

"No."

"You haven't seen it once, and we have five at the same time?"

"It does sound suspicious when you say it out loud. We can have the Magic Society examine them."

"It won't be that easy," Danielle said. "Their families will resist. If something has been done to them, their families will want to quietly handle it. Letting the Magic Society look into it takes control out of their hands."

"That's incredibly short-sighted," Emir said.

"Welcome to the politics of Greenstone."

"What about the one from your family?"

"Once we return to Greenstone I'll use a speaking chamber to talk to his parents. They should have no priority beyond what's best for their son. The problem is the director of Greenstone's Magic Society branch. He'll definitely come down on the side of the families, to the point of refusing to have any of them examined."

"That's not good."

"No," Danielle said. "We may have to have Jonah examined ourselves and go from there."

“I have trouble believing people would choose ignorance. I would have thought they would want to know if something has been done to their family members. Perhaps we can convince them of that.”

“Have you not met people?” Danielle asked. “We love choosing ignorance. This is not the time to start a fight over it. Right now, everyone has lost people. It won’t pay to poke at raw wounds.”

“Then the best we can do for now is keep an eye on them. In the meantime, we have more work to do.”

Danielle nodded. Their original task was to investigate what was going wrong with the astral space, and what they found inside made finding the truth all the more important. She had tasked Emir with fetching back the scattered adventurers while she reorganised the expedition. The group was pared-down to its best and reinforced by Emir’s people, all of whom were not only capable, but experienced in exploring unusual environments.

With the missing adventurers retrieved, there were now teams thoroughly sweeping the islands. They were finding regular traces of the enemy’s activities, brining back various magical paraphernalia from abandoned work sites. It was quickly becoming evident that their enemy had been occupying the astral space for months, if not years. After the battle with the expedition, however, all signs pointed to a very rapid withdrawal. Every site they found showed signs of immediate evacuation.

“Thank you for this,” Cassandra said, squeezing Jason’s hand. He had organised a separate tent for the five adventurers whose tracking had failed. They were all restored to health, but would not wake for some time.

“The least I can do,” he said, giving her a tired smile. “Not the reunion I was expecting.”

“I need to get back,” Cassandra told him. “There’s still work to do.”

He nodded, looking around the bustling camp. There were over a hundred people now, many of whom seemed to feel like they should be in charge of it. His early, stop-gap measures were being overrun by sheer numbers and he could no longer shield Vincent from the pressure.

“There’s work enough here, too,” he said.

“I heard about your friend,” she told him. “I didn’t know her well, but I’m sorry. Are you doing alright?”

“No, but are any of us? We all lost friends. I’ll see you again when this is all done.”

The edges were marked by a rainbow-coloured void of chaotic energy, radiating a powerful aura that gave even Emir pause. The astral space, while certainly vast, turned out to be only a fraction of the size of the desert. Even so, there were hundreds of islands, of which the teams could thoroughly search around a dozen each day.

The enemy had fled, leaving most of their constructed army to harry pursuing forces. There were also ordinary monsters to contend with, but neither posed a real threat to the powerful search teams.

The enemy leadership themselves fled through various apertures. The teams followed them through, usually finding they had caused chaos on the other side before vanishing into various areas of the desert. Not all managed to escape, however, and the teams managed to capture two of the enemy leaders. Like the others they had seen, under the robes they were horrifying fusions of steel and flesh. The two leaders gave up no information, suiciding in explosive fashion on being caught.

Emir increased his personal participation in the search, hoping his gold-rank power would let him take someone alive. He approached an enemy camp alone, his aura restrained as his senses spread out. It had been a major encampment, once, with cleared land and wooden huts. Now it was mostly deserted, Emir sensing only one living aura and a plethora of constructs.

Emir closed in on the camp through the thick forest, finally close enough to take a look. He saw the one robed figure packing tools into a dimensional bag, surrounded by artificial guardians. Watching from hiding, Emir was holding an open suppression collar in one hand and a conjured staff in the other. The staff had a black, stone shaft with golden script running down it and golden caps at each end.

He slammed the base of the staff into the ground and copies of it erupted from the ground under every construct creature. The iron-ranked constructs exploded into chunks at the sheer force, the bronze likewise destroyed at a blow. The silvers survived, but were tossed into the air and Emir was already moving. He vanished from the spot, leaving an illusory afterimage behind as he appeared next to the startled human. Emir had already dropped the staff and used both hands to snap the suppression collar around the human's neck.

Emir's concern was that suppression collars took a few moments to adapt to the wearer and suppress their powers. The human's hands shot up to pull the collar off, but Emir slapped his hands away. Emir could sense the affect on the enemy's aura as the man's powers were suppressed. The enemy sneered at Emir, lunging towards him as Emir sensed a silver-rank power suddenly rising up inside the man. It wasn't the man's own

power, but something inside him. Emir retreated in an instant, leaving another afterimage in his place.

Huge, crystalline spikes erupted from the man in every direction, greater in volume than the man's own body. They ripped him to shreds from the inside, leaving a bloody carcass draped over a strange star of jagged crystal.

A half-dozen damaged, silver-ranked constructs fell out of the air. Emir moved in a blur as he conjured his staff again and smashed them apart before moving to examine the dead man and the bloody sculpture that had emerged from him. He could sense the magic had faded, leaving an inert object for him to examine.

"That's not something you just come across on the street," he muttered to himself as he looked it over. As he did so, he was joined by Constance, his chief of staff.

"This is what happened with the other two," she told him.

"It wasn't his power," Emir said. "It was some kind of object inside him. If we manage to catch up to another one, we'll need some way to negate it."

Chapter 112: The Accumulation of a Life

While the search for answers continued in the astral space, the support camp was suddenly swarmed with bronze-rankers Danielle and Thalia deemed insufficiently reliable to participate. There was also a pair of silver-rankers, one of whom was named Gloria Phael. She had no interest in running the camp but didn't want a commoner in a position of authority, so she rallied the bronze rankers, ousted Vincent and installed her son in his place.

The administrative skills of the new camp leader left something to be desired and since Jason had stayed on as his assistant, he did his best to keep things running smoothly. This quickly proved infeasible as the new camp leader had little interest in doing, or even hearing about things. This was remedied by having Jason removed as well.

Left idle, Jason spent his time with Gary and Rufus, who was still barely moving. He would robotically eat a spirit coin when prompted by Gary, but never talked. Gary took Jason aside because they were running out of coins and needed clean clothes. Their possessions had all been stored in Farrah's storage space.

Jason went and found Vincent.

"That worthless, wet sack of nothing actually had me confined to the tent," Vincent complained.

"Are they enforcing that?" Jason asked.

"No, but its still humiliating."

"That doesn't matter," Jason said. "Gary and I need to do something, so we need you to keep an eye on Rufus."

Vincent had been giving Rufus his distance, at Gary's suggestion.

"Of course," Vincent said.

He and Gary went out into the desert, finding a flat space of red, rocky earth Jason had been keeping Farrah's body in his own storage space since she was brought out through the aperture. She was in a magical casket that would preserve her until she was returned to her family. Jason once had the sombre task of placing another adventurer in an identical casket, and now understood why friends and family were not the ones sent to recover a fallen adventurer.

Jason started laying out a ritual circle with salt, with Farrah's casket at the centre. Using the powdered cores of lesser monsters, he tested the circle, correcting it again and again.

"I keep messing it up," he said, voice catching.

"Take your time," Gary told him. It went unspoken that Jason could have extracted the items from Farrah's storage space by looting her body like a monster. They both knew it could be done, but neither man suggested such a defilement.

Still trying to get the circle right, Jason had to stop. His vision was swimming with tears as he remembered Farrah instructing him on his very first magic circle.

"I was just thinking about when we summoned my familiar," he said. "Remember how we snuck off the other side of the manor so Anisa wouldn't find us?"

Gary laughed, reminiscent mirth weighed down with sadness. After days of sombre reflection, the sound was strange and alien.

"You wouldn't tell us what it was, but we knew she wouldn't like it, coming from an apocalypse stone."

"Farrah walked me through the ritual circle. It was a complex one for my first time."

"You passed out again. You were constantly falling unconscious, back then."

"Getting hit in the head with a shovel will do that. I sometimes wonder if I don't have some lingering damage from all that cranial trauma."

"We've wondered that too," Gary said and they shared a sad smile.

Jason finished the circle and performed the ritual by reciting an incantation. Items from Farrah's dimensional space started appearing around her casket. By the time it was done, it formed a small hill of crates, boxes, bookshelves, cupboards, wardrobes, furniture and various loose items.

"I don't have room for all this in my inventory," Jason said. "Some of it won't fit at all. She had a banquet table in there?"

"How big an item can you fit?" Gary asked.

"About the size of a regular dining table. Maybe half the size of that great long thing. Who needs a banquet table on hand?"

"You'd be surprised," Gary said. "It doesn't matter if you can't fit everything. There are dimensional bags in here somewhere. The banquet table should fit into a bronze-rank one."

They started sorting through everything; the accumulation of a life. They found the dimensional bags, placing Gary's things in one and Rufus' in another. That was only a portion of the pile; the rest they started putting in the remaining bags.

Jason brushed his hand along the spines of books on one of several bookcases.

"She always wanted me to pay more attention to magical theory," he said.

"Take them," Gary said. "She'd want you to have them."

“You’re sure?”

“Just make sure you read them,” he instructed Jason. “You have no idea how often she complained that you wouldn’t learn magic properly. She saw so much potential in you.”

“I don’t know about that,” Jason said, “but I’ll try to live up to it.”

Returning to the support camp, Jason and Gary were heading for the large dormitory tent where they had left Rufus. As they drew closer, they heard a commotion coming from the tent and people evacuating it.

“MY SON ALMOST DIED BECAUSE YOU COULDN’T HOLD THE LINE!”

Gary and Jason went into the tent. Rufus was standing, his expressionless gaze on a man who had clutched the front of Rufus’ clothes in a fist. He was yelling invective at Rufus, blasting out his bronze-rank aura. Everyone else had either backed-off or left entirely.

“What good were you?” the man continued to shout in Rufus’ face. “You couldn’t even protect yourselves!”

“I do not like where this is going,” Gary said, stepping forward.

“Still nothing to say?” the man kept yelling. “That worthless friend of yours wasn’t worth the dirt her blood stained!”

Rufus’ expression remained blank, but a golden sword appeared in the hand at his side. Gary’s hand was faster and stronger, clamping down on Rufus’ arm and holding it in place. Gary’s other hand formed a fist, which crashed into the face of the yelling man without Gary so much as looking at him. His gaze was on Rufus, who looked back at him blankly.

“You dare?” the man asked disbelievingly from the floor. Gary turned to face him.

“Leave. Otherwise, I will let him kill you.”

“He wouldn’t dare!”

“Look at him and say that again,” Gary said, stepping aside while keeping a solid grip on Rufus’ arm. Rufus looked down at the man and the man looked back. What he saw in Rufus’ empty eyes unnerved him more than the sword in Rufus’ hand and he scrambled away, out of the tent.

After a brief discussion, Gary and Jason decided that the camp was no good for Rufus. Vincent wanted to stay behind and try and help the camp, futile as his efforts may be.

Jason had supplied himself for the desert and they set out from the camp in the early hours, shortly before sunrise. Their destination was Boko, where Jason had first arrived via Hester's portal. The support camp was in the middle of nowhere but Jason had the city on his map and there was no danger of getting lost. It would be a trek of days without a sand skimmer, but that was largely the point. Nothing but quiet, empty space.

Rufus followed along passively as they walked. It was reminiscent of their journey through the desert when they first met. After hours of walking in silence, Jason started talking about their first encounter. Trapped with Rufus, Gary and Farrah in that basement, then the sacrifice chamber. The terrifying spectacle of Farrah's volcano powers. After the tale had run its course, Gary started telling stories from before Jason had met the trio. He told about how they met while fighting a zombie plague that had wiped out a massive town. He talked of other adventures they had undertaken together. He spoke of how they champed at the bit under the supervision of one silver-ranker or another.

"We had little chance to control our own fates," Rufus said. His first words in days startling the others into stopping.

"We came out here to get away from that," Rufus continued, "yet she died under the command of silvers. Because she followed me."

"Because of you?" Gary growled, voice thundering. "That's the biggest load of crap I've ever heard. You think she followed you around like a lost dog? Am I your pet cat? We came out here to control our own fates; you just said it yourself. She chose to be here, just like you. She knew the risks of this life and she died protecting people, like a hero."

Gary marched up to Rufus and shoved him hard, sending him stumbling back and falling over. Rufus pushed himself up on his elbows, only to be shoved down again by an enormous foot. Rufus looked up at Gary, finally shaken out of his blank expression.

"If I hear you try and take her sacrifice away ever again," Gary growled, "I'll beat you halfway to death and then you and me will be done."

Gary lifted his foot off Rufus' chest and stormed off. Jason walked over and crouched next to Rufus, who lay on the hard ground with a shell-shocked expression. Jason looked down at Rufus, then over at Gary, marching on alone.

"We all lost her," Jason told Rufus. "You're not the only one who gets to mourn."

Jason stood up and followed after Gary.

Emir emerged from the aperture into a camp that was in chaos. The original neat rows of tents had been added to in haphazard fashion, poorly adapting to the influx of people from the expedition.

“What in the world are they doing out here?”

He marched over to the management tent, only to find that it was missing. He extended his senses, the low-level anger in his aura bringing out goose-bumps in people all over the camp. He wasn't sufficiently familiar with Vincent Trenslow to pick his aura and didn't sense Jason anywhere in the camp.

He made his way to the closest bronze rank aura, terrifying its owner as he demanded the location of the management tent. It had been moved from its central location to an isolated rise outside the camp that had nice views and didn't smell of people. Emir stormed inside, where he found some bronze-ranker with his feet up as he reclined, eating grapes. The man shivered as he felt a gold-rank aura pressing down on him, almost falling to the floor as he scrambled to his feet.

“Who are you?” Emir asked.

“Cassius Phael, Lord Bahadir.”

“I'm not an aristocrat, Phael. Where is Vincent Trenslow?”

“Who?”

“The person in charge of this camp!”

“I'm in charge of this camp.”

“Why? Where is the person that used to be in charge?”

“No idea. We saw him off.”

“Saw him off?”

“We couldn't let him tell nobles what to do. He was just some common filth.”

“Like me?”

Phael went white as milk.

“How did you end up in charge?” Emir asked.

“My mother told me to do it,” Phael said.

“Oh, dear gods. What about Asano?”

“Who?”

“Trenslow's assistant.”

“The mouthy one? We got rid of him too.”

“Did Asano say anything about the five people whose tracking was lost?”

“Right, yes,” Phael said. “I found out he had people watching them. Can you believe it? The families they come from and he had people spying! Obviously, I got rid of them and warned the families.”

Emir looked at the idiot incredulously, taking a slow, calming breath.

“Do you know why Asano didn't tell me about any of this?”

“He did try to go see you, but we stopped him. He was obviously just going to complain and toady, so we made sure he didn’t bother you.”

Emir ran a hand over his face.

“Suddenly I see the flaw in putting all the competent people on one side of the aperture and the rest on the other.”

“Sir?”

“Phael, where is Trenslo now?”

“I had to have him confined to one of the dormitory tents,” Phael said. “He kept coming in to make stupid suggestions. I’m the one in charge, now.”

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Emir said, keeping himself under control as his voice audibly teetered at the edge of breaking into a yell. “You are going to find Trenslo and tell him, along with anyone who objects, that I have personally placed him in charge of this camp. Then, figure out how to stay out of my sight, because if I ever see you again, I might just slap you so hard it changes your religion. Do understand what I’ve just told you?”

“I think so, sir. My family worships Vineyard, if that helps. He’s subordinate to the god of revels.”

“Oh, dear gods. Look, just tell me where I can find him.”

“The god of revels?”

“Trenslo, you cretin!”

Rufus trailed behind Gary and Jason at a distance for the rest of the day, the pair occasionally glancing back to make sure he was still there. Once darkness came, Jason and Gary made camp. They set out aura-suppressing tents that would shield them from the senses of unintelligent monsters and placed a warming stone that saved them making a fire. The arid air rapidly cooled once the sun went down, and while any adventurer could withstand it, they would rather not. Gary especially, as his fur had a natural ability to diffuse heat while offering little insulation.

Sitting on blankets on either side of the cylindrical heat stone, they were eventually joined by Rufus. His formerly blank expression now looked tired and haunted. They sat in silence for a long time before Rufus unexpectedly spoke.

“Remember that little village in the eastern reaches?” he asked Gary.

Gary looked at Rufus in surprise.

“The one with the flour mill?”

Rufus nodded and Gary burst out laughing.

“Am I missing something?” Jason asked.

“There was this flour mill,” Gary said. Farrah wasn’t always so accurate with her unruly volcano powers and she blew up a flour mill. The explosion did kill the monster, though.”

“What kind of storytelling is that?” Rufus asked Gary. “You jumped right to the end.”

“If you want to tell it properly,” Gary said, “then tell it.”

“I will then, Rufus said. “This was a few years ago, when Farrah and I had just hit bronze. Gary had been bronze for a few years when we met him, but he’d been slacking off.”

“I was focusing on my forge-craft, not slacking off.”

“So he claims,” Rufus said. “The three of us took this contract, way out in the eastern reaches. It was a long way and there weren’t a lot of takers, but it was a low-magic zone and we could go without supervision, so we accepted the contract.”

“I thought you told me coming out here was your first chance to take contracts without a silver-ranker over your shoulder.”

“Well, there was this one instance,” Rufus said. “It didn’t go very well.”

“They made us go back and deliver a bunch of food,” Gary said, “on account of having blown-up their flour mill.”

“What did I just say about jumping to the end?” Rufus asked. “So, we set out for the eastern reaches, and the mission seemed plagued from the start. One of the heidels went lame in the middle of nowhere, and none of us were healers. That was when we found out that heidels don’t respond well to healing potions...”

Chapter 113: You Need to Work on Making Enemies

The cloud palace was not only the largest magic construction in Greenstone but also the most sophisticated. This was demonstrable in ways large and small, from its ability to take multiple forms to the amenities incorporated throughout the structure.

In Belinda and Sophie's guest suite, there were several cooler cabinets, each with a front of translucent mist. Belinda went to the one specifically for non-alcoholic beverages and reached directly through the veil, her hand feeling the chill. She retrieved a frosty pitcher of fruit punch and took it back to the terrace table where she and Sophie had been spending their idle days.

"This is so strange," she said, sitting down in a meltingly soft patio chair made of blue and white mist. "Did you ever expect to experience something like this?"

"No," Sophie said, taking the pitcher and pouring out drinks into crystal tumblers. "It scares me."

"You're wondering that if it's this good now, how wrong will it go later?"

"I am. I don't know what game Asano is playing or how he intends to use us."

"It can't be worse than handing us over to Silva or that Magic Society guy," Belinda said. "Look around. The director of the Adventure Society doesn't dare come get us. If this is the company Asano is keeping, what does he care about Silva or even the local Magic Society? What would he possibly need us for?"

"Lots of things. None of which are good for us."

"Jory thinks Asano is doing this to help us," Belinda said.

"You don't seriously believe that?"

"I believe that he believes it. So does Clive."

After Asano and Bahadir departed, Clive had periodically appeared to visit Belinda, the two spending hours going over the various tools and tricks she employed in her career as a professional thief. They also toured the cloud palace and its myriad wonders. The palace was enormous, with multiple wings in all directions, connected to a central building by cloud pathways. The palace was unaffected by floating on the exposed water, with neither wind nor wave causing so much as a shudder.

There were dining rooms, ballrooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, ritual rooms, parlours, terraces, kitchens, studies, training halls, libraries, art galleries, it just went on and on. In the lowest levels, below the waterline, there were lounges with walls of translucent mist, allowing occupants to see out into the water. Very few places seemed out of bounds, with

the major exception being Bahadir's personal suite. It occupied the top four floors of the central building but almost all other areas were open to them. The other restricted areas were secure rooms containing various valuables. The two thieves naturally thought of robbing the place but were not foolish enough to try.

Experimentally, they went to the cloud path that led to the shore. None of the people Emir left behind attempted to stop the two women as they stood just inside the palace, looking out. The bridge to the shore was anchored directly in front of the Adventure Society reception building, beyond which were garden paths leading deeper into the campus.

"I really don't think they'll try to stop us leaving," Belinda said.

"They don't need to," Sophie said. "Do you really think we'd get out of the Adventure Society grounds without being snatched up?"

Rufus held out his glass.

"To Farrah."

Gary and Jason touched their glasses to his and they drank. The trio was in an open-air bar in one of the wealthier parts of the city of Boko. It had been a day and a half since they arrived and they had been exploring the city. It wasn't a port city like Greenstone, or as large. As such, the population wasn't as diverse, being made up almost entirely of humans. They were very dark-skinned, like the Ustei, but the cultures were clearly very different. The hairstyles in Boko weren't wild and crazy, and the clothes weren't a patchwork mess. The local fashion was loose and breathable, like that of Greenstone, but in more subdued colours. Earthy browns, yellows and reds dominated, compared to the kaleidoscope colours the Greenstone populace preferred.

Gary and Rufus shared more stories about Farrah, while Jason brought them up to speed on his activities in their absence.

"You want to make this thief girl an adventurer?" Rufus asked. "What was her name again?"

"Sophie Wexler. She's a celestine, no family ties in Greenstone, from what little I was able to get out of her."

"It's a creative solution," Rufus said. "At the very least it would prevent her from being quietly handed off to Lamprey in some backroom political deal. The Society would never allow that for a member."

“Lamprey’s fixation on her is the key,” Jason said. “It’s the lever Arella is tugging on. If we can definitively remove Wexler from Lamprey’s reach, that lever goes away. Her political value vanishes and she goes back to being just some woman from Old City.”

“The problem is her fugitive status,” Rufus said. “Until that gets resolved, you won’t be able to get her Adventure Society membership.”

“What if we did it here?” Gary asked. “She’s not a fugitive here in Boko, and they have an Adventure Society branch.”

“I thought about that,” Jason said. “There’s too much chance of Arella finding out and interfering. One communication to the branch director here and everything comes unravelled.”

“Then what’s the plan?” Rufus asked.

“The key is the service agreement between the Adventure Society and Greenstone,” Jason said. “The right to her indenture is clearly mine. So long as the Adventure Society legal advocate doesn’t roll over, there won’t be an issue. Which means we either need leverage on the advocate, or leverage on Arella.”

“The thing with her father being a crime lord isn’t enough?” Gary asked.

“I very much doubt it,” Jason said. “Rising above her criminal past to become an anti-corruption crusader is a narrative she can use to her advantage. It does make it harder for her to make any blatantly corrupt moves, though.”

“You may not have to do anything,” Rufus said. “The leverage may provide itself.”

“Oh?” Jason prompted.

“The Adventure Society recognises that politicking is a required part of administering a branch, but Society interests have to be protected above all else. We just lost a whole slew of adventurer, which means the Continental Council will be raining down in full force. There will be an inquiry that holds the Greenstone Adventure Society upside down and shakes it until all the goodies come out.”

“And Arella is the one responsible for the makeup of the expedition,” Jason said, realisation dawning. “Everyone wanted in, so she let in every political rival who wanted to go along, instead of building an effective team. Still, the blame could fall in a lot of places. I’m guessing it depends on who does the blaming.”

“It will depend on who the Continental Council sends,” Rufus said.

“The expedition was a mess,” Gary said. “Surely it has to fall on Arella. We lost so many because there weren’t enough strong people to shield the weak.”

The glass in Rufus’s hand shattered, his face full of quiet but hot-burning fury.

“Farrah died covering those people,” he said. “I’m done putting up with Greenstone’s worthless adventurers. I think I’ll pay Elspeth Arella a visit myself.”

“I would hold off unless you have a goal beyond yelling at her,” Jason said. “Don’t muddy the waters unless muddy water is useful to you.”

Danielle and Emir finally declared the expedition at an end. They withdrew all their people back through the aperture, along with everything they collected. Although the cost in blood was heavy, they succeeded in their goal of finding and stopping what disrupting the astral space.

A network of astral magic nodes had affected the whole astral space. They hadn’t figured out what it was for yet, but they didn’t need to; they just needed to take it down. They did exactly that, packing away large portions in dimensional bags for study and destroying the rest.

As people and supplies were loaded onto skimmers and sand barges, Emir and Danielle were looking at an object, waiting to be packed away. It was a five-sided column, the height of a person and covered in engravings, one of many waiting to be stowed away.

“So this is what was causing all the trouble,” Emir said. “How many are we taking?”

“Our people examined them,” Danielle said. “There are fifteen different types, so we’re taking three of each and destroying the rest. It’s the Magic Society’s problem now.”

“It is what they do,” Emir said. “I think it’s past time I added an astral magic specialist to my team.”

The columns had been the physical medium of the astral magic. No one in the expedition could even tell if destabilisation was the goal or a side-effect. They would also be taking the remains of several construct creatures, plus one construct they had captured intact. Their purpose and origins would eventually be teased out by the Magic Society.

“What about Rufus and Asano?” Emir asked. “Any word?”

“There was some kind of altercation,” Danielle said. “Shortly after, Gary and Jason took Rufus out into the desert and didn’t come back. According to Vincent Trenslow, they were heading for the city, so you should find them there.”

The return to Greenstone was going to take two paths. The vast majority of the people and supplies would take the skimmers and barges they brought with them back overland, with Danielle in command. Emir and his people would return the extra skimmers requisitioned from the city of Boko.

“Do me a favour when you head to the Adventure Society in Boko,” Danielle asked Emir. “See if the Ustei have been causing trouble since we turned them back out where they came from.”

When he arrived in Boko, his first goal was to arrange the local Adventure Society branch to send periodic, silver-rank patrols into the astral space. Left alone, the astral space should eventually return to normal functioning, replenishing the drying oases. After that, he would return to Greenstone via portal ability. Many of the more prestigious members of the expedition petitioned to join him but were refused outright.

When the last of the gear was packed up, both groups left the aperture behind. Emir and his people had the shorter journey, arriving at Boko within the day. He organised his people to return the requisitioned skimmers and see if they could find Rufus, Jason and Gary. Emir was on his way to the Adventure Society headquarters when something strange appeared in front of him.

➤ You have received a voice chat request from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

“What?”

Hester was the member of Emir’s staff who had opened the portal to Boko and back. She was widely travelled, which was an advantage to anyone with such a power. Portal-type abilities had several limitations, starting with destination. They could only be opened to locations that the one with the power had been before. There were also limits to who could use it, based on rank. The only reason she was able to create a portal the gold-ranked Emir could travel through was that her portal ability had reached gold rank, even though she hadn’t.

The portal she opened back to Greenstone deposited them at the Adventure Society campus, right next to the cloud palace. It was late in the afternoon and Emir led them inside where a large meal was quickly arranged. Emir’s people went about their business after that, except for Constance. She joined Emir, Jason, Gary and Rufus on a terrace. They took after-dinner drinks as they watched the sun set over the ocean.

Jason let out a loud sigh.

“I’m just now remembering the crisis I was dealing with before the other crisis,” he said. “I missed the essence and awakening stone auction. Is that mysterious thing of yours still coming up, Emir?”

“I’m going to push it back,” Emir said. “I was intending to rely on the Greenstone’s iron-rankers, but that clearly isn’t viable. The entire adventurer community here will be reeling from the results of this expedition. Even if that weren’t the case, the standards here are lower than I feared. A few stand-outs aside, the general level ability is woeful. I’m going to put out an open contract and ship more capable people in.”

“You’ll have some competition, Jason,” Gary said.

“Competition for what?” Jason asked.

“Something that will, for the moment, remain unrevealed,” Emir said. “Suffice to say, there is a place that only iron-rankers can go, in which there is a thing iron-rankers cannot use. Whoever brings that thing to me shall receive glorious prizes.”

“And this place will have essences and awakening stones?” Jason asked.

“If the conditions are what we believe, then yes.”

“Still,” Jason said, “if you’re moving it back, I’m going to need another source of essences.”

“You still want to make this thief girl an adventurer?” Emir asked.

“That, or send her so far from here it’s not worth anyone looking. Given how hard it would be to get her into the Adventure Society, that’s the direction I was leaning. That may change, depending on how much trouble Elspeth Arella is in.”

“A lot,” Emir said. “The Society doesn’t like to interfere with its branch directors but losing all those adventurers will be more than they’re willing to tolerate. Danielle Geller told me that she lodged a protest about the makeup of the expedition before it even left. That will make things all the worse for Arella. I will be astounded if she keeps her position.”

“Then I should act quickly,” Jason said. “If she has to walk the line, suddenly the rules people have been stomping over have some teeth. If I can lock in the indenture, that resolves her being a fugitive, and if I can then make her an adventurer, she’ll have the Society’s protection.”

“I’ve never heard of anyone getting their indentured servant into the Adventure Society,” Constance said. “The Society’s protection of its members would eliminate almost all control over them.”

“Jason has been making crazy choices to rescue people since literally the day we met,” Gary said. “You get used to him.”

“No you don’t,” Rufus said. “Jason, you need to work on making enemies of your own rank. You have the directors of the Adventure Society and the Magic Society after you, now.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “But how amazing will it be when I win?”

Chapter 114: Climbing Mountains

Jason walked through the halls of the cloud palace. Far from just white cloud-stuff, the walls, floors and ceilings were marked-out in sunset shades of rich blues, purples, oranges and golds. In some areas it was startlingly vibrant; in others, soft and subdued. Everything glowed with its own light, which Emir had told Jason was absorbed sunlight the palace could store-up and distribute as needed. The floors underfoot had a springiness that was still very stable, as if a very sensible engineer had been forced to design a bouncy castle. The total effect was like walking through a fairy tale.

A full wing of the cloud palace was dedicated to guest suites and Jason walked from his own to that in which Emir had placed Belinda and Sophie. The wide door was white, with the edges marked out in blue. Next to it was a small, circular patch of gold in the wall, which he pressed a finger into. It felt like pressing into a soft, downy doona.

He heard a pleasant chime from the other side of the door, like tinkling water. A few moments later, the door became translucent, revealing Sophie standing on the other side. She was wearing dark, practical clothing and her entire posture screamed the opposite of welcome.

“You’ll want to come in then,” she said, her tone trying to convince him otherwise.

“It’s time we had a talk,” Jason said, “but we don’t have to do it here. The palace is full of places for a nice chat.”

“It’ll be nice, will it?”

“Probably not, now you ask. I brought sandwiches if that helps.”

Sophie jerked her head in a reluctant invitation and Jason walked inside. Jason's suite was larger than any place Jason had ever lived in and Belinda and Sophie were occupying one that seemed very similar.

“Terrace,” she directed him, although not heading that way herself.

He could see the terrace through the walls, which had their opacity shifted to the point of being invisible air. It tussling Jason’s hair as he walked through it.

“That’s indoor/outdoor living,” he murmured to himself as he walked over to the terrace furniture. He took out a tray of sandwiches, plates, glasses and a pitcher of blended fruit drink before sitting down.

Belinda and Sophie came out just as he was pouring drinks. Belinda was dressed in light, summery clothes. She immediately sat down and grabbed a sandwich. Sophie didn’t reach for the food, looking at it with suspicion.

“Is this bread from Pantero’s?” Belinda asked after swallowing her first bite. Pantero’s was a bakery in Old City and had the best bread Jason had found in the city.

“It is,” he said brightly. “My friend Beth told me about it. They’ve been operating there for an incredibly long time. Her grandmother used to go there as a girl when their family owned that whole part of the city.”

“You’re talking about the Cavendish family?”

“That’s them.”

“Didn’t they leave the Cavendish district the better part of two centuries ago?”

“Something like that,” Jason said. “That’s the adventuring life, I suppose. You live long enough to see history for yourself.”

The easy smile fell from his face.

“If it doesn’t get you killed first,” he added darkly, clearly talking to himself.

“Did something happen when you went away?” Belinda asked.

“A friend of mine died,” he said.

“A close friend?”

“As close as I have in this world. She taught me so much about being an adventurer.”

“She taught you to fight?” Sophie asked.

“No, that was Rufus. He taught me to fight like an adventurer. Farrah taught me to live like one.”

He smiled, sadly.

“She’d call me out when I started talking out my backside. Which you may come to find is pretty often.”

He brushed the back of his hand over his eyes and gave them a grin that was only a little forced.

“None of that matters to you, though,” he told them. “You have your own troubles to deal with, which is why I’m here.”

“I thought your clever plan collapsed in a heap,” Sophie said.

“It did,” Jason said, “but times, as the song goes, are a-changing.”

“What song?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Jason said, waving a dismissive hand. “As it stands, I see this going one of four ways. The pair of you will have to choose between them.”

“And if we don’t like your options?” Sophie asked.

“That would be option one,” Jason said. “You put me and my schemes behind you, which is reasonable, given how they’ve gone thus far. You walk out of the cloud palace and seize your own fate. Option two is similar, but more appealing, I think. You still walk

away, but we send you far from here first. Our host has someone that can send you places so far from here it's not worth the effort of looking for you."

"A teleporting power," Sophie said.

"She opens portals, which is how we came and went just recently. Her name is Hester, and she seems quite nice. You can talk to her to pick out a destination, then we send you off. We'll send you off with a fist full of cash but that is all you will have, aside from each other. I imagine a couple of resourceful women like yourselves will have no trouble starting fresh."

"A clean slate is all we've been looking for," Belinda said.

"You can have it," Jason said, "if that's what you choose. Option three is to upgrade who is standing between you and Lucian Lamprey. You've seen that my efforts haven't worked out as well as I thought they would. Emir, on the other hand, is all the protection you could ask for."

"Why would he help us?" Sophie asked.

"The way you fight. The way we fight. He's interested in the origins of that style. If he finds out that you use it, I'm certain he'd fully take you under his protection. He'd want you to help him trace back its history, but I don't imagine that would be an onerous task."

"Is that how you know him?" Belinda asked. "You're helping him find the history of the fighting style?"

"No. I met Emir because he's a friend of a friend. He doesn't know that either of us can use the style, but I'm of little use to him because I learned it from a skill book."

"You learned that from a skill book?" Sophie asked, her expression turning curious as it broke out of stern suspicion for the first time since he arrived.

"I've fought people who used skill books before," she said. "Fighting you didn't feel like that."

"I've had additional training to fully incorporate those skills," Jason said. "Unless you learned to fight from a skill book too, turning to Emir might be a good option for you."

"Why haven't you told him already?" Sophie asked.

"Not mine to tell."

"You expect us to believe that?"

"No," he said, giving them a smile instead of trying to convince them further.

"What's option four?" Belinda asked.

Before answering, Jason picked up a sandwich and took a generous bite, chewing thoroughly before swallowing. He washed it down by emptying his glass, then slowly poured himself another.

“Really?” Sophie asked and he flashed her a grin.

“I got this from a guy who makes blended fruit drinks here on the Island,” he said.

“Not cheap, but what is on the Island?”

Belinda sipped at her glass curiously, eyes going wide at the sweet, pleasant taste.

Sophie glared at her, leaving her own glass untouched.

“There was meant to be an auction while I was gone,” Jason said. “All the big spenders were away, though, so they ended up cancelling it. That means the brokers have a few essences and awakening stones available for relatively reasonable prices.”

“Why are you talking about essences?” Sophie asked. “I don’t care how reasonable the prices are; they’re way beyond what we have. We weren’t stealing for the money and margins were slim because high-end jewellery and the like is easy to trace. After expenses, we were barely breaking even. Are you offering us a loan?”

“Option four,” Jason said, “is the original plan. I take you, Sophie, as an indenture. That eliminates your fugitive status, meaning that with a couple more essences, you can sign on to the Adventure Society. You’ll be shielded from Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva for good. At least, for the purposes they originally intended. Nothing I’ve heard about either suggests they are above petty revenge.”

“You didn’t answer her question,” Belinda said. “How are we meant to afford essences?”

“A loan would not be an inaccurate characterisation,” Jason said. “Joining the Adventure Society would offer you many protections, including from me, but the indenture would still stand.”

“You want me to work it off,” Sophie said.

“Exactly. And once you’re an adventurer, you’ll find opportunities abound. If you’re willing to work for them.”

“What does that mean?” Sophie asked.

“I’m not entirely sure, to be honest,” Jason said. “There is some kind of competition coming up, organised by our host. He has told me that there are essences and awakening stones to be had. Even if you don’t get three for your friend, here, you’ll still be an adventurer. It would only be a matter of time.”

“How would that even work?” Belinda asked. “I thought indenture was off the table.”

“I told you earlier: times are changing. You probably didn’t hear, shuttered away like this, but the big expedition went wrong. Very wrong. A lot of adventurers died, which is why we left to help.”

“Were you any help?” Sophie asked.

“Sophie!” Belinda scolded.

“You seem too weak to help a big adventurer expedition,” Sophie said, unrepentant. “You barely caught me.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Mostly I just told people where to put up tents until some silver-ranker got rid of me.”

“So what does this expedition have to do with the indenture?” Belinda asked.

“Because it went wrong,” Jason said, “there’s going to be an inquiry. There’s a Continental Council that oversees Adventure Society business continent-wide. After the mess that happened, they’re sending a team here to conduct some kind of audit on the whole Adventure Society branch.”

“I get it,” Sophie said. “People will actually have to follow the rules for once.”

“At least for a small window of time,” Jason said. “It’ll be back to business soon enough but until then, the director won’t be able to sell out the Society’s legal agreement with the city. Which means I can ‘recapture’ you and the indenture hearing is back on.”

“Why?” Sophie asked. “Essences, indenture hearings. Why would you do any of that for us? Are you trying to tell me that Jory is such a good friend to you that you’d go this far over some girl he likes?”

“You know I’m sitting right here,” Belinda said.

“I’m not sure you’d believe me if I told you why,” Jason said. “I’d guess you believe maybe one word in ten coming out of my mouth.”

“If that,” Sophie said. “Tell us anyway. You learn a lot about a person from how they lie.”

Jason chuckled, leaned back in his chair and took another long drink. The amused half-smile he used to mask his emotions was replaced by a slightly sad, sober expression.

“When I first came here,” he said, “I was lost. More lost than you can imagine. I knew no one; nothing made sense. I was tired, beaten and had people trying to kill me, all while doubting my own sanity. My friends helped me get on my feet. They taught me, supported me. Put up with me. They helped me take control of my life.”

He paused for a long time, looking out at the ocean. Sophie was about to say something, but Belinda gestured to wait.

“One of them is dead now,” he said. “I think she would like me trying to do the same for someone else. Or maybe she’d yell at me and tell me to sort my own problems out before looking to someone else’s.”

He smiled sadly, but genuinely, his eyes twinkling with moisture. He wiped them and stood up.

"I'll leave the lunch," he said. "Talk over what you want to do and tell me when you figure it out. Or vanish and tell me nothing. Up to you."

He headed through the invisible wall of their suite and made for the door.

"How long do we have to decide?" Belinda called after him and he stopped.

"As long as you can convince Emir to have you," he said. "If you want to be an adventurer, the sooner the better. I'm not the only one who spotted cheap essences, and the next Adventure Society intake is in nine days. We need to have the indenture hearing, pick out some essences and shove them into you before that."

He left Belinda and Sophie sitting at the table with a bunch of sandwiches and blended fruit drink.

"If he's a liar, he's a good one," Belinda said.

"He is liar," Sophie said. "And he is a good one."

"You think he's playing us? I don't see what he would get out of that."

"Some political game we don't know enough to see."

"I don't know," Belinda said. "Jory and Clive aren't like the people we usually deal with. Maybe he isn't either."

"Does he feel like that to you?"

"No," Belinda said. "Those two are easy to read. Asano is more like dark water. You see things in there, but you can't tell if what you saw was real."

"I've seen people like him before," Sophie said. "They know you won't believe what they say, so they tell you five stories and let you figure out which is true."

"And how do you do that?" Belinda asked.

"That's the trap; none of them are."

"So those options he gave us. You don't think they're real options?"

"Maybe," Sophie said. "Maybe he wants us to think they're our only options."

"Our current options are to leave or hope we don't get kicked out," Belinda said. "If you have something better than what he's offering, I'm listening."

"You know I don't. But I don't trust him."

"At this point, we have to trust either him or fate. It wasn't fate that put us in a magic castle. It was him."

"That's what he wants us to think," Sophie said.

"Maybe we can talk to some of the other people here," Belinda said. "Get a better sense of him."

"That's a good idea," Sophie said. "Information isolation is our biggest weakness right now."

“That’s our biggest weakness?”

“The biggest one we can do something about. Press Clive about him, next time he comes by. In the meantime, we can find out who else in this place knows him.”

Jason was leaving the cloud palace when he ran into Emir and Constance coming back. They stopped to chat halfway across the platform connecting the cloud palace to the shore.

“Did you talk to my other guests?” Emir asked.

“I just came from there.”

“And?”

“My guess would be they choose to get sent far from here.”

“The adventuring life not tempting?”

“They don’t trust me,” Jason said. “Probably a smart choice. My first plan didn’t exactly work out.”

Emir chuckled.

“You need to work on that,” he said. “I wasn’t happy to find the camp I put you and Rufus’ friend in charge of being run by some imbecile.”

“You didn’t put us in charge of that camp,” Jason said. “It just kind of worked out that way. Until it didn’t.”

“Are you sure?” Emir asked. “It feels like I put you in charge.”

“You’re the only gold-ranker here,” Jason said. “It probably feels like everything happens because you wanted it to.”

“He’s right,” Constance said. “You didn’t put them in charge.”

“Well, if Constance says so, it must be true. What are you up to now?”

“Does no one believe what I have to say, today? I’m off to see Elspeth Arella. I’m going to explain why the indenture hearing is going to go the way I want.”

Constance, who was normally a detached professional, creased her brow in confusion.

“You know you’re still an iron-ranker, right?” she asked.

“I do,” Jason said.

“And you’re going to march into the office of the silver-rank branch director of the Adventure Society and tell her what to do?”

“I am.”

“Which, if I understand correctly, is exactly what you did last time. After which, she immediately played you for a fool.”

“That would be an accurate summation, yes,” Jason said.

“I hope you aren’t going to be throwing around Mr Bahadir’s name.”

“I have a little more decorum than that,” Jason said. “I have my own levers to push, thank you.”

“Very well,” she said, her expression still a warning.

“We’ll let you get to it,” Emir said. “Good luck.”

They parted ways, Emir and Constance returning to the palace. Out of sight from outsiders, Constance’s posture became more relaxed.

“Rufus was right,” Constance said. “That boy is mad.”

“That’s the things about climbing mountains,” Emir said. “The first thing you need is someone foolish enough to try it.”

“I never saw the point of that as a recreational activity,” Constance said. “Putting a suppression collar on yourself and clambering up an edifice? If they’re that keen on danger, why not fight monsters, like regular people?”

“The point is that they are challenging themselves to do what others think can’t be done,” Emir said.

“That man Koenig who used to work for you when I first started. He liked to climb mountains, didn’t he?”

“He did, indeed,” Emir said. “He was quite the enthusiast.”

“What happened to him?”

“He fell off a mountain and died.”

“Don’t a lot of people die trying to climb mountains?”

“Yes,” Emir said. “Yes, they do.”

Chapter 115: Nothing Can Hurt You Like Hope

The door to Arella's office opened itself as Jason approached and he walked right in. Sitting behind her desk, she made a gesture and the door closed behind him. He stood in front of the desk, looking around.

"You've changed the artwork."

"I'm surprised you showed your face," she said. "I suppose I shouldn't have expected any bounds on your arrogance."

"That's probably fair. I should thank you, though, for the object lesson in the pitfalls of being arrogant. Your mistake was the same every time; you never consider how your actions hurt other people. The thief you tried to hand over to Lamprey. The iron-rankers you made look buffoonish at their inability to catch her. Your own officials being squeezed between you and the Duke. That was already hurting you, but the expedition? There's plenty of blame to go around but we both know that you're in line for a hearty serving. You alienated your allies and made deals with your enemies."

Arella looked at him with open disgust.

"You really never tire of hearing your own voice, do you?"

"I do like to monologue, don't I? Next thing you know, I'll be building a weather machine in a mountain fortress carved into the shape of my own head."

"You also like to babble nonsense. What are you here for, Asano?"

"Are you still going to revoke my membership?"

"You know I'm not."

"All those eyes on you make petty revenge a little harder, don't they?"

"If that's all you want, then get out."

"There is one thing," Jason said. "There needs to be a new sentence-dispensation hearing for the thief. I need to know you won't try and sabotage it again."

She gave him an angry glare.

"You know full-well that I can't interfere. Not if I want to still be in this office a month from now."

"You say that, but the last time I was in here was to ask for the same thing. You said it would go smoothly but I bet you had a messenger on their way to Lamprey before I was out of the building. I'm here for assurances."

"You think you can make demands?"

"I tried cooperation. And yes; I think I can make demands."

“I could crush you into paste without getting out of this chair.”

“Could you, though? You’re a smart woman, director. Not as smart as you think, but enough to know the consequences of that. You’ve disillusioned your allies while I keep making friends. I told you that your mistake was not caring who your games hurt. Kill me and you won’t just lose this office; you’ll die in it.”

She reached out an arm in a clutching motion, her silver-rank reflexes too fast for Jason to react. His aura was ground down to nothing, then an invisible force picked him up, lifting him into the air as it squeezed him from every direction. The crushing force wracked his whole body with pain.

“You’re so sure of yourself,” she said. She was still reclined in her chair, hand held out toward him.

“Yes,” he croaked, looking back with defiance. She squeezed all the harder until his muscles felt like pulp, his bones on the verge of breaking. His head was ready to pop like a pimple.

She floated up, out of her seat and over her desk until they were face to face. Hers held a sneer, while his was turning purple.

“Power trumps everything,” she told him. “It doesn’t matter how clever you are or how well you can manipulate the rules. Schemes and laws are nothing in the face of complete and absolute power.”

“Do it then,” he choked out. “Are you powerful enough to handle the consequences?”

She opened her clenched hand and he dropped to floor, immediately collapsing. She floated down and gently on the floor, looking down on him as he gasped and spluttered.

“Get out of my office,” she told him.

Jason pushed himself achingly into a sitting position, then stood up with a groan, looking her straight in the eye.

“I told you,” he said. “I came for assurances.”

She let out a disbelieving laugh.

“You’re bold for someone hiding behind the strength of others.”

“You do what you can with what you have,” Jason said. “Something I imagine you know very well.”

She sneered.

“You said assurances. What kind of assurances do you want?”

“You misunderstand,” Jason said. “When I said I’m here for assurances, it was to give them, not receive.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If you don’t keep your hand off the scale for the sentence-dispensation, then that inquiry coming up will be hearing from me.”

“The secret is already out, Asano. People know my family history.”

“Not that,” Jason said. “I mean the fact that an Adventure Society director undertook no small effort to prevent the completion of a contract she herself posted. You’ll be lucky to keep your membership after that, let alone your position.”

“You have no proof.”

“You were sloppy. Too reliant on no one guessing what you were up to. You think the inquiry won’t find anything, once they know to look? Even if you start cleaning up the moment I walk out of here, how many bodies will you have to drop? Are you sure you can get them all? I don’t think you can. There are too many threads and chasing them all down would just make more.”

Her hand twitched up, then down again. He gave her a predatory smile.

“Killing me only hurts you,” he said. “You know that, and you have much bigger problems than me. Danielle Geller isn’t back, yet, but you’ll know about it when she is. I told you your mistake was not considering the collateral damage of your plotting. She once thought quite highly of you but she lost family out there.”

Arella’s face scrunched up in reluctance and unreleased fury.

“What assurance do I have that you won’t burn me with the inquiry anyway?” she asked, biting off her words.

“The last time I came in here asking you to uphold the rules, I trusted you and got burned for my trouble. This time, you have to trust me.”

She forced out a nod.

“I’ll direct the advocate to defend the tenets of the service agreement with the city,” she said, biting her words off unhappily.

“All I wanted to hear,” he said and immediately turned for the door.

“Asano,” she called out and he stopped to look back.

“You really would have stood between Lamprey and this girl, wouldn’t you?” she asked.

“Is that why you sold me out? You didn’t think I had the resolve?”

The anger seemed to wash out of her, shoulders slumping and face suddenly haggard, in spite of its silver rank perfection.

“Call it a lesson learned. Things won’t be going well for me in the near future, but I will climb back up.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Jason said.

“I also won’t forget the iron-ranker that walked into my office to put his foot on my neck when I was down.”

Belinda watched with concern as Sophie paced back and forth on the terrace. Her friend rarely showed her anxiety, which meant she was running close to the edge.

“If they’re really willing to send us far from here,” Sophie said, “I think we do that, then get far from where they sent us. Put them and this whole city behind us.”

She sped up her pacing, running her hands through her hair. Normally she tied it back in a pony tail, but today it was loose and wild.

“That’s assuming we can trust going through some portal they set up,” she continued, “which we absolutely can’t. Maybe the best option really is leaving and making our own way from here.”

Belinda got up from her chair, placing herself in Sophie’s path, who stopped, looking up as if surprised she was there at all. Belinda took her in a hug, Sophie’s arms slipping around her in turn, gripping her like a security blanket.

“You know we can’t walk out of here as fugitives,” Belinda said softly. “Even if we got out of the Adventure Society grounds, which we wouldn’t, there was a reason we turned to Ventress for protection. If we go out into the city, things are worse for us now than they were then.”

Belinda let go of Sophie and went through the invisible wall into their suite.

“I’m having a drink,” she said. “So are you.”

The sprawling main area of the guest suite was one open space, but had areas divided up for lounging, dining, a kitchen and a bar. Belinda snagged a couple of glasses and a bottle, bringing them back outside. They sat down and Sophie took the first shot without tasting it, before sipped at the second.

“You realise this bottle cost more than most of the things we’ve ever stolen,” Belinda said.

“I thought we’d half-emptied this bottle. Did you get it from the cooler cabinet?”

“I got it from the bar. You know there’s a floor cabinet and two wall cabinets with drinks in addition to the bar?” Belinda asked. “How am I meant to remember where any given bottle came from?”

“You know there’s a wine room,” Sophie said.

“No, where is it?”

“You know the floaty things that lifts you to the upper floor?”

“Yeah.”

"If you hit that gold patch next to it on the wall twice, it goes down instead."

"This place is crazy."

Sophie looked at the glass in her hand, then at the cloud palace around them.

"Everything about this whole experience is crazy," she said.

"It'll be hard to give up," Belinda said. "If that's the way we decide to go."

Sophie frowned.

"You think we should go along with Asano's plan."

"You know I'll follow you, whatever you decide," Belinda said.

"You get just as much say as I do," Sophie insisted.

"Great," Belinda said, standing up. "I'll go find Asano and we can get you some essences."

"Hold on," Sophie said, half-standing in her seat. Belinda flashed her a grin and sat back down.

"What happened to I get as much say as you?" Belinda asked.

"As much," Sophie said as she gave Belinda a flat look. "Not more."

"You know I was only half-joking," Belinda said. "Even if we get so far from here we don't have to deal with Silva or Ventress or Lamprey, do you really want to go from this back to stealing?"

"We're good at stealing."

"What if we're good at something else? What if we didn't have to live by the whims of some sadistic crime lord? You know that wherever we went, there will always be a Clarissa Ventress or Cole Silva. If we turn down this chance, that will be our lives. Forever."

"We could do something else," Sophie said. "Something legal."

"Like what? Open a shop?"

"We could be locksmiths," Sophie said. "That's assuming even the offer to send us away is real. We've been stuck in this box, only hearing what they want us to hear. They could be using us for anything."

"Why would they bother?" Belinda asked. "Look at where we are. Look at who they are. Look at what we're drinking! What could we possibly offer Bahadir that he can't just take? At what point does this much effort in service to some elaborate ruse become less plausible than they just want to help us? I think we've crossed that line. What they're offering may seem outlandish to us, but clearly that isn't the case for them. They're adventurers, making adventurer money."

Sophie took a deep breath as she considered what Belinda had to say.

“My instincts are still screaming at me to run,” she said. “The better things seem, the worse it will be when the floor falls out from under us. Nothing can hurt you as badly as hope.”

Belinda looked at her friend from under raised eyebrows.

“Really, Soph? Nothing can hurt you like hope. Is that how you want to live your life?”

“When were our lives ever different? We both had dead parents and massive debts when we were still children.”

“That’s exactly why I think we should take a risk,” Belinda said. “We were already risking everything on these crazy jobs, and for what? The chance to go somewhere else and have different crappy lives? I don’t want to go back to stealing for whatever murderous lunatic is in charge of wherever we end up.”

She gestured at the sky palace around them.

“I want more of this. This is worth risking everything for.”

Sophie looked at her friend for a long time. She took the bottle, poured herself a large drink and gulped it down.

“Alright,” she said finally.

“Alright?”

“Yeah.”

A huge grin broke out on Belinda’s face.

“Sophie Wexler, adventurer.”

“Don’t get carried away.”

“Your going to be an adventurer!”

“This could all still go horribly wrong.”

“That means I’m going to be an adventurer too, sooner or later.”

“You’ll have to earn how to fight,” Sophie said. Despite her best efforts, a smile was creeping its way onto her face.

“I know how to fight,” Belinda said.

“Kicking a guy in the beans and then running for it is not fighting.”

“It got me this far.”

Chapter 116: See You in Court

Elsbeth Arella was in the family home she had spent very little time in, even as a child. Raised by her mother in secret, now the secret was finally out and she was free to come and go as she pleased. Those precious, clandestine visits to her father, Dorgan, were in the past; she could casually come by to take tea in one of his courtyards.

“Your mistake was your need to feel in control,” Dorgan told her. “You had a choice between letting Asano bear the brunt of Lamprey’s ire, or cutting a deal with Lamprey yourself.”

“I didn’t think Asano could stand up to Lamprey.”

“The boy is arrogant and reckless,” Dorgan said. “He would have stood up to Lamprey. Probably not successfully, but that wouldn’t have mattered. If Lamprey put the boy down, that would have given you all the leverage you needed. You didn’t choose that path, because it felt passive. You wanted events to move by your hand, so you took the initiative and went to Lamprey.”

“It felt right,” Arella said.

“Our feelings are not always the wisest guide. Even if it had gone well, dealing directly with Lamprey wouldn’t have given you anything you couldn’t get by waiting. All it brought you was a risk, the consequences of which you subsequently suffered. Now, with the unfortunate fate of the expedition, you have been left critically exposed.”

She nodded.

“I was impatient,” she said. “What do I do next?”

“For now, you must be above reproach,” he told her. “Every rule, every stipulation. This is not the time to push for new goals. The inquiry will remove you or not. Only once the decision is made will we know the way forward.”

“If they remove me, everything we’ve done will be wasted.”

“Not everything,” he said. “Our connection is in the open now and while it may not be endorsed, it is tolerated. If we have to start again, we will. Who doesn’t like a redemption story?”

“I really want to crush Asano under my heel,” she said. “If he hadn’t caught the thief...”

“If he hadn’t, it was past time for you to arrange her capture anyway. You had already let it play out too long. Asano was the perfect foil with which to jab Lamprey and the mistake was yours in not using him properly.”

“He stormed into my office to demand I help him with his damn agenda. Twice!”

“Don't make Lamprey's mistake and become fixated on someone unimportant to your ultimate goals. If you really must do something about Asano, then be patient. After the inquiry is done we can act, but at a careful remove. If we move deftly, then once he is dead the vengeance of his friends will fall on those whose removal will advantage us.”

“How do we do that?” she asked.

“Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva are kindred spirits. When the time is right, we can help them make a connection.”

“What about Lamprey's dealings with Clarissa Ventress? Her and Silva hate each other.”

“Ventress failed to deliver what she promised to Lamprey months ago. By the time we choose to act, I would be astounded to find her still alive.”

Rufus and Gary had been highly motivated to find out who was behind the activities in the astral space. The various magical paraphernalia discovered there would only arrive once the expedition returned overland, but Rufus could not be talked into waiting. He roped Gary into scouring Magic Society records and the library at the temple of knowledge for any reference to the bizarre enemies they faced in the astral space. The first time their friends had seen them in days was when they arrived at the courthouse, showing their solidarity for Jason.

Belinda remained in the cloud palace for safety while Jason took Sophie into court for the sentence dispensation hearing. Until her docket was called she was required to stay the courtroom gaol in the basement to await her hearing. Jason took Gary along, who stayed to watch for any last-minute schemes while Sophie was trapped and isolated. As Jason was leaving, one of the guards stopped him. The guard threw an uncertain glance in the direction of Gary, who was leaning against the wall by Sophie's cell.

“He can't stay here,” the guard said.

Jason looked over at the huge, hairy form of Gary, then back at the guard.

“You'd best go tell him, then, because damned if I'm doing it.”

Leaving the nonplussed guard in his wake, Jason went back upstairs. On the ground floor, just outside the courtroom entrance, he spotted Vincent and Rufus talking to someone. Vincent spotted Jason in turn and waved him over.

“This is Rupert Cline,” Vincent introduced. Rupert was a neatly put together man of around thirty, with an iron-rank aura. “He was the one who gave us the warning about Arella and Lamprey.”

Jason shook Rupert's hand.

"Thank you for that," he said. "You kept a pair of young women from an unpleasant fate."

"We're Adventure Society right?" Rupert asked. "Standing between people and the bad stuff what we're for."

Jason flashed a grin.

"Yes we are," he said happily. "It's nice to meet a fellow idealist."

Vincent and Rufus shared a sceptical look, noticed by Jason.

"What?" he asked them.

"It's just strange to see you meeting someone and acting like a sensible person," Vincent said.

"That's hurtful," Jason said.

"I heard about what you put Clive through when you first met him."

"Jory told me to do that. Clive thought I was counterfeiting spirit coins or something."

"He did?"

"Yeah. Never really came up again after I told him I was an outworlder."

"What's an outworlder?" Rupert asked.

They chatted until Rupert had to go inside and Jason, Vincent and Rufus went upstairs to the viewing gallery. They took seats to await proceedings to begin. Jason's knowledge of courtrooms was sourced heavily on television. The Greenstone court was less like an American legal procedural and more like a British period drama. The gallery was mezzanine viewing, looking down the courtroom.

As they waited, a man with a silver-rank aura arrived in the gallery. Despite being an elf, muscles bulged under his expensive clothes. He was wearing a Magic Society pin, fancier than the usual and embossed in a strange metal that shimmered with rainbow colours. The man stopped on his way to a seat, turning to look at Jason.

"So you're Asano," he said.

"Yep. You must be... actually, I have no idea who you are," Jason said.

"I'm Lucian Lamprey."

"Doesn't ring a bell. I see you're in the Magic Society. Are you one of those guys who work in a booth identifying magic items?"

"What? A booth?"

"Haven't heard about that yet? You're probably new, so that's alright. You should make sure and learn about all the services the Magic Society offers though. Wouldn't want to get fired."

“I’m the director of the Magic Society.”

“You’re Pochard Finn? I thought you’d be thinner.”

“Pochard Finn is my deputy. I’m Lucian Lamprey.”

“Still doesn’t ring a bell. Are you sure?”

Lamprey opened his mouth to shoot back when he saw Vincent and Rufus stifling laughter. Lamprey moved closer, looming over the still sitting Jason.

“You should know better than to mock me,” Lamprey warned.

Jason craned his head back to look up at Lamprey’s face.

“Mate, you’re hardly in a position to point out what others are doing wrong. Using the power of your position to force women into sleeping with you? That’s about as sleazy as it gets. Is it even necessary? You’re super ripped; I bet there are plenty of people who respond to that. Is it a charm deficit? Just keep the mouth shut, bathe regularly and do the strong but silent thing. You’ll get some takers.”

A sinister smile cross Lamprey’s face.

“You were always going to pay for this, Asano. For your mockery, I’ll make sure you pay slow.”

“Like a layaway plan? You seem like the kind of guy who’d shaft me on the interest. I’d rather pay for doing the right thing than roll over and let someone like you do whatever he likes.”

“There will come a day when I remind you of those words. We’ll see what you say then.”

“Probably something about carb-loading. What do you bench?”

Lamprey shook his head, looking at Jason like he was a mad person before walking off to take a seat at the other end of the gallery.

“Why would you provoke him like that?” Vincent asked.

“He was coming after me either way; he said it himself. I’d rather he do something angry than something smart.”

“You play dangerous games, Jason,” Rufus warned. “Someday you’re going to pay for that.”

“I know.”

Sophie was brought up from the basement cells and placed in the prisoner dock, where she would have to stand for the duration of the proceedings. Jason realised that he’d never really stopped and taken a good look at her. They’d met briefly under normal circumstances, months ago, but most of their encounters had come when she’d been cornered, bloodied and dirty.

He had seen her enough to know she preferred simple clothes, more fitted and practical than the normal fashion. Today was no different, wearing white that appealingly set off her dark complexion. They showed-off the physique of an athlete, sleek and strong.

Physically, she was a study in contrasts. Her silver hair was tied back in a simple ponytail, bright against her chocolate skin. Her features were delicate, for such an indelicate woman; rather than make her seem fragile, there was a sharpness to them. A promise of danger in her silver eyes that moved around the room, taking everything in. He noticed them linger on the exits.

As she looked around the room she met Jason's gaze and held it, her eyes full of challenge. She was surrounded by power, her fate in the hands of strangers and yet she stood upright, proud and fearless. Jason understood in that moment why men like Lamprey and Cole Silva had such a need to possess or destroy her.

"You know, Rufus," Jason said. "I think she might be prettier than you."

"She's not," Vincent said.

"Thank you," Rufus said as Jason chuckled.

The hearing moved swiftly; the real decision-making had already happened behind closed doors. The Adventure Society advocate, Rupert Cline, asserted the Adventure Society's right to claim her indenture through the Adventure Society member who captured her and the magistrate agreed without challenge. Lamprey had apparently given up, knowing it was futile.

Soon after, Jason, Gary, Rufus and Vincent were leaving the courthouse with Sophie. There was a silver tracking bracelet on her wrist, but she was otherwise unfettered.

"We should go," Rufus said to Gary. "We've been away from our investigation long enough. We need to find who these people that killed Farrah were."

Gary threw Jason a look.

"Actually," Jason said, "I was hoping you could help me with something. I want Sophie in the next Adventure Society intake. I need your expertise to get her ready."

"I already have something to do," Rufus said.

"Rufus, you don't have enough information. Wait until the expedition returns with everything they collected. Clive is their astral magic guy and he'll tell us what he finds. That means you'll know where to look instead of stumbling blindly. When the time comes for action, you'll be rested and ready."

A look of reluctance crossed Rufus' face, but Jason pre-empted him.

“What would Farrah tell you to do?” Jason asked him. “Would she tell you to work hard or work smart? Do what you’re good at now and do the next thing when it’s ready to be done.”

Rufus looked unhappy but nodded.

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “Sophie, you’re in for a treat. He’s reluctant to tell people, but Rufus’ family actually runs a school for adventurers...”

The other looked at Jason as he trailed off.

➤ Contact [Phoebe Geller] has entered communication range.

“What is it?” Gary asked.

-
- Contact [Rick Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Hannah Adeah] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Claire Adeah] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Thalia Mercer] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Danielle Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Cassandra Mercer] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Humphrey Geller] has entered communication range.
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“The expedition,” Jason said. “They’re back.”

Chapter 117: Six-Month Lease

The arrival of the expedition was a mix of welcome, relief, commiseration and loss. Rufus and Gary waded into the chaos while Vincent headed for the administration building and the immense amount of work about to be dumped on him. Lacking anything else to do, Sophie trailed along behind Jason to the marshalling yard.

They found the Gellers, Rufus and Gary moving to talk to Danielle. With the arrival at the marshalling yard, her job as expedition leader was finally over. The strain was showing, even through the vitality of silver rank. As Rufus and Gary greeted her, Jason sought out the iron-rank Gellers. He met a tired-looking Humphrey with a broad smile and a warm handshake.

“Welcome home, mate; glad you made it. It was a bit touch-and-go there, from what I hear. Sorry I wasn’t there to help.”

“I’m not,” Humphrey said. “I’m glad you didn’t have to go through it. Life and death were separated by not much more than luck. Everyone lost people and we were no exception.”

Jason knew a lot of the iron-rank Gellers by sight, and some familiar faces were missing. The one he knew best was Henry Geller, who he had fought in their now-infamous mirage chamber clash.

Rick Geller came up and shook Jason by the hand.

“I want to thank you,” he said. “What you did to us in the mirage chamber; we were better prepared for when things went truly wrong. We had lived with the idea of losing people and still moving forward. It was worse for real; so much worse. We held it together, though, even after losing people. You helped us get ready for that.”

Claire Adeah was one of the two elf sisters on Ricks team. Of them all, she had resented Jason’s actions in their mock battle the most. She stepped up next to Rick and offered Jason her hand and he shook it.

“Rick’s right,” she said. “I didn’t like what you did, back then, but it was nothing next to the real thing.”

“I’d like to say that was my intention,” Jason said. “Honestly, though, I was just looking for a way to win.”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Rick said. “You helped us stay alive when we might not have otherwise.”

“No, that’s on you,” Jason said. “You got as many people as you could out of there when much stronger adventurers were dying.”

Rick nodded.

“We heard about your friend,” he said. “You should look around you, right now. A lot of these people wouldn’t be here if she hadn’t bought them the time to survive.”

Jason looked around, seeing the faces of strangers.

“I’d trade them all to get her back,” he said. “Does that make me a bad person?”

“It makes you someone lying to yourself,” a voice came from behind him. He turned as Cassandra fell into his embrace.

“If you really had the choice,” she whispered into his ear, “you’d let her save those people.”

“It doesn’t feel like that,” he whispered back.

They drew apart, their hands held together between them.

“How did your family come out?” he asked. “How’s your brother?”

“We lost people, but not many as some. Thadwick woke up on the way back. He’s... different.”

“Coming that close to death can change you,” Jason said.

She nodded.

“It’s like he’s finally seen how empty all the nonsense he built up around himself is. How much all the things he cared about were just worthless bluster in the face of real power. I think this will be good for him, in the end.”

“We should take what good we can from all this mess,” Jason said.

“I do have one question,” Cassandra said with a sweet, tired smile.

“What’s that?”

“Why is that very attractive young woman staring at us?”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” Jason said innocently.

“No?” Cassandra asked, turning her head to examine Sophie. “You didn’t notice the extremely pretty woman with the silver hair and the tracking bracelet.”

“Oh, her.”

“Yes, her.”

“She’s new.”

“Yes, I imagine I would have spotted her before. She stands out.”

“You don’t need to bother about her.”

“Don’t I, now?”

“Not at all. That’s just my nubile slave girl.”

“WHAT?” came Sophie and Cassandra’s simultaneous exclamation, to a backdrop of Jason’s wild cackling as a gaggle of people started talking over one another.

“I’m not a slave!”

“You have some serious explaining to do, Asano!”

“Jason, I think you’re my hero now.”

“What I have can’t be taught, Rick.”

“Just try treating me like a slave I will drown you in your own...”

“HEY!”

Rufus’ booming voice cut through the noise as he marched over.

“What is going on here?” he asked. “Jason, what did you do?”

“Why do you assume it was me?”

“Was it you?”

“Well, yes, but where’s the faith?”

“What were you thinking, causing a commotion here?”

“I thought people could use some normalcy,” Jason said. “What’s more normal than two women fighting over a sexy man?”

“You can have him,” Cassandra told Sophie.

“Don’t want him; you can keep him.”

“That’s hurtful,” Jason said, looking between the two.

“Jason, this isn’t the time for your nonsense,” Rufus said.

“Rufus, this is exactly the time. There will be days and days of mourning the lost.

These people just got home safe and they need just a few moments to celebrate surviving. A little laughter; a little joy. There won’t a lot of that for a while.”

“I don’t agree with you at all,” Rufus said, then sighed and gave him a sad smile.

“Farrah would have, though,” he said. “Just be respectful of people.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. He gave Rufus a rare, earnest smile; a far cry from his usual ones where he looked like he was up to something. He turned to Cassandra.

“Do you have to go home, or do you have some time for a debonair gentleman caller?”

“Oh, you have some questions to answer,” she said. “You’ll be answering them now.”

“I’m an open book,” Jason said. “Come along, slave girl.”

“I’m not your slave!”

“She’s a rental,” Jason said as they started extricating themselves from the busy marshalling yard. “Six-month lease.”

“You didn’t rent me!”

"I have a receipt."

"It's an indenture contract."

"Why do you even have an indentured servant?" Cassandra asked.

"Well, you know how you said I should catch that thief?"

Cassandra looked over at Sophie.

"That was you?"

"It was," Sophie said unhappily.

"Frankly, I'm surprised he caught you."

"It was his friend who figured out how to ambush us."

"It was a team effort," Jason said. "And since I was team leader, the credit is primarily mine."

"What team?" Sophie asked. "There were only two of you."

"Senior partner, then."

"Does Standish know you were the senior partner?"

"I think he intuited it," Jason said.

"I think you're full of crap," Sophie said.

"I like her," Cassandra said. "But how did she end up indentured to you?"

"Ah," Jason said. "That is a tale of vicious crime lords, shady politicians and a handsome adventurer, generous of spirit..."

Rick Geller watched Jason saunter off, shamelessly boasting to a pair of beautiful women.

"I want to be just like him," he said wistfully, then received a hard thump on the arm. He yelped, turning to see, Claire had been the one to hit him.

"What was that for?"

"The man is infuriating," Sophie said. She was back in her shared suite with Belinda. They were standing at the terrace rail, enjoying the cool ocean breeze.

"How so?" Belinda asked.

"He keeps calling me a slave."

"Does he treat you like a slave?"

"That's not the point."

"It really is," Belinda said.

"He called me a nubile slave girl."

Belinda burst out laughing.

"That is not funny!"

“You’re complaining about being called a slave while you live like a princess, complete with enchanted castle.”

“Yeah, well... you don’t know what he’s up to.”

“You’re right,” Belinda said. “He didn’t want you around after the indenture hearing?”

“He’s down the hall with his upper-class lover. I’m not sticking around for that, whatever the terms of indenture are.”

“He has a lady friend? What’s she like?”

“She’s a Mercer. Main family too; not one of the branches. Obnoxiously good-looking.”

Belinda groaned.

“I know what the pretty ones are like to deal with,” she complained.

“She seems alright. Wait, was that directed at me?”

“It makes sense that she’s a big nob,” Belinda said, ignoring Sophie’s question. “Look at the company Asano keeps.”

“What’s his background?” Sophie asked. “What have you managed to dig out of Standish?”

“A job offer, actually. Clive asked me to come work with him. Assuming that all this political stuff gets settled.”

“What does he want you to do?”

“Be a research assistant, which I’m pretty sure means taking care of all the mundane stuff he doesn’t have time for. He’s expecting to be very busy, soon.”

“Are you sure he isn’t looking for something more intimate?”

“He had a thing for that friend of Asano’s who died. He’s not hiding it very well, just throwing himself into his work.”

“Are you going to take the job?”

“Of course. In the Magic Society, I can learn more about that Lamprey guy. Asano might think he has all this handled, but I doubt we’ve heard the end of it.”

“What did you get from Standish about Asano?”

“According to Clive,” Belinda said, “Jason isn’t even from this world.”

“What does that mean?”

“Well, you know the world?” Belinda asked.

“Of course I know the world,” Sophie said. “It’s a big round thing. We’re standing on it.”

“Actually, we’re standing on the cloud palace.”

“And the cloud palace is sitting on the world. By your reasoning, you aren’t standing on the ground if you’re wearing shoes.”

“That’s actually a good point,” Belinda conceded with a frown.

“You don’t need to sound surprised,” Sophie said.

“Sorry,” Belinda said. “What were we talking about? Right, the world. Generally, you think about the world as being everything, right?”

“But you’re saying it isn’t.”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. Asano comes from a whole other world that’s apparently out there.”

“A whole different world,” Sophie mused.

“Yes,” Belinda said. “Uh, but no.”

“What?”

“Well, it’s a different world. Except, it’s the same world. But different. It’s complicated.”

“I can tell by the fact that the only part of that I could follow was that the rest of it was complicated. You said he came from another world.”

“Yes.”

“But then you said that this different world is the same world.”

“No. Except, yes. They’re different versions of the same world. Like when we helped Donzo with the fake spirit coin racket.”

“I can’t believe I let you talk me into that. You’re saying Asano comes from a counterfeit world?”

“No, both worlds are real.”

“Then it’s not a terrific comparison.”

Belinda glared at Sophie.

“Maybe if you ever read a book that went three pages without the phrase ‘glistening thighs,’ I wouldn’t have to dumb it down so much.”

“Oh, so I should have been reading all that boring nonsense you collect in case I ever became the nubile slave girl of some guy from a world knocked out by some godly equivalent of Donzo making fake money in his bathtub?”

“Exactly,” Belinda said.

They looked at each other and both erupted into laughter. They wandered into the lounge area and crashed down together on a couch.

“How is this our life?” Belinda asked, reclining back into the soft, cloudy furniture. “It’s like things kept getting worse and worse, until they so bad they came right around the other end to amazing and we somehow live in a magic palace, now.”

“This is just temporary. We need to be ready for what comes next.”

“What comes next is you getting amazing magical powers,” Belinda said. “You know I blame you for all this.”

“How is this my fault? Also, you just said this is amazing.”

“If you shaved off all that shiny, silver hair, you might not get creepy guys chasing after you.”

“You want me to run around bald?”

“You could wear a wig to cover it up,” Belinda said. “It would have to be an ugly one, though, or it would defeat the purpose. Bald would be best, thinking about it.”

“I’ll do it if you do,” Sophie said.

“And give up these natural curls? No thank you.”

The room chime rang and Belinda went and pressed the gold patch on the wall that turned the door translucent. On the other side was Jason.

“If you’d like to come with me, ladies.”

“What happened to your lady friend?” Belinda asked.

“She only just got back and has her own responsibilities. Our reunion was short but sweet.”

“Stamina issues?” Sophie asked, walking up behind Belinda.

“My stamina is just fine,” Jason said defensively.

“Sure it is,” Sophie said.

“I’m perfectly virile, thank you very much.”

“Where do you want us to go, exactly?” Belinda asked.

“I have assembled a panel of seasoned adventurers for advice and a catalogue of goods that are available – and affordable – from the brokers at the trade hall. It’s time for your friend to choose her essences.”

Chapter 118: The Perks of Being an Essence User

Jason introduced Sophie and Belinda to his panel of seasoned adventurers. It turned out to be comprised of Emir and Clive, who they knew, plus a bald, dark-skinned man that they didn't. He was handsome, lithely muscled and carried himself with an air of straightforward competence. Even with him just sitting at a table, Sophie read the subtle cues that told her he would be dangerous if he needed to be.

The assured sense of capability he gave off was the exact opposite of what she read from Asano. In her encounters with him, Jason had variously come across as casual, dangerous, friendly, manipulative, vulnerable, controlling and buffoonish. She had no idea which, if any of what she had seen was genuine.

The room was a small dining room, by cloud palace standards, with a wall open to one of the ubiquitous terraces. The three adventurers were on one side of the table, Jason and the two women taking seats on the other.

"You know Emir, and Clive, of course," Jason said. "Emir is the most experienced adventurer in the city, and Clive works for the Magic Society. He's spent no small amount of time cataloguing essence abilities, mine included."

"Speaking of which," Clive said, "I really would like to hear more about that execute ability of yours..."

"Not the topic of the day, Clive," Jason said, gesturing for him to stop before he became too enthused. "The last member of our impromptu advice panel is Rufus Remore."

"The one who taught you to fight," Sophie said, giving Rufus a second look.

"Someone's paying attention," Jason said. "Rufus comes from a prestigious academy, so he knows quite a lot about matching people to essences. Rufus, this is Sophie Wexler and Belinda Callahan."

Rufus nodded a greeting.

"Can the three of you explain to me why this is happening?" Sophie asked and Belinda slumped forward.

"Really, Soph?"

"I still don't understand why Asano is doing any of this," Sophie said. "Why bother, for some people he hardly knows?"

"You've known him the longest, Rufus," Emir said. "I have to admit to sharing the young lady's curiosity."

All eyes turned to Rufus, who was thinking over a reply.

“The day I met Jason,” he said, “We were all caught up in circumstances I can only describe as dire. This was especially true for him, who had no idea what was happening or why. As you will no doubt learn for yourselves, Jason can be quite resourceful when it matters most and he managed to get himself free. He got out of his cage and had a clear run at freedom.”

“He’s exaggerating,” Jason said. “I would have been easily caught.”

“So he says,” Rufus countered.

“Did you say cage?” Belinda asked.

“Yes,” Rufus said. “My team and I were in quite the unfortunate circumstance, except for one thing: we met Jason. He didn’t take that run at freedom. Instead of escaping, he walked back into the sacrifice chamber of a blood cult. He was outnumbered and outmatched but he walked right in. He did that to rescue three strangers, which is the only reason I’m alive to tell you this story.”

“I needed them to get me out,” Jason said. “If I didn’t get them out I would have died by cultist or by desert. Rufus just likes to put it down to altruism.”

“Yes I do,” Rufus said.

“You really expect us to believe he’s doing this out of the goodness of his heart?” Sophie asked.

“You can believe what you like,” Rufus said. “You can still just walk away.”

“No,” Belinda said, giving the others a plastered-on smile. “She’s going to clamp those lips together before she talks us out of the best opportunity we’ve ever had.”

“Her caution is well placed,” Emir said. “In all my time as an adventurer, I’ve never encountered a situation like this. I would be suspicious, as well.”

“What’s it going to be, ladies?” Jason asked. “If you want to walk away, I won’t stop you. Your indenture isn’t violated unless I say so, which I won’t. We can still put you through a portal to a destination of your choosing.”

“No,” Belinda said, putting a hand firmly over Sophie’s. “We decided to accept your offer.”

Sophie glanced unhappily at Belinda, then gave Jason a reluctant nod.

“Alright, then,” Jason said, pulling two sheets of paper from his inventory. “This first sheet is a list of all the essences that are available and that I can afford. The second list is awakening stones with the same conditions, although if I can afford those at all will come down to which essences we go with.”

“You don’t seem short of money,” Sophie said, eyes moving over the cloud palace around them.

"This place is mine," Emir said. "Jason's plans for you are his, as is the cost of carrying them out."

"You're saddled with the poorest adventurer in the cloud palace. That's not a complaint, mind you. I have far more money than most; I just happen to keep exalted company."

"Except for us," Belinda said.

"Give it time," Jason said with an encouraging smile.

He picked up the first list and they started going through the essences. Hours passed as they discussed the value of various combinations, what they offered and what would be required from their user. Sophie already possessed the swift essence, along with the single ability that awakened when she acquired it. She had never gained a second ability in the more than half-dozen years since. It was more than enough to raise that one ability to bronze rank, even without training or monster cores.

They needed to select two more essences for Sophie to complete a combination. Emir offered the insight of experience, having seen many essences in action. Clive had a tablet with the full list of recorded abilities from the Magic Society and years of cataloguing such abilities. He was the best equipped to describe the kind of powers each combination was likely to awaken. Rufus had seen many people at his family's school learning to use their abilities and understood the skills and training required to make the most of various power sets.

"The balance essence has a high-skill requirement," Rufus said.

"And by skill, he doesn't just mean quick hands or combat technique," Emir said. "Many skill-based abilities do require them but it isn't always about reflexes and muscle memory."

"Timing, judgement and the ability to anticipate are all key," Rufus said. "When Jason was chasing you, you got away, yet woke up to find him waiting for you. You think that was an accident? He sent you to where he knew he could find you. That is the kind of skill that makes for great adventurers."

"Thank you," Jason said brightly.

"Potentially great," Rufus corrected. "Very, very eventually."

"That's less nice, but I'll take it."

"The difference between simple abilities and skill abilities is their effectiveness when used inexpertly," Rufus explained. "Simple abilities are easy to use and broadly effective, even with an inexpert user. A bolt of lightning that tracks enemies isn't hard to get right."

Skill abilities fall flat if not employed correctly. Use them the right way, in the right moment, though, and they can turn a fight on its head.”

“Swift and balance is an interesting essence pairing,” Emir said. “Danielle Geller has those essences and knows how to use them well. Of course, you won’t be able to match her dimension essence. Even her family was lucky to get a hold of that.”

“I also have the balance essence,” Clive said. “My abilities are very spell-oriented and require more anticipation and timing than agility or martial ability. As a celestine, you can expect most of your abilities to be of the utility type, rather than spells or special attacks.”

“What kind of utility?” Belinda asked.

“As with everything else,” Clive said, “it depends on the essence and the awakening stone involved. With the swift essence you already have, Miss Wexler, you can expect movement abilities and effects conditional on mobility. The balance essence is trickier to predict. My powers, for example, are about balancing risk and reward, rather than finesse. Lady Geller, on the other hand, does require finesse, along with judgement and timing. The reward for all that challenge is abilities that can overturn a fight in an instant.”

“You’re saying skill abilities are better if you have skills,” Sophie said, “and simple abilities are better if you’re crap at everything.”

“That’s not exactly right,” Emir said. “Simple abilities are more useful in more situations. In most circumstances, the best solution is the simple one. If you’re building a team of adventurers, the last thing you want is to have a roster full of skill specialists. You mostly want people who have simple abilities and know how to leverage them effectively, with some high-skill people splashed in.”

“Take Jason as an example,” Rufus said. “He has to work harder to efficiently eliminate monsters most adventurers find easy. It takes him more skill and effort just to achieve the same result, let alone be better. His strength is handling monsters that many adventurers couldn’t beat at all. That makes him a valuable addition to a team with a preponderance of simple abilities, while he would have little to add to a team already loaded up with high-skill power sets.”

“So you’re highly skilled, are you?” Sophie asked Jason sceptically.

“I caught you,” he shot back.

“The effectiveness of any power set comes down to the user, whatever the power,” Emir said. “My abilities, for example, fall on the simple side of the scale. Some martial technique helps, but they are fast, powerful and useful in almost any scenario. Against someone who uses high-skill abilities, I need to pressure them so their abilities that are

hard to execute become impossible. If I succeed, I win. If I don't, the fight is turned around on me in a key moment and I lose."

"I think something that has been overlooked," Clive said, "is that every adventurer has a power set of twenty abilities. While most people tend to skew one way or the other on the skill-simplicity scale, very few are all simple or all skill-based. Even if you end up with a lot of high-skill abilities, you will likely have a handful of more straightforward ones. They won't be the most exciting, but you'll find yourself using them the most, leveraging them to set up your more specialised ones."

"He's right," Rufus said. "My more exotic powers tend to finish fights, but it's the simple and reliable ones that make that possible."

"You also need to understand that you don't really get a choice in which way you go," Clive said. "Randomness is inherent to awakening essence abilities. People with an excess of time and access to experts sometimes try and slant the results, but even the most expensive and laborious efforts have mixed results at best. Some people just end up with high-skill abilities, and an essence like balance makes it all the more likely."

"I will say this, though," Rufus said. "It's been my experience that people get the abilities to which they are naturally inclined."

"Yes," Emir agreed. "I have found that people are reflected in their power set. Mine, for example, is ostentatious yet effective. Rufus' is beautiful and dangerous. I don't really know about Jason and Mr Standish."

"Jason's powers are alternately deceitful and flashy, leading to a miserable, inexorable demise," Rufus said. "There's a recording floating around of him maniacally tormenting a group of powerful adventurers as he brings them prolonged, horrifying deaths."

Everyone turned to look at Jason.

"It was in a mirage chamber," he said. "None of them actually died."

"Something you need to understand," Emir told Sophie, "is that whatever the nature of your abilities, every essence combination is powerful in the right hands. We just need to find the right essences for your particular hands."

"He's right about every combination having the potential for greatness," Rufus said. "Even the ones you might dismiss. When I was a boy, a man came through my family's academy with the duck essence. Everyone thought he was a joke, myself included. I couldn't understand why my grandfather took this boy from the countryside and placed him in our school. I learned the hard way that if you know how to use it, every essence is a threat."

“That’s why I asked Rufus to be part of this,” Jason said. “He grew up watching people come into their abilities.”

“Jason has apprised us of your strengths,” Rufus said. “Mobility and fighting skill are where he said you excel.”

“You think you can judge me?” Sophie asked Jason, then turned to Rufus.

“Did he say I fight better than him?” she asked.

“He did,” Rufus said.

“Oh,” Sophie said. “Maybe he can judge me.”

“You’re being very rude to the people trying to be our benefactors,” Belinda said through gritted teeth.

“If politeness is where they draw the line, then they aren’t exactly reliable benefactors,” Sophie said.

“That’s an attitude I recognise,” Clive said, looking at Jason. Rufus agreed with a chuckling nod.

“If you’re confident you can develop the skills,” Emir said, pulling things back on topic, “then the balance essence might be a good fit.”

“Speed and skill are exactly what I’m looking for,” Sophie said.

“Alright,” Emir said. “That leaves one last essence. The adept essence is the obvious choice if skill is where you want to focus.”

“Rather than push harder into one aspect,” Rufus said, “it might be better to diversify. Something that still synergises while offering different kinds of abilities.”

“That’s a good point,” Emir said. “I’ve seen people who overspecialise and end up with five answers to one problem and no answers to the rest.”

“Wind essence,” Clive said confidently, tapping the list. “There’ll be at least one mobility power and it’ll be different from what the swift essence will give out. Some elemental control would definitely expand her power set, but wind will better match speed and skill than earth or fire would.”

“You make a compelling argument, Mr Standish,” Emir said and Rufus nodding his agreement.

“What confluence essence does the swift, balance and wind combination produce?” Rufus asked.

“Mystic,” Clive said, not bothering to look it up. “If you wanted something more aggressive, you could swap out balance for a might essence it would produce the onslaught confluence.”

“Not a good idea,” Rufus said. “Onslaught is best for humans with all those special attacks.”

“Not an option anyway,” Jason said. “Might essences get snapped up quickly, so there's none on our list.”

“Mystic is definitely the superior choice for a celestine,” Clive said. “Mystic can awaken some very interesting utility powers, in which they excel.”

“Mystic is a common confluence essence,” Rufus said. “That isn't just because so many combinations produce it, though. A lot of useful abilities come out of the mystic essence. It's an easy and effective choice, especially when you're working with common essences.”

“I have the mystic essence myself,” Emir said. “Staff, might, magic and mystic. All three of my combination essences are common. Two of those are highly sought after but still common, yet I've been nothing but happy with them.”

“Mr Bahadir is right,” Clive said. “The mystic essence is well known for producing the kind of abilities that are rare in other essences.”

“What kind of abilities would I get from these wind and mystic essences?” Sophie asked.

“Mystic is wide open,” Clive said. “The awakening stones you use would be the defining factor; similar to the balance essence, but even more so. As for the wind essence, you can expect something movement-related, as well as some kind of elemental control. Probably a combination of both. A flight power is quite likely.”

“A flight power?” Sophie asked.

“That's right,” Clive said.

“Flight, as in being able to fly?”

“That's how flight works, yes, Clive said.

“So that would be me, able to fly?”

“Yes. That would be you. Flying. With your flight power. That makes you fly. Am I overcomplicating this?”

“Seems straightforward to me,” Jason said. “Wish I'd known flying was on the table before I used the first essences I came across.”

“Just to be absolutely clear,” Sophie said, “I would have the power to fly.”

“You'd most likely be restricted to gliding at iron-rank,” Clive said. “Eventually, though, yes.”

Sophie and Belinda looked at each other, then back across the table.

“That's the one,” they said together.

“A definitive choice, if I’ve ever heard one,” Emir said with a chuckle.

“It has some other advantages, too,” Jason said. “The wind essence is common, but not as sought-after as a magic or a might essence. It leaves room in the budget for some awakening stones.”

“I was looking at that list,” Rufus said, picking it up off the table. “There are some interesting common picks on here. An awakening stone of the eyes is a good shot at giving a perception power.”

“I was looking at this,” Clive said, pointing out an item on the list.

“A set of two awakening stones of the hand and two awakening stones of the foot,” Rufus read. “The price is right but I’m not so sure about those stones.”

“You said yourself that every ability is good in the right hands,” Clive said. “My understanding is that Miss Wexler is quite the pugilist. Many people look down on awakening stones of the hand, but they’re well-known for awakening empty-hand abilities and attacks. Miss Phoebe Geller used a number of them and was quite satisfied with the results. They’re exactly what an unarmed combatant wants in an awakening stone.”

“I’ve seen Phoebe Geller in action,” Jason said. “I saw her make elementals explode with a punch.”

“Awakening stones of the foot can also awaken unarmed attacks but also movement abilities and are similarly worthwhile to someone focused on unarmed combat,” Clive said. “To the right essence user, which I believe Miss Wexler is, this collection of stones is very underpriced. These four stones, plus the stone of eyes and she would be well on her way to establishing her ability set.”

Emir and Rufus looked at each other, then at Clive.

“Not bad, Mr Standish,” Emir said. “Not bad at all. Thoughts, ladies?”

“Sounds right,” Sophie said. “Moving, punching, kicking. Those are my areas of expertise.”

“That would be five abilities, plus the four from using the essences,” Jason said. “Almost half your abilities awakened out of the gate is pretty good. If that’s settled, then, I’ll go straight to making purchases. I’m not the only one bargain hunting, after all.”

He stood up, then looked at Sophie.

“I make a lot of money, but this still won’t be cheap for me. The next six months, you’ll be doing a lot of work to pay this back. A lot of work.”

“That may be the first thing I’ve heard you say that I’m halfway willing to trust,” Sophie said. Jason flashed her a grin.

“If you’re willing to trust me this early, you might not have been paying attention.”

He swept out of the room dramatically, Clive and Rufus shaking their heads.

“Do any of you understand that man?” Sophie asked in Jason’s absence.

“Definitely not,” Rufus said.

“I haven’t known him very long,” Emir added.

“I’m still unclear on why he accused me of sleeping with his wife,” Clive said. “He doesn’t have a wife. Neither do I, for that matter, which did not stop him from accusing himself of sleeping with her.”

Jason suddenly stuck his head around the door.

“I just remembered,” he said. “Not sure if anyone mentioned, but one of the perks of having a full essence set is you don’t have to poo anymore.” His head retracted as he set off down the hall again.

Emir, Rufus, Clive, Belinda and Sophie all looked at the empty doorway.

“I’m changing my answer,” Emir said, breaking the silence. “I’ve just now known him long enough to realise I absolutely do not understand him at all.”

Chapter 119: This is the Moment

The Adventure Society campus became a continual series of memorial services. There were so many dead that group memorials were being held one after another. First came the largest groups, made up of the least influential adventurers who had passed. The memorials took place on the north shore, where they could be easily overseen from the high terraces of the cloud palace. Gary and Rufus, as expedition members themselves, made their way out of the cloud palace to attend each and every one. Jason, Emir and the adventurers among Emir's staff could all be found on the terraces at various times, looking on at the sombre proceedings.

After the larger group memorials came the smaller ones, each of the most prominent families having a service for the people they lost. Jason and Emir attended the service for the Geller family and Jason for the Mercers. He stood close by Cassandra, who held his hand tightly. Thadwick didn't give Jason so much as a glance.

Rufus and Gary chose not to have Farrah memorialised until they took her home. Her casket was stowed away somewhere deep in the cloud palace. Rufus had notified her parents over water link, looking twice his age after. Neither Gary nor Rufus went back to the lodgings they had shared with Farrah. Jason went to settle accounts with Madam Landry and collect their things.

Before he took Sophie to perform her essence rituals, Jason took her and Belinda up to the terraces to see one of the memorials.

"Becoming an adventurer is an opportunity," he told them, "but it's also a danger."

"You think we don't know danger?" Sophie asked.

"Of course you do," Jason said. "You know the worst kind; the malevolence you can only find in people. Monsters are different. They don't hate you. They just want to kill you. An intelligent enemy can obsess over you. Pursue you relentlessly. But you can manipulate a malevolent enemy. You can reason with them, play on their fears and desires. That doesn't work on a monster. One of you is better at killing than the other and that is the only question between you. No hesitation, no doubt. It's a simpler danger than an avaricious crime lord but one that can't be talked down or negotiated with. A monster's only objective is to kill you."

The two women looked at Jason. He was leaning on the railing as he looked at the memorial below without really seeing it. He continued to talk, gaze still caught in the distance.

“This life can kill you without giving any recourse,” he said. “It can and does take even the best of us. Being an adventurer can give you everything you ever wanted. Wealth, respect, power. For some, that’s all there is. They take it all without paying the price, but they aren’t really adventurers.”

He tapped an arm on the terrace railing.

“You’ll see amazing things, like a palace made of clouds. On almost any given day, there’s no better life than being an adventurer. But there are some days, if you’re a real adventurer, where you earn all the others. You make the hard choices and put everything on the line. You walk through the fire so no one else has to.”

He finally turned to face the two women.

“Rufus gave me this speech the night before I got my completed my essence set, and now I’ve given it to you. You’ll have to choose for yourselves what kind of adventurers to be.”

“You don’t make being what you call a real adventurer sound very appealing,” Belinda said.

He gave them an odd smile, weary and a little sad, but with an underlying satisfaction.

“I wake up every morning, proud of who I am,” he told them. “I go out into the world, never regretting that I didn’t at least try and be the person I want to be. I face dangers and make mistakes. Sometimes I get beat, and sometimes I win. I stand up for what I believe in, whatever it costs me. When you give everything you have to be who you want to be, that’s freedom, whatever your circumstances.”

He turned his head to look down at the memorial currently happening below.

“If wealth and power are all you want,” he said, “then you can have them. Make all the safe choices and reap the rewards. Many adventurers do just that and, objectively, it’s the smart choice. But if you want to see who you really are, what you’re really capable of, you have to push yourself to the limit. There’s no better job for that than being an adventurer.”

Turned from the railing, looking at them straight on.

“You get the essences either way,” he said. “You have six months to decide what comes after. For now, Clive should have the room ready.”

On the way to one of Emir’s ritual rooms, they passed through one of the walkways connecting two wings of the palace. It was high up on the towers, spanning over the sea below. It was broad, with open-air sides and doubledg as a garden. Flowering vines grew

directly out of the cloud-stuff, lush green leaves and bright blossoms lining the sides of the walkway. Jason laughed as they walk through it.

“I don’t think I’ve gone a day in this palace without a pleasant surprise,” he said.

“Good,” Belinda said. “It’s not just us, then.”

“How do you find your way around?” Sophie asked. “We’ve gotten lost more than once.”

“One of my abilities maps all the places I go,” Jason said absently as he stepped to smell the flowers. “Can you smell that? This is amazing.”

“You think flowers are amazing?” Sophie asked.

“He stores this entire palace in a bottle not much bigger than your head and still successfully cultivates flowers. Where’s your sense of wonder?”

“Speaking of scents,” Belinda said, “what’s the perfume you’re wearing?”

“I’m not wearing one,” Jason said.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed,” Belinda said. “Lots of men wear scents.”

“I’m not worried about being embarrassment,” Jason said. “I’m really not wearing a scent.”

“Humans don’t smell like that,” Belinda said. “Just a little bit of sweat and they smell like leather left in a damp cupboard. You smell more like an elf or a celestine, but even more so. Fresh, like, um...”

“Springtime,” Sophie said as Belinda searched for the right word.

“Yeah,” Belinda said, looking at Sophie with surprise. “That’s exactly it.”

“I’m not human,” Jason said. “This is just how I smell.”

He resumed his way along the cloudy garden path and Belinda shared a look with Sophie.

“He smells like springtime,” Belinda said.

“So what?” Sophie asked and followed after Jason.

The ritual room had the usual walls and ceiling made of cloud, but the floor was a single slab of black stone, cut perfectly level and smooth. Given that the room was around half the size of a basketball court, Jason was impressed. Clive was waiting for them, with a magic diagram drawn on the floor with lines of golden light.

“Clive is going to be doing the rituals,” Jason said. “We’d be here all day if it were me and he’s the expert, in any case.”

Clive's essence ability, Enact Ritual, made drawing-out and performing rituals much more convenient. Jason looked over the diagram, which had two magical circles partly

overlapping as its core. Jason's knowledge of ritual magic included several essence rituals, but this was more complicated than anything he knew.

"I thought essence rituals were meant to be the simplest ones," Jason said.

"This is a double-essence ritual circle," Clive explained. "The idea is that absorbing more essences at once promotes inter-essence synergy. It's yet to be proven effective due to our limited understanding of how abilities are selected, but it doesn't hurt to try."

"Two at once?" Sophie asked warily. "Will there be any side-effects?"

"None at all," Clive said. "In fact, while studies have never been able to prove an increase in synergy, they have discovered that simultaneous absorption alleviates the purging effect compared to sequential absorption."

"When you hit iron rank, your body will be improved through magic," Jason said. "Part of that improvement is dumping out all the bits it doesn't like in the form of gunk."

"Gunk?" Sophie asked.

"Lots of gunk," Clive confirmed and pointed over at the side of the room where there was a small door. "As soon as you've absorbed your essences, go straight through there before it hits you. Belinda, you should join her as she may pass out. There is a shower in there for once she's done, and Jason kindly provided some of his crystal wash supply that I also left in there. There is also an extensive closet, from which Mr Bahadir said you may take anything you like to keep."

"You might not even need the crystal wash," Jason said as Sophie and Belinda wandered over to take a look into the next room. There was a shower large enough to lay down in, plus benches and cabinets.

"The shower will probably be enough," Jason continued.

"That is a lie," Clive said. "You will absolutely need the crystal wash. Won't she, Jason?"

"Yes," Jason sullenly conceded.

"If you knew Jason," Clive said, "you would realise that he would rather part with those essences than his crystal wash. Speaking of which, do you have them?"

Jason took out the two essences had procured, along with five awakening stones, laying them all out on a bench sitting against the wall. The essences were cubes, shining with colour. The wind essence was a roiling mass of white mixed with streaks of pale grey and blue. The balance essence had its colours divided in a dead-straight line in the middle. The colours of each side constantly shifted in contrast to the other: Red and blue, black and white, green and purple. Most of the awakening stones were a plain peach colour by comparison, while the last looked like an oversized glass eye.

“That one’s kind of creepy,” Belinda said, looking at the eyeball one.

“How do we even know those are what they say they are?” Sophie asked.

“Really?” Belinda asked, turning on her. “Are trying to get them to change their minds?”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Jason said. “Clive takes his experiment subjects from villages in the delta where people will just assume a monster got them.”

“What?” Clive asked.

“We still don’t know why Asano is doing any of this,” Sophie said. “If he’s in this to help us, then why give me essences when throwing us through a portal would get us away from everything?”

“Sophie!” Belinda scolded.

“No,” Jason said, his voice suddenly hard and cold, arresting everyone’s attention. The signature amused insouciance fell from his expression, his relaxed posture becoming firm. He locked his eyes with Sophie across the chamber.

“It’s hard for you to trust,” he told her.

“So?” she said, glaring back.

“The real answer is half-measures. I agreed to help you. Sending you away to live the same lives again just leads you to the same end. If I’m going to save you, then you’re going to stay saved, which means that when I’m done with you, you need the means to protect yourselves.”

He arrived in front of the bench with the essences, placing a hand on each.

“In this world, that means essences,” he said, picking them up.

“They are the line between acting and being acted upon,” he continued as he walked back toward Sophie. “They are the difference between dominion and obedience. Justice and iniquity. Controlling your destiny and being a pawn of fate.”

He held the essences out in front of her.

“Why doesn’t matter,” he said. “All that matters is the choice you make, right now. Sometimes the moments that define our lives go unnoticed until later. This is not one of those. I am offering you the chance to literally grasp your destiny. Take it or walk away, knowing that this is the moment in which everything that comes after is decided.”

He stood there, still holding out the essences.

Sophie looked at the essences in his hands, then up at his face. He gave her a goofy grin.

“What are you?” she asked him. “A fool? A madman? A liar playing games only he can see?”

“Yes,” he told her, eyes sparkling. “I once met a woman who thought that essences shape who you are but she was wrong. Essences are power, and power doesn’t change you. It reveals you. Give someone the power to be who they always wanted and you will see who they always wanted to be. This is who I am, good and bad. This is your chance to be who you want to be, not who you have to be to survive.”

Her response came in a soft voice; the first time Jason has seen her vulnerable.

“I don’t know who I am without that.”

“Do you want to find out?” he asked gently.

She nodded, placing her hands on the essences he was still holding out for her.

Chapter 120:

Iron Rank

In the ritual room, Clive was rubbing his hands together.

“Now for the good part,” he said.

“The good part?” Belinda asked.

“Jason has an ability that he shamelessly squanders,” Clive said. “He could be a one-man revolution in how we categorise powers but he refuses to come and work for the Magic Society.”

“That would be the Magic Society run by the guy who wanted Miss Wexler for what I can only assume to be a creepy love dungeon?” Jason asked.

“Oh,” Clive said, looking between Sophie and Belinda. “I’m probably not going to sell you on the virtue of the Magic Society then.”

“Not likely, no,” Sophie said. She was still holding the two essences she had accepted from Jason.

“Hold on,” Clive said, turning to Belinda. “Why did you accept the job as my assistant, then?”

“To find out more about Lamprey, obviously. Also, it sounded pretty interesting and no one is looking to put me in a... love dungeon.”

“I guess Jory didn’t show you all the renovations,” Jason said, which got a laugh from Sophie. Jason’s head swivelled around to look at her in surprise.

“What?” Sophie asked.

“I’ve never heard you laugh before,” Jason said.

“You have a problem with the way I laugh?”

“Not at all,” he said. “It’s just that our normal interactions range from you saying you don’t trust me to you kicking me in the head.”

“She’s like that with everyone,” Belinda said.

“I guarantee you that Jason’s worse to deal with,” Clive said.

“How am I worse? I’m affable. And I didn’t just make up that kicking me in the head thing.”

“He’s definitely worse,” Clive said to Belinda. “You have no idea what he put me through when we first met.”

“Jory told me to do it,” Jason said.

“He told you to tell your landlady that I slept with the wife you don’t have?”

“He left the specifics to me, but yeah.”

“Why would he do that?” Clive asked.

“You were investigating me for forging spirit coins or whatever.”

“You made counterfeit coins too?” Belinda asked Jason.

“Wait,” Clive said, turning to Belinda. “You made counterfeit spirit coins?”

“Er... no.”

“I think it’s time to use that ability, Clive,” Jason said. He opened his contacts list, selected Sophie, Belinda and Clive and sent party invites.

➤ You have received a party invitation from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

Sophie and Belinda were startled by the sudden appearance of screens in front of them. Belinda started waving her hand in the air in front of her.

“Party invitation?” she asked. “Like where everyone dresses up?”

“More like where people form a group to go fight a monster,” Jason said. “This is an ability I have that I can share with other people. It lets you know things about the world.”

“What kind of things?” Sophie asked.

“Accept the invitation and find out.”

She barely hesitated before nodding, to Jason’s relief. Sophie was like an alley cat that had been kicked so many times it didn’t trust you when you tried to feed it. Shortly afterwards she was staring wide-eyed at one of the essences in her hands.

Item: [Wind Essence] (unranked, common)

Manifested essence of the wind (consumable, essence).

- Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.
- Effect: Imbues 1 awakened wind essence ability and 4 unawakened wind essence abilities.
- You have absorbed 1/4 essences. Once absorbed, an essence cannot be relinquished or replaced.

“I don’t see anything,” Belinda said and Jason offered her his hand to shake. As they touched, a window appeared in front of her.

-
- Jason Asano (outworlder).
 - Essence User (iron rank).
-

“One of the features is that you can identify things by touch. You don’t get much from people, but it’s useful for items.”

He looked over at Clive with a frown.

“As you can see.”

Clive was pulling a series of racks out of his storage space, laden with items. He started picking them up, one by one, scribbling in a notebook in between.

“Clive,” Jason said.

“Yeah?” Clive asked absently, not looking up from what he was doing.

“Did you save a up a bunch of items you wanted to catalogue until they next time we were in a party?”

“I figured if I asked, you’d say no.”

“Of course I’d say no.”

“That’s why I thought to myself: ‘what would Jason do?’ Obviously, he’d just do it without asking and then point out that no one said he couldn’t.”

“That’s what I’d do, is it?”

“Of course it is,” Clive said. “Also, I’d like to point out that no one said I couldn’t.”

Jason groaned.

“Look, we need to get on with this ritual,” he said. “Pack it up for now and you can do some more while she’s recovering before we move onto awakening stones.”

“You promise you’ll let me finish at the end?” Clive asked.

“Yeah, alright,” Jason conceded. “It’s not like I actually have to do anything. I just don’t want you treating me like I’m administration software.”

Jason looked at the racks of items Clive had pulled out.

“Do you even have time to be doing this? I was surprised you even agreed to help with the essence ritual. I thought you’d be neck-deep in what they brought back from the expedition by now.”

“I won’t be allowed to see it for at least a few days,” Clive said as the racks started vanishing back into his dimensional space. “Whoever figures out what they were after will look very good in the eyes of the wider Magic Society. Lucian Lamprey is motivated entirely by personal benefit and I’m the son of eel farmers. First look at what they brought back goes to the Magic Society members he wants favours from.”

The mention of Lamprey arrested Sophie and Belinda’s attention.

“I think you may have extended the definition of benefits in an unsavoury direction,” Belinda said.

“Do you think your colleagues will find the answer?” Jason asked.

“Highly unlikely,” Clive said. “Greenstone’s Magic Society is almost as rotten as its Adventure Society. It’s basically a social club for people who like magic toys, with only a handful of genuine researchers. There aren’t a lot of experts per field and I suspect it will require actual expertise in astral magic. Aside from me, the only other astral magic scholar in Greenstone was Landemere Vane. Who you killed.”

“That sounds a little accusatory,” Jason said.

“It would have been nice if you had killed someone stupid. He was a capable magical scholar.”

“He didn’t list his accreditations before trying to kill and eat me.”

“Did you just say eat?” Belinda asked.

“I certainly did,” Jason said. “You two don’t have a monopoly on being caught in bad situations.”

While Clive put away the racks of paraphernalia, Jason moved over to Sophie. She was still staring at the essences in her hands with fascination.

“Now you know,” he said.

“Know what?” she asked, looking up at him.

“How I see the world.”

“Is it like this for everyone, where you come from?”

“No. I lost my humanity when I came to this world. This is what I got in trade.”

She watched his expression as he looked at the essences in her hands. He was clearly caught up in some memory, his mask of perpetual amusement briefly absent.

“You’ve been through your own troubles, haven’t you?” she asked softly.

He looked up, flashing her a grin as his usual visage returned.

“Nothing that rakish charm and dashing good looks couldn’t handle.”

She frowned, searching his face for something authentic.

“I can never tell what’s real with you,” she said. “I’ve known manipulators before. The good ones use vulnerability as a weapon.”

“When I first met Cassandra, I told her that there was only one way to use vulnerability as a weapon.”

“That was a lie.”

“Yes.”

“Leave her with a question and plant the seed of seduction,” Sophie said. “I’ve seen it work before.”

“It was just some flirty banter,” Jason said. “It wasn’t some kind of organised campaign.”

“Of course it wasn’t. Men like you try to turn the world into a story, even with friends and lovers. It’s like breathing; you don’t even realise you’re doing it.”

“You seem to think you know me pretty well,” he said.

“I’ve known plenty like you. Some are subtle, others outrageous, like you. Keeping people off-balance so you can tip them over. You’re not special, Jason Asano.”

Clive had finished packing away his things. He stood with Belinda, observing Jason and Sophie across the room. They couldn’t hear the softly worded exchange but watched their body language. They stood right in each other’s faces, neither looking away. Their bodies had confrontational stances but were close together, the cubes in Sophie’s hands filled most of the space between them.

“That’s trouble,” Clive said to Belinda.

“Yep,” she agreed.

“I hope Jason doesn’t do something stupid.”

“If he doesn’t keep his hands to himself, she’ll break them.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Clive said. “Jason has very specific views on power relationships, and while his values might be strange, they’re important to him. He’s not Lucian Lamprey.”

“Then what kind of stupid are you talking about?”

“Look at the choices he made to get you here,” Clive said. “What iron-ranker would face down a silver in order to turn a pair of thieves into adventurers?”

“I still don’t know why he would go this far for strangers. He made his big speech but that felt more like he was telling a story than telling the truth.”

“Farrah,” Clive started, his throat catching. “I think she was the only one that really understood him.”

“That’s the woman that died?”

Clive nodded.

“When I first met Jason I wanted to understand him better. I mean, a man from another world. For an astral magic scholar like me it’s the opportunity of a lifetime. Farrah told me that under all the... Jason, he feels constantly exposed. Beset on all sides by powers that could easily destroy him.”

“I know that feeling,” Belinda said.

“And he recognises that. It’s why he wants to help.”

“It’s that simple?”

“He has bit of a hero complex.”

“That kind of thing gets people killed,” Belinda said.

“Probably,” Clive said. “But where would you be right now if he didn’t have it?”

Clive left Belinda at the edge of the room, moving up to the magic diagram. He directed Jason to get out of the way with Belinda and Sophie to step into the magic circle. He had her hold her hands out from her sides with an essence cube in each hand. He took out a magic wand and started waving it like he was conducting an orchestra. The air in the room started to stir, centred on the diagram and Sophie within it. It swirled around her, whipping her silver ponytail.

“Is this how your’s went?” Belinda asked Jason, quiet, so as to not interrupt.

“I didn’t have an essence ritual,” Jason said. “I just absorbed my essences with my vast magical powers.”

“Because you’re some weirdo from another world?”

“Pretty much,” Jason said, wondering once again how accurate his translation power was.

The wind was continuing to pick up as it stormed about in the enclosed ritual chamber. There was a sonorous hum and they could feel a prickling on their skin. The sharp taste of ozone filled their mouths. Light from the magic diagram on the floor started floating up in golden motes, drawn into the two essences cubes. As the light sank into them, the essences started shedding dust that floated into the air, also faintly glowing. Slowly at first, then with increasing pace, the essences dissolved, riding the wind to shroud Sophie in a magical squall. Rainbow light started appearing in the squall, sinking into Sophie’s obscured body.

The last of the essences turned to glowing dust, swirling around Sophie. Suddenly the wind stopped dead and the glowing dust stopped glowing, dropping to the ground. The magic circle faded as the now powerless dust scattered across the stone floor.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Wind Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 2 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 50% (2/4 essences).
 - [Wind Essence] has bonded to the [Power] attribute, changing [Power] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all wind essence abilities to increase the [Power] attribute.
 - You have awakened the wind essence ability [Wind Blade]. 1 of 5 wind essence abilities have been awakened.
-

“I love this part,” Clive said.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Balance Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 3 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 75% (3/4 essences).
 - [Balance Essence] has bonded to the [Recovery] attribute, changing [Recovery] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all balance essence abilities to increase the [Recovery] attribute.
 - You have awakened the balance essence ability [Equilibrium]. 1 of 5 balance essence abilities have been awakened.
-

“That didn’t feel bad at all,” Sophie said.

“Essence rituals are very gentle,” Clive said. “It’s only if you shove the essence inside yourself without one that the experience is a harsh one.”

“You’re just bitter that you didn’t get to see me do it,” Jason said.

“That’s true,” Clive said as he read the description of Sophie’s first new power.

Ability: [Wind Blade] (Wind)

- Special attack.
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
 - Effect (iron): Create a cutting projectile of air.
-

“Special attack,” Clive said. You probably won’t get many, so each one is valuable.”

Ability: [Equilibrium] (Balance)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
 - Effect (iron): Meditate to slowly accrue instances of [Integrity], up to an instance threshold based on the [Recovery] attribute. Instances quickly drop off when meditation ends.
 - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

“See, this is great,” Clive said, jotting in his notebook. “Jason, you really should be helping out the Magic Society with this ability. People have an instinctive sense of their

abilities, but they aren't always great at verbalising them. The time and inaccuracy this saves is fantastic."

"Eyes on the prize, Clive," Jason said.

"Right," Clive said, refocusing on Sophie. Three intangible, translucent cubes floated out of her body, interposing on one another until they formed a single cube floating in front of her. Still insubstantial, it had a vibrant blue colour.

"The confluence essence," Clive said. "Take it."

Sophie reached out and the intangible object became solid at her touch. It began dissolving into blue smoke in her hands, which seeped into her body until it was gone.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Mystic Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 4 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 100% (4/4 essences).
 - [Mystic Essence] has bonded to the [Spirit] attribute, changing [Spirit] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all mystic essence abilities to increase the [Spirit] attribute.
 - You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Strong Soul]. 1 of 5 mystic essence abilities have been awakened.

"Strong soul sounds good," Belinda said, reading the description.

Ability: [Strong Soul] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
- Effect (iron): Disruptive-force damage dealt to you reduced by a large amount; other damage dealt to you is reduced by a small amount. Resistance to dimensional and astral effects and energies is increased. You can physically interact with incorporeal entities.

"How does having a strong soul make you take less damage?" Belinda asked.

"My advice is to just be glad it does," Jason said. "My damage reduction power is stabbing them in the back. How do you feel, Wexler?"

Sophie was still reading the last system message.

-
- You have absorbed 4/4 essences.
 - All your attributes have reached iron rank.

 - You have reached iron rank.
 - You have gained damage reduction against normal-rank damage sources.
 - You have gained increased resistance to normal-rank effects.
 - You have gained the ability to sense auras.
 - You have gained the ability to sustain yourself using sources of concentrated magic.
-

She stood awestruck in the middle of the chamber, rubbing one hand over the back of the other, feeling her skin.

“This feels incredible,” she said, her usual undertone of cynicism completely absent.

“You need to go into the side room,” Clive told her.

“What?” She asked, looking over at him, distracted.

“The side room,” Clive repeated. “Now.”

“I feel fine,” Sophie said. “Better than fine.”

“Give it a moment,” Jason said, stepping up next to Clive.

“I don’t see what you’re...”

Sophie’s words cut off as her face went pale. She sprinted for the side room, slamming a hand on the golden mark that opened the door. She rushed inside and the others heard her violently throwing up.

“I’ll go check on her,” Belinda said.

Chapter 121: Getting Stoned

Sophie and Belinda emerged from the side room, Sophie wearing a fresh outfit.

"That was deeply unpleasant," Sophie said, still looking peaky.

"I imagine Jason had it worse," Clive said. "He's an outworlder who came here before ever getting an essence."

"Why does that matter?" Belinda asked.

"He made his body from the most diluted and impure magic. He was basically a human-shaped lesser monster."

"That's a little blunt," Jason said.

"Because his body was so full of impurities, his purgation when he ranked up would have been very extreme."

"It certainly wasn't fun," Jason said.

"What do you mean by 'he made his body'?" Belinda asked.

Jason and Clive shared a glance.

"That's probably best left for another day," Clive said.

"Not an explanation that benefits from brevity," Jason agreed. "Suffice to say, my ascension to iron rank was a messy and profoundly awful experience."

"Sophie made quite a mess herself," Belinda said. "Good thing this whole place cleans itself because I wouldn't wish that on anyone. All the muck just sank into the floor."

"Mine was still worse," Jason said. "I completely passed out."

"Are you sure you weren't just weak?" Sophie asked him.

"Yes," Jason said. "I was, but it wasn't just that."

"How about we get started?" Clive asked. He had already used his abilities to purge the lingering magic from the previous ritual and draw a new circle on the floor. "Unlike the essences, we'll have to go through the awakening stones one at a time. It's a quick and simple ritual, though."

It was as simple as promised, starting with the awakening stone of eyes.

-
- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Sight Beyond Sight]. You have awakened 2 of 5 mystic essence abilities.

Ability: [Sight Beyond Sight] (Mystic)

- Special ability (perception).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Perceive auras.
-

“A perception power,” Clive said. “It’s what we expected, but welcome, all the same.”

Sophie was disoriented at the influx of new stimuli. Her iron-rank ability to sense auras was only minutes old and had now erupted with sensitivity. She could not only see the auras of Belinda, Jason and Clive but feel them with all her senses. She could taste the auras around her, feel them on her skin.

Belinda’s aura was weak, with strange flavours Sophie couldn’t make sense of. It felt like spying on her friend’s thoughts and she instinctively withdrew her senses. Instead, she turned them on Jason and Clive. Their auras were much more controlled, nothing escaping the way it did with Belinda.

The aura of each man had a strange and powerful feel to them. Clive’s aura felt like a wellspring of magical power. Jason’s felt more dangerous; oppressive and controlling.

“Something wrong?” Jason asked as she stared at him.

“I was looking at your auras,” she told him and nodded at Clive. “I like his more.”

The remaining stones were the two awakening stones of the hand and the two of the foot.

“I recommend we start with the stones of the hand,” Clive said. “As you use more awakening stones, the abilities awakened will increasingly fill in the gaps of your power set. If the stones of the hand give you unarmed combat abilities, the stones of the foot are less likely to do so. There’s more chance they’ll give movement abilities instead.”

“That sounds fine,” Sophie said.

“I can’t make any promises, though,” Clive said.

“Understood,” she said.

Clive purged the ambient magic and set up a new circle.

-
- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Immortal Fist]. You have awakened 3 of 5 mystic essence abilities.

Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional resonating-force damage, which is highly effective against physical defences. Suffer no damage from making unarmed strikes against objects and negate all damage from actively intercepted attacks. Not all damage from very powerful or higher-ranked attacks will be negated.
-

“Another mystic essence ability,” Clive said. “It’s quite unusual to awaken the confluence essence abilities first.”

“Is that bad?” Belinda asked.

“No, just interesting,” Clive said. “There’s a theory that our personalities have a large impact on the kinds of abilities we awaken.”

“That’s a little worrying,” Jason said, considering his own abilities.

“Some advocates of this theory suggest that people with a very strong sense of self awaken the confluence essence abilities first, although I find the evidence to support that idea rather questionable.”

“Asano,” Sophie said. “Hit me with a weapon.”

“Wait, what?” Belinda asked.

“Read her ability,” Jason said. “It negates the damage from incoming attacks.”

“Reading is all well and good,” Belinda said. “Trying to catch a sword is another thing altogether.”

“I have to test the ability sooner or later,” Sophie said.

“Then I vote later!”

“Now is best,” Jason said, pulling out his magical sword. “I have healing potions on hand.”

“That’s a handsome sword,” Sophie said.

Jason held it out for her to take. She drew it halfway out of the scabbard as she examined it. With Jason’s party interface in effect, she was able to read the description.

Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- *A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).*

“A friend made it for me,” Jason said. “It’s my most treasured possession.”

“I’m still not convinced about this idea,” Belinda said.

“I told you,” Jason said. “If anything goes wrong, I’ve got healing potions.”

Sophie handed the sword back and, after confirming she was ready, Jason drew it and slashed out at her. She unhesitatingly blocked the attack with a palm strike, the sword bouncing back like it had struck a wall.

Everyone looked at Sophie’s hand, which was completely unharmed.

“Nice,” Jason said.

“Didn’t even hurt,” Sophie said. “Keep going.”

Jason unleashed a series of sword attacks, which Sophie intercepted with forearms, shins, shoulders and even a head-butt. She took several superficial cuts as she got a handle on the ability, but urged Jason to continue.

“I’ll need to adjust my fighting style for this,” she said.

“That’s normal,” Clive said. “An adventurer who doesn’t adjust the way they fight to their powers is a bad adventurer.”

“How do you fight?” Sophie asked him.

“From far away,” Clive said. “An adaptation in approach I was more than happy to make.”

“Looks like your ability doesn’t just protect your body,” Jason said. “Your clothes were only cut when you failed to intercept the hit.”

Sophie looked down at her clothes where blood was leaking from several slices in the fabric.

“You’re right,” she said.

“You said something about healing potions?” Belinda said.

“I’d like to try something first,” Jason said and looked at Sophie. “You up for it?”

“I can take anything you’ve got.”

“Alright. I’m going to throw out a special attack.”

He lashed out with his sword again and she intercepted it with a fist.

-
- [Celestine] has negated all damage from special attack [Punish].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Celestine].
-

"Interesting," Jason said.

Sophie frowned at the message in front of her.

- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on you.
-

"You inflicted me with sin," Sophie said. "That better not be a sex thing."

"You completely negated the damage on my physical attack," Jason told her. "Even the magical damage. The non-damage effect still went through, though."

"What is that non-damage effect?" Belinda asked.

"A curse."

"A curse," Sophie said, glaring daggers.

"A minor curse," Jason said. "It won't do anything unless I use more special attacks on her. Also, I can just take it away."

"So take it away!" Belinda demanded.

"No worries," Jason said and pointed an arm at Sophie.

"Feed me your sins."

Sophie's life force radiated out from her body as a vibrant red glow. A dark stain swam within it but was drawn out, floating through the air and vanishing into Jason's outstretched hand. The glowing life force withdrew back into her body and he tossed her a healing potion from his inventory. She drank it, making a sour face.

"Those cheap potions of Jory's get the job done," she said. "I cannot get used to that taste, though."

Clive set up another ritual and Sophie absorbed the next awakening stone of the hand.

-
- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Radiant Fist]. You have awakened 4 of 5 mystic essence abilities.

Ability: [Radiant Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage, which is highly effective against magical defences and intangible or incorporeal enemies. Unarmed attacks do not trigger retaliation effects. Negate any non-damage effects from actively intercepted attacks.

“Mystic essence again,” Jason said. “It’s a magic version of the last ability.”

“That’s useful,” Clive said. “The damage types of those two abilities, resonating-force and disruptive-force. Between them, you’ll get through almost any defence. They’re special abilities rather than special attacks, so I imagine the damage is limited, but they will be effective against any enemy you can put a hand to.”

“Try that special attack again,” Sophie said and Jason pulled his sword back out.

-
- [Celestine] has negated all damage from special attack [Punish].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Celestine].
 - [Celestine] has prevented secondary effects of special attack [Punish].
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Affliction negation has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - [Celestine] has negated the triggered effect.

“Wow,” Jason said. “That even stopped my sword from buffing itself.”

“It seems clear the direction her abilities are taking her,” Clive said. “Of her first seven abilities, three are defensive and one is self-recovery. They aren’t blanket defence powers, though; they take skill to use effectively. She’s developing an evasion-type defensive specialist power set.”

“A dodge tank,” Jason said.

“There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of defence specialist,” Clive said. “They directly conflate with the two kinds of essence users we were discussing yesterday. The most common type uses raw toughness, heavy on simple, passive abilities that mitigate damage. Their strengths are standing their ground and withstanding punishment.

“And I’m the other type,” Sophie said.

“It looks that way,” Clive said. “You can expect more active defensive powers and more mobility. You won’t be as good at holding a fixed position but you’ll have the tools to be exactly where you need to be, exactly when you need to be there. You won’t be as good at passively taking hits, but you’ll be better at intercepting them. The other kind of specialist will outlast you under a barrage of attacks. More powerful, singular attacks can punch through their defences, though, while you’ll have to tools to avoid or negate them.”

“Sounds like you’ll be good at staying alive when things are at their worst,” Jason said.

“I always have been,” Sophie said.

Clive set up the next ritual, moving on to an awakening stone of the foot.

-
- You have awakened the balance essence ability [Cloud Step]. You have awakened 2 of 5 balance essence abilities.

Ability: [Cloud Step] (Balance)

- Special ability (movement).
- Cost: Low stamina and mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Take a single step on air as if it were solid ground, becoming intangible for a brief moment. This ability can be used while all steps are on cooldown at an extreme mana cost per step. If used within mist, fog or cloud, this ability has no cooldown.

“Finally not a mystic one,” Jason said. “Kind of a shame at this point. You’ve almost fully awakened that essence.”

“What’s a cooldown?” Belinda asked, reading the ability description.

“That’s how long you have to wait after using an ability before you can use it again,” Jason said.

“It’s terminology from Jason’s world,” Clive said. “His ability serves as a guide for him to our world, so it describes them in ways he will best understand.”

“Why would she have to wait?” Belinda asked.

“Our bodies serve as a medium for the magic of our essence abilities,” Clive said. “Using the same magic in the same way repeatedly can over-stress the body. Less imposing abilities require little or no time before they can be used again, while more excessive powers require more time for recovery. This ability of yours, Miss Wexler is rather interesting in that you can circumvent this limitation using large amounts of mana.”

"Is that unusual?" Jason asked.

"Yes, but far from unheard of," Clive said. "It functions by spreading the strain across your body, which allows use in rapid succession but requires much more mana to push through. Very inefficient, but inefficient is better than unavailable in a critical moment."

"Try it out," Belinda said.

Sophie trod on an invisible step, then fell back to the floor.

"It seems underwhelming," Belinda said.

"I want to try the intangible thing," Jason said pulling a small pouch from his inventory. "Try your ability again."

Sophie used her ability to step on the air as Jason threw a glazed nut. It bounced off her forehead, earning Jason a glare.

"The ability does say briefly intangible," Jason said. "I think we need to get the timing right. Can you feel being intangible?"

"I think so," Sophie said. "There's a very brief sensation of lightness."

After several more attempts, they finally got a glazed nut to pass through Sophie's intangible body, right at the moment she took a step on the air.

"I wonder what happens if she uses it while standing on the ground," Jason said. "Would she fall through?"

"Not through the cloud palace," Clive said. "One of its many properties is to block the passage of intangible entities. She might go through the stone floor of this room, though."

The ritual room had a stone floor made from a single sheet of smoothly polished rock, to facilitate drawing ritual circles. After some experiments, they discovered that Sophie would sink into it if she had a foot on the ground while using the ability. After the fleeting moment of intangibility, her foot was pushed back out of the stone.

"You'd have to be moving fast but you could use that to get through a wall," Belinda said. "You have maybe a second of being intangible. You'd have to be moving fast enough to get most of the way through so you'd be pushed to the other side."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that test," Sophie said. "What if I get stuck halfway through?"

"Your foot got pushed out of the floor," Belinda said. "There's no reason to think a wall would be any different."

"What happened to the woman who didn't want me catching swords?" Sophie asked.

"There are healing potions," Belinda said.

"I don't think a healing potion will fix my head occupying the same space as a chunk of wall."

“We can take a look at the possibilities later,” Clive said. “We have more rituals to perform.”

“In a little bit,” Sophie said. “I want to see what this ability can do. Asano, spar with me for a bit.”

Jason and Sophie engaged in some light sparring, neither pushing too hard. In the fighting pits, acrobatically using her speed and the walls to outmanoeuvre her opponents was her signature. She started using her new ability as a wall to kick-off whenever she needed. It wasn't wildly effective right away, but she saw the potential. Eventually, she begged-off with a splitting headache and Jason handed her a mana potion.

“Is that your first low-mana headache?” Jason asked.

She sighed with relief as the potion took effect, then nodded.

“Not pleasant, are they?”

“No, they are not,” she agreed, rubbing her temples.

“Do you want to take a break?” Clive asked.

“I'm fine,” she said.

“Take the break,” Belinda scolded. “You don't have to tough everything out on principle.”

“It's past time for lunch anyway,” Jason said. “I have sandwiches.”

On the bench where the last awakening stone was still waiting to be used he set out a lunch spread. A tray of sandwiches, plus glasses and a pitcher of iced tea, complete with chunks of ice floating in it.

“Do you always carry around sandwiches?” Belinda asked as Jason poured out drinks.

“He does,” Clive said, taking a sandwich from the tray. “Also, a rope ladder.”

Sophie wandered over last and Belinda shoved a sandwich in her hand.

“Where did you get this chutney?” Belinda asked Jason after biting into her own sandwich.

“My landlady makes it. Now that Emir has set us up in the cloud palace, I don't see her, which is a shame. I learned a lot about local ingredients in her kitchen. I went and packed-up the rooms my friends and I were renting and she stocked me up on chutney and jam. I've been meaning to figure out how you cook things in a kitchen made of clouds and knock out some sweet scones.”

Belinda chatted with Jason and Clive while Sophie ate in silence. Belinda occasionally glanced her way, noting that Sophie put an end to a good portion of the sandwiches. As Jason packed away the remains of their lunch, Clive set up the ritual for

the last awakening stone.

- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Mirage Step]. You have awakened 5 of 5 mystic essence abilities.
- You have awakened all mystic essence abilities. Linked attribute [Spirit] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank mystic essence ability.
- You have 1 of 4 completed essences.

Ability: [Mirage Step] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension, movement, illusion).
 - Cost: Low stamina and mana.
 - Cooldown: 40 seconds.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
 - Effect (iron): Move instantaneously to a nearby location, leaving an afterimage behind.
-

“Instantaneous movement,” Clive said. “It’s functionally similar to a teleport, but requires a path of traversal.”

“Teleporting can be tricky,” Jason said. “It took me a long time before I was able to successfully...”

Sophie suddenly appeared next to him

“...activate the ability,” he finished. “Never mind, I guess.”

A shimmering afterimage lingered briefly in Sophie’s original position before vanishing. As for Sophie herself, she was reeling, unbalanced.

“That was amazing,” Sophie said as she dizzily held her arms out. “That felt absolutely incredible. I’m going to need some practice, though. That was the last of the awakening stones, so I should do that.”

“Actually,” Jason said, “Clive and I managed to rustle up some extras yesterday.”

He walked over to the bench. It was now empty of awakening stones, but he took out two more and placed them down.

“One of these I got from the Adventure Society for catching you. The other I got from... somewhere else, but also for catching you.”

“Somewhere else?” Belinda asked.

Jason didn’t respond to the question. Clive took out a third stone, placing it with the other two.

“This is the one I got for catching you,” he said. “Jason doesn’t have his full set of essences but he’s close. Since he’s waiting for what Emir is setting up, he decided to give these to you.”

“What about you?” Belinda asked.

“I’ve had my full set for a long time,” Clive said. “I was just never much of an adventurer.”

Jason slapped him on the back.

“You killed a bronze rank monster in a hidden fortress under a swamp,” Jason said. “You’re a plenty good adventurer, now.”

“Last night, after our meeting, we were belatedly contacted by the Adventure Society about the reward for catching you,” Clive said. “I was going to give my stone to Jason but since he was giving his to you, I decided to the same.”

“What kinds of awakening stones are they?” Sophie asked. She walked up to the bench, looking at the stones. Jason gestured at them invitingly.

“Touch them and see.”

Chapter 122: Children

Sophie brushed a hand over the first of the three awakening stones Clive and Jason had laid out on the bench.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Focus] (unranked, uncommon)

An awakening stone containing an undistracted power. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 11 unawakened essence abilities.

“That is the most common of the three,” Clive said. “The Magic Society grades stones on a scale of one to five stars, based on how frequently they are known to appear world-wide. We work with brokers and the Adventure Society to try and catalogue them all. Jason’s ability also seems to grade them into five stages of rarity, but not numerically. The stones you’ve used thus far were all common, or one star. Uncommon is two star.”

Sophie touched the next stone, with was blue with streaks of white.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Sky] (unranked, epic)

An awakening stone containing the freedom of the open sky. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 11 unawakened essence abilities.

“Epic,” she said.

“Four star, the second highest rarity,” Clive explained. “After it took so long to catch you, the Adventure Society raised the reward to a four star awakening stone for each person on the team that caught you.”

“They had to make it a limit of six after people started forming giant groups,” Jason said.

“After we caught you,” Clive said, “there were some issues, as you may recall. Jason and I collected our rewards yesterday evening and we were given a selection of four-star stones.

“The second-highest rarity,” Belinda said. “Are they the kind of stones you used?”

“Actually, I used all one and two star stones,” Clive said. “I was given an epic four-star essence, however. A rune essence. Very valuable.”

“Who gave you that?” Jason asked. “There can’t be a lot of epic essences in an eel farm.”

“My mentor,” Clive said. “He was the director the Magic Society; the predecessor to Lucian Lamprey’s predecessor. He took me out of the delta, gave me an education. Showed me the value of what we do at the Magic Society. I became an adventurer just in time for the last monster surge, when I was sixteen. He died during the surge and after it was over I never tried my hand at adventuring again until just recently. I threw myself completely into the Magic Society, but our branch here isn’t the same as it was back then.”

“I don’t imagine Lamprey fostering a positive institutional culture,” Jason said.

“No,” Clive said. “I’d say the one before wasn’t any better, but Lamprey really does set a new low.”

“I’m not even in the Magic Society and I know that much,” Belinda said.

Jason turned his attention back to the stones.

“Stone of the sky, he said. “I considered picking that one and using it myself.”

“It’s very highly sought after,” Clive said. “The chances of awakening some kind of flight power are very good. I’m a little surprised our Adventure Society here had one.”

“Turns out I already have a flight power,” Jason said. “Clive told me. I’m super looking forward to it, now, but it won’t let me fly until silver rank.”

“Jason has a number of abilities we have very little information on,” Clive said. “We do have thorough records on a number of them, however, and his cloak ability will let him glide at bronze rank and fly at silver. It won’t be as effective as a more dedicated movement power but he will fly.”

“I should probably look up what my abilities do at later ranks,” Jason said.

Clive turned on him in disbelief.

“That’s what I’ve been telling you!”

“Are you sure?” Jason asked. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

As Clive started turning red, Jason turned to Sophie.

“Clive picked this one, in the end, since we were giving them to you. It’s your best bet at a flying power.”

“There are no guarantees, though,” Clive said, still glaring at Jason. “It could just as easily give you a special attack effective against enemies in the air.”

“Don’t be a downer, Clive,” Jason said.

“I’m just managing expectations,” Clive said. “Take a look at the last stone and then we’ll begin.”

Sophie reached out and touched the last stone, which was clear with such clarity as to be hard to see.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Purgation] (unranked, epic)

An awakening stone possessed of a cleansing power. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 11 unawakened essence abilities.

“This will almost certainly give you some kind of cleansing ability,” Clive said. “You don’t have any obvious essences for it, so it could come in many forms. It might be a balance ability that transfers afflictions to your enemies or a swift ability that lets you recover from afflictions faster. It might be some other ability with a self-cleanse as a secondary effect.”

“How valuable are these epic stones?” Belinda asked.

“Each of them is more valuable than all the other stones put together,” Clive said. “The sky stone is more valuable than either of the essences you used.”

“And you’re just giving them to me?” Sophie asked.

“Your indenture contract is six months,” Jason said. “By the time it’s over, you’ll have been an adventurer for longer than I have, as of right now. You’ll earn them, believe me.”

“The question,” Clive said, “Is what order do you want to use them in? Do you want to start off with the potential flight power, or save that for the end?”

“Even if you get one,” Jason warned. “You probably won’t be able to fly well. My friend Humphrey can fly, but it costs him so much mana he can’t do it for long.”

Clive nodded.

“He’s right” Clive said. “At iron rank, the power will either be restricted by cost or the type of flight, like gliding. It will get cheaper or more useful as you rank up.”

“Speaking of which,” Jason said. “You didn’t use any monster cores to raise the ability you already have, right?”

“No,” Sophie said. “Before my father died, he left my one essence with Belinda’s father, who performed the ritual once I was old enough.”

“My dad didn’t have any essences himself, but he knew a good hodgepodge of different magical fields. He knew that monster cores would mess up her essence development and warned her off them,” Belinda said.

“Sounds like a good guy,” Clive said.

“He was a drunken prick whose sole act of decency was not selling off that essence before giving it to Sophie,” she said. “He tried to rob Cole Silva’s father and failed badly. Silva killed him and I was saddled with making restitution.”

“How do you know when you’re old enough to use an essence?” Jason asked. “Also, what happens if you try and you’re not old enough?”

“There’s a simple test for whether your body can handle it,” Clive said. “Usually that’s sixteen or seventeen, but I’ve heard of as low as fourteen and as late as nineteen or twenty. As for what happens if you aren’t ready, well, I’ve heard horror stories. Magical deformities. People using children in essence experiments to try and unlock the secrets of essences.”

Clive shook his head.

“Not every Magic Society branch is the best group of people, obviously,” he said. “Even the worst of us will put a stop to that, though.”

“Well, no worries here,” Belinda said. “Sophie’s practically a spinster.”

“I’m twenty three.”

“Me too,” Jason said. “Actually, it’s been about four months. I think I missed a birthday.”

“I’m going to set up the next ritual,” Clive said. “Pick which stone you want to use.”

“Do the sky stone last,” Belinda said. “If you actually get the power to fly, we can head straight out and try it.”

“Good idea,” Jason said. “Work your way up to the big finale.”

Sophie nodded and Clive got to work, quickly setting up and performing the ritual using the uncommon stone of focus.

-
- You have awakened the swift essence ability [Avatar of Speed]. You have awakened 2 of 5 swift essence abilities.

Ability: [Avatar of Speed] (Swift)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Your movement abilities have increased effect and reduced stamina and mana cost.
-

“That seems a bit underwhelming,” Belinda said.

From the middle of the fading ritual circle, Sophie exploded into motion. She swiftly ran to the side of the room and up the wall, turning to run along the wall and around the room multiple times.

“Well, that’s quite a thing,” Clive said as the others watched her go around, swerving side to side on the wall in little jukes that didn’t seem to slow her down.

“Is she normally that zippy?” Jason asked Belinda.

“Not sure,” Belinda said. “When she goes running, the first thing she does is run away, so I never get to see much.”

Sophie leaped off the wall, flipping in the air and landing in a crouch.

“That may be the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen,” Jason said.

“You know you said that out loud, right?” Clive asked.

“I’ll stand by it.”

Belinda looked at Jason from under a sceptically furrowed brow.

“You think a woman back flipping off a wall is sexy?” she asked him.

“Yep.”

“You’re weird.”

“I’ll stand by that, too.”

Sophie stood up and walked over to them.

“Good ability,” she said.

“Avatar abilities are often good,” Clive said. “They embody an aspect of an essence, making you very good at a specific thing. In this case, movement abilities.”

“I like being fast,” Sophie said. “The ability I’ve always had makes me fast, and this makes me faster.”

“Can you show us that ability?” Jason asked.

“How do I do that?”

“It’s pretty instinctive. You just want to, basically.”

After a brief moment, the ability appeared in front of them.

Ability: [Free Runner] (Swift)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Increased speed. Low stamina and mana per second cost to run on walls and water. Momentum must be maintained on walls or water to prevent falling.

- Effect (bronze): Enhanced balance and spatial sense.

“Enhanced balance and spatial sense,” Jason read. “That would let you move very fast through a complicated environment. Super parkour.”

“Parkour?”

“In my world it’s what we call the practice of moving through complex spaces with efficiency and speed. People train to be very good. I’m guessing that ability of yours makes you very, very good at it.”

“Yes,” Sophie said plainly. He could see she wasn’t boasting but simply stating a fact. She neither wanted nor needed his validation. He chuckled.

“That’s a classic, skill-oriented power,” Clive said. “It seems simple and underpowered but lets you do something you’re good at very well.”

“Let’s see about the next one,” Sophie said. “Set it up.”

Clive did just that, performing the ritual of awakening with the stone of purgation.

-
- You have awakened the wind essence ability [Cleansing Breeze]. You have awakened 2 of 5 wind essence abilities.

Ability: [Cleansing Breeze] (Swift)

- Aura (holy, cleanse).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. This is a holy effect. Negates poisons in the air; this is a cleanse effect.

“Aura,” Clive said. “That is a big win.”

“It is,” Jason agreed.

“Why is that?” Belinda asked.

“Aura manipulation is an important skill for adventurers,” Clive said. “You can only learn it once you have an aura power, although any aura power will do.”

“He’s right,” Jason said. “Aura control is one the things that differentiates a capable adventurer from a scrub.”

“A scrub?” Sophie asked.

“You might know it as a buster,” Jason said. “Doesn’t matter; you can get it from context.”

“It’s an unexpected ability for the wind essence,” Clive said. “I would have expected something from the mystic essence. It’s also the exact opposite of Jason’s aura.”

“Will they conflict?” Belinda asked.

“No,” Clive said. “Jason’s aura only affects enemies, while Miss Wexler’s only affects allies. So long as they’re on the same side, it won’t be a problem.”

Clive and Belinda looked between Jason and Sophie, who were giving each other assessing looks.

“I wouldn’t rule out problems just yet,” Belinda said.

“It’s a holy ability, too,” Clive said. “That’s matches well with the celestine holy affinity.”

“I thought they had astral affinity,” Jason said.

“They have holy too,” Clive said. “Still not as many as elves, who have life, nature and magic affinities, which is why elves make such good healers. I’ll set up the next ritual.”

Jason stood next to Clive as he used his essence ability to draw golden lines on the floor.

“How likely is it really that she picks up a flight power?” he asked quietly. “I’ve heard a lot of people say that you can’t go making predictions, yourself included.”

“Looking at all twenty abilities, that’s correct. It’s why the best approach is to select a more general direction for your power set. Pick out your essences and leave the specifics to fate. There’s always one or two abilities you can confidently see coming, though. For example, there are certain awakening stones that have a higher change of producing auras if you have a lot of abilities and no aura yet. Another example is all those feast stones you used, Jason.”

“I didn’t tell you about that.”

“Farrah did. The combination of feast stones and the blood essence meant that a health-draining power was almost a certainty. It could have been any of a wide slew of health-draining powers but you were almost certain to get one of them. If you combine a celestine’s natural aptitude for utility powers, the wind essence and a sky stone, that’s as

close to a guarantee of a flight power as you'll get. You couldn't ask for a better chance, except for maybe with the wing essence."

Jason moved away from the circle, pausing next to Sophie.

"Good luck," he said, then joined Belinda out of the way against the wall.

Clive performed the ritual no differently than any of the others.

-
- You have awakened the wind essence ability [Leaf on the Wind]. You have awakened 3 of 5 wind essence abilities.

Ability: [Leaf on the Wind] (Swift)

- Special ability (movement, dimension).
- Cost: Moderate mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Glide through the air; highly effective at riding the wind. Can reduce weight to slow fall at a reduced mana cost. Ignore or ride the effects of strong wind, even when this ability is not in active use.

Clive let out a boyish laugh.

"You've got it," he said. "I'll have to look it up to make sure but I'd bet my library that's a flight power."

Jason took out a tablet and looked up the ability.

"Yep," he said. "It was the third one down on the list of wind essence flight abilities. From what I'm seeing here, you glide at iron and sort of fly-glide at bronze. Riding the wind, that sort of thing. You'll have full-flown flight at silver, then go back to wind-riding at gold, but you'll be controlling the wind. Doesn't say about diamond, which is no surprise."

Sophie and Belinda looked at each other, grins spreading on their faces.

"You can fly," Belinda said.

Sophie nodded. "I can feel it."

"The next move is obvious, then," Jason said. "Let's go jump off a sky palace."

"You might want to be a little cautious," Clive said. "Until she gets a handle on the ability."

"Boo!" Belinda jeered.

"Did you just boo me?" Clive asked.

"And so she should," Jason said. "Boo!"

"You're acting like children."

"We're about to go jump off the roof," Jason said. "Of course we're acting like children."

Chapter 123:

Star Seed

In the Adventure Society marshalling yard, a portal opened and people started stepping through. There were fourteen in total, each bearing a pin marking them as Adventure Society officials. The woman at the front looked to be of early middle age, with her hair unflatteringly pinned tightly back. Her Adventure Society pin was black.

Jason, Clive, Belinda and Sophie waited until the last memorial for the day had finished before moving outside to test Sophie's new abilities. The gliding had a few false starts, but the slow fall function of the power was intuitive enough that she went unharmed. Several attempts in, she was gliding out over the ocean before curving back in to land on the lower levels of the palace. She would have preferred if the earlier attempts hadn't involved dragging her waterlogged self onto one of the palace's sea-level platforms.

Aside from her gliding ability, being outdoors allowed her to test her wind blade. She could throw out a shimmering arc of slicing wind with a sweep of an arm or leg. A short gesture would produce a small, swift blade that was hard to see. A larger motion created a longer and more visible blade that was noticeably slower.

"Some abilities will come easily and naturally," Clive said. "Others you'll need to practice before you can use them effectively."

"We'll leave you to it, for today," Jason said. "Play around and get used to them. Tomorrow we start training."

"That Adventure Society assessment is in a week, right?" Belinda asked. "Is she going to be ready?"

"The next intake was cancelled," Jason said. "After days of memorials, no one is looking to feed their young people into the grinder. The assessments will be rigorous in a way they haven't been for a long time, with a few exceptions."

"Won't that make it harder for Sophie to pass?" Belinda asked.

"The field assessment judges two things," Jason said. "The skill to reliably hunt monsters and the judgement to know when not to. I won't let her participate until she's ready."

He looked at Sophie, standing unhappily in her still-wet clothes.

"No one is going to argue that you lack skill," he told her. "Have you ever fought a monster?"

She shook her head.

“Once Rufus deems you ready, I’ll take you out to the delta and we’ll do some adventure board notices. If you meet his standards, then passing the field assessment won’t be a problem.”

A meeting was taking place in the conference room next to the director’s office in the Adventure Society administration building. At the head of the table but standing instead of sitting was the leader of the inquiry team, Tabitha Gert. Her clothes were plain, with the only flourish being her black Adventure Society pin. She wore a stern expression, accentuated by her tightly pulled-back hair. Elspeth Arella was also present, sitting to Gert’s right. Emir Bahadir sat at the other end of the table, his relaxed slouch a contrast with Arella’s poise and Gert’s rigidity.

“Is there a reason the director of the Magic Society is not here?” Tabitha asked.

“Lucian Lamprey would obstruct and inform because it serves his purposes, regardless of the outside consequences,” Arella said. This earned a pointed cough in her direction from Emir, which she responded to with a flat look.

“Having Lamprey here,” Arella said, turning back to Gert, “would be as good as sending the families in question an explanatory pamphlet detailing out intentions.”

“That’s very unhelpful,” Gert said.

“Of that, I am very much aware,” Arella said.

Gert turned her attention to Emir.

“You are convinced these five expedition members have been compromised?” she asked. “If I discovered that this was some manner of ploy to distract from the enquiry, it would not go well for you, gold-ranker or not.”

“I’m convinced that the political cost of forcing the issue and being wrong is preferable to leaving it alone and being wrong.”

Arella gestured at the door, which swung open of its own accord to admit Danielle Geller. Arella used her power again to close the door behind her. While Danielle would prefer to throw her out a window, she restricted herself to throwing Arella a dissatisfied glance before schooling her expression into blank professionalism.

“Sorry I’m late,” Danielle said. “I’ve just come from a water link communication with Jonah’s family.”

“This is the one of the five from your family?” Gert asked.

“He’s from a branch family of House Geller, but broadly, yes. I’ve just been speaking with his parents and the branch family patriarch.”

“This boy, Jonah,” Emir said. “He refuses to be examined?”

“Yes, just like the others,” Danielle said. “He’s been isolating himself from us. His behaviour screams that he sees us as some kind of threat.”

“I’ve just had word,” Arella said. “All five have withdrawn from their existing teams and formed a team together.”

“What?” Danielle asked. “When did this happen?”

“Around an hour ago. I’ve had my deputy director keep a discreet but watchful eye on any official activity related to the five.”

“We need to act,” Gert said. “However, it is outside the Adventure Society’s purview to forcibly subject the five to examination.”

“Jonah may not have consented,” Danielle said, “but I’ve explained the situation to his people. They have given me formal permission to act on their behalf regarding his welfare. They are making the legal arrangements as we speak and they’ll send everything through the Magic Society via document duplication.”

“There is a risk that word will get out that way,” Arella said. “Lamprey pays little attention to his own Magic Society but these are hardly ordinary times. Even if he maintains his inattention, his deputy is subtle and thorough.”

“A dangerous combination,” Emir said. “His loyalty?”

“To Lamprey. By all indications they are actual friends. My instincts tell me his only true allegiance is only to himself but I’ve never found so much as a hint of disloyalty, and I did quite a bit of looking.”

Gert frowned at Arella.

“Using the Magic Society for such communication is a necessary risk,” Gert said. “This city has seen quite enough activity operating outside of the rules.”

“We shouldn’t let rules get in the way of something potentially this important,” Emir said.

“There are always reasons to ignore the rules,” Gert said, “which is why we must be fastidious in following them. They are the very basis for civilisation, without which we would exist in a state of anarchy.”

“I disagree,” Emir said.

“I don’t care,” Gert said. “This operation is being conducted under the strictures of the Adventure Society, not one of your frivolous private excursions. Gold rank or not, you will follow instructions.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“Once the legal documentation arrives,” Gert said, “We must act immediately to secure this Jonah boy. Have you lined up someone capable to examine him? The local Magic Society does not sound like a satisfactory place to find the assistance we need.”

“I’ve contacted the local high priest of Purity,” Emir said. “He’s politically detached and has as good a chance as anyone of finding anything that has been done to them and purging it safely.”

“You think there may be a danger?” Arella asked.

“The people we captured in the astral space all quite thoroughly killed themselves with some manner of object buried in their bodies,” Emir said. “My concern is our five adventurers coming to a similar end.”

“Turning to the church of Purity is a good choice,” Danielle said. “I want to send Jonah home to his family intact.”

The arrival of the inquiry team from the Adventure Society’s Continental Council had little impact on Jason, at least over the first few days. He had not been a member of the expedition and was too low rank to be involved in major Society affairs. In the mean time, he had been working with Rufus to prepare Sophie for the next Adventure Society intake.

“Her skills are impressive,” Rufus said. He gave Sophie his own assessment but remained mostly hands-off, leaving Jason to introduce her to various aspects of adventuring. He took on more of a mentor role to Jason, offering advice and guidance on what to teach her, and how.

“Her skills are impressive,” Rufus said. “In terms of empty-hand technique, she’s better than I am. Her weapon-work isn’t as strong but given her abilities that won’t be an issue.”

“All the fighting she’s done has been against people, though,” Jason said.

Rufus nodded.

“Her lack of experience fighting monsters is unquestionably her main shortfall,” he said. “Take her out into the delta and do some adventure board notices. Recruit Humphrey, if you can. He has more immediate impact than you if someone needs to step in.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jason said. “Have you heard anything from his mother about the inquiry?”

“They’re auditing the whole branch,” Rufus said. “From what she’s hearing, there will be sweeping demotions across the board, expedition members or otherwise. More than a few will be losing their membership entirely.”

“I’ll probably get bumped back down to two stars,” Jason said. “I always suspected that moving up to three stars so quickly was part of Arella’s games, and I daresay this inquiry will agree.”

“I wouldn’t worry about local politics too much,” Rufus said. “Bronze rank will be a fresh start that you can make far from here. My part in the Remore Academy annex with the Gellers should time nicely with you ranking up and your indenture contract coming to an end. We can head for Vitesse, leaving this city and its troubles behind.”

“We have no ideas how things will look, six months from now,” Jason said. “There should be a monster surge by then, right?”

“There should be a monster surge by now,” Rufus said. “I’ll be interested in where your thieves will be in six months. Things are changing in very large ways for them.”

“That’s up to them,” Jason said. “The whole point was to give them the chance to choose their own path.”

“How goes the non-combat training?”

“I’ve been teaching them what Farrah taught me about meditation, aura manipulation. The mental exercises. Are you sure I’m ready to teach anyone?”

“Farrah was always impressed by you,” Rufus said. “We all saw the potential in you. You’re her legacy now.”

Jason face was stricken.

“Don’t say that,” he said. “I can’t live up to it.”

“None of us live up to the expectations we put on ourselves,” Rufus said. “Gary and Farrah taught me to accept that. But in the attempt, we push ourselves to new heights. You don’t have to be some shining representative of who she was. Just try and be an adventurer she would be proud to have trained.”

“That, I can do. It feels strange, passing on what she taught me to these women.”

“You’ve been teaching them both?”

“Wexler will get essences for her friend sooner or later. If she knows the meditation techniques and training exercises beforehand, that’s only for the good. Wexler tends to listen more with her friend riding herd on her, too.”

“Problems with the training?”

“Wexler’s walls are slowly coming down,” Jason said. “A lot of construction went into them, though. Building trust is half the battle.”

“Trust is crucial,” Rufus said. “If you want to teach her anything effectively, she needs to trust that what you’re imparting has value and that you’re doing so in good faith.”

“Any tips?”

“Don’t try to rush things. Let time do its work.”

Jason nodded.

“It won’t hurt to take a day off, then,” he said. “I haven’t seen Cassandra since the day the expedition got back.”

“You have plans?”

“She invited me to go sailing.”

“They’re gone,” Genevieve said. The deputy director of the Adventure Society was in the director’s office, along with Danielle, Emir and Tabitha Gert.

“What about tracking their badges?” Gert asked.

“The fact that we couldn’t track their badges is what drew our attention to them in the first place,” Danielle said.

“They were all directed to have their aura’s re-examined and their badges replaced,” Arella said. “None of them showed up to do so.”

“Do we know anything?” Emir asked.

“I’ve already got my information network in Old City looking,” Arella said. “They don’t have the skills or the powers to hide from my people in Old City. If they’re there, we’ll find them. If they left, we’ll know which direction. Our best course of action now is patience.”

“How reliable is your network in Old City?” Gert asked.

“Now that everyone knows my father has me standing behind him, his power in Old City is unchallenged,” Arella said. “You couldn’t ask for better.”

“You said they don’t have the skills to hide,” Emir said. “That is assuming their skills are what they were. For all we know, they may not be in charge of their bodies anymore.”

“It doesn’t change our course of action,” Danielle said. “We have people looking, so we be patient and let them. Acting just for the sake of doing something is borrowing trouble when we already have enough.”

All the major temples in Greenstone fronted the Divine Square but the of their space occupied extensive chunks of the temple district in sprawling, multi-building complexes. The temple of Purity was no different, with a number of sizeable buildings spread out over its spacious grounds. A priestess of Purity, Anisa Lasalle, walked through those grounds to a construction site in the early stages of adding a new building the temple’s collection.

On site was a foreman’s office made of what looked like hastily thrown together materials. Anyone with the right knowledge and the ability to see magic would realise that time, effort and expense had been put into the powerful protections against eavesdropping

built into the structure. Should anyone enquire, it was a sound-suppressing measure, allowing the foreman to hold meeting with the church representatives in peace and quiet.

After stepping inside the building, Anisa glanced around, sensing for gaps in the sound-shielding magic but finding it thorough and intact. The other occupant of the room looked every bit the ordinary construction foreman, yet she looked at him with a distaste undue a simple tradesperson.

“Well?” The man asked.

“Your thrown-together plan has been lucky enough to work,” Anisa said. “All the attention is on the five you seeded. No one has even considered that your true agents exist to look for. We suggest you restrict your activities for the moment, so as to not risk exposure.”

“Agreed,” the man said. “The next stage is reliant on remaining unnoticed.”

“You are certain that Bahadir will send people into another astral space?”

“Bahadir’s people are loyal and discreet, but the people they work with are not always the same. Our information is solid.”

“And this other astral space is still of sufficient scale to do as promised?”

“Oh, yes,” the foreman said. “It’s not the prize the desert astral space would have been, but still a very welcome one. As for the secondary effects of our claiming it, they will be more than enough to meet your needs. Better, in fact, since you won’t need to evacuate your people as far.”

“We are evacuating no one,” Anisa said. “It would arouse too much suspicion.”

“I admire your conviction,” he said. “After the adventurers have returned from this new astral space, we will need to become more active to carry out the next step. The risk of some of our agents being exposed during this phase is high.”

“They cannot be allowed to talk,” Anisa said.

“Again, we are in agreement,” he said. “We have more star seeds and any of our people who know anything will be implanted.”

“See that they are,” Anisa said. “We’ll speak again after the first stage is complete.”

“I look forward to it, priestess.”

“I don’t.”

She swept over to the door, flung it open and left, as if rushing to escape a trapped stench.

Chapter 124: It's About How You Use It

While a cabal of the city's most powerful plotted to get their hands on Thadwick Mercer and the other five, Thadwick's sister was on her family's boat with Jason. Jason and Cassandra were – if the half-dozen Mercer family staff were discounted – all alone on the open water. The vessel was the size of some billionaire's yacht, to the point that Jason suspected the sails it boasted to be vestigial. It was made of wood but was a far cry from the wooden ships Jason knew. White paint and smooth lacquer, seemingly impervious to the seawater and salty air, gave it a feel more akin to a contemporary pleasure craft.

There was a sunken lounging area in the middle of the foredeck. It was a square space, lined with seating on all sides and sporting a glass table in the middle. A huge parasol was affixed to the centre of the table to offer shade.

"This was a very good idea," Jason said. "I'm so glad you offered. Everything has been sadness, frustration and grief lately."

"My thoughts exactly," Cassandra said. "First the lost people to the expedition, now these outsiders with their inquiry are pushing to hand Thadwick over to them."

"For what?" Jason asked.

"They think something was done to him and want him examined by their own people when ours have already looked him over quite thoroughly. Mother is considering having Thadwick leave until everything has blown over. You haven't heard anything about it from the gold-ranker, have you?"

"Emir's involved in it? I haven't seen him for days. If nothing else, I've been caught up trying to get my new indenture to listen to me."

"Things not going well with your first indenture?" Cassandra asked.

"I'm here to forget about that," Jason said, "not talk about it."

"I thought you were here for me?" she said provocatively.

"Nope," Jason said with weary shamelessness. "You are a very welcome addendum to what is primarily an escape plan. I just hope you don't take on the usual role of beautiful women in escape plans and betray me at a critical moment."

"What kind of critical moment would I betray you in?" Cassandra asked.

"Well," Jason said, "the kind that has a hammock, for preference. I'm sure saw I spied a hammock hanging up somewhere when I came aboard."

"Was it big enough for two?" Cassandra asked.

"You know, now that you bring it up, I actually think it was."

She let out a relaxed chuckle.

“Even if it wasn’t,” she said, “it will be by the time we wander over there.”

The staff were discretely out of sight, but Jason could sense their auras.

“That must have been a very strange way to grow up,” he said. “Never having a truly private moment.”

“It teaches you to put on a façade,” she said. “One that takes an unusual person to shake.”

“Shaking it isn’t the trick,” Jason said. “You need to make the person want to come out from behind it. You have to be tantalising.”

“That’s what you are, is it?”

“I think I have my moments,” he said. “You’ll have to tell me.”

“Where is it exactly that you learned your particular way of handling people?” she asked.

“Private school.”

“Private school?”

“Yes. I grew up on a rather pleasant little stretch of coastline. Just a little town, tourists in the summer.”

“Tourists?”

“Taking a holiday where I come from is a lot cheaper and easier than it is here. It isn’t just the wealthy who can do it, although they certainly do it best. The less affluent participating in such activities are called tourists.”

“Do they have something to do with your private school?”

“Definitely not. Around thirty years or so back, a lot of wealthy people looked at our lovely stretch of coast and the conveniently placed local highway and decided to move in. Being rich folk, of course, they had no interest in our humble little town. Small, exclusive communities started popping up around us like mushrooms after the rain. Swanky summer homes and the kind of accommodation you can only afford if you own a boat like this one.”

“It doesn’t really rain here,” she said. “I’ll have to take your word on the mushrooms.”

“I’m trustworthy,” Jason said. “I just don’t seem like it because seeming trustworthy is suspicious.”

“You can be an unnecessarily convoluted man.”

“Thank you. Anyway, a lot of these rich people would only hang about for the summer, but enough stayed that they needed a place for their children to go to school. Thus, the Casselton Educational Institute was formed. Excellent teachers, quality

education. Exorbitant cost. Everyone of means in the region sent their children there, from the first day of school until they were sent off to university.”

“Education is more prominent in your homeland, isn’t it?” Cassandra asked.

“For now. The government keeps taking away money from the public schools to give to the wealthy private ones, but they haven’t finished the job quite yet.”

Cassandra didn’t need to ask why; power dynamics were universal across worlds.

“Now, we weren’t amongst the richest of the rich,” Jason continued, “but my family did very well for themselves. My mother got in property sales early, making quite the bundle on the influx of wealthy buyers. My father is a landscape architect and had a strong hand in literally shaping the new communities. Between them, they sold and/or designed most of the region.”

“So your family had money enough to send you to this fancy school.”

“I don’t look like most of the children who went to that school. My father’s parents came from another land and we only have humans where I come from. Instead of looking down on elves or leonids or whoever, people isolate and exclude by ethnicity.”

“That sounds foolish.”

“It is. It’s getting better, but there are always these undercurrents of prejudice, coming out in little ways most people don’t even notice. It’s like constantly being pricked with needles and being accused of making a fuss if you have the gall to point it out.”

“That doesn’t sound delightful,” she said.

“You get used to it. That’s just the background issue, though. The more specific problem was my older brother.”

“He made it hard for you?”

“Not intentionally, which made it all the more difficult to deal with. You see, my brother is excellent with people. He’s the handsome one, the charming one. The obedient one. He can just go with the flow, let things pass without questioning. He has a way of intuiting what people want and becoming that. A social chameleon. Do you have chameleons here?”

“We do,” Cassandra said.

“Well, he is one, socially speaking. He doesn’t manipulate people, not consciously. He just likes people and people like him. He went down very well with the wealthy families, who liked how unprejudiced they looked if their children had a multiethnic friend. It saved them from getting one themselves.”

“Let me guess,” Cassandra said. “One outsider friend was just the right amount, with a second one being surplus to requirements.”

"Exactly," Jason said. "It sounds like rich families are the same wherever you go."

"The way you describe your brother reminds me of Beth Cavendish," Cassandra said.

"You've met her, yes?"

"I have," Jason said.

"There aren't a lot of non-human families at the peak of Greenstone society, which doesn't always look good when you're dealing with global training partners. Beth is something of an ideal, which makes people want to rope her in. She's very socially adroit, in a more subtle fashion than you. Similar to your brother, I suspect."

"Are you saying I don't smoothly fit in?"

"Your approach to socialising is like tossing snakes into a ballroom."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he said innocently.

"My mother said that the first time you met her, you denied being in a group with some of the city's most powerful people and claimed to have won a raffle."

"I forgot about that, he said with a chuckle. "You're right about being socially adroit, though. I never had Kaito's – that's my brother's name, Kaito. I never had his skill for getting along. I just can't seem to help challenging and provoking."

"Yes, we've all noticed."

"Shush, you," he said, putting a finger to her lips. She kissed it and pushed it away.

"I was one foreign boy too many," he continued, "despite not being foreign at all. Kaito is a year older than me, so as far as the other kids were concerned, I was a disappointing rehash of the well-received original. I only had one real friend. The literal girl next door. Her name is Amy and we grew up together."

"Who you fell in love with, obviously," Cassandra said.

"Oh, it wasn't just love," Jason said. "It was eighties power-ballad love."

"I have no idea what that means," she said.

"Imagine a man with long hair, no shirt, open vest and leather pants, walking into the ocean while singing a song."

"That sounds like an insane person."

"Yes," Jason agreed. "It was that kind of love."

"It came to a tragic end?"

"She married my brother."

"That must have hurt."

"I reacted poorly, I'll admit," Jason said, "but that's a story for another day. When we were in school, my brother cast a long shadow and I never had his knack for becoming what people wanted. It turned out that my knack was for getting people to do what I

wanted. At least for a little while, until they realised what I did and got cross. They had no interest in being my friends, though, and I quickly stopped caring what a bunch of entitled rich kids thought about me.”

“It’s been my experience,” Cassandra said, “that things can become quite political when you gather enough wealthy children together.”

“That’s been my experience as well,” Jason said. “There and here. Speaking of entitled rich kids, how is your brother doing? You said people were looking to study him.”

Cassandra nodded, unhappily.

“Things had been going so well with him after the expedition. He’s been training non-stop, actually building the skills he should have developed long ago. Mother and father are thrilled. Or they would be if it weren’t for the rumours going around, which is why people want to take him away and start probing him.”

“What kind of rumours?” Jason asked. “I’ve been too busy to keep an ear out, lately.”

“Your friend Bahadir brought tracking stones for all the members of the expedition, first to rescue survivors, then recover the fallen. There were five people, my brother included, whose tracking stones lost track of them. They were still found, all severely hurt. Now people are saying that something was done to them in the time they couldn’t be tracked and they were left to be found.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s frustrating,” she said. “Thadwick is finally turning into the person we always hoped he would become and people found an all-new way to harass him. They say the changes to his personality are some kind of magical parasite.”

“I know from experience that being thrust into wild and unexpected danger can see you come out the other side different. I’m not the man I was before coming here. I’ve seen dangers and been driven to become as prepared as I can be for the next time. It makes sense to me that Thadwick experience something similar.”

“Thank you,” she said, leaning into him. “I know you and he never got along and I thought that might taint your judgement.”

“Hopefully, I’m growing as a person. Have the other four been experiencing similar problems?”

“They have,” she said. “To the point that they felt the need to all leave their old teams and form a new one together.”

“That will only deepen the rumours.”

“I know, but Thadwick seems more settled this way. Go back to talking about your school; I want to hear more.”

“Well, there’s not much to tell, really. I learned two lessons about people that have always held true, in my world or yours. One was that people really like to fill in the gaps in a story. You give someone the right selection of facts and you don’t have to lie to them. They’ll connect the pieces in accordance with their own beliefs and lie to themselves for you.”

“Wouldn’t that make people wary of you, once they figure out what you’re doing?”

“That’s where the second lesson comes in,” Jason said. “When someone believes something, they believe it hard. Too hard. They’ll dismiss good evidence that contradicts their belief and accept spurious evidence that supports it. So, in their mind, if you’re wrong, they’re very wrong, and the whole point is that their thoughts don’t go down that path.”

“That sounds like something that could get out of hand,” Cassandra said.

“Oh, yes,” Jason said. “These realisations were far from original revelations. People have been using them in my world for thousands of years, to rather disastrous effect.”

“So, why use them?”

“Amy used to ask me the same thing. People liked her better than me.”

“What did you tell her?”

“It’s what I have,” he said. “Like any tool, it’s about how you use it. A hammer can build a house or club someone to death.”

“Did it make you any more friends?”

“I would more say it gave me an accepted position in the social landscape. I’ve learned to take a quality over quantity approach to personal relationships,” he said. “Look at you, for example. Every eligible young man in the city hates my guts because of you, and so they should. You are spectacular by any metric.”

“Thank you. But what about this Amy girl? It doesn’t sound like she was too spectacular.”

“She was,” Jason said. “Still is, presumably. I’ve known her for most of my life and there’s no one I understand better. She was absolutely worth falling in love with, which only became a problem when my brother finally noticed that fact.”

“If you knew her so well, why didn’t you see it coming?”

“I told you: people will dismiss good evidence if the bad evidence tells them what they want to hear. I’m no more immune to that than anyone.”

“You seem to have taken it well.”

“I can talk about it, now,” he said. “At the time, I blew up my whole life, forming an ever-deepening vortex of mediocrity. Banal job, no real friends. A series of relationships you could see the end of before they began.”

He flashed her a wry smile.

“Coming to an alternate world was the best thing that ever happened to me,” he said. “Of course, nine of the ten worst things that ever happened to me happened here. Still, completely worth. I’m happy with the balance.”

“Well,” Cassandra said. “Maybe we can go find that hammock and tilt the scale.”

Chapter 125:

We End Here

As a week of ongoing memorial services came to a close, the adventuring community fell into a sober silence. The Adventure Society campus was quiet and, for the first time Jason had seen, largely occupied by adventurers who didn't come from the upper echelons of Greenstone society.

Jason had learned to recognise the upper crust adventurers over time. Many he knew by sight, although the quality of their gear was an even better indicator. The people he saw roaming the campus tended towards plain, functional equipment; more value-for-money than the highest performing gear.

There was a pregnant pause in the wake of the disastrous expedition, while people awaited word of what the inquiry would choose to do. In the absence of the usual dominating forces, frequently overlooked adventurers were coming to the fore. These were the adventurers who would never have gotten a place on the expedition and, in the absence of those who did, stepped in to fill the gap. While the expedition was now back, the city's most powerful families were licking their wounds and awaiting the inquiry results. The adventurers newly flourishing in their place were left free to continue.

Belinda started working with Clive at the Magic Society. He took her in and showed her what he was expecting from her while things were still quiet for him. Once he was finally allowed access to what the expedition had brought back, he expected to become very busy. At that point, he would need her to have already grasped the basics of her new job.

For his own preparations, he reviewed works on astral magic from the Magic Society's library, as well as his own collection. Although it suited his purposes, he was rather dismayed at their availability. The people already working on the materials brought back really should have been accessing the astral magic texts quite heavily.

The incompetence of his fellows allowed Clive to put together a quick-reference library of astral magic to help his own investigation, once he had access to the materials. He also put together some theory primers for Belinda, to fill in the gaps in her patchwork education. Whenever Clive had no specific tasks for her, she could dive into the list.

Jason, in the meantime, introduced Sophie to the training cycle that Rufus, Gary and Farrah had introduced to him. Some of it, like the meditation training and the weightlifting, was new. Other things, like the parkour and the observation training, she had been doing some version of for years.

Because she could outperform him in certain aspects of the training, it was colouring her view of his ability in the others. She was self-sufficient by nature, more used to finding her own way through things than having someone instruct her. She hadn't had anything like a teacher since her father had died and was resisting it now.

In one of the cloud palace's meditation rooms, Jason was instructing her on using meditation techniques to gain better control of the mana within her body. They were sitting on the soft cloud floor, cross-legged and face to face.

"I can actively move the mana around my body," Sophie was arguing. "Taking control feels better. Stronger."

"This technique isn't about strength or control," Jason said. "It's about mapping out how the mana flows within the body. You need to be patient, sense how the mana moves on its own. Exercising control before gaining an understanding will do more harm than good."

"It doesn't feel right," she said. "It really feels like I should be doing it my way."

Jason ran his hands over his face, taking a deep, calming breath. He got to his feet.

"That's enough for today, I think," he said.

"That's it?" she asked.

"I don't think continuing will be very productive."

She lightly hopped up to her feet.

"So, if I don't do everything the way you want, you just give up?"

"Meditation is about achieving a useful state of mind," Jason said. "If we have fundamentally opposed positions on what you need to achieve then we get nowhere. Letting it go and starting fresh tomorrow will achieve more than forcing the issue."

Their respective suites were close together in the guest wing, so they walked together as they returned, albeit in silence. They encountered Clive and Belinda on the way, who easily spotted the tension. Jason gave them a curt nod of greeting before disappearing into his suite.

Clive frowned as he looked at the door through which Jason had passed through, then at the dissatisfied expression on Sophie's face.

"I think it's time we had a little talk," he said. "Do you have a moment to discuss something?"

She gave him a wary, assessing look before nodding and heading into the suite she shared with Belinda.

"She means 'of course, please do come in,'" Belinda said.

“That’s the impression I was getting,” he said, Belinda laughing as they followed Sophie inside to the main lounge in the centre of their suite. Sophie took a chilled bottle of water from a cooler cabinet and fell into a couch while Clive walked over and sat down in a chair opposite, across a low refreshments table from her.

“So what is it?” Sophie asked as Belinda sat down beside her. Clive looked Sophie straight in the eye.

“We told you that we were given a choice of awakening stones and Jason chose the one that gave you your aura.”

“I remember.”

“Jason is an affliction specialist and that stone was almost certain to give you some ability that would be bad for him if you ended up on the opposite sides of a fight again. Which is exactly what it did.”

“So?” Belinda asked.

“He wants me to ask why,” Sophie said.

“Yes,” Clive acknowledged. “I asked him why he would choose that stone myself.”

“And?” Sophie asked.

“He said that three men had gone to considerable lengths to control your destiny. Cole Silva lost his chance when Lucian Lamprey became involved. Lamprey lost his chance when Jason claimed your indenture. I didn’t know who the third man was, though.”

“Asano is the third man,” Sophie said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “He told me the same thing. And that’s why he chose that stone. It makes it a little harder for him to enforce his grip on you.”

“I never asked him to be my protector,” Sophie said.

“He doesn’t want to be,” Clive said. “He’s giving you the tools to you need to protect yourself.”

“He thinks he’s my hero?”

“He is your hero,” Clive said. “Throwing you through a portal and never thinking about you again would have fulfilled whatever responsibility he felt toward you, and not many of us would have done that much for you. But he doesn't think like me and he's decided this is the right thing to do.”

He shook his head disbelievingly before continuing.

“Do you even understand what he's paid, literally and figuratively, to put you in the position you are now? He stood up to the directors of both the Adventure Society and the Magic Society. He actually stood in front of each and told them that he was taking you out of their hands. I wouldn't have done that. The idea of doing that would never have entered

my head. I don't think you're worth what he's done for you, but when Jason decides to do something, he goes all the way. He decided to help you, which is why you're here instead of chained to a bed somewhere with a glazed look in your eye."

"I didn't ask for any of that," Sophie said.

"And you don't deserve it," Clive said. "Not everything he's done for you. It's past time you started to show him some gratitude."

"You make him out like he's this great guy," Sophie said, "but I've seen plenty of lying, scheming manipulators. He fits right in."

"Yes, he does," Clive said. "And look what his schemes and manipulations have done."

Clive stood up.

"I've said my piece; take it or ignore it as you please. I'll see you tomorrow, Belinda."

He walked out of the suite, leaving Sophie and Belinda alone.

Belinda looked at Sophie, caught up in thought. Sophie turned and met her gaze.

"What do you think?" Sophie asked.

Belinda thought for a while before answering.

"Maybe Asano needs to feel powerful. To prove to himself he can make something a little less awful when awful is in abundant supply. We both know what it's like to be stuck in the mud, powerless to do anything about it."

"People don't help other people to feel in control," Sophie said. "They push those people down."

"Jory doesn't," Belinda said. "Look at what he's done to help people. I think maybe Asano is like that. And if he is, then what he's done for us is really incredible."

"So I should go fawning after Asano, now?"

"No," Belinda said. "But maybe not treat everything he says and does like it's part of some scheme to screw you over. He's had every chance to hurt us but everything he's done has helped us. At least give him the chance to prove he's actually trying to do right by you. Maybe even let him do it."

"If he's such a good guy, then why does he always act shady?"

"Maybe he realised you'd find a good-guy even more suspicious and didn't want you running for the hills."

Sophie's brow furrowed as she thought it over.

"Yeah," she acknowledged with a nod. "I guess I would have."

She got to her feet.

"I'll go talk to him," she said. "Maybe I can clear the air a little. Hear him out with an open mind, at least."

Belinda gave her an encouraging smile.

"That sounds sensible," she said. "I think we've been scrambling for so long that we may have lost the knack for sensible and patient."

Sophie went out into the hall, seeing Rufus just leaving Jason's suite.

"Is he in?" she asked.

"He is, but I'd leave him be, just for now. I just let him know that he's been demoted to one star."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"It means that he just went from the highest rank he could have to the lowest."

"Why?"

"The inquiry in the Adventure Society."

"I thought they were just looking at that expedition," Sophie said.

"They're doing a full audit of the local branch, looking at everything and everyone. They just announced a sweeping wave of demotions, including Jason's."

"He doesn't seem like the kind that would bother."

"Yeah," Rufus said. "Not seeming bothered is something he's good at."

Jason looked out from his terrace, the late afternoon sun shining over the ocean. He had been expecting to lose one star, but two was a blow. Rufus had once again told him that it didn't matter, that soon enough he would be bronze and could start over at a new rank. It still felt like a repudiation of everything he felt he'd achieved. He knew he'd done some contentious things but he believed he was a good adventurer. Until the moment Rufus walked in, he had the stars to prove it.

Jason vaulted over the edge of the terrace, his cloak appearing around him. After floating down to a lower level of the palace he made his way to the shore and set off through the Adventure Society campus.

When he reached the marshalling yard he found a throng of people. Rows of bulletin boards had been set up, listing out demotions. A large notice at the front instructed the demoted to go to the administration building to have the stars removed from their badges. Jason went through the rows, shoulder to shoulder with people as he looked for his name. He didn't think Rufus had gotten it wrong, but he needed to see for himself. He noticed as he browsed through the names that many weren't just demoted but had their membership revoked entirely.

He found his name. Jason Asano. Old rank: three stars. New rank: one star. He let out a weary breath, then extricated himself from the crowd. He looked in the direction of the Adventure Society and saw that not many people heading there to confirm their demotion. He overheard talk that people wouldn't stand for it and the decision would be overturned. He heard more than one assertion that they would refuse to confirm the demotion until all the politics had played out.

Jason made his way to the administration building where a long bench had been set up. There were four Adventure Society officials behind it, with people queuing up in front. The officials were each using a wedge-shaped magical stone to remove stars from badges. None of the queues were long and Jason joined the one that led to Vincent.

"Rufus found you, then," Vincent said when Jason reached the front.

"He did."

"Sorry about this."

Jason handed over his badge, watching the third star, then the second disappear as Vincent touched it twice with his stone. Jason took it back and left. Standing outside the admin building, he had no interest in going back to the cloud palace. Setting his feet in the direction of the jobs hall, he strode off. He wanted to kill something.

After four days in the delta, he met a member of the Geller family and discovering that people thought he had gone missing.

"No," Jason had told the man. "I'm just doing adventure notices. Tell them I'm fine."

It was another week before he returned to the city. He went straight to the jobs hall, handing over the contract he had originally taken, along with a stack of completed adventure board notices. As he made his way across the Adventure Society campus, he heard Cassandra call out his name. She was rushing to catch up to him but became hesitant as she drew closer.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I've been trying to find you," she said. "I heard you were out in the delta."

"I was."

"Jason, I..."

She looked around. They were standing in an open area of grass, with very few people in sight. Ever since the expedition, far fewer people were to be found at the campus, with the demotions only making it worse.

"What is it?" he asked, as if the distance she kept between them didn't tell him what she was about to say.

"I have to end things. Between you and I."

He was going to ask why, but his brain beat his mouth.

"The demotion," he said.

"I've received a lot of privileges, being part of my family," she said. Her beautiful face was sunken, reluctant, but determined. "There are responsibilities that come with it, too. I have to find a match that makes the family stronger."

"I see."

"Your lack of background always made it hard to convince the family. Mother helped. Your connections to the Gellers and the Vitesse adventurers were good and your rapid rise silenced a lot of voices. Dropping to one star, though. I have to find someone reliable."

"You think I'm unreliable?" he asked.

"You know I don't. I argued against it, but it was decided. We end here."

"Just like that."

"I didn't want this," she said. "They're being short-sighted, I know."

"But they're family," Jason said.

"Yes," she said softly.

She was holding her hands in front of her, vulnerability showing in what was usually an unassailable countenance. He stepped closer, gently taking her hands in his.

"Alright," he said.

"Alright?" she asked.

"Not really, but yes."

"Just like that?"

"What did you expect?" he asked.

"I don't know. Maybe I thought you'd say that nobles are stupid and do something reckless and impulsive."

"That would only hurt you and accomplish nothing," he said. "Take it from someone who let a failed relationship drive a wedge between him and his family."

He leaned in, gently kissed her and stepped back, letting go of her hands. His eyes glistened with tears but he had a familiar, impish grin.

"You're going to miss me, Cassandra Mercer."

"I know."

He turned and walked away, without looking back.

Chapter 126:

Poison Pill

It was late morning, the sun high in the sky. Clive arrived at the cloud palace, finding someone standing near the platform that touched the shore.

“Acolyte Pellin,” he greeted.

“Mister Standish,” she greeted in return.

“Are you waiting for something?” he asked.

“I’m waiting for Mr Asano,” she said. “I’m going to deliver a gift from my goddess, as promised.”

“Jason has been gone for almost two weeks,” Clive said. “I take it, as an acolyte of Knowledge, that you know something I don’t.”

“He’s on the Adventure Society campus right now,” she said. “He’s speaking with Cassandra Mercer and will be done shortly.”

Clive looked up at the towering cloud palace.

“Then I think I’ll wait as well,” he said. “My days have been busy, but I can spare a few minutes. It must be an odd experience, having knowledge placed into your mind by your goddess.”

“I’m told the sensation is similar to using a skill book,” Gabrielle said. “I’ve never used one myself but it’s gentler than a skill book, from what I’m told. The goddess doesn’t impart so much information at once.”

“I always imagined it would be disconcerting,” he said. “I’ve spent so much of my life in pursuit of knowledge that having it just turn up in my head would be quite alarming.”

“The goddess is aware of your pursuit, Mr Standish, and she loves you for it.”

“Oh, um... thanks?”

“He’s here,” she said, turning away from Clive.

Clive followed her gaze to spot, spotting Jason and becoming slightly alarmed at what he saw. Jason was still wearing his battle robes, which he rarely did in the city. His gaze was normally sharp and focused or roaming and observant, but today he looked puffy-eyed and disoriented.

“I don’t suppose your goddess told you if he’s been drinking?” Clive asked.

“He hasn’t,” Gabrielle said. “Cassandra Mercer just ended their relationship.”

“Oh,” Clive said sadly, then turned a narrow gaze on Gabrielle. “I think I’m starting to understand why Jason complains about your goddess and privacy.”

Gabrielle gave Clive a disapproving glare.

“She is Knowledge,” Gabrielle said. “Knowledge is hers to disseminate as she sees fit.”

Jason drew closer, giving Clive a sad and tired smile.

“G’day Clive; it’s been a while.”

He greeted Gabrielle with a nod. “Acolyte.”

“Mr Asano.”

Jason turned back to Clive.

“They must be keeping you busy at the Magic Society by now.”

“They are,” Clive said. “I don’t have answers, yet, but I’m making progress.”

“How’s your new assistant?”

“She has some unusual gaps in her knowledge, but she works hard and learns fast. Everything I could hope for.”

“Good. Have they been talking about bringing in more astral magic specialists?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Clive asked.

“Heard what?” Jason asked. “I’ve been chasing monsters through wetlands for two weeks.”

“The events in our astral space were not unique. There have been incidents in other astral spaces all around the world.”

“That’s disturbing,” Jason said. His unfocused expression grew sharp as his muddled brain started turning over.

“It explains why there were no opponents above silver in ours for an operation of that scale,” he said. “Whoever they are, they needed their high-rankers for the high-magic areas. There was no reason to anticipate gold-rank adventurers here, so they could save them for other regions.”

“That’s been the consensus,” Clive said. “At least it means that if I don’t manage to unveil their intentions, many others are working on the problem elsewhere.”

“Don’t talk yourself down, Clive,” Jason said. “If you’re not convinced you have the goods, I’ll be convinced for you. You’ll get there.”

“Thank you,” Clive said. “Look, I have to go speak with Rufus but I wanted to check in on you. You’ve had people worried, taking off without a word like that.”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I’m fine, as you see.”

“Yes,” Clive said, unconvinced. “It’s good to see you back.”

Clive cast an uncertain gaze at Gabrielle.

“I’m sorry about Cassandra, Jason.”

Jason’s face went very still, then turned slowly on the acolyte.

“Thank you, Clive,” he said, voice flinty as his eyes locked onto Gabrielle. “Come find me when you have some free time. We’ll get a drink.”

“It may be a little while but that sounds good,” Clive said. He set out across the cloud bridge to enter the palace.

“I shouldn’t have told him that,” Gabrielle said apologetically.

“You shouldn’t even know about it. I know I’ve been jokey about your goddess and her privacy issues but she had no right to tell you that.”

Gabrielle’s expression went stiff.

“She’s a goddess, Mr Asano. She has whatever rights she wants.”

“I’d respond to that, but she already knows what I have to say because I do. In case she doesn’t tell you, it involved a lot of bad language and several physiologically implausible suggestions.”

“You should show her more respect.”

“Respect is earned.”

“She earned it by being a goddess.”

“That’s a tyrant’s reasoning. If you’ll excuse me, I’m leaving.”

“Wait. I came here to give you something.”

She had a small satchel slung over her shoulder, from which she took a wooden case. Holding it out, she opened it to reveal three objects in the padded interior. Two were awakening stones and the other a small stone square. It looked similar to the world-phoenix token in Jason’s inventory, but a washed-out blue colour instead of vibrant red.

“She knows that you will confront the people responsible for the death of your friend,” Gabrielle said. “She expects you to encounter them more than once. She chose a gift that would better prepare you for those encounters.”

Jason touched a hand to the first awakening stone.

Item: [Divine Awakening Stone of Inevitability] (transcendent rank, epic)

An awakening stone crafted by a god to bestow a specific aura power. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Doom essence, unawakened doom essence ability, no aura essence ability.
 - Effect: Awakens the aura essence ability [Inescapable Doom].
 - You have 3 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You do not meet the requirements to use this item.
-

Jason frowned at the description, which troubled him in several regards. He focused on the listed ability.

Ability: [Inevitable Demise] (Doom)

- Aura (magic).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Effect (iron): Enemies within the aura have any affliction immunities, including inherent immunities, treated as complete resistance. This resistance can be reduced by ordinary resistance-reduction effects. This is a magic effect.

He wasn't able to use the stone as each person could only awaken the one aura. Presuming the tablet was some kind of solution to that, it was the next object he touched. the square tablet.

Item: [Soul-Purgation Tablet (aura)] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (consumable, ???).

- Effect: ???.
- Uses remaining: 1/1.
- You meet the requirements to use this item. Use Y/N?

Like the world-phoenix token, this item was too powerful for Jason's ability to discern its characteristics. After looking at it for a moment, the description changed.

Item: [Soul-Purgation Tablet (aura)] (transcendent rank, legendary)

A tablet with the power to remove an aura essence ability. Cannot be forcibly used on another by any means. (consumable, soul-shaping).

- Requirements: Awakened aura essence ability.
- Effect: Removes an existing aura essence ability.
- Uses remaining: 1/1.

- **Warning:** Information on this ability has been provided by an outside source and cannot be verified.

- You meet the requirements to use this item. Use Y/N?

He didn't even realise that removing an essence ability was even possible, unless it was a god taking away what they'd given out themselves. After looking over the description for a moment, he touched the second awakening stone.

Item: [Divine Awakening Stone of Persistence] (transcendent rank, rare)

An awakening stone crafted by a god to bestow a specific spell. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Dark essence, unawakened dark essence ability.
 - Effect: Awakens the spell essence ability [Dark Descent].
 - You have 3 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You meet the requirements to use this item. Use Y/N?
-

Jason checked the ability.

Ability: [Curse of Isolation] (Dark)

- Spell (curse, magic).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Effect (iron): This spell cannot be resisted. Periodically inflicts an instance of [Dark Descent]; this is a curse effect.
 - [Dark Descent] (affliction, magic, stacking): Target has their perception distance, the effect of their perception ability and resistance to all afflictions reduced by a small amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

The three items would make Jason much more effective against enemies immune to his afflictions. Various types of monsters were not flesh and blood, but the abilities the two stones offered would allow him to act as if they were. Given the army of constructs he heard about from the expedition members, if he really did encounter them then such abilities would be immensely useful.

"According to the goddess," Gabrielle said, "your current abilities are ill-suited to your fated enemies. These gifts were crafted by her specifically to rectify this. She said you would recognise their usefulness."

"Yeah," he said. "It's a shiny red apple, alright."

He snapped the case shut in Gabrielle's hands.

"Thanks, but no thanks. She chose the moment to offer me this, didn't she?"

"She said you could use some good news."

"No," he said, voice tired. "She sent you now because I'm emotional and vulnerable to making a rash decision."

Gabrielle glared at Jason.

"My goddess doesn't lie."

"She has all the knowledge in the world and near-infinite power," Jason said. "I bet the god of deceit looks at her with admiration."

Gabrielle shoved the box back into her bag and conjured a heavy iron staff into her hand. She raised the end to just under Jason's chin.

"Watch your words, Jason Asano. I will only tolerate them so far."

He gave her a look of weary disdain. "This is the part where your boss tells you to leave."

She opened her mouth to respond, then froze.

"See?" he asked. "I don't know what possible use I am to her but she wants me for something. For all I know, she's provoking this response because she wants me angry. I'm not stupid enough to think I can out-game her. I do think she made a genuine mistake here, though. She told me once that people constantly surprise her, and I think that's true. She knows everything, but that gives her a blind spot. She is as close to anyone to seeing a person's optimal choice in any situation, yet we constantly act against our own interest. It must drive her crazy."

Gabrielle's agitation was rising while Jason stood in front of her, just looking tired.

"You think to know my goddess? You think she has flaws for the likes of you to see?"

"Sure," Jason said. "Gods are big-picture types, older than we can imagine. I bet they have all kinds of trouble understanding the thoughts of short-lived wretches like us."

"Blasphemer!"

"Yeah," Jason said. "It's kind of my thing."

Again Gabrielle opened her mouth to speak only to stop. Knowledge appeared in person next to Gabrielle, placing a hand on her shoulder.

"That's enough dear," she said. "Time to run along back to the temple."

"Yes, Goddess," Gabrielle said, bowing her head before walking away with an angry stride.

As in their last meeting, the goddess looked like an ordinary person. Despite this, she radiated glory, even with her aura fully suppressed.

"I made a mistake, here," she said.

“Unless that’s what you want me to think,” Jason said.

“You are making a mistake as well,” she said. “The same one Sophie Wexler has been making. Don’t push away an incredible opportunity out of an instinctive mistrust.”

“If I was her, I wouldn’t trust me either.”

“So suspicious. You think my gift is a poison pill.”

“If you wanted to give me something to help me deal with the people who killed Farrah, you could just tell me where to find them.”

“You know better than that,” she said. “If I start telling mortals how to solve all their problems, where does it end? If I tell them how to fix everything, then life becomes a puppet show where I hold all the strings. The other gods would not stand for that and neither would you.”

“I can’t fight a god.”

“We both know it wouldn’t stop you from trying. I may not tell people the things I know, so as to let them lead their lives, but I do make exceptions for my followers.”

“You want me to worship you? You can’t seriously think I would.”

“Don’t be so hasty. Come into my church in full faith and trust and I will tell you about the people who killed Farrah.”

“Don’t say her name.”

“I’ll tell you who killed your friend. Who they are, where they are. What they’re doing and how to stop them. All this I will give you, in return for your faith.”

“You mean obedience.”

“I am not Dominion. In faith to me, there is no obedience; only loyalty. Do not rush to reject this offer. Take the time to consider it objectively. Think of what that knowledge can do. The lives it can save. And that is not the end. Follow me and there is countless good you can do with the knowledge I will gift you.”

“Can I tell Clive about gravity?”

“You don’t understand gravity.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. I can see it.”

“You can see gravity?”

“I’m a goddess.”

“That must suck. Not a lot of hills left to climb. You must feel purposeless.”

“You cannot aggravate me, Jason Asano.”

“That’s the advantage of being mortal; I can set goals. If you want something, you have it.”

“I want you to worship me.”

“I guess you can have goals,” Jason said. “You know what I know, so you know what I think you’re full of, and where I’d like you to stick your offer.”

“You’re letting your heart rule your head. I will give you some time to consider.”

Jason gave a bitter, malevolent laugh.

“This must be frustrating for you,” he said. “You can’t predict my reactions yet know them immediately. You see how every approach you take just pushes me further away. Assuming you’re not trying to push me away for some reason I can’t see because I’m not an all-knowing immortal.”

“We will speak again when you are more reasonable.”

“But that’s why you picked now, right? I’m angry and miserable. Not thinking straight. And here you are with the handy-dandy tools to vent my rage on a nice, deserving target. I hope you really did make a mistake and this isn’t what you wanted. It makes me feel good to think of you realising how wrong this has gone, step by step. But you know that.”

“There will be times in the future when you need me, Jason Asano.”

“You know that, do you? Because it sounds like you’re just guessing.”

“Not many gods would tolerate this kind of insolence.”

“Smite me, then.”

She gave him a sad smile.

“We will talk again, Jason Asano. I hope to find that with a cooler head, you make better choices.”

She vanished, leaving Jason alone.

“I’ve got some bad news for you lady,” he said to the air. “Making bad life choices is kind of my thing.”

“You seem to have a lot of things,” Emir said, suddenly appearing next to Jason.

“I’m versatile,” Jason said. “Does no one in this world respect privacy?”

“A goddess appeared on my doorstep,” Emir said. “Did you really expect me not to take a look?”

“She let you. She wants you to tell Rufus about her offer.”

“That would be ill-advised,” Emir said. “Rufus very much wants vengeance for Farrah. He would push you hard to take the offer, making his friendship another cost of refusal.”

“Yeah, she’s sneaky,” Jason said. “She’ll probably see to it he finds out anyway.”

“What will you do if she does?”

“What I always do,” Jason said. “The best I can with what I have.”

Emir nodded.

“I have some things to talk with you about myself, but now is not the time. You haven’t even really got back yet, standing here on the doorstep. I would appreciate it if you come find me sometime in the next few days.”

“I can do that.”

Chapter 127: Let's Just Fight Monsters

Rufus opened the door to his suite to admit Clive inside.

"I thought you were busy these days," Rufus said.

"I am, which is why I needed a break. Jason's back, by the way. I just saw him outside."

Rufus frowned.

"That boy needs a talking to. You can't just wander off without telling anyone when there are monsters looking to eat you and silver rankers looking to do worse. Not to mention the woman he is meant to be teaching."

"I wouldn't go too hard," Clive said. "Cassandra Mercer just ended things with him."

"Is that why he went off? She's been coming around looking for him, right?"

"No, I mean really just ended things. As in, minutes ago."

"Oh."

"That's not what I'm here for, though," Clive said. He pulled a document folder from his storage space. "I haven't been able to figure out what they were doing in the astral space, yet, but I'm making progress. This is a list of the more unusual and specialised techniques and materials they were employing."

"I don't have any magical knowledge," Rufus said. "I can't help you decipher any of that."

"It's not about finding out what any of these things are for," Clive said, tapping on the folder. "Each of the things I've listed here is rare, distinctive, and can't be sourced locally. They include exotic materials and magical devices requiring specialised knowledge. That gives us three possibilities. Possibility one is that they have a high-ranked portal user. We can ignore that, because it's a dead end for us. The next possibility is the items being bought in via some great overland trek, to maintain secrecy by avoiding anyone."

"That's unlikely," Rufus said. "Unpopulated lands are rife with monsters that go uncultured; nomads that know the territory far better than any interlopers, plus the logistical problems and potential navigation mishaps."

"That leaves smuggling the goods in through the port in Hornis or the one here in Greenstone," Clive said. "That seems like the kind of thing an intrepid and motivated adventurer could look into."

"Yes it does," Rufus said. He took the folder and shook Clive's hand. "Thank you for this."

Clive nodded.

“Let’s just find these people.”

Sophie had been left to her own devices for almost two weeks. Jason had vanished and Belinda was off with Clive all day. She spent some of her time with Rufus, who guided her in the training loop Jason had shown her. He seemed a more comfortable and capable instructor than Jason but was distracted with his own training. There was a frenetic drive to the way he pushed himself to the limit, which at the peak of bronze rank she had no chance to match. He also went out every couple of days to hunt monsters. She asked to join him, but he told her that the monsters he was hunting were the strongest to be found in the area and she should wait for Jason’s return.

She hunted up Emir’s library or, as it turned out, libraries. They turned out to have a disappointing deficit of romantic potboilers. Lacking anything better to do, she finally turned to the meditation techniques Jason had showed her. At first she kept doing things the way that felt right to her, but she would increasingly end a session feeling tense and tired. She started trying things more like he had suggested, less self-conscious about it in his absence.

At first it felt awkward and pointless, although she felt better at the end of each session. Slowly it began to feel more natural, patience and persistence showing slight but noticeable results. She became more comfortable with the power flowing through her. At the start it had felt like a wild beast she needed to forcibly control. With each day she came to understand that greater control came through acceptance that it was a part of her, rather than an external force to be brought forcibly into line.

After two weeks, meditation had become a pleasant and comfortable part of her day. She moved her sessions from the meditation room down the hall from her suite to the terrace that wrapped around the whole guest wing. Unlike the private suite terraces, this was the one anyone with access to the guest wing could make their way onto.

Normally she would choose privacy, but in Belinda’s absence the isolation was starting to eat at her. She was happy for any chance encounter with the palace staff, who were pleasantly absent of agendas.

She was meditating in the warm sunlight when she was interrupted by Jason’s voice.

“I haven’t been a good teacher,” he said. “That was even before I left without a word.”

She opened her eyes and turned to look at him. He looked tired.

“I didn’t sense you coming,” she said.

“The benefits of aura control,” he said. “I’ve been trying too hard to control you, while telling myself I’m helping you.”

From her sitting position she rolled back, then kicked up onto her feet. She looked him up and down, his adventuring gear topped off by a bone-weary face. She had finally been ready to try opening up, only for him to skulk off. She was ready to give him an earful but he genuinely didn’t look up to it. She felt her anger dissipate, wondering if that was a side effect of all the meditation.

“It’s not all on you,” she said. “I’ve been fighting everyone, when I should be picking my enemies.”

“How about we start over?” he suggested. “I’ll show you what I know, and you help me improve where you’re already better.”

“That works out for you,” she said. “I’m better at a lot.”

Her expression had some hesitation to it but was ore open than Jason had seen, with even the ghost of a smile. It was a welcome breakthrough.

“You are better than me at a lot,” he agreed. “You’ve been surviving the hard way your whole life. Six months ago, I was assistant manager at a retail bulk office supplier.”

“I don’t know what that is.”

“Probably for the best,” Jason said. “So what do you say? Fresh start?”

He held out a hand and she shook it.

“I’m willing to try,” she said. “Where do we begin?”

“I’m going to get some rest,” he said. “I just got back and had a series of encounters that didn’t go well for me. Keep doing what you’re doing and tomorrow we’ll go monster hunting.”

“What kind of encounters?”

“I had a fight with my mate’s girlfriend, my girlfriend dumped me, I had a row with a goddess after she tried to scam me out of my aura power and I saw Clive. It wasn’t in that order, and the bit with Clive was fine.”

“What do you mean by a row with a goddess?”

“She’s trying to bait me into worshipping her. I’m not an expert but I’m pretty sure that’s not how worship is meant to work and we had an argument about it.”

“You mean an actual goddess?”

“Yeah, Knowledge. I assume you’ve heard of her.”

“She’s a goddess, Asano; of course I’ve heard of her. You expect me to believe that an actual goddess came down to try and recruit you to her church.”

“Sounds shady, right? Ask Emir. He was watching the whole thing, or the end, at least. Right now, I’m going to find a comfy cloud bed and try to not think about my girlfriend kicking me to the curb.”

Sophie shook her head in disbelief.

“You’re a lot to take,” she told him. “I don’t know if you’re telling the truth or lying, and I don’t know which is more insane.”

“I’m from another universe,” Jason said with a shrug. “I’m pretty sure this is my life now. Welcome aboard.”

He gestured behind him with his thumb.

“I’m going to go get some sleep.”

“It’s not even lunch time.”

“It turns out the night time was inside me all along.”

“What?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Wexler. Get ready to fight some monsters.”

Soon after, Jason was in his suite, smoke swirling around him as his clothes changed. His battle robes were replaced with a pair of silken boxers and he walked out to the balcony terrace. He took a bottle of alcohol from his inventory.

Item: [Shimmer Beet Rum] (bronze rank, common)

An alcoholic beverage brewed by the Norwich Distillery of Greenstone City. (consumable, poison).

➤ Effect: Inflicts [alcohol].

It was something he kept in his inventory for Cassandra. He pulled back his arm to throw it in the ocean but stopped and took a deep drink, straight from the bottle.

➤ Special attack [Shimmer Beet Rum] has inflicted [Alcohol] on you.

The bronze-rank beverage managed to get past his resistance, and it went down rough. Jason liked his drinks smooth and sweet, avoiding straight spirits. He looked at the bottle in his hands and took another swig.

“You look awful,” Sophie said as Jason staggered past her to fall into a soft chair. Jason replied with an incoherent groan.

“What happened to going straight to bed?” she asked. “It seems like you detoured to the liquor cabinet.”

“I needed some sleepy medicine,” he said.

“Quite a lot of it, it seems.”

“Is he hung over?” Belinda asked coming out of her bedroom and looking at Jason.

“His lady friend dropped him,” Sophie said.

Belinda looked at the line of drool dropping from the semi-conscious Jason’s mouth.

“He’s taking it well. The same day a goddess yelled at him, too.”

For her own edification, Sophie had taken Jason’s advice and sought out Emir for confirmation.

“He certainly keeps exciting company,” Emir had told her the night before. “I mean, look at us; we’re no deities, but still. A professional thief and a gold-rank adventurer? The most exciting person I knew at iron-rank was a guy named Brian who could conjure a huge metal duck.”

She had told Belinda the whole story after coming back from speaking to Emir.

“Wasn’t Asano meant to take you out and fight a monster?” Belinda asked, looking at Jason’s slumped form.

“We’re still doing that,” Jason slurred.

“I’m not sure you’re in any state to be fighting,” Sophie said.

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “I contacted a friend of mine to come along. He’ll keep you safe better than I could anyway.”

“Another ludicrously well-connected young scion?” Belinda asked. “It’s not that girl whose grandmother owned the whole section of town I grew up in, is it?”

“Beth? She’s more of an acquaintance. Humphrey’s from the Geller family. Have you heard of them?”

“Seriously?”

“I just hope he doesn’t yell at me. I had a fight with his girlfriend.”

“Blasphemy, Jason?”

“Not so loud, Humphrey.”

“She said you were proud of it!”

“If I lie and say I wasn’t, will you chastise more quietly?”

Humphrey had met Jason and Sophie outside the jobs hall.

“I thought alcohol didn’t work on you?” Humphrey asked.

“I used the bronze-rank stuff.”

“Why would you do that?”

“His lady friend broke things off,” Sophie said. “Right before he met with your lady friend, from what I gather. She’s the acolyte, right?”

“That’s right,” Humphrey said.

“Her god chose that exact moment to put your friend in Asano’s path,” Sophie said. “I’m not going to speak ill of the gods but she should have seen how that would go.”

“According to my mother, gods sometimes have trouble understanding the behaviour of people. A matter of perspective, she says. I’m sorry about Cassandra, Jason. Was it her family over the demotion?”

“Yeah.”

“I lost my second star as well, but that’s not too bad at iron rank. You and my mother got it worse.”

“Danielle got demoted?”

“Three stars down to two. At silver rank, that’s worse than losing two stars at iron.”

They went in and Humphrey made for the jobs board while Sophie was surprised by the man behind the desk.

“Bert?”

After Humphrey picked out an appropriate contract, they left the Adventure Society campus via the loop line. Jason’s gaze was fixed on the floor after looking through the windows made his stomach turn.

“I think this is the first time I’ve ridden the loop without a disguise,” Sophie said.

“Why would you wear a disguise?” Humphrey asked.

“Usually because I was on my way to or from stealing something,” Sophie said.

“Stealing something?”

“Didn’t I tell you?” Jason asked, eyes still locked on the floor. “While everyone was off on the expedition, I caught that thief everyone was talking about. This is her.”

“Why are you training her to be an adventurer?”

“Who did you think I was?” Sophie asked.

“Clive told me Jason was helping the friend of his new assistant become an adventurer,” Humphrey said.

“True, if incomplete,” Jason said. “Nice one, Clive.”

“You stole my aunt’s necklace, right off her neck,” Humphrey said to Sophie.

“Did she get it back?” Sophie asked.

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “We caught some criminal trying to sell it.”

“Not smart,” Sophie said. “High-specificity goods like that you sell in another city. Of course, we were picking stupid fences on purpose. Didn’t make any money on it, though. Takes costly preparation to rob people like you, and something that hot doesn’t sell worth a damn.”

“Speaking of another city,” Humphrey said, “Jonah and his new team were found in Hornis.”

“Wait, what?” Jason asked. “Hornis? Jonah has a new team? What about Rick? And why did you need to find him?”

“We haven’t really seen each other since the memorials have we?” Humphrey said. “I’m surprised you haven’t heard, though.”

“I’ve been away,” Jason said.

“Right,” Humphrey said. “I remember hearing one of my cousins said they met you out in the delta.”

“Let’s just fight monsters for now,” Jason said. “We can catch up when there isn’t a little man attempting to pickaxe his way out of my brain.”

Chapter 128: Damage You Shouldn't Walk Away From

Since Humphrey lacked extended movement powers and Jason's stomach lacked a tolerance for movement powers, they hitched a ride into the delta on a trade wagon for a spirit coin each. Using supply crates as furniture, they bounced along in the back of the wagon, Jason looking decidedly peaky.

They had stopped at Jory's clinic to pick up potions, at which point Jason discovered there was no easy hangover cure. Jory explained that he had one for regular hangovers, but trying it on a hangover from iron or bronze rank booze would only make things worse. It was akin to using a potion too soon after already having used one, or using a potion right after using a high-ranked spirit coin. Jason had experienced that himself, which had felt even worse than he did from the hangover.

"I think I've been spoiled by the cloud palace," Sophie said, shifting uncomfortably on her crate.

"I'd love to take a real look," Humphrey said. "I've only seen it at a distance during the memorials."

"I'm pretty sure Emir wouldn't mind you having a look around," Jason said. "What were you saying earlier, about Jonah quitting Ricks team?"

"There were five people in the expedition whose tracking stones failed," Humphrey said. "They were all found, but close to death."

"I know the ones," Jason said. "Emir wanted them watched at the recovery camp but never said why. Everything was chaos. It was Jonah, Thadwick Mercer and three I don't know. Cassandra told me about the rumours. Back before she dumped me. Were these rumours just because of the tracking stone thing?"

"It was where they started," Humphrey said. "Severe injuries have been known to change people's aura, though. Enough that it no longer matches the imprint on their badge and they can't be tracked until they get a new one."

"Is that common?" Jason asked.

"Not at all," Humphrey said. "One person experiencing that would be extraordinary. Five all at once? Beyond unlikely."

"So people think something was done to them," Jason said.

"Yes," Humphrey said. "It started on the way back to the city. They were all behaving differently to how they were before. You could pass it off as an after-effect of a brush with death, but the changes became more prominent over time, not less."

"I helped peel what was left of their clothes off them," Jason said. "They went through the kind of damage you shouldn't walk away from. It would be weird if they weren't affected."

"This wasn't just trauma," Humphrey said. "Jonah was like a different person. He was always loyal to his team, which was what happened to him in the astral space. He held off the enemy to buy time. Now he looks at them and it's like he doesn't see them. He left the team without so much as a word; he just went to the Adventure Society and had his name stricken from the team listing. He and the other four formed a new team of their own, spending all their time together."

"I will acknowledge that's waving a few pod-people red flags," Jason said.

"Pod people?" Sophie asked.

"You know. Creepy parasite thing that gets inside you and takes over."

"Is that something that happens?" she asked in horror.

"Nothing is impossible with magic," Humphrey said.

"Surely they got checked out?" Jason asked.

"They all refused," Humphrey said. "Neither the Adventure Society or the Magic Society has the right to forcibly subject them to examination without some complicated legal wrangling."

"I can't believe your mother would let it rest at that. Not when it involves a family member or an expedition she was in charge of."

"No," Humphrey said. "She didn't tell me much, beyond that steps are being taken. Before it came together, though, all five up and vanished. They were found a week later in Hornis, on a boat bound for distant shores."

"They were making a run for it?" Sophie asked. "You can't just slip out of the city and make off to Hornis when people are watching you. Believe me, I've looked into it. You either have to get passage through the port here or make an overland run through some very empty and inhospitable territory."

"Beaufort Mercer was facilitating them," Humphrey said.

"Thadwick's father," Jason said.

"Yes," Humphrey said. "My mother didn't say it explicitly, but she at least implied that Beaufort's wife was the one who tipped her off. They've been friends since they were young and I think she's at least as concerned for her son as Mother is for Jonah."

"Less interested in the family reputation than whether something is wrong with her child," Jason surmised. "Good on her."

“The Adventure Society sent that portal user who works for Emir Bahadir to send them back, although I'm not sure how willingly,” Humphrey said. “In the meantime, Mother wants me to replace Jonah on Rick's team.”

“Doesn't Rick himself already fill the armoured striker role?” Jason asked.

“Yes. They lost a ranged damage-dealer and a specialised defender. I'm not what they need. I have no idea why Mother wants me to join.”

Humphrey looked inquisitively at Jason.

“You do better than most at recognising her intentions,” Humphrey said. “What do you think?”

“I think she doesn't want you to join Rick's team at all.”

Humphrey let out a frustrated sigh.

“Always a lesson with her. So what does she really want me to do?”

“Best guess? Form your own team. Whoever it was you fought in the astral space, they're still out there. I reckon she wants people you can rely on around you for the next disaster. Also, she probably wants you to find a new front-liner for Rick.”

“She could do that herself; she doesn't need me.”

“And have you miss the chance to make some adventurer connections? Come on, Humphrey.”

Humphrey let out a groan.

“You know you sound like her sometimes,” he said.

“So who can fill the slot in Rick's team?” Jason asked.

“I don't know,” Humphrey said. “There are plenty of specialist defenders around but the only one I can think of who could stack up to Jonah is Hudson Kettering. There's no chance of peeling him out of Beth Cavendish's team.”

“No one else?” Jason asked.

“The only other person who might stack up would be Hudson's cousin, Dustin, but he's...”

Realisation dawned on Humphrey's face.

“He's what?” Jason asked.

“He's been stuck following Thadwick around,” Humphrey said. “Thadwick formally annulled that team, though.”

“One of Thadwick's lackeys? Even Rufus thinks they've got the goods. You should snatch him up for Rick before Thadwick's stink washes off and people start knocking on his door.”

Humphrey frowned.

“I wish I’d realised,” he said. “I could have spoken to Dustin before I met up with you, and now we’re heading out into the delta.”

“We’re still pretty close to the city,” Jason said. “Let me see what I can do.”

Jason checked his contacts list, which consisted of anyone he had a reasonable interaction with. This made for a long list, which he could, fortunately, organise into groups. Hudson Kettering had appeared on the adventurers list, along with the rest of Beth Cavendish’s team, when Jason had temporarily joined it for the sand barge assault. They were close enough to the city that Hudson was in range and Jason sent a voice chat request.

“Jason,” Hudson said by way of greeting. He had used Jason’s voice chat before and wasn’t surprised by it. Humphrey and Sophie were in Jason’s party and could hear his voice as well.

“Morning, Hudson,” Jason said. “I’m here with Humphrey Geller. He wants to talk to you about your cousin.”

“Dustin? If this is about probing him over Thadwick being mind-controlled or whatever, he doesn’t want to hear it.”

“That’s not it,” Humphrey said. “Good morning, Hudson. I was wondering if Dustin would have any interest in joining Rick Geller’s team. They need a quality frontman and they understand what it’s like to have one of their team members placed under suspicion.”

“Join a Geller team?” Hudson pondered. “That’s a good name to be attached to, but so was Mercer. He really took a hit for the family, being stuck to Thadwick, so we only want the best for him this time around. Real adventurers.”

“Rick is the real thing,” Humphrey said. “He’s practically obsessed with becoming stronger. I should point out that it isn’t really a Geller team anymore, though. One left to join Thadwick and they lost someone during the expedition. That leaves Rick and a pair of elf sisters.”

“Sorry to hear it,” Hudson said soberly. “We got lucky; those Vitesse adventurers covered us and paid the price. They’re friends of yours, right, Jason?”

“Yes.”

“There wasn’t a memorial for her,” Hudson said. “Her standing strong is the reason my team all got out alive and we wanted to pay our respects.”

“They’re taking her home for that,” Jason said. “We’re going to have an informal wake once things calm down, though. I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks. Humphrey, I’ll put it to Dustin and see what he thinks. I think you’ll pretty much have him once I tell him about the elf sisters.”

While Jason and Humphrey were off introducing Sophie to monster hunting, Rufus marched through the Adventure Society administration building. In the main lobby he made for the elevating platform to the upper levels. Standing next to the platform was a man in the robes of the church of knowledge, waiting patiently.

“Mr Remore,” the priest greeted him.

Rufus sighed.

“I’m busy, but your goddess knows that. State your purpose.”

“Your business is in pursuit of the people who struck down your precious team mate,” the priest said. He had a friendly look about him, his bronze rank and middle-aged appearance meant he was likely sixty or seventy years old. His voice had a sympathy that sounded completely genuine; the empathy of a clergyman.

“Unless your goddess wants to tell me who they are and where to find them, we have no business.”

“She has offered that and more to someone you count as a friend, yet that friend spurned her offer.”

The frown on Rufus’ face told the priest that Rufus was far from willing to be jerked around.

“You have my attention,” Rufus said.

“Jason Asano was offered all the answers you seek, but he refused.”

“Why?”

“You know the man,” the priest said. “You know he can be mistrusting toward figures of authority.”

“What was the condition?” Rufus asked.

“Condition?” the priest asked.

“He wouldn’t refuse if all she did was offer. What did she ask in return.”

“The goddess knows all. There are tribulations ahead and Asano will need guidance to navigate them successfully. She wishes to offer that guidance.”

“Worship,” Rufus said. “She offered to hand Farrah’s killers up on a plate in return for worship.”

“This goes well beyond the people who killed your friend,” the priest said. “You have heard about incursions in other astral spaces around the world.”

“And what?” Rufus asked tersely. “Your goddess will give up all the answers in return for the worship of one iron-ranker in a provincial city?”

“She sees what others do not. Patterns too large for mortals to notice. For such a small price, she offers such great gains. She was refused but remains patient. The counsel of a friend could do so much good.”

The backhand strike from Rufus landed square on the priest’s mouth, sending him tumbling to the floor. Rufus moved to stand right over him as he looked up, his expression of surprise mirrored by everyone in the lobby. He spoke to the priest in a voice as cold and hard as ice.

“If your goddess is willing to hand over such information, then by what moral stricture does she not? Instead, she looks to ransom a man’s principles. You just tried to turn me on my friend, a man who saved my life, and you have the gall to lay there looking surprised? If you want to help me, then help me. Bring your self-serving ways to me again and you’ll get worse than you got today.”

Rufus strode away, riding the elevation platform up into the building.

Chapter 129: Picking Out the Good Ones

Sophie, Jason and Humphrey left the wagon in the first town they came to. Being the closest to the city, it was a busy distribution hub. Making their way through the town, Sophie was startled at how many people seemed to know Jason. Some would wave, others approaching for a few words of greeting. How Jason kept all the names straight was beyond her.

Sophie observed the difference between how people treated Jason and Humphrey. Jason was approached without reservation and greeted like an old friend. Humphrey was treated with respect and reserve, no one speaking to him unless directly addressed.

“How do you know so many people here?” she asked Jason.

“I’ve passed through quite a few times,” Jason said.

“Surely you have as well,” Sophie asked Humphrey.

“He has,” Jason said. “A lot more than me. The Geller family seat is out in the delta, so Humphrey has been shuttling between the family compound and the family townhouse his whole life. All these people know what a big-shot he is.”

“Don’t they think the same of you?” she asked. “You’re roaming around with him and covered in expensive-looking equipment.”

“They know common when they see it,” Jason said.

On their way to the adventure noticeboard, they found a large group of people queuing up for something.

“The healer must be here today,” Jason said. “It’s good that they’re out and about now. It was really an eye-opener when I heard about Healer showing up at Jory’s place to lay down the law. Forced me to reassess the whole god scenario.”

“That must have been frustrating for you,” Humphrey said. “I know you can be adamant about things.”

“You should always welcome being proven wrong,” Jason said. “It means your understanding of the world just got a little bit better.”

“Says the guy who gets downright obnoxious about being right,” Humphrey said.

“I’m not saying I always welcome being wrong in the moment,” Jason acknowledged. “The important thing is to reflect on it and accept it, going forward.”

They reached the noticeboard and after looking them over, took them all. Plotting out the locations, they mapped an itinerary and set off from the town.

A tentacle wrapped around Sophie's other arm, the first one already being having been caught up. The fleshy blob of the monster's main body sported many, prehensile tentacles and she was running out of limbs. The supple tentacles were studded with sharp, bony protrusions that dug into her skin, lacing her body with cuts as the creature gripped around her arms, legs and torso. Desperately, she bit into a tentacle. Her abilities added damage to any unarmed attack, which turned out to really mean any unarmed attack as her bite severed the monster's thin member. This freed her right arm to attack the tentacle binding her left with a more traditional assault.

Two tentacles severed, the monster withdrew into itself and made for the water.

"No you don't," Sophie told it, rushing forward to grip a tentacle in each hand. With a grunt of effort, she hauled it out of the water. Holding it in place with one hand at the base of a tentacle and her foot pushing down on it, she bent down and brutally pounded its bulbous body with her free fist.

-
- You have defeated [Wetland Tentacloid].
 - 10 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been awarded to you.

Quest: [Notice: Wetland Tentacloid]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Wetland Tentacloid] 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been awarded to you.

"What spirit coins...ow!"

A bag appeared above her and fell down, bouncing off her head before dropping into the mud.

"What was that?" she complained as she picked up the bag to discover it was full of coins.

"Loot," Jason said with a grin.

"We didn't get rewards, despite being in the group," Humphrey observed.

"I don't think moral support counts as an actual contribution," Jason said.

"Do all adventurers get coins like this?" Sophie asked. "No wonder you're all rich."

"Actually, that's a unique benefit of working with Jason," Humphrey said.

"I'd rather you not spread that around," Jason said. "I don't want people trying to use me as a loot farm. If you had a storage space power, like Humphrey, here, the coins would have gone straight into that."

"You should have Jason store your money until you buy yourself a dimensional bag," Humphrey said. "It's a reward well-earned."

"You really think so?" she asked.

"It was alright," Jason said. "Not great. You're bleeding all over, your clothes are in tatters. You almost let that thing go full hentai monster on you."

"What's a hentai monster?" she asked.

"No idea," Humphrey said. "I will say that I was on the verge of stepping in. Still, it was very good for your first monster hunt."

"Yeah," Jason acknowledged. "For the first time out you did alright. None of those cuts and scrapes are major. I got impaled in my first real monster fight. Luckily, I had a healing power."

"I have one too," Sophie said.

Ability: [Equilibrium] (Balance)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Meditate to slowly accrue instances of [Integrity], up to an instance threshold of ([Recovery] attribute +1). Instances quickly drop off when meditation ends.

- [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

They found some dry ground and she sat in a meditation pose to use it. It took time to heal her injuries, but Jason and Humphrey were willing to wait. The more she used it, the quicker the ability would advance.

"I'd give you something to clean yourself off, but you'll be fighting again, soon," Jason said.

"And he doesn't want you to use up his crystal wash," Humphrey said.

The second encounter was less precarious but still far from an ideal showing. Jason reluctantly supplied some crystal wash and fresh clothes from his storage space.

"You'll want to use those coins you're earning on some decent armour," Humphrey said.

"I know a guy who supplies quality light armour," Jason said.

On the way to the next notice location, they arrived in a small village. Once again, Sophie was struck by how many people seemed to know Jason.

"Seriously, Asano, what's going on?"

“I just get around a bit,” Jason said.

They stopped for lunch in an open-air eatery that served travelling merchants and passing adventurers. The owner treated Jason like visiting royalty.

“The baby was born two weeks gone, now,” the owner told Jason. “Healthy as you like.”

“That’s good to hear,” Jason said.

“If you hadn’t been there, I don’t know what would have happened,” he said.

“I’m sure it would have worked out. You aren’t so far from the city that you couldn’t have gone for a healer.”

“She was so sick, though. I’m not sure how long the baby could take it.”

“We got lucky,” Jason said. “I should make introductions. Johan, my friends, Humphrey and Sophie. This is Johan, who makes the best fried savoury puffs in the delta.”

“Any friends of Jason are more than welcome,” he said. “You’ll never need take out your purse in my establishment.”

Jason ordered for the three of them and Johan went inside to the kitchens.

“Is that’s what’s going on?” Sophie asked. “You’ve been out here healing people, like at Jory’s clinic?”

“More like curing,” Jason said. “I can’t heal injuries, just disease and poison. A few other things, but you don’t see a lot of curses in villagers.”

“Jason does it quite a lot,” Humphrey said. “During our field assessment for the Adventure Society, he was always holding the group up.”

“They let him stop for that?” Sophie asked.

“You try telling a crowd of sick people that you’re too busy to help them,” Humphrey said. “In this one village there was a huge crowd and we were there all morning. The locals put on this big midday feast, which was actually really nice.”

“Those stops are less time-consuming now,” Jason said, “and often not necessary at all. The priests of the Healer are a lot more active since Healer replaced them all. They stopped charging for services, too, so people aren’t reliant on the chance I’ll be passing through.”

“The new attitude of the local Healer church has caused some disarray amongst the nobles,” Humphrey said. “Until Healer replaced his whole clergy, the church was largely at the beck and call of the noble families. Now they’re treated the same as the general populace and there’s been a lot of dissatisfaction.”

“There’s a lot of disruption to the upper crust going on lately,” Jason said. “First the healers, then the expedition, now these rumours about Jonah, Thadwick and the others.”

“Not to mention the inquiry,” Humphrey said. “Did you hear the entire Phael family had their Adventure Society membership revoked? Every one of them, even the silver-ranker.”

“I only dealt with them in the expedition support camp,” Jason said, “but even that left a nasty taste in the mouth. If the rest were like the ones I met, it’s not much of a surprise.”

While they waited for the food to come out, they discussed Sophie's performance against the monsters. Fighting humans in a city was very different to fighting monsters in marshes and swamps. Whether in a fighting pit or a dark alley, the footing was usually solid in a city.

The delta had slick mud, deceptively deep bog, random obstructions and plenty of places to hide or retreat into. Sophie had no experience fighting in such an environment, while the monsters were well-adapted to the locations in which they spawned. The elements that hurt her were things they could use to their advantage.

The inhuman appearance of monsters made it harder for her to read their intentions, which slowed her reactions. Their monstrous forms made many of her favoured attacks pointless, forcing her to use long-dismissed elements of her style. These were techniques she had barely thought about since her father had first taught them to her.

It wasn't just their physical form that was an issue. Monsters lacked the doubt and hesitation of a more thoughtful opponent and she came to realise how much she relied on mind games in a fight. They were also possessed of a bloody determination, tenaciously fighting on after a human would have given up.

The final thing hurting her in the fights was that she was still getting used to her new abilities. She had been working on shifting her style to take best advantage of them, but it was still early days.

“What we’ve seen today has been good,” Jason said. “Obviously, there’s room for improvement but this is day one. We’re building a list of what we need to work on, which will show us where to focus the training. You and I fight the same way, but you’ve had more practice against people, where I’ve used it more against monsters. We can help each other.”

After lunch, they set out for the third and final job they had taken from the adventure board notice. After that would come the job they took from the jobs hall, which should take them into the evening.

“Do adventurers all run around doing this many jobs at once?” Sophie asked.

“Not at all,” Humphrey said. “It’s one way of picking out the good ones. They’re on the job a lot and they hit-up multiple contracts. That’s true at iron-rank, anyway. At higher

ranks, it pays to give your contracts more caution and consideration, matching the jobs you take to your abilities.”

“That’s getting ahead of ourselves,” Jason said. “Let’s just concentrate on getting her into the Adventure Society, for now.”

He turned to Sophie.

“You get to choose the kind of adventurer you want to be,” he told her. “If you want to throw yourself into it and push your abilities to the limit, that’s great. If you want to just be a nominal member and never actually hunt monsters, that’s alright too.”

“No,” Sophie said. “I never thought I would have the chance to get a full set of essences. I want to see how far this can take me.”

“Me too,” Jason said. “Humphrey already knows because his Mum told him.”

“Hey,” Humphrey protested.

“You do talk about your mother a lot,” Sophie said, “and I’ve only known you since this morning.”

Chapter 130: Events Loom Large

Rufus arrived at Arella's office and knew she wasn't there when the door didn't swing itself open at his approach. He knocked and it was opened by the deputy director. Rufus had few dealings with the elderly elf, Genevieve. He had heard she was the one person Arella completely trusted, but he'd heard a lot about the director that turned out to be false.

"Something I can help you with, Mr Remore?" she asked.

"I was looking for the director."

"She was called away on important business. Perhaps I can be of assistance?"

"Not unless you can introduce me to her father and help convince him to assist me."

"Oh, I can probably manage that," she said, to Rufus' visible surprise. "I'm a little busy to go along, but find your way to his home and I'll have someone waiting for you."

In a one-room ritual building on the Geller estate grounds, a portal opened. Jonah Geller stumbled through, as if shoved, followed by the bronze-rank Ernest Geller. The portal closed behind them. The ritual room had been marked off-limits for weeks, with no household staff allowed to enter. Only Rick Geller had been trusted by Danielle to keep watch, having supplied him with a comfortable chair and a stack of books on a side table.

Rick put his book down and stood up at the appearance of the others, gaze fixed on Jonah. He looked for anything in the big man's expression he recognised but it was like looking at a different man. Like someone else was wearing his friend's face.

"You have no right to do this," Jonah said to Ernest, ignoring Rick's presence.

"So you keep saying," Ernest said, voice and body language both equally unyielding. "You will stay here until we're done with you."

"Jonah," Rick said. Jonah turned, looking at Rick as if he were no more connected to him than the chair Rick had been sitting in.

"Please just tell me what happened to you," Rick implored. "You know I'll do whatever I can to help. The way you've done for me, more than once."

"Then get me out of here," Jonah said. "They want to cut me open."

"Don't listen to him," Ernest said. "He'll say anything to make us let him go."

Jonah threw a look of bile at Ernest.

"You have no idea what you're dealing with."

"You're right," Ernest said. "That's the whole reason we're here. Rick, you were here to announce our arrival to Danielle, yes?"

“That’s right.”

“Double check the locks before you go,” Ernest said. “Make sure they’re all locked from the outside.”

The Geller family compound had been heavily landscaped to be on solid, secure ground. The meandering creeks, picturesque garden ponds and even the small lake might seem like natural waterways but had been artfully and carefully designed centuries ago. There was a section of river that had been diverted into what looked like a natural stretch of river but was actually a canal that diverted it through the estate before returning to its original course. Between construction and growing-in the gardens, it had been the work of generations to get the estate to the impressive and natural-seeming state it was currently in.

Clive was aware of all this, the Geller family having detailed the process and donated copies of the records to the Magic Society. Only the numerous security features, developed and improved upon over centuries had been withheld. As he drove an airboat through the delta, he loudly explained it to Belinda, who was sitting behind Clive’s rune tortoise familiar, Onslow. It was an unusual experience for Clive to have someone share his interest in magical esoterica.

Clive steered the airboat up to the estate’s water gate and coasted to a stop. The archway that framed the gate was smaller than the one in the Greenstone city wall, but the portcullised arch was still imposing. This was especially true as the Geller portcullis was usually closed, unlike the city gate, which placed the imposing metal grill on full display.

The guards on station, on a small stone dock with a booth, came out to question Clive. As he was expected, they swiftly allowed him to continue, magically raising the portcullis to admit his airboat onto the estate. Belinda gaped as they passed through the stone arch.

Shortly beyond the wall was a larger stone dock nestled into the embankment, where the Gellers stored their inland watercraft. There was an attendant in another bamboo booth who waved them into an empty slip and tied off the vehicle. Once they were on shore, the man took their details in a small notebook and gave them directions.

As much as they would have liked to explore, Clive and Belinda had come with an important purpose and stuck to the main paths. Using the sedate pace of Clive’s familiar as an excuse, though, they did have the time to at least look around. Clive occasionally glanced back to check on his familiar, who kept stopping to snack on the shrubbery.

“Onslow, stop that! We are guests, here!”

They followed the directions they had been given along the main pathway, which constantly tempted with detours. They finally arrived at the main house complex to find an august company outside, even by Geller family standards.

Talking together were Emir Bahadir, Thalia Mercer, Elspeth Arella and the stern-faced head of the Adventure Society inquiry team. With them was a priest of the god of purity, who looked older than most but was clean-faced and looked very hale. Clive wasn't conversant in the robe designs of the church of purity but the elaborate outfit implied considerable rank almost as much as the company he kept. Danielle Geller was with them, playing host. As Clive stood off, giving quiet introductions to Belinda, Emir spotted them and quietly pointed them out to Danielle. She walked over to greet them.

"You must be Humphrey's Magic Society friend, Clive. I hear good things."

"Thank you, Ma'am. This is my assistant, Belinda."

Danielle gave her an appraising look.

"I take it you find helping Clive a less antagonistic pursuit than running around robbing people," Danielle said.

"It was my friend who did the running," Belinda said. "As for antagonism, a few cash-heavy theatre-goers hardly compare to an army of weaponised magical constructs."

Danielle chuckled.

"A well-made point. So, Clive, you're our resident astral magic specialist?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"I was surprised you were ready this fast."

"We've been working hard," Clive said, including Belinda with a glance. "This is important. It's a lot of responsibility."

"Indeed it is," Danielle said. "Exciting times are dangerous ones. We have something I can't talk about right now going on, so you'll have to forgive my not attending to you personally. I'll have one of my family members give you access to the mirage chamber."

"Thank you," Clive said.

"I've completely cleared the schedule for the mirage chamber; it's yours for the day. If you need more time, just tell us and I'll see you get it. Did you bring everything you need?"

"Yes," Clive said, his tone leaving no room for doubt. "Our preparations were quite thorough," Clive said.

"Good. I'll find young Rick to show you the way; he's wandering about here, somewhere. Have you met Rick, Clive?"

"I have, Lady Geller. At the picnic in the park, after the sand barge assault."

“Of course. Jason can be something of an explosive factor, socially speaking, but when it comes to throwing a truly casual affair, he comes into his own. Rick is reliable and trustworthy. He doesn’t know what’s going on here, yet, but I would appreciate you not asking, anyway. He has a personal stake in ongoing events.”

“Of course,” Clive said. “Does he have the might essence, by any chance? Or earth, iron; anything that gives him a strength power.”

“He has the might essence,” Danielle said. “Do you need some heavy lifting done?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “I’ve looked over the design of your mirage chamber and it has the old stone-slab control configuration. It’s no doubt why it held up so well over so long but I’ll need to take the top off make some required upgrades.”

“You want to upgrade our mirage chamber?”

“It’s quite necessary for what I need to do with it,” Clive said.

“Do you have the expertise to carry that out?” Danielle asked.

Clive looked at her, nonplussed.

“It doesn’t take any real expertise.”

“My people have assured me that any upgrade would very much require both expertise and some prohibitive material costs.”

“I suppose it comes down to what you think constitutes expertise,” Clive said. “I can see how it could be expensive if you did it wrong. As in, very wrong. I won’t. I checked the requisite materials out of the Magic Society storehouse and charged everything to the Adventure Society. It was cheap enough that it fell within my discretionary budget. All the expensive materials in a mirage chamber are in the dome, which I don’t need to touch. It should take me less than a couple of hours.”

“Have you worked on a mirage chamber before?” Danielle asked.

“I assisted in the complete rebuilds of the mirage chambers in Boko and Hornis and still do annual maintenance. The original construction wasn’t as lasting as your stone setup.”

“Boko and Hornis have their own Magic Society people,” Danielle said.

“Yes,” Clive said.

“And they call you in anyway?”

“Yes.”

Danielle gave Clive an assessing look.

“You’re one of those people, aren’t you?” she asked. “The ones who are just very quietly exceptional at what they do.”

“I don’t know I’d say that,” Clive said, scratched his head awkwardly.

“You’re kind of the opposite of Jason. He’s full of potential but runs around causing huge messes because he’s headstrong and inexperienced. You’re forming a team with my son, right?”

“We’ve never really discussed it.”

“Well, now you don’t need to,” Danielle said. “I’m going to have you looked into and if everything checks out, you’ll be part of my boy’s team.”

“I don’t think you get to decide that,” Clive said uncertainly. “We get to form our own teams.”

“Don’t be silly,” Danielle said. “Of course I get to decide that. Now, wait here while I go find Rick.”

Clive looked nonplussed at the retreating figure of Danielle as she went into the house.

“That felt oddly like talking to Jason, there at the end,” he mused.

Sophie was feeling good after her third monster encounter. It had been a group of ratlings pillaging a farming crop. While not exactly humanoid, they were close, and she fought them on flat, open ground. At first, they had swarmed her but their opportunistic aggression lacked cohesion. Her swiftness and agility let her avoid being encircled, catch one exposed and make short work of it. Cowardly by nature, the others scattered. They were only quick compared to someone other than Sophie, who chased them down one by one.

That only left the contract from the jobs hall, but en route, they passed through a village where they were approached by a harried teamster. He recognised them as adventurers from their equipment and informed them of a trap weaver nest close to a major trading road.

“Trap weavers?” Sophie asked.

“Nasty, spider-like monsters,” Humphrey said. “Dangerous and unfortunately common in the delta. We should clear them out now.”

“Yep,” Jason agreed. “I’ll do it.”

“You aren’t exactly in the best shape today,” Humphrey said.

“The fight doesn’t wait until you’re ready, Humphrey. A little impairment training will do me good.”

“Can I do it?” Sophie asked.

“No,” Jason and Humphrey said together.

"You think he can do it," Sophie said, "and he's hungover. He's not that much better than me."

"Yes, he is," Humphrey said. "You haven't seen him fight."

"I've fought him myself," she said.

"No," Humphrey said. "You've sparred with him. Run from him. You haven't fought him. Jason is very good at killing and very bad at leaving things alive. If he'd wanted you dead, you would have been dead."

"Yeah?" she asked, sceptically. "I want to see this, then."

"That's the thing," Humphrey said. "You don't see him unless something very bad is about to happen. I'll show you a recording when we get back to the city."

"Don't show her that," Jason said. "It shows me at peak chuuni."

"Chuuni?" Sophie asked.

"We're pretty sure anything that slips through Jason's translation power is him being difficult," Humphrey advised her. "We've found it's best to let it go and not ask."

"Who's 'we?'" Jason asked.

Rufus arrived at the entrance to Dorgan's compound via magically-propelled carriage. Rather than reins, the driver steered with a bar that turned the front wheels as it was shifted left and right. Speed was controlled with a lever next to the driver's seat. Such vehicles weren't any faster than animal-drawn carriages but saved having to deal with the animals.

Rufus got down and walked up to the large gate in the outer wall. The estate had once been the main residence of a powerful Greenstone family and was suitably impressive, with grounds that were outrageously indulgent in the crowded space of Old City.

There was a well-dressed elf in a small security station built into the wall. Rufus could sense an iron-rank aura from him, the uncontrolled and muddy kind that spoke to an excess of magic cores and a deficit of training. The elf came out to open the gate and let him in.

On the other side of the gate was another elf servant, who had been awaiting his arrival and guided him inside. As they went through the grounds, Rufus could see that the grandeur of the compound had not been allowed to fade after the original occupants vacated it for the Island. The gardens were painstakingly maintained, the centuries-old brickwork still in fine condition.

The servant led Rufus to one of the wide wings of the manor and into a library. He showed Rufus to a portion of the library where an elf was standing in front of a desert landscape. Adris Dorgan had tawny skin and long, chestnut hair. He was every part the classic slender, handsome elf. Without turning his gaze from the painting he dismissed the servant with thanks.

“Do you like this painting, Mr Remore?” Dorgan asked.

Rufus considered the work.

“The artist was more concerned with evocation than accurate representation. It lends itself to the stark desert environment. It’s clear that the artist finds meaning in the desolation. A local artist?”

“Moher,” Dorgan said. “From the day I found your friend Asano standing right here, things have been going poorly for my daughter.”

“She kept her position,” Rufus said. “She wouldn’t have if certain people had their way. Luckily for her, Jason had no say in the matter.”

“His unfortunate demotion,” Dorgan said. “Association with my daughter was behind that, I imagine.”

“He did his job and he did it well,” Rufus said. “All she had to do was let him.”

“I told her much the same. Patience is a lesson often hard-learned. I have tried to guide her away from considering him part of her troubles but his position as the starting point of things going wrong plays on her mind.”

“She would be well-served by keeping her attention on what comes next,” Rufus said. “Events loom large and she has bridges to mend.”

“Is that why you’re here, Mr Remore? To mend bridges?”

“No,” Rufus said. “I’m here for those large-looming events. There is a chance someone has been smuggling some unusual materials through here or Hornis. If you help me track those down, it would reflect well on your daughter. Show the association that you are an asset to her and not an anchor. I would be willing to reflect that in my attitude on the topic, which is not without weight in certain circles.”

“Even after she turned on your friend?”

“She only tried to hurt his interests, not him,” Rufus said. “Where I come from, politics are a fact of life. Since she is going to continue as director, my preference would be that’s she’s an effective one. Her plan is still in play, if she wants it to be.”

“What plan is that?” Dorgan asked.

“To get promoted out of this town by cleaning it up. An appropriate show of contrition and using the inquiry as a launching pad will at least give her a chance. The city service agreement is two years from renegotiation. Two years is a long time in politics.”

“So it is,” Dorgan mused. “If I agree to help you, I can’t just wave my hand and produce all the city’s smugglers. I can use my connections, here and in Hornis, but there are complications. Clarissa Ventress and Cole Silva control no small portion of the less documented aspects of city trade. And there are some operators whom none of us tolerate and who are forced to work around us. There are things even the worst of us will not allow to be traded.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Rufus said.

“Mr Remore, I am more government official than criminal. The powers ruling the Island would let Old City fall into chaos so long as the money flows. I’ll acknowledge that I have walked hard roads, but I have my standards.”

“What about the other two? Ventress and Silva.”

“Ventress knows her limits, or at least she used to. If anyone is working with those I won’t tolerate, it will be Cole Silva. He’s impulsive, short-sighted and repulsive enough to traffic with those his father would have hunted down.”

“I’d pay him a visit,” Rufus said, “but that would send the ones I’m after scurrying into the shadows.”

“I will make some circumspect inquiries,” Dorgan said. “I will expect your support for my daughter, in turn.”

“Your daughter’s best move is to do her job right, in the open, where people can see her do it. I’d be happy to help that along.”

“Very well,” Dorgan said. “You have secured my help, Mr Remore. I will find you when I have something.”

Chapter 131: What the Geller Name is Worth

Rick led Clive and Belinda through the grounds. Clive and Belinda were both enraptured as Rick took them through pathways off the main thoroughfares, the visitors rapidly talking.

“See that flowering vine?” Clive asked, pointing it out to Belinda. “See the way they have it growing over the bamboo frame?”

“That’s floating ghost flower, right?” Belinda asked.

“Good eye,” Clive said.

“I know a guy who grows it.”

“A herbalist or apothecary?”

“He’s more of a recreational enthusiast.”

Clive stopped under an archway covered in the flowering vine, making sweeping gestures with his arms.

“If you could see magic you’d be able to spot the subtle impact it has on the ambient magic over the whole estate. Whoever designed this whole place was a genius. The foresight to wait for plants to grow over decades, planning out the shifts in magic as plants and trees grew. Adapting for seasonal changes, different stages of growth.”

“I can’t imagine planning that out over the whole space,” Belinda said. “This estate is bigger than an entire district in Old City.”

“We should probably keep moving,” Rick prompted. His cousin, Henry, was the team magic expert and had been similarly impressed by the grounds when they first arrived. Now Henry’s ashes had been mixed into the soil.

They spotted the dome of the mirage chamber, well before they reached the annexed buildings attached to it. Rick unlocked the control room to the mirage chamber and led them inside. Light from the glass ceiling lit up the interior, showing the wooden platforms lining the sides of the room and the waist-high stone block under the wide window that crossed the entire back wall. The interior of the dome beyond was dark.

Clive immediately began explaining things to Belinda, who had never seen anything from this branch of magic. “These wooden platforms are the interface,” he explained. “It projects your senses into an illusionary self that can interact with other generated illusions in the dome, on the other side of that window.”

He walked up to the stone block. It was heavy and grey, with a wild mess of runes and sigils carved into it.

“These are the controls,” Clive said. “It’s a lot more impressive when the chamber is active, which you’ll see later.”

Clive pointed out a small hole on the side of the block.

“That’s where you feed the crystals containing the various things to be replicated under the dome,” he explained. “The chamber’s current configuration is fine to generate some environments with some monsters in them. It’s a bit basic to handle what we brought along, though. Still, just building a mirage chamber in an area of such low magical density was incredibly impressive, especially for the time they did it. Only a fraction of what is now Old City had even been constructed. Even now, the important part – the dome – is more than capable of doing what we need. We just need to upgrade the control system so it can tell the dome to do it.”

Clive turned to look at Rick.

“Your forebears were formidable people, Rick. You have every right to be proud of what your family has accomplished.”

Rick nodded absently, glancing at the door.

“That legacy comes with a responsibility,” he said morosely. “One we pay in blood to uphold.”

Clive paused what he was doing to give Rick a long look.

“I’ve actually been here in the estate before,” Clive said. “My first monster surge was the one before last. when I was a boy. My family are eel farmers here in the delta and it was your family that took us in and sheltered us, along with countless others.”

He walked over to Rick and put a hand on his shoulder.

“This is Greenstone,” Clive said. “We know what the Geller name is worth. If you ever need anything, you ask. Everyone in the delta knows that we’ve asked plenty, and your family answered every time.”

Rick steeled his face to mask his emotions and Clive gave him a big smile, patting his shoulder before leaving him be.

“Time to gets started,” Clive said as he began pulling crates from his storage space, leaving Belinda to organise them neatly and crack them open with a pry tool.

“You don’t have a dimensional storage space,” Clive said, looking the small but effective crowbar. “Where were you keeping that?”

“Tricks of the trade,” Belinda said. “You always have to be ready.”

“You’re full of surprises, aren’t you?”

“You have no idea.”

After taking out the last box and leaving them to Belinda, Clive glanced back at Rick, then to the stone block.

“Now, Rick,” Clive said. “You see that line running around the side of the stone block, near the top?”

“Yeah,” Rick said.

“That line is where the whole top section of the block comes off as a slab, to access the inside. I'm going to unseal it and I'll need you to lift that slab off and put it out of the way. Is that something you can manage? ”

“That's a hefty bit of stone but I'll sort it out,” Rick said.

Clive used a magic wand to trace around the outside of the block, along the line he had just pointed out. Rick then hauled off the rune-covered top, revealing the block as a large stone box. The inside was covered in runes, and fitted with different components. Stone tablets, also rune-covered, were slotted vertically into the bottom, as were crystals like sculpted icicles. Unlike the control panel, magical glows traced out lines and shone from the crystals, spraying rainbow colours into the room.

“Where are all the crystals?” Rick asked. “The ones you put in the side to add new monsters.”

“Like this?” Clive asked, taking out a crystal. It was a finger-sized length of faceted crystal.

“Yeah,” Rick said. “I've seen a bunch of them put in.”

“These are highly specialised, artificial manifestations of raw magic,” Clive explained. “Sort of like very complicated spirit coins, if you like. When you feed them in the intake on the side they vanish, like when you eat a spirit coin.”

“So they don't just pile up inside, then?” Rick asked.

“No, which is good. We'll need to add quite a few once the upgrade is up and working.”

“How many is quite a few?”

“Four thousand and ninety-six,” Clive said.

“Seriously?”

“Take a look at those crates,” Clive said. “Most of them are filled with padded racks of crystals.”

Clive took a simple table from his storage space, then draped a plain, heavy cloth over it. He laid out a series of magical tools, from wedge-shaped stones to crystal orbs with silver stands to stop them from rolling away. There was a slew of magic wands, varied in length, material and shape. Many were curved or kinked; one was bent into a spiral

halfway down its length. Clive got to work, explaining what he was doing to Belinda as he went.

“I’m going to wait outside,” Rick said. “I’ll be just out the door if you need anything.”

“Thank you,” Clive said absently, not looking up from his work. Bent over into the stone box he called on Belinda to hand him various tools. Belinda peppered him with questions as she handed him each new tool, peering in at what he was doing while he explained what he was doing at each step. One after another, the magical lights went out as he worked. Once the glow was completely faded, he started carefully removing parts.

After setting them aside, he had Belinda start handing him replacement parts from the boxes they had brought. He changed the runes inside the box, his tools reworking the hard stone like the softest clay. He slotted-in new tablets and crystals, replacing almost everything inside. Finally, he chose a few of the components he had removed, and after checking them over, put them back into place. The discarded parts he had Belinda crate up for the Gellers to do with whatever they wanted.

Finally, Clive began reactivating the magic of the control system, fastidiously testing his work carefully as the rainbow light once again started shining from within.

“This all looks good,” Clive said. “I’ll rework the control slab a bit and we can do some final testing. Fetch Rick, would you please? I’ll need him to reorient the slab as I work with it.”

Clive modified both sides of the lid of the stone box, altering the mirage chamber controls. He had the lid replaced and started running tests on the mirage chamber functionality. They watched through the window as wild patterns lit up the space under the dome. There were several problems, requiring the slab to be taken off and put back on again multiple times as Clive made adjustments and tested again.

Under the dome, on the other side of the viewing window, images flickered in and out. Monsters randomly appeared with odd colours or strangely warped bodies. The most bizarre was a heidel with duck legs, both its heads having been replaced with Rick’s.

“Oh, that’s not right,” Rick said.

“You must use the chamber a lot if your head is the one that popped out,” Clive said. He methodically tackled each problem, testing and retesting as he worked through every incompatibility and adjusted every miscalibration. Finally, everything was in working order.

“Thank you,” Clive said to Rick. “You’ve made this so much easier. Or possible at all, in fact. I doubt I could even move that lid, let alone lift it.”

“My cousin would have loved this,” Rick said. “Getting into the guts of that thing.”

“The expedition?” Clive asked gently and Rick nodded.

“Will this help us find the people who we fought there?” Rick asked. “The ones who...”

Rick’s voice failed him as he remembered the blank look his friend had given him just hours ago.

“That’s the idea,” Clive said darkly. “We’re looking for something that will let us hunt them down.”

Rick nodded, eyes clear and focused.

“What else can I do to help?”

“Grab that first crate of crystals,” Clive said. “We have a lot to shove in there.”

Chapter 132:

Cleansed

“That should be the nest in there,” Humphrey said. They were on a wide embankment road, running through a stretch of wetlands. The largest portion of high ground had a sizeable stand of trees, in which they had been informed were the trap weavers.

Humphrey and Sophie looked at Jason, who still had bags under his bloodshot eyes. His gaze focused on the trees and Sophie noticed a shift in his posture. The confident, laconic, half-slouch became more upright, his feet ready to move. There was a sudden readiness that her own instincts recognised as a preparedness to fight.

“Use a recording crystal,” Humphrey said. “Give her something to watch later.”

He nodded, taking out his carousel stand of recording crystals and picking one out before returning the carousel to his inventory. He tossed the crystal over his head as his magical cloak formed around him. He ran to the edge of the embankment and leapt off, cloak floating around him as he drifted lightly down to land on the surface of the water like it was solid ground. Moving forward, he disappeared into the trees.

➤ **Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 1/14.**

“That was quick,” Sophie said.

“Jason has abilities and equipment well suited to fighting trap weavers,” Humphrey said. “Most of us find them troubling at best and deadly at worst. More iron-rankers in Greenstone die to trap weavers than anything else.”

Jason held his conjured dagger in a back-handed grip. Emerging from a shadow he stabbed out to his side, pinning a spider to the tree it was gripping. The spider’s body was around the size of a human torso, spewing out gore as the knife plunged through it.

-
- **Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 2/14.**
 - **You have defeated [Trap Weaver].**
 - **Would you like to loot [Trap Weaver]?**
-

Jason yanked the knife free and the trap weaver splashed into the water. He walked over the surface of the water, unconcerned. Roots jutted from the water but his perception power let him easily pick them out in the darkness. A thick strand of webbing shot out and latched onto his cloak, immediately trying to pull on it. That section of cloak became

incorporeal and the strand fell limp as Jason drew a throwing dart from the bandolier on his chest and flung it toward the other end of the strand. The dart had a red cord, marking it as explosive. Chunks of trap weaver belched out of the darkness with a loud bang.

- Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 3/14.
-

Jason walked over to a gobbet of flesh that had struck a tree and poked it.

- You have defeated [Trap Weaver].
 - Would you like to loot [Trap Weaver]?
-

One of the functions of Jason's hood was that he could see right through it, not obstructing his vision. He could see trap weavers all around him, crawling on trees and believing themselves hidden in the dark. They were shades of grey, like Jason's armour, which had been crafted from their leather. Their legs ended in the sharp tips that dug into bark, which made them excellent tree climbers. Those legs were also powerful and springy, allowing them to leapt between trees or onto prey.

One of the spider leapt at Jason from the left. He reached out and grabbed it out of the air, gripping it by the head. It bit into his hand as its sharp legs tried to stab his arm, but skittered off his armour.

- [Trap Weaver] has inflicted [Trap Weaver Venom] on you.
 - You have resisted [Trap Weaver Venom].
 - [Trap Weaver Venom] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

He crushed the spider's head in his fist and dropped it into the water.

- Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 4/14.
 - You have defeated [Trap Weaver].
 - Would you like to loot [Trap Weaver]?
-

From multiple directions, strands shot out at him. Some ineffectually struck his cloak, others slid off his armour without achieving purchase.

Item: [Trap Weaver Battle Robe] (iron rank, epic)

*A full body armour, carefully hand-crafted from the silk and leather of trap weavers.
(armour, cloth/leather).*

- Effect: Increased resistance to damage. Highly effective against cutting and piercing damage, less effective against blunt damage.
- Effect: Repairs damage over time. Extensive damage may require external repair.
- Effect: Absorbs blood to prevent leaving a blood trail.
- Effect: Increases resistance to bleed and poison effects.
- Effect: Resistant to adhesive substances and abilities with adhesive effects.
- Effect: Adapts fit to the wearer, within a certain range.

Jason stood in the middle of the trap weaver encirclement. The monsters milled about, confused by their ineffectual attacks. In the shadowy copse of trees, Jason could teleport almost however he willed. He panned his gaze around, mapping out the shadows and the positions of the trap weavers. As the monsters launched a second barrage of webs, he vanished and went to work.

Humphrey and Sophie awaited Jason's return.

-
- Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 5/14.
 - Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 6/14.
 - Objective: eliminate [Trap Weavers] 7/14.

"He really isn't messing about," Sophie said.

"Everyone has their own way of fighting," Humphrey said. "With most monsters, I have an easier time than Jason but trap weavers are a bad match for me. I'm most effective against enemies that stand their ground in open space. Complex, shadowy environments are where trap weavers nest but that's where Jason thrives. Over time, you'll come to find what works best for you. As you pick up more abilities and get more experience, you'll refine your style."

Quest: [Notice: Trap Weavers]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Trap Weavers] 14/14.
 - Quest complete.
-

Sophie looked up, but no bag of coins appeared.

“No rewards if we didn’t contribute,” Humphrey said. “I can see the bag dropping on you becoming annoying.”

“Getting tired of money literally falling out of the sky is a problem I’ll be happy to have.”

They spotted rainbow smoke drifting up from the top of the trees as Jason emerged. Once he reached them he dropped his cloak, revealing a large amount of blood on his head. The monster blood had vanished into smoke, making what remained come from his own injuries.

“Are you alright?” Humphrey asked.

“No worries,” Jason said. “I healed up using my abilities.”

“Did one of them bite you on the head?” Humphrey asked.

“Uh... yep. That was it.”

“What really happened?” She asked.

“Like Humphrey said,” Jason told her. “I got bitten by a monster.”

“I hope you won’t be cutting me out of too many fights,” Sophie said. “I like getting paid. Not that it feels that way, with you storing all the money.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason said. “My storage space keeps all the money together, but I’m keeping track of how much is yours.”

“And I can trust you to keep the numbers straight?” she asked.

“You still don’t trust me?” Jason asked.

“If our positions were swapped,” she said, “I would absolutely be stealing from you.” Jason chuckled.

“You’re his indentured servitor,” Humphrey pointed out. “All the work you do is for him and he is entitled to take any or all of what you earn as he likes. He doesn’t need to steal from you because he can take it all with complete legality. He doesn’t have to do any more than feed you.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason said. “I’ll keep proper track. You have to pay for your own gear, though.”

He took out a bottle of crystal wash and tipped it over his head.

“That means both equipment and consumables,” he added.

She gave him a flat look.

“What?” he asked her.

“Why would you lie and claim you were bitten on the head?” she asked.

“I’m not lying,” Jason said. “I definitely didn’t get woozy after the fight from teleporting too much while hungover and hit my head on a log.”

The procession of people who entered the ritual room was as prestigious a gathering as to be found in Greenstone. Danielle Geller, Thalia Mercer, Elspeth Arella, Emir Bahadir and the archbishop of the church of purity, Nicolas Hendren. Ernest Geller was waiting inside, playing guard to Jonah Geller. Jonah, his upper arm firmly in Ernest’s grip, glared at each person as they entered. When the Archbishop entered, Jonah’s eyes went wide and he strained to yank his arm free of Ernest’s grasp. It didn’t budge in the grip of Ernest’s bronze-rank strength.

Elspeth Arella used her aura to brutally suppress Jonah’s. Many powerful constriction abilities could only affect those whose auras had been beaten down, like the ability she used to entrap Jonah in a bubble of force. It cut off his protestations and lifted him helplessly into the air.

“Thank you, Madam Director,” the Archbishop said. “If you could move him away from the centre of the room, that would be appreciated.”

Jonah’s bubble floated away as his fists hammered at the inside. His mouth was visibly firing off invective but his voice was as confined as his body. The Archbishop took a white bag from the satchel at his side and removed the stopper from a spout in the bag’s corner. From it, he started carefully pouring out a mixture of powdered silver and gold to form a ritual circle.

“Fortunately,” he said, “divine rituals are not so vulnerable to vagaries of ambient magic as the mundane varieties.”

“I’ve never seen one performed before,” Arella said.

“They are much as ordinary rituals,” the Archbishop said. “They still draw on the power of ambient magic but are infused with the glorious might of the divine. My god’s will moves the magic and not the other way around, which is why your ability entrapping the unfortunate boy will not affect it.”

After drawing out the magical diagram, the Archbishop went around placing materials within it. Silver rank spirit coins were the bulk of the materials, while most of the others were orbs of gold or crystal, set out in small frames like silver egg-cups. When he was done, he stepped back, held out a hand and started chanting.

“God most pure, I beseech. Make in this place a sanctuary most clean, to suppress that which poisons the stem and reveal that which poisons the root. In this circle, let no rot spread nor foreign taint take action. Let all be made pure and clean.”

White and gold light started shining up from the circle.

“You may deposit the man in the circle, Madam Director,” the Archbishop said.

The bubble floated toward the circle with Jonah, trapped inside, still furiously thrashing about. His hands and head were bloodied from where had pounded them against the enclosure. As it entered the light, the bubble rapidly dissolved, like butter melting in the sun. Jonah fell out but instead of collapsing to the floor, drifted through the air to float above the centre of the magic circle. His arms and legs were pulled out to his sides, his whole body jerking in a small seizure. His eyes were wide and rapidly turning bloodshot, his jaw clenched tight.

“Jonah,” Danielle whispered, her voice wracked with misery as she looked on. Thalia Mercer placed a comforting hand on her shoulder, her own troubled gaze locked on the young man in the circle.

Jonah’s eyes rolled up in his head as his veins became visible in the form of thin, dark lines all over his body.

“There is no question,” the blank-faced Archbishop said impassively. “Something resides within the body. The circle will purge it.”

“The enemies in the astral space had something inside them,” Emir said, looking at Danielle with concern. “When endangered they were able to trigger it and kill themselves rather than be taken alive.”

“It is too late for that,” the Archbishop said. “Any power the thing inside him has cannot be activated within the circle. The concern you must have now is how deeply it has infiltrated his body. Removing it may damage or even kill him.”

“I have gold-rank potions of the highest grade ready to go,” Emir told Danielle. “So long as there is a scrap of life left in him, we won’t let it fade.”

“I will heal him the moment I am certain the taint is gone,” the Archbishop said.

Danielle didn’t acknowledge their words, her gaze unwavering from Jonah’s struggles. His body’s jerking became more violent, pushing back against the magic of the circle that held him in place. His eyes went bloody and dark, then burst outward, spraying dark fluids as something erupted from within them.

Flailing metal wires, thin as hairs, shot out in clusters from his now-empty eye sockets, waving like the tendrils of a sea creature. Danielle made to lunge forward but her arm was gripped by Emir, his gold-rank reflexes catching her before she moved. She turned on him in fury.

“You cannot help him until it is done,” the Archbishop said. “I would suggest prayer.”

Danielle shot the priest a look of venom before turning back to Jonah. She did so just in time for Jonah's cleansing to reach the final stage. Wires burst out from every part of his body, shredding muscle and skin, slicing apart bones. His flesh was shredded just as badly as his clothes as they erupted out of him.

The wires formed a complex network that seemed to have threaded itself through his entire circulatory system. A whole nest of wires had riddled Jonah's brain, slicing his skull into pieces that tumbled to the ground with the rest of his shredded corpse.

What was left was a vaguely man-shaped wire figure, with all the wires threading into and out of a nucleus in the place of the heart. Free of Jonah's body, the mass of wires staggered forward, but was rapidly corroded by exposure to the light of the circle. The wires dissolved into nothing as the nucleus fell to the floor with a hollow clatter.

In the aftermath, the light faded from the now-bloody circle. What had once been Jonah was splattered over the circle. All that remained of the wire construct was the empty nucleus. It looked like a small, hulled coconut. Danielle didn't spare it a glance as she staggered forward, toward the gory mess that was all that remained of Jonah.

"It's done," the Archbishop said, his emotionless intonation startling everyone but Danielle into looking at his calm expression. Emir and Thalia turned to Danielle, who mercifully didn't seem to have heard. She stood in front of Jonah's bloody remains, no longer recognisable as a person.

Chapter 133: It Just Takes Practise

In the late afternoon, Humphrey, Sophie and Jason were walking down a road with tall, leafy crops to either side. Finally starting to feel better, Jason let his head fall back as he drew a deep breath. He felt the warm sun of early autumn, smelled the fresh, earthy scent of the crops. He let out a contented sigh.

“This is it,” he said happily. “People talk about the money and the power but this is the adventuring life I want. Meandering through beautiful places with a good friend and a beautiful woman who may or may not be waiting for the chance to snap my neck and run for it.”

“Really?” Sophie asked flatly as Humphrey shook his head.

“I said ‘may not.’ Just look around you. Breathe in that air. Tell me you don’t want to spend your life travelling the world and visiting nice places.”

Sophie did look around, sceptically at first, then compared it to the boxed-in streets of Old City. The open spaces. The peaceful breeze playing through leafy crops.

“It does smell a lot nicer than Old City,” she acknowledged.

“Money and power are great,” Jason said. “Anything you want to get, they can give you. Anything you want to do, they can let you. But you have to want things worth having and want to do things worth doing. Money and power have to be a means, not an end, or you’ll lead a joyless life.”

Jason looked around the landscape again.

“Freedom. Travel. I want to see what this world has to show me. And someday, I want to go home. To see my own world with new eyes.”

Sophie said nothing, giving Jason an assessing look.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she said. “You’re just not what I expected.”

“And what were you expecting?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Not this.”

“What’s your world like, Jason?” Humphrey asked.

“It has places like this,” Jason said. “My family used to take trips out into the country when I was younger. My mother has a large family of mostly rural types. Good, hardworking people, you know? Not all twisty in the head like me. I grew up in a sleepy little beach town. In summer it fills up with people. Later I moved to a big city, although nothing like Greenstone. I’m not sure how to even start describing it. I wasn’t happy there, but I don’t think I was trying to be, then.”

He flashed a grin.

“But now I’m here. I have money, magic powers and I’m walking around in a place like this on a day like today. Yes, monsters try to kill me a lot and I’ve made my share of enemies, but I’m living my life, now, instead of just waiting it out.”

“Speaking of monsters,” Humphrey said. “The contract is for margolls. Dog-headed humanoids with large claws. They should be a good matchup for you, Miss Wexler, but don’t underestimate them.”

“They’re highly aggressive and fight in packs,” Jason said. “You’ll be outnumbered. The contract says six, but you should never assume the details are accurate.”

“That’s an important lesson,” Humphrey said. “A couple of months ago, Jason and I went to retrieve the body of an adventurer killed because the contract details were wrong.”

“Very wrong,” Jason said. “We were lucky someone else didn’t end up coming for our bodies.”

“Margolls are another common local monster,” Humphrey said. “When they turn up, everyone evacuates and word is sent to the city to post a contract. There are several farms here, so they’ve probably settled in until they eat their way through the herds. Once Stash spots them, we’ll have a location.”

“Stash?” Sophie asked. “That’s the bird familiar you’ve had scouting around?”

“He’s been spending a lot of time as a bird, lately,” Humphrey said. “I’m not sure how much he understands about what happened during the expedition, but he knows there was a lot of danger. I think he’s trying to be more useful.”

“Spending time as a bird?” Sophie asked.

Humphrey was about to answer when a large bird swooped down out of the sky towards Humphrey, transforming into a puppy and dropping into his arms. Humphrey scratched him behind the ears.

“He’s a shape-changer,” Humphrey said. “You found them, little guy?”

Stash yipped happily. By turning his head and letting out little barks, Stash led them in the right direction. Eventually, they spotted the margolls in a field full of dead animals. The three crouched in the long grass, behind a simple, wooden rail fence that separated the field from the road. They looked through the fence at the margolls on the far side of the field.

“Looks like the margolls came from this side,” Humphrey said. “The herd fled to the far end of the field and were pinned against the fence and slaughtered.”

The slain herd were creatures that Jason had always thought of as cow lizards. The margolls had killed them all and were feasting on the carcasses.

“Those poor animals,” Humphrey said. “I know they were a meat herd, but they didn’t need to die in fear like that. And it’s wasteful, too. The margolls can’t consume all that meat, but they only eat their fresh kills. They’ll take their fill, sleep it off and go hunting for more things to slaughter.”

“No, they won’t,” Jason said. “They aren’t leaving this field. I count nine.”

“Me too,” Sophie said.

“Wexler, Humphrey will be ready to step in quickly if anything goes wrong. You need to understand, though, that when things go wrong, they go wrong fast and hard. I’m not saying don’t take risks, because pushing yourself is the point. Just make sure they’re calculated risks.”

Sophie took a steeling breath, then lightly vaulted the wooden fence and started walking across the field. Caught up in gorging on the dead animals, the margolls didn’t notice her until a breeze picked up and carried her scent to them. As it did, they looked up from their kills and howled. Leaping to their feet, they started charging across the field at her. She stopped walking, watching them approach.

Dog-headed monsters with sickle claws scrambled madly in her direction, some on two limbs, others on four. She started moving again, picking up pace to run at them as they charged in her direction, letting out discordant, bloodthirsty howls. They were quick, but she sailed over the grass like a wind spirit.

Well-short of reaching them, she leapt into the air. She span through one horizontal kick and then into a second with the other leg, both without touching the ground. Then she stepped on the air to keep her momentum going and kicked once more before finally landing. She had made two full turns in the air and landed at a run.

Each sweeping kick had unleashed a wide blade of wind that made a shimmering path toward the margolls. The trio of wide blades were as large and slow as she could make them, but the ravaging monsters disregarded their approach entirely.

The change came as the first blade savaged the foremost monsters, blood spraying as they ran right into the blade. It was not enough to kill them but to fell to the ground, howling distress. The one who stayed standing took the full brunt of the second blade, having its body cut into ragged halves, while more of the creatures were injured behind it. The third blade came on the heels of the second, finished wounded margolls and injuring more.

The pack were left angry, hurt and confused. The injured one howls their pain, the others their rage. Their charge had been halted as they milled in disarray.

Back on the road, Jason and Humphrey looked on using a far-sight crystal to magnify their view.

“Did you know she could do that?” Humphrey asked.

“I did not,” Jason replied. “Should we move closer?”

“I think so,” Humphrey said as wings appeared on his back and he flew over the fence. Jason vaulted it, not with the grace Sophie had done, but Gary’s mobility training made it a negligible task.

“How long would it take you to get over there?” Jason asked.

“A few seconds,” Humphrey said. “Five maybe.”

“You can cross the distance that quick?”

“If I fly forward, then launch into my flying leap attack, yes.”

“Not bad.”

The margolls were in turmoil and Sophie was not going to waste it, still running across the grass as if she were flying. She crashed into one of the injured ones, knocking it into the rest and adding to the chaos her wind blades had sown. The margolls fought with wild ferocity, while her movements were clean and efficient. Blocks made openings for attack and dodges set up combination strikes. Fists and feet, elbows and knees; no movement was wasted or opportunity missed as she pounded the margolls with power and precision.

Despite her speed and skill, the frenetic creatures were not on the back foot for long, using their numbers to box in their singular enemy. Sickle claws aimed to reap her life away, but were met with fists and forearms. Every attack she was able to meet, her powers shielded her from suffering so much as a scratch.

As they moved to surround her, she couldn’t intercept every attack. A raking slash from the side cut into her leg and from the rear a lacerating swipe scored her upper arm. She ignored the pain and kept fighting, having drawn them in as she wanted.

Having boxed her in, the monsters pushed in hard, only to find she had been replaced with an afterimage. As their claws lashed ineffectually through it, she reappearing a small distance away. As the clustered margolls milled in confusion, Sophie was launching another triple wind blade.

Having moved so close together in their attempt of overwhelm her, they had made themselves vulnerable to the sweeping blades of if air. The razor wind erupted on impact after slicing through skin and muscle, the blade hideously effective against the margolls who had no more defences than their short, bristly fur. After three blades only one was standing, badly injured. Sophie finished it off before making sure the ones on the ground were all dead.

Surrounded by dead enemies, Sophie stood tall and drew in heavy, exhausted breaths. Jason and Humphrey arrived at the scene as a bag of coins fell on her head.

“Ow.”

“When did you come up with that spinning jump thing?” Jason asked her.

“You left for two weeks,” she said, picking the bag. “Did you think I spent the whole time meditating?”

“Fair enough,” he said, taking the bag and putting it in his inventory. “Did Rufus help with that?”

“I think he felt bad for me.”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I kind of left you in limbo, there.”

Jason took out a notebook scribbled in it with a pencil.

“What’s that?” Sophie asked.

“It’s how I’m keeping track of your money,” he said, putting them away again.

“Oh,” she said. “Thank you.”

“You have some real unarmed combat skills,” Humphrey said. “I have a relative, Phoebe. She’s an unarmed specialist, too, and she’s been looking for someone to practice with for a while. I think you could help each other.”

“I’d like that,” Sophie said, jerking a thumb at Jason. “She has to be more reliable than this guy.”

“Oh, come on,” Jason said.

“You did just leave without telling anyone,” Humphrey pointed out.

“Yeah, well... alright. That’s fair.”

“If you’re interested, then sooner might be better than later,” Humphrey said. “It would be dark long before we reached the city; my family estate is closer, here in the delta. I can introduce you to Phoebe and we can go back to the city in the morning.”

“Sounds good to me,” Jason said. “What do you say, Wexler? Want to be put up in the most prestigious estate in Greenstone? I’ll just loot these monsters and we can get going.”

“You realise you’re saying that to someone staying in Emir Bahadir’s cloud palace,” Humphrey said.

“I am going to miss having a cloud bed,” Jason said. “It was the worst part of leaving the city for so long.”

“I can’t offer those,” Humphrey said, “but we do have hammocks. They’re really good for the hot nights.”

“Never have sex in a hammock,” Jason advised. “It seems like it would be awesome, but it’s actually quite troublesome.”

“It just takes practise,” Humphrey said offhandedly, earning a wide-eyed look from Jason.

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“What are we looking at?” Rick asked.

In the mirage chamber control room, Rick, Belinda and Clive were looking through the window. Under the dome, a large illusionary orb and a small illusionary orb were pressing into one another.

“The small orb is a simulated astral space,” Clive said. “The big orb is a simulated world it’s attached to. This isn’t what they would actually look like; I simulated their magical aspects, rather than the physical ones.”

“Why?” Rick asked.

“A lot of equipment was brought back from the astral space,” Clive explained. “I managed to replicate what they were doing on a small scale, but I couldn’t figure out what it did. Using it in our world, instead of an astral space, meant all the power it output just got absorbed. Our world is too big. Of course, going back into the astral space and setting it up again was not an option. Here, we’ve created a simulation of an astral space, a world to anchor it and the equipment the expedition bought operating inside it.”

“So, instead of a monster, you created a whole world?” Rick asked.

“Not exactly,” Clive said. “I’ve examined the equipment quite thoroughly and isolated what it should interact with and simulated that. Simulating a whole world is beyond any mirage chamber I’ve ever heard of.”

“So, what are the results?” Rick asked.

“We’ll have to wait. I’ve accelerated the simulation as much as possible, and so long as I haven’t missed anything major, it will eventually show us exactly what the expedition interrupted.”

They watched eagerly for the first hour, attention waning in the second. Rick went and brought them all lunch while Clive and Belinda turned to books from Clive’s personal stash. After looking through Clive’s collection, Rick went to retrieve a book with less theory and more tales of dashing heroics.

It was evening before something changed on the inside of the chamber. They all went to the window, watching the two orbs.

“We already know what they were doing would have catastrophic results,” Clive said. “The major question is whether that was the objective or a side-effect.”

The two orbs had been pushing into each other for the entire run of the simulation, but as they watched, the smaller orb pulled away. The surface of the large orb, where the small orb had contacted it, was wrinkled and marred, where the rest was smooth.

“Is that it?” Rick asked.

“No,” Clive said. “The astral space, the small orb, shouldn’t be able to maintain its integrity without being attached to its world. Just pulling apart should have caused it to break down.”

“Is someone trying to make a small, independent world?” Belinda asked.

“If they are, it won’t work,” Clive said. “It can’t last long, like that.”

As if to prove his point, the smaller orb started to distort, breaking apart into chunks and then vanishing entirely.

“There we have it,” Clive said. “Their objective was to separate the astral space from our world while maintaining its structure for at least some amount of time.”

“How much time?” Belinda asked.

“Weeks. Months, at the outside. I’ll need to examine the simulation recording to get more details, but the basics are clear.”

“Why would they do that?” Rick asked.

“No idea,” Clive said.

“Who benefits?” Belinda asked. “And how?”

“From a huge chunk of dislodged physical reality, floating through the deep astral?” Clive asked. “No one. Even gods couldn’t do anything with it; once it leaves their world, it’s out of their ability to affect. All that leaves is...”

Clive’s eyes went wide as he let a low sound of horror out of his mouth.

“No...”

He paced back and forth, clutching at his hair with his hands.

“This is bigger than us,” he said. “Astral spaces. Ours wasn’t the only one affected. Oh, this is bad.”

“What’s bad?” Belinda asked. She and Rick were looking at Clive in frustration.

“I’ve figured it out,” he said.

“We got that much,” Belinda said. “What did you figure out?”

“We need to tell someone,” Clive said. “A diamond ranker. Lots of diamond rankers.”

He bolted for the door, Belinda and Rick following, only to meet Clive rushing back in. He gave Rick a wild-eyed look.

“I don’t know how to get back,” Clive said.

Chapter 134: World Building

The sky was nearing full dark but the pathways of the Geller estate were lit up by magical lights, albeit ones selected and placed more for aesthetics than practicality. Rather than simple illumination, the discretely placed lights washed the gardens in shifting colours.

Clive had no time to stop and appreciate it as he led Rick and Belinda through the gardens in a rush, striding with his long legs. Belinda did have time, as Clive's enthusiasm outpaced his ability to navigate, requiring Rick to correct him as he headed down one wrong path after another. This allowed Belinda to keep up in spite of her more measured pace.

"I like these lights," Belinda said.

"Good, aren't they?" Rick asked. "No, Clive, the left.

Clive grumbled as he came back up one path to head down another.

"Explain this again," Belinda said to Clive as he came past. "There's some kind of super god?"

"Yes," Clive said distractedly. "Except no. But yes. But no."

"That clears everything up," Rick said as Clive strode off again.

Compared to Clive, Humphrey, Sophie and Jason made their way through estate grounds at a relaxed saunter. They took the time to appreciate the colourfully lit paths.

"I looted some material from those trap weavers," Jason said. "My combat robes are made from the same stuff. I know a guy who can probably use it to make you something similar, Wexler."

"I thought you said I'd have to pay for my own gear," Sophie said.

"We're in a group," Jason said. "We split the loot as a group. You'll still have to pay for labour costs yourself."

"Thanks," she said with a frown. "Sorry, that sounded insincere. Gratitude isn't a feeling I'm used to."

Jason laughed.

"No worries. I know what it feels like to go from random nobody to adventurer with magic powers and such, hobnobbing with the wealthy and powerful. Which will be us, soon enough. It's a bit disorienting, isn't it? Feels hard to get your feet under you. Normal keeps

slipping away from you like a bar of wet soap. You're constantly trying to figure out what normal is, now."

"Yeah," she said. "That's exactly what it feels like."

Danielle, Emir, Thalia, Arella and the Archbishop were moving through the estate grounds from the ritual building toward the main house. Fresh from witnessing the gruesome demise of Jonah Geller, Danielle was still reeling, lingering at the back of the group. Ernest Geller, the only non-silver amongst them, had taken over the duty of guiding them through the grounds.

"I am not subjecting my son to that process," Thalia Mercer said adamantly as they moved along the path.

"That will not be necessary," said Herston, the Archbishop of purity. "Now that we know what we are dealing with, our methods can be more precise."

"We know what we're dealing with?" Arella asked.

"The boy was implanted with a star seed. My church has seen such things in the past and has long-developed the means to extract them. There will be damage, depending on how long the seed has been inside them, but no irrevocable harm."

"What good does that do Jonah?" Danielle spat. It was the first time she had spoken since Emir led her away from Jonah's ruined body.

"What is this star seed, exactly?" Emir asked.

"They are the creations of entities from beyond your physical reality, only existing in the deep astral," the Archbishop said. "They are known by various names, but most commonly as the great astral beings. There are heretics in our world who offer them improper veneration, perversely akin to how the pious worship the gods. The astral beings can bestow blessings, like gods, but cannot bestow essence and awakening stones. Instead, they can send their followers star seeds."

"Is that what the people we tried to capture were using to kill themselves?" Emir asked."

"Most likely," the Archbishop said. "The seed must first be implanted into the body. Once it has germinated, the body undergoes a transformation, which may be minor or major."

"We've seen that," Thalia said. "The people who attacked the expedition were bizarre combinations of flesh and steel."

“Once the transformation is complete, the remnant power of the star seed is available for the heretic to use. Exploding that power to kill themselves should be well within their capabilities.”

“And they put those things in our children,” Thalia growled. “I’m going to kill them all.”

“And so you should,” the Archbishop said. “The seeds turn the implanted people into vessels for the astral beings; puppets without will. Only the most dedicated volunteer for such a process. At first the influence is subtle. Their memories and personalities remaining intact, the only control being a drive to protect the seeds within them from discovery. Slowly, without their even realising it is happening, the hosts become puppets. Their personalities are supplanted, shifting towards the will of the astral being who crafted the seeds.”

“How long does that take?” Thalia asked.

“I don’t know,” the Archbishop said. “I only know this much because I have studied all manner and means of impurity. I have never encountered a star seed in person. I will consult my church’s records after returning to the city.”

“Why weren’t these seeds found before now?” Thalia asked. “All five were examined in the camp, then back in the city, by silver-rank healers. Why didn’t they find these things inside them?”

“Star seeds are not some affliction to be easily purged by an essence ability,” the Archbishop explained. “These are transcendent-rank objects, brought into being by entities so vast and alien that we cannot comprehend the fullness of them. They require more than some simple ritual or essence ability to discover, let alone, purge. We should give thanks to our gods for shielding us from such things.”

“Your god didn’t help Jonah,” Danielle said. “Your god’s ritual tore him apart.”

“Perhaps if your family were more dedicated in their piety, he would have been protected.”

The whole group stopped as Emir used a mirage step to get between Danielle and the Archbishop, holding a hand out to forestall her rage. After checking she wasn’t going to try and rush past him, Emir turned a fierce glare on the priest.

“You had best watch yourself, Archbishop,” Emir warned. “Keep talking like that and I won’t get in her way again.”

The Archbishop snorted derision but didn’t say anything else, resuming their passage through the gardens. After a heavy pause, the others followed.

“The next step must be to retrieve the other four,” Arella said as they neared the main house. “You are certain you can extract these seeds without harming the people they are implanted in?”

“Without harming, no; without killing, yes. I am certain my church has the means, although there are two requirements. First, we must get hold of the people that harbour them before the seeds have taken too deep a root. Once the seeds have overtaken the body, they impinge upon the soul, after which it is too late. The second requirement is that we need to know which astral entity created the seeds. Each such entity creates a different seed and must be adjusted for, accordingly.”

“That gives us two priorities, then,” Arella said. “First, retrieve the remaining four affected, which should be the easy part. The Adventure Society has people watching them, waiting on the results of this ritual. Now we are certain they’ve been compromised, we can have them brought in immediately. They will be apprehended and Mr Bahadir’s portal user can bring them back to Greenstone.”

“What about finding out which great astral being we’re dealing with?” Danielle asked. “I want to know who is doing this to us.”

“I can answer that!” a voice called out.

They were nearing the main house, where the pathways leading all through estate converged into an open space. Coming from another path was an agitated Clive, with Rick and Belinda in tow.

Rick cast an anxious gaze over the group. He saw that Jonah was not with them, while Ernest, who he had last seen guarding Jonah, was. Then he spotted Danielle, red-eyed and distraught, which startled him. He had never seen her in any state but complete self-control. Rick’s whole body slumped as he realised what that meant for Jonah’s fate.

“What are you talking about?” Arella asked Clive as he hurried over to them.

“You were talking about an astral entity, right?” Clive asked. “I know which one it is, and what it’s after.”

The two groups converged as Rick and Belinda followed, then grew again as Humphrey, Jason and Sophie appeared. Belinda and Sophie shared a surprised look at each other’s presence, while Humphrey was startled by his mother’s plain distress, rushing to her side. His large figure towered over her as he embraced her in a deep hug.

“I think, perhaps,” Arella said, “We should take any further discussion inside.”

She turned to Ernest.

“You were part of the group that found the five, yes?” she asked.

“I was,” Ernest said.

"I assume there is a speaking chamber here on the estate. The personal autonomy of the other four is no longer valid. Tell the rest of your group to take the remaining four into custody immediately and bring them in, under the full authority of the Adventure Society."

"Yes, Ma'am," Ernest said before moving off at a half-run.

"We have a conference room in the house," Danielle said, giving Humphrey's worried arms a reassuring pat as she moved out of them. "We can hear out Mr Standish there. Humphrey, please see to the rest of our guests."

Danielle led the group inside the house, leaving Humphrey with Jason, Belinda, Sophie and Rick.

"What are you doing here, Lindy?" Sophie asked.

"Complicated magic with the fate of the world at stake," Belinda said causally. "You?"

"It's getting late and I was offered a hammock."

"My thing is more exciting," Belinda said.

"Sounds like it. Who were all those people?"

"Just a bunch of rich folk," Belinda said. "So, a hammock? Do you remember that guy Barry? He always used to sleep in a hammock."

"Was he the one that got killed when an anvil fell on him?"

"That's the one. Building a smithy on the third floor was a terrible idea."

"I recall a lot of his ideas being bad."

"No kidding. He wanted to, you know, in his hammock one time. I thought it would be fun but it was just awkward."

"I'm told it takes practice," Sophie said.

"Of course you were told that," Belinda said. "Anyone who looks at you, their first thought is 'how to get that girl to practise sex with me a lot?' That's how we got into this whole mess, remember?"

"That's not how I'd describe it."

As the two women talked, Humphrey and Jason approached Rick, staring blankly into the air.

"Rick?" Humphrey asked.

"I don't think Jonah made it," Rick said absently, eyes unfocused.

"He's dead?" Humphrey asked.

"They didn't say, but you saw your mother."

Humphrey bowed his head, running his hands through it. "Gods damn it. I didn't know things were that bad."

"Ernest brought him in by portal," Rick said. "They had me waiting to go get all the..."

He waved his arm at the house where all the important people had gone, leaving them behind.

"Where was that?" Humphrey asked.

"The ritual room. The big, isolated one."

"Well, let's go take a look," Humphrey said. "See if we can't get some answers."

Humphrey pointed out a building annexed from the main house.

"That's one of the visitor residences," he said. "Jason, you, Miss Wexler and her friend can go straight in."

Jason nodded, patting Rick on the shoulder.

"Let me know about Jonah, yeah?"

"Of course."

Clive was pacing at the end of a conference room, while the group of Greenstone's most important people sat around the conference table.

"How did you know one of the great astral beings was involved?" Clive asked.

"You are here to answer our questions," the Archbishop said. "Not the other way around."

"Right, yes. Um, so, great astral beings. We don't know all that much about most of them, because only a handful seem to take any interest in physical realities. The World-Phoenix, the All-Devouring Eye, the Reaper, the Celestial Book. More than any of those, however, one called the Builder takes specific interest in physical realities."

"You seem well versed in the knowledge of these beings," the Archbishop said.

"Yes," Clive said. "I happen to venerate the Celestial Book myself. It's fairly common for those of us heavily involved in magical theory."

"You admit to being a heretic?" the Archbishop asked, half-standing. The rage on his face was a stark contrast to the emotionless way he had observed Jonah's horrific death.

Clive glared back at the Archbishop.

"I suppose I could be considered a heretic," Clive said. "The same way that the exploitation of rigid dogma to act out personal prejudice could be considered faith."

The Archbishop's silver-rank aura exploded out towards Clive but was immediately crushed by Emir's gold rank aura.

"This is not the time, Archbishop. We are here to listen, not judge."

"The gods are always judging us. Forgoing righteousness for expediency is an easy path to sin."

“And not shutting up is the path to being kicked out,” Danielle said. “This is my home and you are here by my forbearance.”

The Archbishop scowled but settled silently back into his seat.

“Emotions are running high, and with good reason,” Emir said. “That doesn’t change the fact that tempering ourselves will accomplish more than indulging ourselves will.”

Emir panned his gaze around the room, asserting his authority with a delicate but unmistakable employment of his aura.

“Please, continue, Mr Standish,” he said.

“Thank you,” Clive said. “As I was saying, there is one astral entity who takes more interest than the others in physical realities, which is to say, worlds like ours. Most of the others operate similarly to gods in that what they want is the promotion of various ideals. The World-Phoenix fosters dimensional integrity; the Celestial Book promotes the understanding of magic’s underlying nature. The Reaper advocates the finality of death. The Builder is not like these others. It has no interest in disseminating principals and is instead obsessed with physical reality while, by its very nature, being unable to co-exist with it. This dichotomy of its core drive and its intrinsic properties has led to an undertaking on such ambition it staggers belief.”

“What kind of undertaking?” Emir asked.

“It is building a world of its own,” Clive said. “Creating a new physical reality in the deep astral. The way it does this is to take raw materials that are neither fully of the astral or of physical reality.”

“You’re talking about astral spaces,” Arella said.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “Astral spaces form attached to worlds, without which they immediately break down. Without a world to anchor them, they cannot exist. But if an astral space is given the ability to sustain itself, even for just a brief period, the Builder can take it and anchor it to the world the Builder is creating from stolen parts.”

“You’re saying that those people we fought were trying to steal the astral space for this Builder?” Arella asked. “A dimensional pirate, plundering chunks of reality from which to build its own?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. An astral being cannot interact with physical reality directly, so it needs to recruit others to act for it. The Builder recruits people to carve off the astral spaces connected to their world, then it steps in and claims them. I’ve read about the Builder doing this, but now I’ve seen the means by which it does so.”

“What are the ramifications of losing astral spaces?” Emir asked.

“It varies, since different astral spaces are connected to worlds in different ways. The process they were using in our local astral space was designed to keep the astral space intact, at the cost of catastrophic destruction to the physical reality. I can confidently assert that the results would be similar in other instances.”

“We have reports of astral spaces suffering incursions like ours all over the world,” Arella said.

“That’s right,” Clive said. “Astral spaces, all over the world. We’re talking about cataclysmic destruction the world over. Death and destruction on a civilisation-ending scale. The only comfort I can take is that there are smarter people than me looking into all this and stronger people than us doing something about it. This is a threat that extends beyond the reaches of our world. We need diamond rankers to act, and act fast.”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Mr Standish,” Emir said. “The information you’re giving us is not information we’ve been getting from elsewhere. Either they don’t know, or they are hiding the potential risks to avoid panic.”

“At the risk of agreeing with the Archbishop,” Thalia Mercer said, “how confident are you in this information, Standish?”

“Very,” Clive said. “My knowledge of the great astral beings comes from one of the Magic Society’s previous directors. The great astral beings were his field of study and he had a collection of journals from diamond-rank adventurers who had travelled between worlds. He left those to me after his death and I know them well.”

“And you’re sure this Builder’s people are the ones doing these things to our astral spaces?” Thalia asked.

“Yes. The Builder, as I mentioned, has no driving ideology. He forms groups, cults, driven not by ideology, but through gifts of power. The fact that we are seeing any of this suggests they have been operating here for years. Maybe decades.”

“But you are certain this Builder is behind them?” Arella asked.

“I have managed to successfully simulate what they were doing in the Geller’s mirage chamber. The goal of their efforts was to reinforce the astral space and sever it from our world. Nothing short of a great astral being has the power to make anything of such an act, and of them, only the Builder has any interest in it.”

“I think our next move should be to confirm this information as best we can,” Arella said. “If combine we what we’ve seen today, Mr Standish’s findings and the experiences of the expedition together, we may well have at least an acceptable level of confirmation to disseminate to the Adventure Society at large.”

“Mr Standish, I’d like a look at those journals, if you don’t mind,” Emir requested.

“I’ve made copies of the originals,” Clive said. “I’ll deliver them to your cloud palace.”

“I shall look into the records of our rituals for removing star seeds,” the Archbishop said. “There may be details in the rituals for removing this Builder’s seeds that help confirm he is the one.”

“Thank you,” Emir said.

“I’ll turn the more scholarly members of my family loose on the temple of knowledge’s library,” Danielle said. “The goddess always welcomes seekers of truth.”

“I’ll do likewise,” Thalia said.

“I will make sure that everything we learn is spread to the Adventure Society as a whole and see if they have anything in return,” Arella said. “We aren’t the only ones dealing on this problem, but one group of many working to contribute.”

“Good,” Emir said, standing up. “We all have our tasks; we should get to them. Well done, Mr Standish.”

“The hour is getting late,” Danielle said, also getting up. “You are all welcome to stay the night. We have ample room.”

Thalia and Emir accepted the offer, with the Archbishop and Elspeth Arella declining; everyone recognised that neither the priest nor the Adventure Society director were truly welcome in Danielle Geller’s home. They went off to their transport while Danielle led Thalia, Emir and Clive toward the guest wing.

“Mr Standish,” Emir said as they left the conference room. “Have you ever considered becoming a professional treasure hunter?”

Chapter 135: Fabulous Prizes

The day's first light found Jason meditating on a porch. It was attached to just one of the Geller family guest houses, each larger than the four-bedroom home Jason grew up in. Like most of the Geller estate building, it was nestled amongst the lush greenery of the gardens.

-
- Ability [Cloak of Night] (Dark) has reached Iron 6 (100%).
 - Ability [Cloak of Night] (Dark) has reached Iron 7 (00%).
-

Jason opened his eyes. His recent two-week storm of monster hunting had not been as effective at raising his abilities as he hoped. His lower-level abilities improved well enough, but his highest-rank ones were starting to plateau. Once he was back in the city, he would seek out Rufus for advice.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: iron
- Progression to bronze rank: 25% (2/4 essences complete)

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Iron 5].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Iron 0].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Iron 0].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Iron 5].

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 8] 19%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 7] 00%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 7] 04%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 6] 98%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 6] 14%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 5] 92%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 6] 89%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Iron 5] 06%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron 7] 23%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 6] 23%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 6] 69%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Iron 7] 69%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Iron 5] 23%.

Doom [Spirit] (4/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 7] 16%.
- [Punition] (spell): [Iron 6] 54%.
- [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Iron 4] 39%.
- [Verdict] (spell): [Iron 3] 94%.

Jason could feel the changes in his attributes. His power attribute made him stronger than he had been before. He could better handle being knocked around by monsters, as well. It was nothing like the superhuman strength of Gary or even Rufus, but compared to his previous self it was definitely noticeable. Additionally, his increased recovery attribute had greatly increased his stamina, and his mana recovery was quicker than previous.

The changes were reflected in his physical appearance, as well. His meagre physique wasn't bulking out, but flaccid muscle was gradually becoming sleek and lean. He stood up and stretched.

"Feeling sexy."

"What was that?" Emir asked, approaching along a garden path.

"I said I'm feeling sexy," Jason said. "I'm not ashamed to admit it. You're up and about, early."

"Lots to do," Emir said. "I wanted to talk to you before I headed back for the city."

Jason returned his meditation mat to his inventory and gestured Emir towards the outdoor furniture on the porch.

"Iced tea?" Jason offered.

"That would be nice," Emir said. The delta heat was already rising. Jason took a pair of tall glasses and a pitcher from his inventory. He filled a glass with ruby red tea, chilled by the chunks of ice in the pitcher. Emir took an appreciative sip.

"What did you put in this?" he asked.

“Gem berries,” Jason said. “They’re in season.”

Emir took another sip before turning to his main topic.

“The reason I’ve come by is that I wanted to talk to you. I anticipated having this conversation earlier but the delay is for the best, given recent revelations. How much are you aware of what’s going on?”

“You mean the monster from beyond reality who likes playing with blocks? Clive told us about it last night.”

“Did you hear about the star seeds?”

“Yeah. Between what Ernest saw and Clive knows, I think I have it all.”

“What do you think about what our enemies are doing, seeding those people?”

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“I think their plan is going about as well as they could ask, given it was almost certainly hatched in a very short time.”

“Care to expand on that?” Emir asked.

Jason snorted a laugh

“You know, I had teachers like you,” he said. “The ones that make you keep talking until they’re sure you’re right, or sure you’re wrong.”

Emir chuckled. “I think I’m starting to understand some of Rufus’ complaints about you. Why don’t you go ahead and indulge me?”

“Fine,” Jason said. “Think about it from the bad guys’ perspective. They’ve been working for months in this astral space, only for a small army of adventurers to arrive. They know the jig is up, so they knock together a hasty plan. Use their construct army to send the invading adventurers into disarray, giving the villains of the piece time to extricate their people. While they’re at it, they snag some iron-rankers in the chaos, shove in some star seeds and leave them in suspiciously easy to find locations. They scarper, leaving us with a bunch of suspiciously suspicious people to be suspicious of. Which we are. Secretive meetings between powerful people; the local powers scrambling to figure out what’s been done to them without setting off a political volcano. In the meantime, their actual agents are running around without us wondering if they even exist.”

“You think the five were a distraction?”

“It’s the only thing they’re good for. Attempting to use them as agents for some agenda would be pointless because they’ve been watched from the moment we got them back, which was obviously going to happen. My guess would be that they have a secondary objective. Maybe another astral space, somewhere.”

“How would you go about figuring out if they’re just a distraction?”

“That’s easy; the key is the other four. They’re only iron rank, so if they mysteriously slip the higher-rank people who try and bring them in, forcing us to focus even more time and resources on them, then they’re definitely a distraction. Whoever is responsible for that might have even let Jonah get taken so they would find what’s inside him. That way, we have to make retrieving the others the priority, even if we figure out they’re a distraction. We can’t just leave a bunch of wealthy scions full of interdimensional mind-control bombs.”

Emir gave Jason an assessing look as he refilled his glass.

“So, teach, was I right or wrong?”

“We send word to bring the four in last night,” Emir said. “They all escaped the people keeping an eye on them. The Hornis branch of the Adventure Society is conducting a large-scale search.”

“There you go,” Jason said. “You need to get people looking for the real agents, maybe find out if there’s another astral space nearby. But you already have people on that, don’t you.”

“There is another astral space,” Emir said. “Smaller than the desert astral space, and different in several key ways. It’s been hidden for longer than Greenstone has been here, but it’s still here.”

“Sounds like you have things well in hand,” Jason said.

“There are some complications,” Emir said. “I’ve already mentioned to you the event I came to Greenstone to conduct.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “This place you want explored is an astral space?”

“Yes, but one much harder to enter than the desert astral space. It requires certain conditions to open that I have spent most of the last two years looking to fulfil, all while looking for the entrance.”

“Which is here,” Jason said.

“Not right here, but close enough. I had my people confirm it shortly after I arrived. The major complication, however, is that even once opened, only iron-rankers may enter. We’ve tried considerable measures to get around it, none of which were found to be viable.”

“So you need a bunch of iron rankers to explore it for you,” Jason said.

“Precisely. There is something my client wants inside it and considerable rewards await whoever brings it to me.”

“Two years of searching; I imagine the rewards that await you are even more considerable.”

“Indeed they are,” Emir said. “It’s what allows me to be so generous.”

“How generous is that?”

“I’m not going to tell you the main prize, but the secondary prize is five legendary awakening stones for whichever team brings me the item. That should give you some indication.”

“Five legendary stones is the secondary prize? That’s generous, alright.”

“Unfortunately, your chances of winning the prize have rather dropped,” Emir said.

“Oh?”

“You know I pushed back the event, in the wake of the expedition.”

“You’re talking about the iron rankers you’re shipping in from outside the city? It’s going to be harder because I won’t just be up against Greenstone’s trashy iron-rankers.”

“Essentially, yes.”

“It doesn’t really change anything. The smart money was always on Beth Cavendish and her team, or maybe one some of the Geller groups. Rick’s team has taken some hits, but they have, what? Five more teams?”

“Humphrey is a Geller. Are you going to formalise a team?”

“We’ve talked about it.”

“You should do more than talk,” Emir said. “Your abilities should be starting to slow down their advancement by now, yes.”

“Actually, yes,” Jason said. “What’s that got to do with a team?”

“You need to start focusing on the contracts for which you are poorly-suited. You need to push yourself harder.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “Go for the hard stuff, but have a team to save you when it goes wrong.”

“Exactly.”

“Thanks for the advice.”

Emir finished his glass of iced tea.

“Another?” Jason offered.

“Please.”

Emir let out a sigh as Jason poured.

“These revelations about astral spaces are having an unpleasant impact on my plans,” he said.

“Do they want you to leave the astral space sealed, or use it as bait?” Jason asked.

“Bait. They want an examination by the purity church to be a condition of participation, but only tell people that once they’re assembled onsite. I’m not sure if the

church can muster an appropriate test, but we may uncover people when they refuse to be subjected to it.”

“I’m not sure I’m willing to be subjected to it,” Jason said. “What kind of examination are we talking about?”

“I don’t know. The impression I get is that these seeds are hard to discover without invasive methods.”

“Well if you think I’m letting a priest shove a probe up in me, you’re sorely mistaken, which I imagine will be the majority opinion. Not to mention that if I were these people, the iron-rankers I’d send would be evil-implant free.”

“Whatever we decide to do,” Emir said, “I’ll be asking certain participants I trust to keep an eye out in the astral space. We have no idea who could be a Builder cultist.”

Jason frowned.

“That rings a bell,” he said. “Builder cultist. I’ve seen that somewhere.”

“Where?”

“Can’t remember,” Jason said, absently scratching his head. “I’m sure I’ve seen it, but... oh, that’s going to annoy me until I figure it out.”

Emir drained his second glass.

“That’s really good, thank you,” he said, standing up. “I’ll leave you to it; I want to call in on our hostess before I go.”

“She didn’t look in the best way, yesterday,” Jason said. “She took Jonah’s death hard.”

“Danielle blames herself for the expedition’s failures. Not as much as she blames Elspeth Arella, but still. Then once she thinks it’s all over, her family loses someone else.”

“I knew Jonah,” Jason said. “He was easy to hate, but also hard to stop yourself from liking. Eventually. We need to get these people.”

“Yes we do,” Emir said as he stepped off the porch. “Try and remember where you heard about Builder cultists from. If we can track down any of their activities outside the astral space, it might be the thread we follow right to them.”

Jason, Humphrey and Sophie joined Clive and Belinda to travel back to the city in Clive’s airboat. Due to the space constraints, Clive’s rune tortoise, Onslow, was unable to take his usual position on the prow. Clive called him back into his body, where he appeared on Clive’s torso as a runic tattoo.

“What ability do you get when Onslow merge into you?” Jason asked.

“I can use the rune powers on his shell as spells,” Clive said.

“That’s nice,” Humphrey said. “It’s like having even more essence abilities. That’s a fantastic familiar power.”

Humphrey’s own familiar, Stash, was currently in puppy form, laid back in Belinda’s lap, getting a scratch on the tummy. He suddenly struggled out of Belinda’s clutches and started trying to push himself into Humphrey’s leg.

“Silly boy,” Humphrey said, picking him up. “You can’t go inside me; you’re not that kind of familiar.”

Puppy Stash let out a little whine, giving Humphrey a pouty look before transforming into a bird.

“No!” Humphrey yelled as bird Stash leapt from his hand and promptly got sucked through the magical ring at the rear as it pull air through itself to propel the boat.

“Again?” Clive asked as he slowed down the airboat. “Every time, this happens.”

“You’ve heard me tell him,” Humphrey said.

“You need to get control of your familiar,” Clive said.

“You aren’t in any more control of your familiar,” Humphrey said. “It’s just so slow that you can’t tell it’s running away.”

The airboat came to a full stop and a frog the size of a St. Bernard swam up to the side, threatening to tip the airboat as it tried to climb on.

“You’re too big,” Humphrey told it and it turned back into a puppy that adorably scrambled at the side of the boat before plopping back into the water. Humphrey reached down to pluck it out, ignoring how wet his clothes were getting as he held Stash to his chest.

“Poor little guy. It happened again, didn’t it?”

The wet puppy snuggled into Humphrey’s chest as Clive started the boat up again. As they closed in on the city, Jason remembered the voice chat they had as they left.

“Are you going to see Hudson about joining Rick’s team when you get to the city?” Jason asked Humphrey.

“That’s right,” Humphrey said.

“You know there was another guy who was on Thadwick’s team,” Jason said. “If we’re going to put a team together ourselves, we’ll need a healer.”

“Neil Davone,” Humphrey said. “I can go and talk to him after, but it may be too late already. Even with Thadwick on his record, people will snatch up a loose healer.”

“I should be the one to do it,” Jason said.

“Are you sure?” Humphrey asked. “You had a history with Thadwick yourself.”

“That’s why it has to be me. If it’s going to work, that air needs to be cleared.”

“Alright, then. That’ll make five, then right?”

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Who are the other two?” Clive asked.

“You and her,” Jason told him, jerking a thumb at Sophie.

“You want me on your team?”

“Of course we do,” Humphrey said.

“Don’t you want someone, I don’t know... good?”

Jason and Humphrey shared a glance and laughed.

“You are good,” Humphrey told Clive.

“I am?”

“You are,” Jason said.

“Oh,” Clive said, tilting his head with a nonplussed. “Really?”

“Don’t get me wrong; you’re no solo operator,” Jason said. “You need someone to stand between you and the bad guy, but once you have that, you’ve got the goods.”

“And she’s good too?” Clive asked, looking at Sophie.

“No, but she’s cheap,” Jason said, right before Sophie punched him on the arm.

“Ow. Don’t forget you’re my indentured servant; I can make you walk the plank. Does anyone have a plank in their storage space?”

Chapter 136: Any Team Except Yours

Jason walked up from the loop line into one the most verdant neighbourhoods on the Island, with streets and residences both full of vibrant greenery with long leaves and colourful flowers. The water-affinity of the green stone that was the foundation of the Island helped the flowers deny the encroaching autumn. The houses didn't have yards so much as grounds, with low walls that were more about decoration than security. There weren't street numbers, but family names appeared on plaques near the entry gates.

Jason found the one he was looking for and approached the gate. On the other side was a gateman reading a book in a small gazebo for shade. He clearly was more greeter than security as he looking older than the house he was guarding, although his normal aura said he was no such thing. He put his book down to approach Jason from the inside of the gate.

"May I enquire as to who is visiting?"

"Jason Asano. I'm looking for Neil Davone."

The old elf nodded and opened the gate, directing Jason to go up the path to the house and knock.

Doing just that, Jason saw some people taking drinks on a terrace and gardeners maintaining the grounds, all of whom were elves. The relaxing people glanced at him with curiosity made no move to approach as he did as instructed, going to the front door and knocking. Another elf opened the door, an older man who was the very image of understated elegance. Jason was again asked his business and he introduced himself a second time.

"Ah, Mr Asano. I was sorry to hear about your demotion and have no doubt you shall soon be rising through the ranks once more."

"You know about my demotion? And that I exist?"

"It is incumbent on the staff to keep abreast of issues that may impact the household."

"I'm guessing that's only true with a certain calibre of staff," Jason said. "I doubt everyone shares your professionalism."

"Thank you for saying, sir. Would you care to wait in the parlour while I check on the young master's availability?"

“That would be lovely,” Jason said. The elf butler led Jason into a garden parlour, just off a large courtyard filled with greenery. The elf had barely gone before a maid came in with a tea tray with finger cakes.

“Thank you,” Jason said as she poured the tea.

“This blend is from the family’s holdings in the Mistrun valley,” The maid told him as he took a sip. “They produce some of the finest tea fields in the world.”

Jason took another sip and nodded.

“I believe it,” he said, giving her a smile. “I can’t think of a finer cup I’ve had.”

“Thank you, sir,” the maid said before withdrawing. Jason enjoyed the breeze drifting in from the courtyard, carrying with it a pleasant scent of flowers. Once he finished the first cup he poured himself another and helped himself to one of the cakes as he waited. When Neil Davone finally entered, Jason got up to greet him.

They sat down, Neil pouring tea for himself into the other cup.

“So what brings you to my home, Asano?” Neil asked. Jason read his tone as civil, with an undercurrent of either challenge or resentment.

“The same reason I imagine all manner of young adventurers have come by,” Jason said.

“You want a healer. You’re putting together a team.”

“Yes. Before we get into that, can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead,” Neil said.

“Everyone I’ve seen here is an elf.”

“That’s not a question,” Neil said. “We’re an elven household; what’s odd about that?”

“Are you adopted?” Jason asked.

“No,” Neil said.

“Your parents are elves?”

“Of course they are,” Neil said. “What are you getting at?”

“Is your milkman a human?”

“What in the world are you talking about?” Neil asked.

“I’m just wondering why you aren’t an elf,” Jason said.

“I am an elf.”

“You’re an elf?”

Annoyed, Neil brushed back his hair to reveal a tapered ear.

“Wow,” Jason said, not hiding his surprise.

“Why would you think I’m a human?” Neil asked.

“Well, it’s just... look. Elves are a slender bunch. Except for Lucian Lamprey, who is probably on some kind of magicalroids, but that’s beside the point. For a human, your proportions are completely healthy. For an elf, though, you’re bit of a chunker.”

“Excuse me?”

“You know; an extra bit of heft. Too much time at the sandwich shop. An overenthusiastic between-meal snacker.”

“Are you saying I’m fat?”

“I’m not saying you’re fat,” Jason assured him. “I don’t think that’s even possible for essence users. I’m just saying you look fat. For an elf.”

“This is how you try and recruit someone?” Neil asked incredulously.

“It does seem like I’m negging you, doesn’t it?” Jason asked with an apologetic grimace. “Sorry. I really don’t want to be that guy.”

“Negging?”

“What it really comes down to is that I’m less of a best foot forward guy than an honest foot forward guy,” Jason said. “What you see is what you get, and if you join up with us, there’ll be a lot of this, if I’m being honest. Which I am. You’ve seen me at my most petty when I was dealing with Thadwick. I could say that’s not a representative sample but that would be a lie. You should have seen my two-star promotion hearing. The transcript of that one must read very strangely.”

“Maybe that’s why you got demoted,” Neil said pointedly.

“Wouldn’t shock me,” Jason said cheerfully. “So, on to the issue of forming a team. The first question is whether you’ve already joined a team. I’m sure you’ve had offers.”

“I have had offers,” Neil said. “The family is weighing them over.”

“I’m guessing they want to put you on a good team. You did them a solid by putting up with Thadwick all that time.”

“That is a concern for my family and not for you,” Neil said. “Why should I give so much as a moment’s consideration to joining your team?”

“I don’t have any kind of elaborate pitch,” Jason said. “All I have for you are two things; the reasons we want you to join us and the reasons you’ll want you to join us.”

“You think I actually want to join you?”

“Of course not,” Jason said. “You haven’t thought about it, yet. Let’s start with why we want you to join us.”

“Why would I care about your reasons?”

“Because if you join us, we’ll be your team, and what we think about each other will matter. Consider how Thadwick’s attitude affected your old team.”

"You don't know anything about our team."

"I'm not saying I do," Jason said. "I'm just saying think about it. How did Thadwick treat you? How did that affect the team? Same for your other team member, Dustin."

Neil frowned but didn't argue the point.

"We know you're a good healer," Jason said. "Rufus Remore said you're the real thing and that really means something."

"Rufus Remore said I was good?"

"More than once," Jason said. "I may talk a lot of crap but he doesn't. If he says you're the goods, then you are. That's not why we want you though. It certainly doesn't hurt but that's not what we're looking for. You went against your own church out of principle. You stood up for people because it was right, even when it cost you. That's what we're looking for."

Jason gave Neil a wry smile.

"I know I'm an arrogant fool," Jason said. "You work with what you have. It may seem like I have no guiding principles, but I do. You stood up for what you thought was right, which just so happened to help my friend Jory and who knows how many others. Whatever else happens, whether you join our team or tell us to take a hike, I want you to know that I respect you for that. I doubt you much care what I respect or don't, but there it is."

"You keep saying us," Neil said. "Who is on this team of yours, exactly? I'm assuming Humphrey Geller. Is Jory Tillman on it, too?"

"Not Jory," Jason said. "He's all about that medical research and isn't looking for a life of adventure. It's me and Humphrey, like you said. There's also a Magic Society guy, if Emir Bahadir doesn't poach him, and my indentured servant."

"Bahadir wants to steal your team member?"

"He wants to employ him for non-adventure related purposes. He's a dab hand with the practical application of magical theory. Solid ritual magic, a bit of artifice. He just did an upgrade of the Gellers' mirage chamber."

"And did you say your indentured servant?"

"Yep," Jason said. "She's doesn't have her Adventure Society membership yet, but we're training her up."

"This isn't exactly convincing," Neil said. "A magical researcher and a halfway slave who isn't even in the Society?"

"Like I said; we're training her up. She should be practising with Phoebe Geller in a training room in the cloud palace, right now. That kind of company, in that kind of location, should tell you something all by itself."

Neil shook his head.

"She was the thief everyone was chasing, right?"

"That's her," Jason said.

"And now she's training in the cloud palace to be an adventurer. How does something like that even happen?"

"The short answer? Me. Really, though, it's the same way anything happens. You look at what you want to happen, then figure out what it'll take to get there from where you are. You can do almost anything if you're willing to do what it takes. People mostly fail at things because they balk at what they have to do. It's not that the path isn't there but that they aren't willing to walk it. There's a price they aren't willing to pay, be it literal, political, social, whatever. But if you're willing to commit, impossible is just a word for people convincing themselves not to try."

Jason gave Neil an easy smile.

"You're not one of those people," Jason said. "You proved that when you stood in front of your whole church and told them no."

"I did think that stopping them was impossible," Neil said.

"Yet you stood up to them and stopped them. Most people would have stood aside without ever finding out and that's the difference. You tried. That's something I want on my team."

"What about why I would want to join?" Neil asked. "You aren't exactly enticing me with tales of a double-demoted guy and his indentured servant forming a team."

"In fairness, she may be temporary. Her indenture is six months and she may quit after, I don't know."

"It sounds like you're trying to convince me to join any team except yours."

"You want a reason to join our team? Humphrey Geller is the reason."

"I've been on a team with a big name," Neil said. "That has the exact opposite of appeal."

"It's not the name," Jason said. "It's the man. Did you hear we once ran into a marsh hydra?"

"I heard. Thadwick though it was a lie."

"Of course he did," Jason said. "It came on us unexpectedly, through a submerged tunnel while we were deep underground. Humphrey was by the exit and could have gotten

clear. It was too small a hole for the monster to chase him but Humphrey didn't even look at the way out. He came and he stood by us because we weren't close enough to reach that way out. And he's the one who fought it, too. The rest of us just hung around at the back and tried not to die."

Jason drained his teacup and got to his feet.

"Everyone knows what Thadwick did to you during the expedition," he said.

"Humphrey Geller will never do that. He'll walk into a field of death for no more reason than you're there already. I have to imagine that appeals to a man who literally stood in the path of his own church."

Jason snagged the last finger cake from the tray.

"We aren't the most impressive team," Jason said. "What you need to remember though, is that you and I are adventurers. Ask yourself, what's more valuable than people who will stand shoulder to shoulder with you when things are at their worst?"

Jason bit the small piece of cake in half, muttering appreciatively.

"Thanks for your time, Neil. And the tea. If you'd told your butler to kick me out, it would have been understandable."

Neil got up and showed Jason to the door. As he watched Jason walk toward the gate, he called out to him.

"Yeah?" Jason asked, turning back.

"You have a shadow teleport, right?"

"That's right."

"And that hydra caught you deep underground, right?"

"Yeah."

"Couldn't you have gotten to that exit, too?"

Jason scratched his head, absently thinking out it.

"It never occurred to me," Jason said. "It was really scary."

Chapter 137: More Than One Clown

Phoebe Geller walked through the Adventure Society campus to the north shore. The cloud palace loomed off the end of the dock, dwarfing any building in Greenstone. Emir's chief of staff, Constance, came across the cloud bridge to meet her.

"Mistress Geller," Constance greeted. "This way, please."

"This is a treat," Phoebe said as they crossed the cloud bridge to the entrance. "Everyone wants to take a look in here."

"Mr Bahadir has had many fruitful dealings with the Geller family," Constance said. "He is happy to welcome you, albeit vicariously through me. Adding to his own affairs, recent events have been a heavy claimant on his time."

"I wouldn't expect a gold-ranker to make time for an iron-ranker like me. Even a silver-ranker, like yourself, is more than edifying."

The cloud bridge spanned a few metres over the water below, leading to the large door that served as the main entrance. Like all doors on the palace, it was not an actual door but a section of wall marked out from the rest by its blue colouration and gold edging.

"Wait here a moment please," Constance requested as she walked straight through. A few moments later, the door started rippling like the surface of a pond.

"Please enter," Phoebe heard Constance say. After a brief moment of hesitation, she stepped through. Inside was a huge atrium with vast open space and large windows that just looked like more wall from the outside. There were doorways, two grand staircases and plants all over, in planters, decorative pots and even growing right out of the walls. Most impressive was a plant-ringed pond between the two staircases, fed by a small waterfall from two floors up.

"Wow," Phoebe said. "He really fits all this in a bottle?"

"The plants are the trickiest part," Constance said. "It's almost impossible to place living material inside dimensional storage, and even then, only some carefully chosen plants are viable. Your aura signature had been added to the cloud palace's registry, so you'll be able to access any of the unrestricted areas of the palace. That's now, or on any future visit."

"Thank you," Phoebe said, still craning her neck as she looked around.

"Miss Wexler is in one of our training rooms. If you'll follow me, please."

Constance led Phoebe through the palace, and out from the main building, along a walkway that rested on the surface of the water towards one of the four surrounding wings.

A fresh breeze played through the open-air passage as water sloshed against the side. They entered the guest wing, passing a ballroom, a lounge and a dining hall on the way to an elevation platform that took them up two levels.

They stepped off in a training hall that occupied the entire level and was the height of a three-storey building. The walls were almost all transparent, giving views of the shore, the ocean and the other wings of the palace. The platform deposited them in an observation area, separated from the rest by a translucent barrier. It was raised higher than the main combat area and included two change rooms, rows of seats and a drinks cabinet, all pointed out by Constance.

On the other side of the barrier was the main combat area, currently full of artificial terrain made from cloud-stuff. The cloud was wildly coloured in blue, purple, orange and gold, making for a strange, alien landscape. Moving through it at blistering speed was a woman being pursued by faceless people and monsters; training dummies, rendered from the colourful and apparently quite versatile cloud-stuff.

"That is Miss Sophie Wexler," Constance said as they watched the woman dart about the room. The dummies chasing her were various shapes and sizes, from humanoid to monster, waist-high to bigger than a long-hall wagon. The smaller figures were quick and chased after her directly. The larger forms clambered right over the terrain or sent lengthy tentacles snaking around it.

Sophie had her hair tied back in a simple ponytail that flicked around behind her head. Her clothes were light and loose, white against her dark skin. She was practically flying around the room, making the most of the terrain with her speed and agility. Using movement to spread out the pursuing dummies, she would isolate a few at a time and turn the tables, thrashing them with a flurry of attacks before escaping, leaving the encroaching reinforcements behind.

Phoebe noted there was some kind of power attached to each of Sophie's strikes as only a few blows would tear the smaller dummies to pieces. Against the larger ones she employed hit and run tactics, taking them down across multiple attacks. Big or small, however, each fallen dummy was immediately replaced with another, creating an unwinnable challenge.

Phoebe sat down to watch as Constance took her leave. The acrobatic techniques Sophie used seemed wild and inefficient to Phoebe's eyes, yet she made it work. She was unarmed, yet the terrain became her weapon as she flitted about like a dragonfly. Her speed and agility were incredible, to the point Phoebe had a hard time believing she was iron rank.

Phoebe looked on in fascination as Sophie fought off waves of endlessly replenishing monsters. Inevitably she Sophie started to flag and her opponents came closer and closer to boxing her in. Eventually, she was overrun, going down fighting before the dummies and terrain vanished as she collapsed beneath their attacks. The sudden empty combat area left Sophie on her back, panting on a suddenly flat, wide-open area.

She rolled over onto her front, pushing herself heavily onto her knees then and then feet. She glanced over at Phoebe through the transparent barrier and trudged over, up the slope leading to the raised barrier and straight through the wall.

“You can only walk through it while the room is inactive,” Sophie said, seeing Phoebe’s surprised expression. “You don’t have to worry about a loose dummy getting thrown through it.”

There were two open-faced drink cabinets on the wall. One was filled with various kinds of liquor and a stack of small glasses. The other had glasses of chilled water, from which Sophie took one and drained it. She threw it at the wall, into which it vanished without a sound as she took a second from the cabinet. New glasses emerged from the back of the cabinet to replace the one she took, water pouring from above to fill them.

Phoebe still had traces of her family’s Greenstone origins, but was lighter-skinned than the locals, being from a distant branch family. Her hair was light brown, in a pixie cut that was short and practical but flattered her round face and delicate features.

“You don’t look much like Geller,” Sophie said.

“If you mean Humphrey, we’re only distant cousins. I’m Phoebe Geller.”

“Sophie Wexler. I’ve heard you can fight.”

“I’ve heard the same about you,” Phoebe said with a challenging grin. “You mostly seemed to be running away, though.”

“Oh, is that how it is?” Sophie asked.

“Think you can prove me wrong?”

Sophie pointed at one of the changing rooms.

“You can get changed in there.”

Jason caught the loop line back from the Davone residence and spotted a familiar face as he emerged from the Adventure Society transit terminal.

“Gary,” he called out with a wave and hurried over to his friend. He hadn’t seen him in weeks and clasped the big furry man in a quick hug.

“Cripes, Gary. I don’t like to question a man’s hygiene but I haven’t seen you in two weeks and I don’t think you’ve seen a shower. You want some crystal wash?”

Gary looked tired and dishevelled, although not so much as the man next to him. He was a human in scholarly robes with a lopsided Magic Society official's pin on his chest. He had an unruly mop of hair and an unkempt beard. His iron-rank aura meant his mid-thirties appearance was probably accurate. All in all, he looked like a slightly older, homeless version of Clive.

"I'm pretty ripe on the vine, alright," Gary said. "We've been in a workshop all week, sleeping on cots. Me and Russell here have been going over the remains of the construct monsters the expedition brought back," Gary said. "I've been stripping them down for Russell to figuring out how they work."

"We've been trying to work out how someone either snuck in or built from scratch a whole army of animated constructs without anyone realising," Russell said. "What Clive told us this morning about the origin of the people we're facing filled in some important pieces and we had a breakthrough."

"He had a breakthrough," Gary said. "I was just taking the things apart."

"Don't even try and play down your contribution," Russell said. "Without your expertise in deconstructing the intact specimen, the crucial piece could have been damaged, overlooked or lost entirely."

"Take the compliment, Gary," Jason said. "Russell, I think we've met."

"Yes," Russell said. "I was present for your initial Adventure Society intake. I've heard about you a lot since."

"You have?"

"If nothing else," Russell said, "Lucian Lamprey really, really doesn't like you."

"The feeling's mutual."

"I'm Russell Clouns," he introduced himself. "Nice to meet you again."

"Likewise," Jason said. "Clowns, you say?"

"Yes, Clouns."

"As in, more than one clown?"

"I'm not sure I follow."

"I'm talking about multiple clouns."

"The Clouns aren't a big or prestigious family," Russell said, confusion still plain on his face.

"But you're a whole family of clouns," Jason said.

"Uh, yes? I'm still not sure why that matters."

"I thought you'd have bigger shoes."

"Shoes?" Russell asked, looking down.

“Jason,” Gary said, “we’re both too tired for you right now.”

“Yeah, you should probably just go,” Jason told him, then turned back to Russell. “Do you all travel around in one tiny carriage?”

“Some portion of this conversation definitely seems to have gotten past me,” Russell said.

“No, that’s just Jason,” Gary said. “He takes some getting used to. Jason, we have to go report some findings and then get some sleep.”

“You look like you’ve been working hard.”

“Yeah,” Gary said. “We found something important, though.”

“Good going,” Jason said. “You can tell me all about it once you wake up.”

“I’m thinking that will be about two days,” Gary said, Russell nodding his agreement. They parted ways, Jason watching as they trudged tiredly toward the administration building.

➤ [\[Russel Clouns\] has been added to your contact list.](#)

“That’s disappointing,” Jason mused to himself. “Finding out clowns were all a family of interdimensional travellers would have been fun.”

Sophie and Phoebe gulped down large glasses of water, Phoebe following Sophie’s lead in throwing her empty glass at the wall. They took fresh glasses from the cooler cabinet and sprawled into seats. Phoebe sighed as the soft cloud furniture enveloped her.

“You can really fight,” Phoebe said.

“You too,” Sophie agreed. “I’m envious of all those special attacks.”

“I’m envious of that ability that negates them. Only my biggest attacks got through at all and I couldn’t believe how quickly you learned to pick them out and dodge. You’re impossible to pin down.”

Phoebe settled happily in her chair, sipping at her second glass while Sophie moved into a meditative, cross-legged pose. Sophie recovered quickly, looking fresh when her eyes snapped open.

“Is that a recovery power?” Phoebe asked and Sophie nodded.

“Nice. Is it just mana and stamina, or health, too?”

“All three.”

“Nice. Not much good in a fight, but don’t underestimate the value of quick recovery between skirmishes. When things went wrong in the big expedition it was a series of

running battles. We'd sometimes only get moments between fights and a power like that would make a huge difference."

"I'm not looking for any big battles," Sophie said.

"When you're an adventurer," Phoebe said, "they sometimes come looking for you."

"Adventurer," Sophie said. "I'm not sure I'm ready to pass that assessment."

"It's not that hard," Phoebe said. "Mostly they'll test your combat ability and you have no problems there. Always pay attention to what you're going to be up against. If you can afford it, buy a monster catalogue from the Magic Society so you can look up the next monster. Know what they can do going in and be ready for it. The other thing they'll test is judgement. If the invigilators try throwing you at something and it doesn't feel right, then tell them no. It's what they're looking for."

"Thanks," Sophie said. "This whole thing is crazy. I can't tell if meeting Asano was the best or the worst thing that ever happened to me. You know him, right?"

"Not well, but he's not hard to figure out."

"He's not?"

"Jason is a lot like Danielle Geller," Phoebe said. "She's subtle and refined where he's outrageous and disruptive, but they operate the same way. There's always a sense with Danielle that she's playing a game only she knows about. It's like you only ever see her from an angle. Jason is the same, except loud and distracting instead of subtle and nuanced. Basically, they're both good people who think like bad people."

"That might explain why I always come away feeling disoriented," Sophie said.

Phoebe laughed. "Yeah, I know that feeling."

"But you think he's a good guy?"

"I do," she said. "I've seen a little and heard a lot. That said, I should really show you this recording of a fight he had with my brother."

"Geller – Humphrey – said something about a recording," Sophie said.

"Oh, it's something to see," Phoebe said. "I can bring it along if you want to do this again. There has to be a projector in this place somewhere, right?"

"I'd like that," Sophie said.

"What do you mean, no one's here?" Gary asked.

"They are all important people, undertaking their own tasks to respond to this threat," Genevieve said. "They aren't just waiting around for people to come and tell them things. They will convene this evening and you can request to be heard then. Otherwise, the head

of the inquisition team is present. At this moment she is the highest-ranked Adventure Society official in Greenstone."

"Forget that lady," Gary said. "Russell; go home and get some sleep. I'm going to the cloud palace. Either Bahadir is there or I can get some sleep. It's a victory either way."

As Jason arrived at the cloud palace, his mood and expression both went icy when he spotted Thalia Mercer departing. She spotted him in turn and they met halfway across the cloud bridge.

"Hello Jason," she greeted.

"Thalia."

"I'm sorry about how things ended with you and Cassandra."

"I don't care."

Anger crossed Thalia's face.

"My daughter isn't worth enough for you to care about losing her?"

"Of course she is," Jason said, resuming his passage across the bridge by walking past her. "I don't care that you're sorry."

Chapter 138: Resurrection

Emir's private study occupied the entire domed top floor of the cloud palace's tallest and most central tower. One of the restricted areas of the palace, the only access without the power of flight was an elevating platform from lower floors. It would not activate for anyone but Constance and Emir, requiring Constance to escort Jason and Clive up. Emir had the dome set to almost full transparency, subtly dimming the bright sunlight while keeping the room fresh and cool.

At a glance, the room seemed mostly empty, aside from the people in it and a few small circles of water in the floor from which plants were growing. The only furniture was the seats the existing occupants were sitting in, but two more rose up from the floor to accommodate Jason and Clive. Constance departed, riding the platform back down, only for a new platform to manifest in its place.

"Thank you for coming," Emir said to them as they sat. Already in the room were Gary and Russell, both looking better for regular meals, showers and a couple of good night's sleep. They exchanged greetings, Jason noting that Clive and Russell seemed to know each other well. Clive had expounded more than once of the state of Magic Society personnel, but it seemed Russell was amongst the few Clive considered genuinely capable.

"You were lucky to catch us," Jason said. "We're about to take Wexler out for another monster run."

"Are you going to be working on group tactics?" Emir asked.

"Humphrey's gotten excited about devising tactics based around our team setup," Jason said. "Finally putting all that training his family gave him to use. We're still short a healer but we can at least get a start on things."

"I'm surprised you're leaving it to Humphrey instead of doing it yourself," Gary said.

"I may be a little self-impressed..."

"A little?" Clive interjected, getting a chuckle from Gary.

"Yes," Jason said, panning a pointed look from one to the other. "A little. I know better than to think I know more than someone with training or experience."

"You do?" Gary asked.

"Yes," Jason said. "I do."

His shoulders slumped. "Farrah hammered that into me. She wouldn't put up with it."

The room fell silent for a moment as all eyes fell to the floor, except for Russell who was smart enough to stay quiet.

“We found something,” Gary said, breaking the reverie.

“We’re pretty sure this is how they made all those constructs,” Russell added, taking a small object wrapped in cloth from a pocket in his robes. “Gary said you have an ability to identify objects and thought we should show you, to confirm.”

He went to pass Jason the item, but Jason stopped him with a raised hand. Jason then added Emir, Gary and Russell to the party that already contained him and Clive.

“This ability has so much potential,” Emir said. “How many people can you include at a time?”

“Myself plus nine more,” Jason said.

Russell opened the cloth and took out the object inside. It was the size and shape of a monster core but made up of intricate, clockwork mechanisms.

“Touch it,” Jason said.

Item: [Clockwork Core] (iron rank, rare)

The core of an artificial monster. (crafting material, magic core).

- **Effect:** When used as the core of a construct creature, the materials and processes used are significantly simplified.

“That is useful,” Russell said. “Can you do this for any item?”

“It doesn't work on very high-rank items,” Jason said.

“Still, possibilities abound. You should come work for the Magic Society.”

Jason groaned.

“I’ve told him, believe me,” Clive said.

Russell wrapped the core back up, returning it to his pocket.

“Thank you for that, Jason,” Emir said. “It’s nice to confirm what we’re dealing with.”

“So, these things are how they were able to build their construct army,” Jason said.

“Did the Builder supply them?”

“Not directly,” Russell said. “Clockwork cores are produced by a creature called a clockwork king.”

“Some kind of monster?” Clive asked.

“No,” Russell said. “I managed to find some records on clockwork cores in the temple of knowledge’s library, including their source, these clockwork kings.”

“What manner of creature are they?” Jason asked.

"In our world, creatures like dragons are highly magical, but they are actual creatures that are born, live and die. They aren't monsters. Clockwork kings are the same, but they aren't native to our world. They're native to the world the Builder has created."

"You think they've come here, somehow?" Jason asked.

"Yes," Russell said. "The bad news is, they're gold-rank entities. The good news is that I don't think there is one in this area. The constructs the expedition encountered were simple affairs. Basically, blocks of wood, stone and metal slapped together around one of these cores. Clockwork kings use the cores they create to craft more intricate and elaborate constructs. We haven't seen anything like what the records I found describe."

"If they're crafting things, does that mean they're intelligent?" Jason asked.

"Oh, yes," Russell said. "They are likely to occupy key leadership positions."

"Are they artificial creatures themselves, or living things?" Jason asked.

"From my understanding of the Builder's world," Clive contributed, "that isn't a strict delineation."

"That comports with what I found as well," Russell agreed.

"Is there any chance there is a clockwork king here and the best constructs are being held back to hide that fact?" Jason asked. "Lull us into a false sense of security?"

"It's possible," Emir said. "I think they would have used them to try and hold the astral space from us, though."

"It's unlikely," Clive said. "Travel between worlds is not easy to arrange, even for a great astral being like the Builder. They can't facilitate it directly because they're inimical to physical reality. An attempt to directly interact with a physical reality would be too destructive. As far as I'm aware, travelling between realities is the domain of diamond rankers, which means the Builder would have to rely on how many diamond-rankers he can spare from whatever other interests he has going on throughout the cosmos."

"You said destructive," Jason said. "I wouldn't have thought the Builder would care about that."

"It doesn't," Clive said. "The World-Phoenix does, however, and the great astral beings are careful about encroaching upon one another's interests. It's why they don't just resurrect any of their key minions who get killed as outworlders."

"What do you mean, resurrect?" Gary asked.

"It's about how death works," Clive said. "When the soul dies, it only lingers with the body for a small-time. Usually minutes, but an annihilated body might have the soul depart in seconds, while freezing to death might have it linger for an hour or even longer. It's why

if a gold rank healer can repair the body in that grace period, the death can be turned back."

"I didn't realise that was possible," Jason said, not the only one in the room thinking bitterly of Farrah.

"For those of us who don't die next to one of the most powerful healers in the world," Clive said, "our souls leave the body and the physical reality it's in. An untethered soul is an astral object and drifts into the astral."

"Where do outworlders come into it?" Gary asked, glancing at Jason.

"An outworlder is someone whose soul has re-entered a physical reality, reflexively manifesting a body for itself," Clive explained.

"Like a monster," Jason added.

"Yes," Clive said. "An outworlder's body is akin to that of a monster, or a summoned familiar. It is physical substance forged out of raw magic. An in-between existence of the astral and the physical."

"That's how you described astral spaces," Emir pointed out.

"I did," Clive said. "The analogy is apt. The point, however, is that an outworlder is a soul that has been pushed, by whatever means, from the astral and into a physical reality. This normally happens when natural, magical phenomena connect one physical reality with another, creating a channel that drags someone between the two realities. Their body is annihilated as it passes through the astral, then reconstitutes itself when entering its new physical reality."

"I see what you're saying," Jason said. "If one of these great astral beings took one of the souls floating around the astral and shoved it into a world, it would do what souls do when that happens. It would make a new body and you have someone resurrected as an outworlder."

"Exactly," Clive said. "They don't do that, though, because of the astral being called the Reaper."

"Is this the same Reaper, as in, Way of the Reaper?" Jason asked.

"What do you know about the Way of the Reaper?" Emir asked, eyes narrowing as he looked at Jason.

"That it was the martial art of an ancient order of assassins."

"The Order of the Reaper," Clive said. "And yes; it's the same Reaper. The Reaper is very big on the finality of death. Some consider it the true god of death, as all our god of death governs is the passage of the soul into the astral. The final resting place of souls is the astral, where our gods hold no sway."

“And the other great astral beings don’t take the souls they want and resurrect them because they won’t cross the Reaper,” Emir said.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “For the same reason, the Builder doesn’t just smash apart worlds and take the pieces it likes, because it will not cross the World-Phoenix. So the Builder gathers followers to carve off astral spaces, leaving the worlds they are attached to battered, but intact.”

“So you’re saying,” Gary said, “that if we convince this Reaper to give her up, we can bring Farrah back?”

“Don't even think about it," Clive said. "The Reaper would never entertain the request of mortals. It would disdain a diamond-ranker, let alone any of us."

“What about this ancient order?” Gary asked. “Bahadir, you’re here to investigate them right? You must know something.”

“I do,” Emir said. “I know the Order of the Reaper were an ancient cult of assassins. They brought death. I have seen no indication anywhere, ever, that they even tried to reverse it. I also know that they were scoured from this world, root and branch, by a coalition of churches, long ago. Only ruins filled with the dead remain.”

“Even if they still existed,” Clive said, “they venerated the Reaper. Bringing someone back would be anathema to them.”

“Do not let the hope of bringing her back take hold in you, Gareth,” Emir said. “Let her live in memory. Trying to bring her back will only stain those memories.”

“There has to be a way,” Gary said.

“Gary,” Clive said. “Even gods can’t bring her back.”

“Maybe we should return our attention to the problems at hand,” Russell suggested. “The clockwork kings.”

“Yes,” Emir agreed firmly. “The most likely scenario is that the Builder was unable to send enough to this world to spare one on a low-magic area like Greenstone. They would have sent the minimal number of people, recruiting locals and using these clockwork cores to literally build their numbers up.”

“So what do we do with this information?” Russell asked.

“Like everything else, we’ll disseminate it to the wider Adventure Society and hope it helps,” Emir said.

“You stripped those construct creatures down to the base components, right?” Clive asked. “If there is anything you found them using that that’s hard to source locally, get a list to Rufus Remore. He’s already following that trail and it might help him.”

“We can do that,” Russell said. “If we’re done here, we can go and look through our notes right now. Gary?”

Gary said nothing but gave a sullen nod.

“We’ll be off too, then,” Jason said.

“Thank you all for coming,” Emir said. “Jason, we’ve set Farrah’s wake for the end of the week. Be sure and be back for that.”

“I thought we weren’t doing anything for Farrah until her body was back home with her family,” Clive said.

“This is informal,” Emir said. “Something for those of us here who knew her.”

“Beth Cavendish’s team wanted to attend.”

“They fought with us during the expedition,” Gary said. “I’ll see they’re notified.”

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “We’ll be off. Do I need someone to work the elevator?”

“No,” Emir said. “It won’t take you up, but it will take you down just fine.”

Clive and Jason walked over to the elevation platform and descended out of sight.

“I’m sorry,” Emir told Gary. “I didn’t expect the discussion to go in that direction.”

“It’s alright,” Gary nodded. “It’s just... everything fell apart when she died. Rufus and I have barely spoken since we got back. I haven’t felt this alone in a long time.

Gary, Russell and Emir had a message pop up in front of them.

➤ [Party leader \[Jason Asano\] has kicked you from the group.](#)

They all looked at the message, then Gary let out a tension-breaking laugh.

“Well, that’s just rude,” he said.

Chapter 139: Manifestation

Four people were in Sophie and Belinda's guest suite as a recording was playing on a crystal recording projector. Sophie and Belinda were both present, as were Phoebe and Jory. Phoebe had brought the recording crystal while Belinda had roped Jory into taking a day off. He had been reluctant, but he hadn't taken a break since the clinic re-opened, and with a priest of the healer on hand, he let himself be talked into it.

Phoebe was the only one who had seen the recording of Jason's fight before. The others looked on with various reactions as they followed the recording from the perspective of Rick and his team.

"That laughter is creepy," Belinda said.

"I knew there was a dark side to Jason," Jory said, "but this is a bit much."

"A bit much is right," Sophie said. "He's being a complete ham. Wait, why is he stepping out into the open? He's just going to get speared. See, what did I just say?"

Belinda put a hand over her mouth in horror. "Did he just lick the spear?"

They watched until the recording ended, freezing with the image of Jason with his foot on the back of Jonah's head, drowning him in the mud.

"That was horrifying," Belinda said. "You had that guy chasing you?"

"Is wasn't real," Jory said, although his words sounded empty.

"It was theatrics," Sophie said. "Get into an opponent's head and you've already beaten them. That kind of over-the-top ridiculousness would only work on people with no real experience."

A melodious chime rang, indicating a visitor at the door and Belinda got up to let in Clive and Jason.

"Oh," Jason said sadly as he recognised the frozen image of himself and Jonah. "I don't like that recording being out there."

"Given how absurd you were, I can see why," Sophie said. "You spend the whole time playing ridiculous games instead of just taking them out."

"I didn't have the skills for that approach," Jason said. "There were five of them and going monster was the only thing I could think of to mess with their heads. If they were thinking straight, I would have lost."

"I'll admit it's good to show people what you'll do if they cross you," Sophie said. "Next time, cut out the maniacal laughter and stick to the horrifying death. That bit at the end where you drown the guy in mud was good."

“That man in the mud,” Jason said softly. “His name was Jonah. He’s dead for real, now, along with another member of that group. I have no interest in watching myself kill them.”

“I think it’s time for you to head off, Soph,” Belinda said. “You go fight monsters, or whatever. Jory and I going to have a picnic.”

“We are?” Jory asked.

“Yes,” Belinda said. “Thank you again for making up the basket, Jason.”

“No worries.”

Jason, Humphrey, Clive and Sophie were in the wood mill region of the delta, in the middle of a plantation forest. Their objective was a pack of monsters called flanards. Flanards were emaciated creatures with four arms and distended jaws full of pointed teeth. Individually they were weaker than margolls but appeared in even larger groups. Their numbers made them perfect for exploring team tactics, which was the reason Humphrey had selected that particular contract.

The thick plantation had trees growing in neat rows. Fighting amongst them, Sophie led three of the creatures between the trunks and into the waiting sword of Humphrey. He stepped out with a horizontal sweep that cleaved two of them in half while the other dropped to the ground, the blade barely passing over it. It sprang up and resumed its pursuit of Sophie.

Three more had been chasing after Jason but had lost him in the shadows. Spotting Sophie rush past, they joined her now lone pursuer. Sophie scrambled, seemingly in a panic as they joined the chase. She changed direction and the monsters followed, without noticing the odd mark on one of the trees. They dashed blindly after Sophie until the sound of Clive snapping his fingers preceded the ground underneath them blasting upward, the force tearing them all to pieces.

Humphrey came jogging through the woods, joining Sophie and Clive.

“That was good,” Jason said, emerging from a shadow. “Nice plan, Humphrey.”

“The key is to stay flexible,” Humphrey said. “Situations always change and rigid plans don’t work. Rather than over-complicated stratagems, if we have a learned and practiced series of flexible tactics, we can rapidly adapt to those changing situations. This was one of the simpler tactics outlined in the booklets I gave you all.”

“I can’t believe you wrote those,” Jason said. “When you do something, you don’t mess about, Humphrey. I think we’re all pretty impressed.”

The others nodded their agreement.

“Now we have them,” Humphrey said, “we need to make sure we learn them with our heads, then practise until we know them. If we combine a shared knowledge of a flexible tactical set with the communications advantage of Jason’s ability, we’ll be ready to react to any situation.”

“Like a malevolent gold-ranker who forces us into a knitting competition with our lives on the line,” Jason said.

“What?” Humphrey asked as the others looked at Jason with confusion.

“Humphrey said ‘any situation,’ so I posited a situation we might encounter.”

“How is that helpful?” Sophie asked.

“Fine,” Humphrey said. “We’ll be ready for *most* situations. These tactics are all preliminary, though. They’re worth learning to get into the habit, but they need to be adjusted once we get a healer and learn their capabilities, plus fill out our abilities, advance to bronze and so on. We’ll be adjusting and readjusting in an ongoing manner.”

“Any word on that healer?” Clive asked.

“Melissa Davone paid my mother a visit at our townhouse in the city,” Humphrey said. “Davone is at least considering joining us.”

“How many abilities do you have left to awaken?” Jason asked Humphrey.

“Two,” Humphrey said. “One from the magic essence and one from might. What about you?”

“Three. Two from dark and one from doom.”

“I still have seven to go,” Sophie said.

“Still early days, for you,” Humphrey said. “Jason and I gained our essences months ago. Getting as many as you have in under a single month is a good start.”

After Jason looted the monsters, they set out back for the city. The wood mill region was less water-accessible than most of the delta, so Clive had requisitioned a magic-propelled, open-top carriage. Clive sat in the driver’s seat, with the others in the back. When droplets of rain started coming down, they rolled off a magical barrier that covered the carriage.

“What is that?” Sophie asked with alarm.

“It’s just a barrier to keep the water off,” Clive said.

“But where’s the water coming from?” she asked. “Is a monster doing that?”

Clive looked back, sharing a confused glance with Humphrey and Jason.

“It’s just rain,” Jason said.

“Rain?” she asked.

“You don’t know what rain is?” Jason asked.

“Oh,” Humphrey said. “Have you never left the city before?”

“Not since I first went there as a girl,” Sophie said. “That was when I was very young. I don’t really remember anything before that. Are you saying water just falling out of the sky is somehow normal?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It doesn’t rain in the city? I thought it just hadn’t since I got here.”

“It’s one of the oddities of the local climate,” Clive said. “The combination of the desert, the delta and the water-affinity of the mass of green stone making up the Island impacts the weather in certain ways. One of those ways is that while it rains regularly in the delta, it never rains in the city.”

“That’s weird,” Jason said.

“How does the water get up in the sky?” Sophie asked.

“It evaporates,” Clive said.

“I thought you were going to say magic,” Jason said, then he and Clive between them gave a basic explanation of the water cycle.

The carriage continued on as the rain grew heavier. Sophie and Jason both looked up at the water splashing off the invisible rain barrier, Jason with wonder and Sophie with wariness. They were travelling along an embankment road through marshlands when Humphrey suddenly called out.

“Stop the carriage!”

He pointed off to the side of the road where a vortex of rainbow light was swirling in the air.

“What’s that?” Jason asked.

“A magical manifestation,” Humphrey said. “It’s rare to actually see them happen.”

“What’s a magical manifestation?” Sophie asked.

“It’s a natural manifestation of magic from the ethereal to the physical,” Clive explained. “Magic, coalescing into a physical form. Most likely it’ll be a monster, but it could be an awakening stone or even an essence. Let’s go take a look.

“How are we going to get out there?” Humphrey asked. “Jason can walk on water, but the rest of us can’t.”

“I can run on water,” Sophie said. “I sink if I stop moving, though.”

“I have something,” Clive said. “I was a bit inspired by Jason’s preparedness when we found that buried complex and put a few things into my own storage space.”

They left the carriage and its rain barrier, so they started getting wet. Sophie looked trepidatiously up at the sky as they made their way down the steep embankment to the

water's edge. Clive pulled an entire raft out of his inventory, which fell into the water. It tipped Clive off-balance in doing so and Clive went in with it and came up sputtering.

The raft wasn't large, with just enough room for Humphrey, Sophie and Clive. Clive sat sodden at the front, his wet clothes tracing out his lanky frame. With a hand on a metal panel near the front of the otherwise wooden raft, he magically directed it to drift slowly in the direction of the colourful vortex. Jason walked alongside, his cloak both letting him walk on water and keeping off the rain.

The vortex was around two metres across and despite what looked like furious roiling, didn't so much as disturb the air, as if it didn't really exist at all. They stopped and waited for the process of manifestation to be complete.

"Are we alright to be this close?" Sophie asked.

"It's fine," Clive said. "It can't affect us and we can't affect it without some high-end ritual magic."

"It's quite pretty," Jason said, taking out a recording crystal and tossing it up to float over his head. He started explaining the vortex for when he showed it to his family. After he had done that, he turned the crystal on Sophie.

"I've mentioned her in earlier entries," Jason said, "but this is her in the flesh. My nubile slave girl, Sophie Wexler."

Sophie was sitting on the raft, so her flashing jab caught him on the thigh.

"Ow. As you can see, she has some behavioural problems."

Sophie turned to Humphrey and Clive.

"If I drown him out here," she asked them, "would you two back me up and say it was an accident?"

"Absolutely," Clive said.

"Someone was going to do it sooner or later," Humphrey agreed.

"As you can see," Jason said, "she has ruthlessly suborned my minions."

"Did you just call us minions?" Humphrey asked.

"Nope," Jason said. "My voice just sounds weird because of the rain."

They waited several minutes before the vortex started to contract, growing smaller and smaller.

"It's not a monster," Clive said. "I can see the magic taking form. It's going to be an awakening stone."

"Nice," Jason said. "How do we decide who gets it?"

"Miss Wexler has the most need," Humphrey said. "You and I only have a few spots left open and should probably wait for Bahadir's event."

“Humphrey, you should call me Sophie,” she said, flashing Humphrey a rare smile before dropping it and turning to Jason.

“You shouldn’t,” she told him.

“Harsh,” Jason said.

“You did call her a slave girl,” Humphrey said.

“I think you’re misremembering,” Jason said. “That doesn’t sound like me; I’m all about egalitarianism.”

The vortex continued shrinking until it was the size of a fist, coalescing into a blue awakening stone that fell into the water with a plop. The others all turned to look at Clive.

“What?” he asked.

“You already went in once,” Humphrey said.

Clive saw the others were a unified front and groaned as he dropped off the side of the raft. The water was waist-deep but he had to plunge down to his neck as he rummaged about where the stone had dropped.

“It’s time like this that I wish Onslow were a turtle instead of a tortoise,” Clive said.

He let out a yelp of pain, lurching to his feet and waving his arm around. A small figure was being flailed about, its teeth clamped onto Clive's hand. It was thrown off and started hovering in the air. It was a small, fairy-like figure, about the size of a human hand, with a naked, androgynous body, dark blue hair and insect wings that buzzed rapidly to keep it aloft. Clutched in its arms was the awakening stone, almost as big as it was.

The stone was wet, muddy and, under the weight, the creature could barely hold itself in the air. It tried to fly off with its prize but the stone was too much, slipping through its arms and back into the water. A furious Clive made a grab at the creature, but it flitted away, turning back to poke it’s tongue out before zipping away through the air.

“I hate those things,” Clive muttered as he smeared healing ointment over the wound on his hand.

“You’ve seen those before?” Jason asked.

“Wetland Pixies? Oh, yeah. They love eating eels, so they were always hanging about the farm when I was growing up. I can’t tell you how many boots Nana lost throwing them at the damn things. She never hit anything and the boots usually landed in the bog.”

“Well you’d best get back down and grab the stone,” Jason said. “There might be more of those things in there.”

Chapter 140:

Potential

In his guest suite in the cloud palace, Rufus was at a desk with papers arrayed in front of him. Ground assessments, potential designs, integration requirements. He wearily ran his hands over his face, trying to maintain concentration. While he awaited word on various investigations, Rufus had resumed the task the academy annex he was working on with the Geller family.

Adris Dorgan had kept his word and was making progress in chasing down the materials on the lists provided by Clive and now Russell. Certain shipments had come into the port at Hornis before being moved to private vessels for destinations thus far unknown. Dorgan was currently digging deeper into the ownership of those private vessels.

Rufus found his attention constantly straying to Builder cultists. The nebulous enemy who, at that very moment was hidden away, advancing their destructive plots. He wondered how many more friends he would lose before they were finally stopped. Getting up, he walked out onto the balcony and let the sea breeze wash refreshingly over him.

He decided to leave the work for the moment and go find Gary, who seemed equally at a loss after finishing his own project with the constructs. They hadn't seen much of one another since coming back from the expedition and there was a friction there that Farrah had always smoothed out. Jason's presence had helped them through the worst of it in the wake of her death, but her absence lingered between them.

Rufus and Gary had adjacent suites in the guest wing, connected by a terrace. Rufus wandered over and saw Gary inside with a half-empty bottle of some rotgut he must have bought in the city; Emir would never stock anything so cheap and nasty. Gary had dissolved the entire outer wall of his suite, leaving it open to the fresh air. Gary, slouched in a chair, nodded his acknowledgement of Rufus' arrival.

"Day drinking?" Rufus asked. "It's barely mid-morning."

"Want to join?" Gary asked.

"Yes," Rufus said, walking over to a cabinet and grabbing a glass.

"We can do it out here?" Sophie asked, looking uncertainly at the village around them.

"Clive can," Jason said. "He's more flexible than most, so he can do it just about anywhere you have a flat space."

“It might seem unusual for the two of you to just up and do it in the middle of a village square,” Humphrey said, “but it’s something the villagers will be eager to see.”

“It won’t take long,” Jason said. “Clive can just slip it into you out here and we can head off.”

“He’s right; it won’t take long,” Clive assured her. “Even in less comfortable conditions, I’m very quick to finish.”

“Alright,” Sophie said. “It’s not like it’s my first time.”

“You heard the lady, Clive,” Jason said. “Whip it out.”

Clive took out the awakening stone they retrieved from the marsh and passed it to Sophie.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Rain] (unranked, common)

An awakening stone containing the power of rain. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 8 unawakened essence abilities.

Using his abilities, he balanced out the ambient magic and drew a ritual circle. As Humphrey predicted, doing so in the village square drew curious onlookers. The ritual went off without incident, awakening Sophie’s new ability.

Ability: [Between the Raindrops] (Swift)

- Special ability.
- Cost: High mana per second and high stamina per second.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
- Effect (iron): Increased reflexes and spatial awareness.

“That’s it?” Humphrey asked. “That seems like an exhaustive cost for increased reflexes.”

“Attack her,” Jason said.

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“Attacker her,” Jason said. “You come in from the right and I’ll pincer her from the left.”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

“Do it,” Sophie said. “No weapons.”

Jason grinned and leapt forward, Humphrey doing the same with a grimace. They unleashed simultaneously from either side but it was like Sophie had eyes in the back of her head. Not only did she react to their every move, but she did so the moment they made them. Soon, Humphrey was sent stumbling back from a kick to the face. Jason had it worse, folded over on the ground as he clutching his crotch with both hands.

“Did you have to go right for the plums?” he squeaked out.

She walked over and looked down at him.

“You’re the one who wanted to attack me,” she said.

Neil Davone had started spending time at the Mercer family compound as a boy. Thadwick had needed friends his own age and the Davone and Kettering families, with their close ties to the Mercers, had frequently sent their own boys over. The Mercer residence was the most impressive in Greenstone, with its five interconnected towers and immaculate grounds. Even with tyrannical toddler Thadwick as a playmate, it had always been an exciting place to visit, growing up.

As he had gotten older, the attractions of the Mercer household for Neil went through various changes. As he became more curious about the world, the impressive library fed his mind. When he became an essence user, he made full use of the training facilities that Thadwick disdained. The rest of the Mercers were more than happy to let Neil and his teammate Dustin use them as much as they liked. After all, their job was to keep Thadwick alive.

Another change in what made the Mercer compound alluring as Neil grew up was the presence of Thadwick’s older sister, Cassandra. As with many young men in the Mercer family orbit, the smart, capable and gorgeous young woman was the object of his youthful affection. Four years older than him, she was the unattainable image of beauty and sophistication in the eyes of thirteen-year-old Neil. She left the city with her mother after reaching bronze rank, putting an end to his boyhood crush.

Cassandra and her mother had been back in the city for six months, in preparation for the monster surge. Many young men once again clamoured for her attention but Neil was not one of them. It had been one thing putting up with Thadwick as children, but they were adventurers, now. His selfishness and incompetence brought with it genuine danger, culminating in his abandonment of them during the expedition. Aside from Cassandra and her mother, the ones who had left, he had become soured on anything with the Mercer

name. Any idea of reigniting youthful passions and pursuing her ended the moment he thought of her family.

By the time he heard that Cassandra and Jason Asano were an item, he had seen Asano for himself and not found him to be anything special. He was just another in a line of self-impressed people who thought they were bold and clever for making Thadwick look like a fool. Neil knew it may just have been his lingering affection, but his opinion of Cassandra was still high enough that he wondered what she saw that elevated Asano above the pack.

Asano's visit to Neil's home had left him uncertain as to what to do. Ostensibly, Neil had received better offers, the only real point of attraction to Asano's being the participation of Humphrey Geller. Neil knew for a fact that behind closed doors, Humphrey was the person the Mercer's wished Thadwick had become. Their family situations had provided Thadwick and Humphrey with the same opportunities, yet Humphrey was lauded while Thadwick was dismissed.

After Asano's visit to his home, Neil's intention had been to dismiss the offer out of hand. There were things about Asano that kept playing on his mind, however, starting with why he had been the one to make the approach. Every way he looked at it, Humphrey Geller would have made the better advocate. Asano's characteristically idiosyncratic conduct bore that out. The absurdity of questioning Neil's elven heritage. Asano's description of his own team that was anything but appealing. Then there was Asano spending most of his time explaining not why Neil would want to join with them but why they wanted him to join.

Although Neil didn't understand it, there was no question that Asano was good at impressing important people. People themselves deserving of respect. The Gellers, the gold-ranked Emir Bahadir, the Vitesse adventurers. Even his enemies were impressive. He was already moving in vaunted circles, to the point that even when he drew hatred, it was from people so far above him they shouldn't care. There were rumours of Asano feuding with the directors of both the Magic and Adventure Societies. If true, that was madness for an iron ranker. Then there was whatever had made Cassandra look at him above all the numerous men in Greenstone vying for her attention.

The character of Asano aside, critical when choosing a team was the team's strength as adventurers. Neil knew almost nothing about the two others but Asano had told him didn't sound promising. Humphrey, on the other hand, was known to be one of the most proficient iron-rankers in the city.

As for Asano, at least as an adventurer he seemed capable. Thadwick's fixation had given Neil a fairly good idea of Asano's record. He had closed out a startling number of contracts in a handful of months, each punctuated with adventure board notices. In all of them, he didn't have a single listed failure. Asano had risen through the ranks fast and fallen even faster, but there were plenty of demotions going around.

He had seen multiple recordings of Asano fighting. Everyone had seen the one from the Geller's mirage chamber with Asano's overwrought theatrics. Neil had seen others where Asano had been fighting for real, his melodrama was replaced with brutal efficiency.

Thadwick had been furious after hearing about Asano spending time with Cassandra and, in typically reactionary fashion, sent a handful of goons to beat Asano down. After what Asano did to the first one, the others not only gave up but gave Asano directions to where he was going. Neil had only heard about it after the fact or he would have had Thadwick's father put a stop to it. Thadwick stupidly had his goons record the whole debacle, with his father tasking Neil with retrieving them all.

The strongest of Thadwick's bottom feeders was Jerrick, who Thadwick had playing muscle in his ill-considered land-grab scheme. Neil had been in the room as Thadwick's father tore strips off him for the plan's spectacular failure as the recording of Asano gathering evidence played. It ended with Asano fighting Jerrick.

Thadwick's father had taken the time to point out that Asano wasn't even fighting at his best. Against an armoured enemy, Asano should have kept hidden and used his leech familiar to crawl into the armour. Instead, he fought out in the open, suffering more damage than necessary. Asano was using a life and death battle with Thadwick's strongest thug as training.

The final recording Neil had seen of Asano was when twelve men confronted him. Four were the thugs Asano had run off in a previous recording, plus double that number of extras. A dozen admittedly mediocre adventurers, yet Asano made the twelve on one fight seem lopsided, in his favour. Five adventurers killed in a shopping arcade in broad daylight, the only repercussion being that it possibly contributed to his later demotion.

It was well-known that Asano had faced a bronze-rank marsh hydra with Humphrey Geller and some other guy no one had heard of. Everyone said that Humphrey had carried them through, including Asano himself, but Neil had come away from his conversation with Asano less certain of that. He knew Beth Cavendish thought highly of Jason's abilities and her judgement was razor-sharp.

As those thoughts chased themselves around his head, Neil arrived at the Mercer family home for the first time since the expedition. In the aftermath of that disaster,

Thadwick had been isolated by the family, then disbanded their team without notice. He had considered confronting Thadwick until he talked with their other team member, Dustin. In the end, they were just happy to be free with what was left of their reputations after being known as Thadwick's flunkies.

Neil approached one of the five gates that were the primary entrances to the Mercer family grounds.

"Neil Davone," the iron-rank guard said from the other side of the gate as he spotted Neil's approach. The Mercer family guards had long known Neil but the usual respect was nowhere on this guard's face. It was clear that in his eyes, Neil had lost his status as a valued ally of the Mercers. Now he was just another iron-ranker, like the guard himself.

"I'd like to see Cassandra Mercer," Neil told him.

"I bet you would," the guard said insolently.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm not going to interrupt her for the likes of you."

"Are you being serious, right now?"

"Move on, Davone. You don't get a seat at the big table anymore."

"Yes, he does," Thalia Mercer said, teleporting next to the guard. "Hello, Neil."

"Lady Mercer," Neil greeted respectfully.

"First, let me correct this man who used to work for us and tell you that you are always welcome here. Your family is important to us and you have always given my son loyalty he sadly never earned. What brings you by?"

"I wanted to ask your daughter about Jason Asano."

"Why?"

"He invited me to join his team. I'll probably decline but I found him odd to talk to. I wanted to know more."

Thalia touched the gate, which slid soundlessly to the side.

"I see. If you don't mind, Jason is a topic I would rather you not engage my daughter in. She's unhappy with the family right now and I don't want to exacerbate that feeling."

"Of course," Neil said. "My apologies for taking your time, Lady Mercer. I'll go."

"Please don't," she said. "Perhaps you can spare me a moment, instead."

"Of course, Lady Mercer."

She turned on the guard who had been hovering silently throughout the conversation.

"You, get to the security station and have them send a replacement. If I can assuage your offence to master Davone, there may be a chance of you maintaining your employment."

The guard nodded and scurried away.

“That’s not necessary, Lady Mercer,” Neil said.

“Nonsense,” she said. “Please come through.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Neil walked through the gate, which she closed behind him.

“Would you care to take morning tea with me?”

“I wouldn’t presume, Lady Mercer.”

“Nonsense, please do.”

“Then thank you, Lady Mercer.”

It did not go unnoticed by Neil that being led to a private social meeting with Thalia Mercer in the eyes of the whole household made a pointed statement about his status. She led him to the blue parlour, one of the various receiving parlours of the Mercer household. Each was named for the primary colour of its decoration, with the blue parlour awash in oceanic shades. It was one of the smaller parlours, for intimate and respected guests. Shortly after their arrival, a maid delivered tea and small savouries before departing. Thalia poured a cup for each of them.

“I know that your family’s tea standards are very high,” she said. “I hope you don’t look down on us too much.”

“Never,” Neil said.

“Such a good young man, you’ve become. So, you are considering joining Jason Asano and Humphrey Geller’s team?”

“Not really,” Neil said. “It’s just that some things about the way he made the approach have left me confused.”

“Perhaps I can help you with answers. When my daughter became interested in Asano I looked into him as deeply as I think anyone has.”

“Oh?”

“He was rather rude, the last time we met, which I am quite happy with.”

“Happy?”

“If he was unaffected by being severed from my daughter, I would have been quite dissatisfied. He is startlingly good for his rank at keeping his emotions out of his aura, but he was rather a mess. The anger of youthful passion meant his feelings were genuine. That’s always a concern when it comes to aristocratic relationships. Is there some young thing you are pursuing, Neil?”

“No, Lady Mercer. My attention is on my future as an adventurer.”

“Yes, you’re pondering Jason’s offer. I know he seems erratic but you’ll find that there is method to his madness. He has a way of leaving people thinking exactly what he wants them to.”

“How so?” Neil asked.

“You said yourself you will probably turn him down. Yet here you are, asking questions. Why?”

“There were oddities in the way he tried to recruit me. It’s like he was hiding reasons to join and giving me ones not to.”

Thalia smiled.

“There you are. Humphrey Geller aside, his team is not enticing at a glance and he knew an ordinary invitation wouldn’t work. Otherwise, he would have sent Humphrey. Instead, he found a way to pique your interest. He saw a path that led to you joining his team, and he put you on it.”

“You’re saying he manipulated me and I should refuse the offer?”

“I’m saying he manipulated you and you should accept the offer. Some, within these walls, will tell you that Jason is unreliable. He’s not. When it’s time to work, he gets the job done. My original intention was to place him and Humphrey with Cassandra, once they reached bronze-rank. That is no longer an option, but if I were in your position, I’d join his team in a heartbeat.”

“That’s not what I would have expected from you,” Neil said.

“Most adventurers in this city never leave it, and nor should they. They’re mediocre, without the potential to thrive in a dangerous world. What they lack in themselves, they fail to recognise in others. Anyone can see Beth Cavendish or Humphrey Geller will go places, but only those of us who’ve seen the wider world recognise the potential in someone like Asano, and someone like you.”

“Me?”

“You have what it takes,” she said. “People couldn’t see that with you chained to my son. I’ve been selfish in binding you to him because that helped keep my son alive. You have my apologies, for that, but not my regret.”

“You have no need to apologise, Lady Mercer.”

“You’re a good boy, Neil, but don’t lie to my face.”

She chuckled at Neil’s nervous expression.

“It’s an interesting team that Jason and Humphrey have put together,” she said. “I’ve just recently met another of their team members, who is an interesting young man from the Magic Society. He’s capable enough that Emir Bahadir is trying to poach him.”

“Asano told me that was for non-combat skills,” Neil said.

“And so it is,” Danielle said, “but why did he tell you that? He wanted you curious so that you would learn for yourself that the man is quite capable. Which he is, by the way. Danielle Geller is keeping a close eye on the team her precious boy is forming and can be trusted to excise any rot. And now you have heard it from me, you will trust it more than if Jason told you the man was good.”

“What about Asano’s indentured servant?” Neil asked.

“I’m not sure,” Thalia said. “Danielle told me she is reserving judgement for the moment. I will say that running rings around the city’s iron rank adventurers for months speaks to a certain capability, regardless of what help she received. Now she has a full set of essences, who knows what she’ll accomplish?”

“You seem quite certain I should join,” Neil said.

“You should be in a team that will help you fly, instead of chaining you to the ground the way I did. My advice is that you drink your tea, leave here and go straight to the Geller townhouse. Tell Danielle Geller you want to join her son’s team.”

“Not Asano or Humphrey?” Neil asked.

“They might think they have the final word on their team members,” Thalia said. “It’s probably best to let them.”

Chapter 141: Weaponising a Barbecue

Jason met Neil at the entrance to the cloud palace, along with one of Emir's staff who added Neil's aura signature to the access list for the palace.

"There are some restricted areas," Jason explained as they entered. "You shouldn't bump into any of those except the guest suites, which are individually locked to guests who can provide you entry or not."

Neil didn't say much looking around, wide-eyed as Jason led him to the guest wing. He was nervous, second-guessing his choice of team, but Jason was welcoming and friendly. He also seemed at home in the astounding surrounds of the cloud palace.

"We're going to start with a little welcoming lunch," Jason said. "You can meet the team and some of the people around it. After that we're going to spend the afternoon on a preliminary strategy session, looking at everyone's abilities and working on tactical concepts around them. From here on out, that's going to be our everyday; develop tactics, workshop them in the training room, then test them in the field."

"You're getting ready for the event Bahadir is planning?" Neil asked.

"You heard about that?" Jason asked.

"Word has gotten around."

"Certainly, being prepared for that is a good idea," Jason said. "Our sights are set past that, though. We're looking at the path to bronze and beyond. We want to establish a playbook of strategies and tactics that we know so well as a team that we're ready to go at any moment. As our abilities grow we can adapt and refine our repertoire, but the first step is working together, everyone knowing their potential roles. I hope you're not afraid of hard work and training."

"To be honest, Asano, you always struck me as more frivolous than hard-working."

"I'm a work-hard, play hard kind of bloke," Jason said. "Talking doesn't mean much, though. You can judge for yourself."

Jason led Neil onto an elevating platform that lifted them to the upper reaches of the cloud palace, before heading out to a terrace crowded with people, tables of food and a pair or large flame grills. Amongst the crowd were people Neil recognised. Rufus Remore was chatting with Vincent Trenslow and his absurd moustache; Humphrey Geller was flipping meat on one of the grills. Danielle Geller was chatting with Emir Bahadir, both holding grilled meat and vegetable sticks. He even spotted his friend and previous teammate, Dustin biting into a steak sandwich. Dustin's cousin, Hudson, was next to him

and they were surrounded by their respective teams. Dustin was on a Geller team now, looking more relaxed than Neil had seen him in a long time.

“What’s all this?” Neil asked.

“If you’re going to chuck a barbie,” Jason said, “you get some mates around. Let’s grab some tucker and I’ll make some introductions.”

The barbecue lunch went on into the afternoon, leaving Neil disoriented from a heady mix of grilled meats, quality alcohol and the kind of political connections his family only dreamed of. It was a social event wholly unlike those he had experienced in the Mercers’ orbit.

Everything was casual and the people present genuinely seemed to like each other. There was no carefully orchestrated social sniping, no playing one family against another. There was no stratification of rank, with bronze, silver and even gold-rankers happily chatting with iron. Instead of dainty, delicate finger food, people had meat piled into plates, skewered onto sticks or shoved between slabs of bread. There were tables of side dishes heaped into enormous bowls for anyone to grab by the tong-full.

Neil could hear the voice of his mother telling him to be mercenary, ditch Asano and seize the opportunity and forge connections. The voice seemed at a loss as Jason led him around, making introductions with no prompting on his part. People asked him questions, seeming actually interested instead of just digging for some useful titbit they could use.

“How long have you been in Greenstone,” Neil asked Jason between conversations.

“About five months.”

“How did you make these kinds of political allies in five months?”

“I didn’t,” Jason said. “I made friends.”

Jason found Humphrey away from the group, looking unhappy as he started out over the ocean. Jason joined him in leaning on the rail.

“What’s got you down, mate?”

“It’s Gabrielle,” Humphrey said. “Things aren’t going to work out with her.”

“That sucks,” Jason said. “Sorry to hear it. I’m guessing I wasn’t helpful in that regard.”

“It’s more than just that,” Humphrey said. “I would never ask her to choose between me and her religion, but she’s becoming more and more dogmatic. She’s becoming honest to the point of rudeness; demanding secrets she has no right to.”

“Well, I do the rude honesty thing too,” Jason said. “But in my defence, I also lie a lot.”

Humphrey laughed, then sighed.

“She’s started telling me who I shouldn’t spend my time with,” he said. “It’s why she’s not here. She really doesn’t like you and Rufus but that’s just the start of it. The strictures of her god are all well and good, but I’m not a follower of Knowledge. She has no right to hold me to those principles.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason said. “I’m at least a bit responsible for nudging you in her direction.”

“I’m not sorry,” Humphrey said. “I care for Gabrielle and I’ve enjoyed our time together. That time is just coming to an end.”

“Wow,” Jason said. “That’s super-mature of you. I was a couple of years older than you when my first big relationship ended and I blew up my whole life over it, like an idiot.”

“I’m going to tell her tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “She probably already knows.”

“Because of her boss,” Jason realised. “Damn, that must have been really annoying, having the goddess telling her everything.”

“It wasn’t my favourite thing,” Humphrey acknowledged. He turned to look over at the gathering. “How’s Neil fitting in?”

“A bit shell-shocked. You think it was the right thing, bringing out the big social guns? I don’t like weaponising a barbecue.”

“His family have been second-tier nobility for generations and this will get his family’s support. As for Neil himself, that’s up to you and me.”

As things wound down, Jason and Emir sent people off, usually with food in bags with a cheap, short-lived enchantment to keep the food inside them fresh and hot. Afterwards, Jason gathered their team together. Neil had now met the others; the lanky Clive Standish and the startlingly beautiful Sophie Wexler. Neil hadn’t been sure what to expect from Jason’s indentured servant, but the woman with silver hair, dark skin and sharp, wary eyes certainly wasn’t it. She was the one he had been the most uncertain about, but watching her sleek liveness made him a lot more confident.

They went off to Jason’s suite in the guest wing. Amongst all the cloud furniture, a trio of wooden bookcases stood out, jammed-full of leather-bound tomes. Even more books were stacked up on a table next to a reading chair, one of which Clive picked up to examine.

“This is some heavy theory,” he said to Jason. “You’re finally taking my advice?”

“This was Farrah’s collection,” Jason said sadly, gesturing at the bookcases. “She was like you, telling me to not just rely on skill books. With these, it’s almost like she’s still teaching me.”

“Farrah was one of the Vitesse adventurers,” Humphrey quietly mentioned to Neil. “She fell during the expedition.”

They sat down and Jason took out a notebook. Recorded in it were the abilities of everyone in the party, to which they added Neil’s. His essence combination was shield, growth and renewal, producing the prosperity confluence. Along with healing and cleansing powers, Neil could create short-lived shields that intercepted attacks, empower allies and replenish their mana and stamina.

“That’s an awesome power set,” Jason said as he wrote them down. “Not great if you get caught alone, but any team you’re on should celebrate. Which is our team, I guess, so... cheers, mate!”

As his powers were most effective when used on allies, Neil was highly reliant on his summoning power when fighting alone. It was not a summoned familiar but a temporary summons, like Gary’s forge golem or Farrah’s magma elemental. It would only last for a limited time, but he could afford to risk it in ways that he couldn’t with a familiar.

His summon was an entity called a chrysalis golem. It was a crystalline construct monster, it could create a protective shell around itself when it was badly damaged. When it emerged, it was fully repaired and adapted to resist the attacks that had previously harmed it.

“I can’t wait to get a look at that thing,” Jason said. “With Humphrey’s summons that makes two, excluding the summoned familiars Clive and myself have. We should be able to do some interesting things with them.”

Humphrey took the lead in discussions as they started devising potential strategies.

“The most fundamental thing is that we each need to have a sound grasp of each other’s abilities,” he said. “Neil, this is especially true for you, whose abilities rely heavily on judgement and timing. You’ll learn as we train, of course, but you should have at least a general idea of what each of us does before we start digging into specific tactics.

“Let’s start with Humphrey, then,” Jason said. “His essences are might, magic, wing and dragon. He moves faster, hits harder and withstands more damage than most adventurers. His attacks are mostly conventional melee powers, but they’re reliable and land like a truck.”

“What’s a truck?” Neil asked. “Is that some kind of monster?”

“It’s a big, heavy, fast thing,” Jason said grouchy. “It’s not my fault your stupid world doesn’t have internal combustion.”

“Lots of people have internal combustion,” Clive said. “Mostly from the fire essence, which is why it’s common.”

Jason groaned at Clive while Humphrey picked up the explanations.

“Clive has the magic, rune, balance and karmic essences. Unlike most humans, his focus is on spells. He can use magical weapons like staves and wands and works with his familiar to output reliable ranged damage. He also has some utility powers, trap magic and the ability to make our enemies suffer retributive damage from attacking us.”

“He also has some big-ticket attacks, if he goes all out,” Jason added. “If we need a single, big hit, he’s our guy. Those hefty spells need some setup, though, so we’ve already started devising strategies around them.”

“Miss Wexler is an evasion-type defender,” Humphrey said. “Swift, wind, balance and mystic. She is the newest of us, with many abilities still to awaken, but she is already the fastest and hardest to harm out of all of us. I have no doubt she will become increasingly formidable.”

“Asano is the sneaky prick of the team,” Sophie said. “His essences are dark, blood, sin and doom.”

“Sin and doom?” Neil asked. “They sounds like they should be on the restricted list.”

“They’re not,” Jason said. “We checked.”

“Jason is an affliction specialist,” Humphrey said. “Once he goes to work, whatever he’s fighting is finished, even if it seems to have gotten away. He’s also a good scout, with stealth and mobility.”

“Obviously, we don’t expect you to remember all this,” Humphrey said. “You’ll have plenty of time to learn, because that’s what we do, now. We get up, we meet up, then we train. Physical and mobility training we do in Old City.”

“When Jory renovated his clinic,” Jason said, “he turned his yard into a dedicated training space. So, thanks for helping stop it from being knocked down.”

“That wasn’t really me,” Neil said.

“Of course it was,” Jason said. “If you didn’t stand up to them and force the confrontation, the Healer might have waited until they tore down the place and then smote them all as sinners.”

“We’ll be alternating our time between developing strategies, refining them in practice areas or testing them in the field,” Humphrey said.

“The practise areas being the training hall, here in the cloud palace, or in Humphrey’s mirage chamber.”

“It’s not my mirage chamber,” Humphrey said.

“Other than that, it’ll be contracts and adventure notices,” Jason said. “That is going to be our day, every day, until Emir’s mysterious contest. We’re going into it as strong as we can be.”

“Is that going to be a problem, Neil?” Humphrey asked. “We’re looking for someone willing to go at this hard, so if that isn’t you, tell us now.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Neil said. “I’ve been waiting for a team that takes adventuring seriously.”

He looked at Jason. “I wasn’t sure that was you.”

“You can judge for yourself,” Jason said. “Today, we’re all talk. We throw every idea at the wall and see what sticks. Tomorrow we start figuring out what’s practical and what’s some overwrought notion I got in my head because I forgot simplicity is king.”

They moved onto the discussion of specific strategies, under the direction of Humphrey.

“I think you’re overlooking what should be our core strategy,” Jason told Humphrey, early into the discussion.

“What’s that?” Humphrey asked.

“You,” Jason said. “You do more damage than most and can survive more damage than most. With Clive and Neil, we have two buffers, plus shields and healing. Neil can even top-off your mana. We load all of that up on you and let you go ham. Add in your mobility and you’ll be an absolute terror to whatever we’re fighting.”

Uncertainty crossed Humphrey’s face.

“Are you sure you want to rely that heavily on me?”

Jason shook his head. “Oh, Humphrey. Hands up who wants to rely on Humphrey as the core of the team.”

Sophie and Clive put up their hands with Jason, Neil raising his hand right after.

“It’s adorable that you’re modest enough that I have to tell you this Humphrey,” Jason said, “but everyone likes and trusts you.”

Humphrey looked around the group, embarrassed.

“Now,” Jason said. “If we take that as our core strategy, all our tactics should be smooth adaptations of that default. What do you reckon, Humphrey?”

“Well, there are a few points that we need to look at using that as a strategy. First would be identifying and distracting anyone or anything with the singular attack power to punch through the buffs and shields.”

“So, the other team’s Clive,” Sophie said.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “For other Clives, we want you and Jason to at least distract and interfere, or preferably put them down.”

“I’m not sure I love this ‘other Clive’ analogy,” Clive said.

“What about actual Clive and the new guy?” Sophie asked. “They aren’t as mobile as the rest of us, and if we’re using a mobile attacking strategy, they’ll be left exposed.”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “They’ll make a tempting target, so instead of trying to cover it, we use it.”

“I like it,” Jason said. “We’ve already worked up strategies using Clive as bait, so develop them and make Neil the second juicy worm of the hook. Turn what seems like a weakness into a weapon.”

Clive and Neil shared a glance.

“I’m not sure I like this plan,” Clive said.

Chapter 142: This Town Ain't Big Enough

The mirage chamber had created a sprawl of ancient, desert ruins. It was a town, long since dead and dry. Built into a hillside, crumbling buildings clung to the steep slope or were dug right into the yellow desert rock. Tunnels and stairwells were alternately exposed or buried by the dilapidating power of time, forming a rat's nest of unsafe passages and hidden nooks. Of the handful of intact buildings, none had a neighbour in the same condition, the slope a mess of tumbled brick and stone, half-gone walls and debris-filled, hard earth streets. The air shimmered with heat as the unyielding sun beat down on the clay and stone remnants of the town. Through the steep ruins, three teams stalked one another. Hiding and moving, they risked precarious tunnels and rooftops as they sought to find prey without becoming someone else's.

"Keep an eye on the shadows," Rick Geller warned his team. "Asano is the strongest scout in here and we all know what he can do if we let him play his games."

"Oh, I have all kinds of games," Jason's voice echoed loudly through the ruins.

"He's doing it again," said Claire Adeah, the healer and one of two elf sisters on the team. "That guy is so annoying."

"He's just trying to get you riled up," her sister said from above. "He knows he can't try what he did last time, but he'll still try and mess up your thinking."

Scouting from a rooftop, Hannah Adeah was an archer, the team's only remaining ranged specialist. The expedition and its aftermath claimed both Jonah and Henry Geller, their front-line guardian and magic ranged attacker. Their new members were Dustin Kettering, a local who filled Jonah's defender role, and Rick's sister, Phoebe.

Dustin's cousin, Hudson, was his counterpart on Beth Cavendish's team and currently an enemy. Dustin was a classic defender, not very mobile but very hard to go around or through. This put him very much in the role of the team member he replaced, unlike Phoebe. Instead of a ranged magic attacker, she was a fast melee attacker using unarmed combat. This forced a change in general strategy for the team, who had previously bunkered around their twin ranged attackers. Phoebe's presence failed to replicate their previous strength but broadened their abilities. In the weeks since gaining their new members, the team had been working on strategies that were less specialised and more adaptive and versatile.

Hannah stepped off the roof, dropping down lightly to rejoin the others.

“He isn’t as much of a threat in this environment as he was when we had to chase him through those mangroves,” Hannah said. “Did you hear how loud he called out? He’s trying to draw the other team to our location.”

In another part of the ruined town, Beth Cavendish and her team moved with the same caution as Rick's team did. Beth was widely known as both team leader and team healer, but it was her dangerous mix of wide-area afflictions and control powers that made her a true threat.

Their own archer, Emily, was likewise scouting from a rooftop vantage, but the steep slope made that tricky. The team was slowly moving uphill in search of visual and tactical advantage. Emily was a celestine with fair skin and a gold pixie cut that matched her eyes. She wore a simple cap to keep the sun from reflecting off her hair and giving away her position.

Their team was only four, compared to five each for the others and they were being appropriately cautious. Emily moved carefully down from her hidden vantage, returning to the team.

“I have at least a direction from Asano calling out,” she said. “Obviously, he wants to lure us into the other team and clean up whoever’s left. Do we scout it out and wait, or avoid it completely?”

“Let them thin each other out,” Beth said. “Jason’s team has his voice communication ability, so they have more tactical flexibility. We stay hidden and keep going for the high ground. We wait for the others to clash and then move.”

“Isn’t that what everyone is going to do?” Niko asked. Niko Tomich was from the smoulder race, with dark skin and burning red eyes. Niko used fire and iron powers to deal heavy damage in melee or combine damage and control powers at mid-range, making him the team's most versatile striker.

“Jason’s team is going to be more active,” Beth said. “Their defender is mobility-based and short on powers, where Rick's team has Kettering and we have Hudson. We're both stronger than his group at suffering an attack, while Humphrey is as strong an initiator as you could ask for. They'll try and catch us at a bad moment and make the most of it.”

Hudson was a huge, comic book character of a man and the guardian of Beth's team. He wielded earth powers and, like Clive, had a racial gift evolution that moved his aptitude from special attacks to another ability type. In Hudson's case, it was conjuration, allowing him to conjure up stone weapons, shields, walls and other objects to protect his team.

As Beth predicted, the three teams were slow and careful as they moved about the ruined town. Jason's team made various attempts to bait one of their opponents into an ill-considered attack without success before regrouping to discuss the next move.

"Both teams are being extremely cautious," Humphrey said. "They aren't willing to risk extending themselves because they know they will do better defending from readiness. Everyone is waiting for an accident or a mistake that turns the tables, letting them swoop in and clean up the other teams."

"So what do we do?" Neil asked.

"Our best bet is to strike first," Sophie said. "For both of their teams, if we can overwhelm the key defender, it opens up the rest of the team to our attacks. We load up Humphrey with powers and use that to punch through their strongest front-liner and clean up the rest."

"Initiating a straight-up confrontation will cost us in the long run," Humphrey said. "Even if the other team doesn't arrive in time to pincer us against the group we're already fighting, they'll be fresh and we'll be hurt when they do turn up."

"Hunkering down fits the other teams better than it does us, though," Clive said. "Our core strategy is offensive, relying on mobility and power. We're better off pitting our strengths against their strengths than our weaknesses against their, uh, mediums."

"Their mediums?" Neil asked.

"Yes, their mediums," Clive said emphatically. "I said it and I'll stand by it."

Jason chuckled, shaking his head.

"You're right, Clive," he said. "These aren't teams we can beat with anything but our best. Humphrey had it right, too. If we want to catch them out of position, it has to be when they're moving to capitalise on a mistake."

"What are you suggesting?" Humphrey asked.

"I'm suggesting we make the mistake that they're both looking for. They're both waiting for someone else to get in a fight, so we'll get in one and we'll ambush them as they rush to swoop in. I found a good spot when I was roaming around, earlier. You're good for one of those illusion rituals you were telling me about, right Clive?"

"In field conditions?" Clive said. "If you don't want any old perception power to see through it, I can't do any better than a blank wall."

"That's fine," Jason said. "We just need them to think there's only one entrance, so we can slip out as they slip in."

"So, who will we be fighting?" Sophie asked.

"Each other, obviously," Jason said.

Emily tilted her head, listening.

“Did you hear that?”

Beth gestured for silence. Soon after they heard the noise of an explosive ability triggering.

“They found each other?” Hudson asked.

“It might be a ruse to flush us out,” Beth said. “Move slow and quiet; we wait to see if it keeps going.”

They moved forward at a cautious pace, Emily scouting the path to each new piece of cover before they took it. As they drew closer to the noise, they could hear a fight in full swing, with abilities going off and multiple weapons clashing.

“Alright,” Beth said. “Pick up the pace, but not too much. We want to get there once they’ve spent themselves on each other.”

They accelerated their way along the path, Emily scouting ahead again as they narrowed in on the continuing sounds of combat. As they drew closer, Emily gestured for them to stop. She came back and gathered with the rest, hidden beneath a crumbling wall. “The noise is coming from inside the hill,” Emily said. “There’s a collapsed building that exposed the tunnel access. I caught a glimpse of fighting inside, but didn’t push my luck.”

“Any other entrances?” Beth asked.

“I can’t rule it out, but not that I saw,” Emily said. “My guess would be one of the teams spotted the other going in and moved on them.”

“Alright,” Beth said. “We go with our standard, three-stage assault pattern. Control powers on any loose threats; be sure and call your targets. This means you, Niko. Then we blanket the fight with area attacks and mop up whoever’s still got fight in them. When you’re ready, Hudson.”

Hudson nodded as his body took on the colour of the desert stone, flesh transmuting into living rock. He then broke out of hiding, the rest of the team on his heels. They dashed up the slope to the shattered building and into the tunnel, balancing haste and care as they moved through the rubble. The tunnel was around a dozen metres long, beyond which it opened into darkness punctuated by flashes of magical light. They surged forward, catching glimpses of figures clashing. It looked like several normal-sized figures against one that dwarfed even Hudson.

“Wait!” Beth called out and they all stopped. “Plug the Hole!”

Reacting without question, Hudson held a hand out ahead of them and a slab of desert stone rose up to seal the end of the tunnel and close them off from the room.

“What is it?” Hudson asked afterwards.

“They were summons,” Beth said. “Back out, now.”

They started heading back down the tunnel when an arrow flew into the tunnel. It came in at an angle, striking the wall but not losing momentum as it ricocheted. Instead, the arrow duplicated, two arrows now zipping down the tunnel at different angles. They kept bouncing and multiplying as they zigzagged down the tunnel, the confines of the tunnel letting them bounce their way into a storm of arrows. Hudson acted quickly, placing another wall between them and the exit, boxing them in from both ends but shielding them from the arrow attack.

“That’s both my wall abilities,” Hudson said. “I won’t have them again for a while.”

“You did well,” Beth said and pointed to the newer wall. “That’s your shatter-stone wall, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then see if you can’t clear us a path with it. Break us out of here.”

Hudson walked from the front of his team to the back. The first wall he had created was the strongest; a simple wall conjuration power from his fortress essence called bulwark. The second power was called shatter—stone wall and could turn defence into offence. He snapped his fingers and the wall exploded away from him in a wave of sharp, stone shards, peppering Rick and Dustin who were on the other side.

The cousins were on opposing teams but filled similar roles. They were both huge, shielding their respective teams with the support of their elemental powers. Hudson had transformed himself into stone, while Dustin was clad in armour forged entirely of ice. Shards of the exploding wall had dug into it, without penetrating.

Standing next to Dustin, Rick also had hefty armour but without the complete coverage that Dustin enjoyed. He avoided most of the damage but still suffered some cuts and scrapes that he was ignoring. As the two teams spotted one another, Beth was already chanting a spell.

“Let venom drift on the breeze.”

She opened her mouth wide and flower petals started streaming out of it and up the tunnel. They were lotus petals, dark green, purple and black. They swept out of the tunnel on a wash of air, blowing past her teammates without incident yet adhering to the enemy team. Wherever they landed on flesh they swiftly dissolved into the skin.

Before the effects of the petals could be seen, Niko stepped forward and exhaled a cone of fire like a dragon. Between the mysterious petals and the roaring flame, the momentum of Rick’s team was completely halted.

“Hudson,” Beth called out and a moment later, a stone block rose up under their feet. It carried them along the tunnel like a raft in a quick current, the ground rippling like water as they passed. Hudson stood at the front, conjuring a huge stone shield as they barrelled out of the tunnel.

Where the stone block carried Beth’s team, the hard, dry earth became soft and unsteady. As they emerged from the tunnel, Rick and Dustin were forced back as the rippling ground left them with unsure footing.

From a hidden vantage, Jason’s team looked on. Humphrey tapped Clive on the shoulder just as the stone raft emerged from the tunnel and Clive snapped his fingers. The magic rune that appeared went unseen under the raft, but exploded upwards, nonetheless. The stone block absorbed most of the force but shattered into pieces, bursting upwards like a geyser.

Beth and Emily were sent flying by the power of the explosion, cut and bludgeoned by chunks of stone. Hudson and Niko had been held in place by their protective powers, their conditions reflecting the strength of those powers. Niko staggered, injured and disoriented while Hudson was entirely unharmed. He looked around, taking stock of Rick’s team.

Rick himself looked singed but was functionally uninjured, although he felt woozy from the poison petals that had found their way onto his exposed hands and face. Dustin was standing strong, as was his ice armour. It was pushing out the stone shards from the wall explosion and sealing over the cracks. There was some melting from the fire breath, but that was likewise recovering in short order.

Phoebe was unarmoured and had been right behind Rick and Dustin, ready to move down the tunnel before they were pushed back. She had moved to use Dustin as a shield from the fire breath but had been subjected to the bulk of the poison petals. She had already dashed backwards, holding a hand out, palm up. Droplets of black, purple and green liquid started falling upwards from her palm, collecting in a small orb floating over her hand.

As Phoebe was purging the poison from herself, the last members of her team were already going to work. The elf sisters had been well back, avoiding the area attacks. Claire was purging the poison from Rick with a spell as Hannah nocked an arrow to her bow. The arrowhead was glowing, the light rapidly increasing in intensity until it started strobing. Aiming it at Beth, still prone from the explosion.

Things were happening all at once as chaos ruled the battlefield. Phoebe gestured with her hand and the poison orb flew at Emily, the enemy archer who, like Beth, was still sprawled on the ground.

Hudson had seen Hannah readying the arrow and moved to get in its path before it was loosed but Dustin intercepted him. Rick and Niko moved on each other; Rick already holding a sword as a huge iron hammer appeared in Niko's hands. Niko started growing visibly larger and the crude hammer grew with him. Even the handle was made of dark iron, which started to glow with heat.

Hannah released the arrow at Beth, only for Hudson to appear in her place while she appeared where he had just been standing. The glowing arrow tore a chunk out of Hudson's torso, which crumbled off him in stony fragments. Dustin, suddenly finding Beth in front of him, conjured a hatchet of ice in each hand and started swinging.

Beth activated an ability she shared with Sophie called between the raindrops. She had obtained it through the water essence instead of the swift essence but it was functionally the same. Her spatial awareness and reflexes took a leap forward at the cost of rapidly consuming stamina and mana which was worth it to escape Dustin's attacks.

After throwing the poison orb, Phoebe was moving before it even struck. Emily held out a hand into which an arrow appeared, the tip glowing. As the poison orb struck her, she jabbed the arrow into the ground. There was a shock wave, launching Phoebe backwards and Emily herself into the air. She was unharmed by her own power, even using the momentum to flip backwards and land on her feet. She was immediately woozy, however, as the poison orb took effect.

From their vantage point, Jason's team watched the conflict unfold.

"Things are stabilising," Humphrey said. "It's time to join in, make things messy again. Everyone knows what to do."

The team nodded and Humphrey looked up, teleporting high into the sky.

Chapter 143: The Second-Best Iron Ranker

After the initial chaos, the two clashing teams were starting to get their bearings. This was the moment that winged death plunged out of the sky in the form of Humphrey Geller. Careening downwards with his dive bomb special attack, wings splayed out behind him, his powers were amplified by both Clive and Neil. A circle of magical runes floated around him and his sword glowed with light. He was twice his normal size, with an attendant increase in strength from Neil's giant's might spell.

Humphrey had a sword pointed down in a reverse, double-fisted grip. Hudson was still prone from his switch-teleport with Beth when Humphrey landed with literally earth-shattering force as his blade smashed into Hudson, smashing off chunks of his stone body. The blade of Humphrey's sword found the exact spot where Hudson had just been injured, imparting all the power of multiple buffs, the massive fall and two of Humphrey's special attacks combined.

Almost any iron-ranker would have died from that single blow alone, but Hudson was just any iron ranker. More than half of his torso and one arm were just gone, shattered into stone dust. He was still massively injured and lying prone as Humphrey stood up from the crouch he had landed in, still almost double his normal height from Neil's spell. He lifted up his sword and brought it down again. Hudson lifted his remaining arm and a stone shield appeared to intercept the attack.

The incredible impact of Humphrey's entry to the battlefield drew all eyes as the rest of his team started emerging, unnoticed. Clive had a large staff, from which he fired a bolt of magic at the elf sisters. Claire and Hannah were largely separated from the battle, leaving them free to heal and offer ranged support, respectively.

Neil also stepped out with Clive but didn't act, instead, making himself ready to intercede with his abilities at need. A third team member, Onslow the rune tortoise, was not a born ambusher and was sedately emerging from cover behind them.

The blast from Clive's staff crackled over Claire's shield, dissipating without any effect beyond drawing the attention of the two elves. The sisters failed to realise that this was the point as they turned to face Clive and Neil and away from their shadows, thrown onto the ground by the bright sun. With Jason's well-honed aura control, they failed to notice his dark figure rise up from Claire's own shadow.

Claire fired a blast from a wand as Hannah launched an arrow that caught fire in flight. Both Clive and Neil had the same mana shield power as Claire, the attacks striking

their invisible shields. Mana shield was a power that each of them gained from different essences but the effects were the same, negating attacks at the cost of mana.

The weaknesses were also the same, however, not impeding non-attacks, or attacks made from inside their sphere. It was a weakness that had cost Claire before, with Jason's leeches, and it was about to cost her again. Standing behind her, Jason slashed his hand on the razor in his wristband and reached inside Claire's shield.

Leeches spilled out over her, prompting startling shrieks that had her sister spinning around to see what happened. Jason pointed his arm at Hannah, who was likewise sprayed with leeches. Both sisters wore a coat of toothy leeches and Team Colin went to work.

Hudson's switch teleport had moved her out of the path of an arrow but placed her squarely in front of Dustin and his ice hatchets. Her between the raindrops power let her avoid his attack and escape his immediate reach but not his attack range. He started throwing ice spikes, forcing her to keep her attention on him and not the battlefield.

She had no time to assess her team's condition, let alone direct them as she was used to. From the moment Rick's team had boxed her in, through their breakaway being aborted by whatever had blown up Hudson's stone raft, she had been on the back foot.

Beth's archer, Emily, was likewise under pressure. She was staging a fighting retreat as she was pursued relentlessly by the swift and powerful Phoebe Geller. Affected by the poison orb Phoebe had used on her, Emily landed arrows on Phoebe but only inflicted minor injuries. Phoebe wasn't deterred, slowly but surely closing the gap.

In the meantime, Humphrey was still pounding away at Beth's front-liner, Hudson. Hudson was very much at his limits, scrambling on the ground and conjuring shield after shield for Humphrey to smash through. Despite his buffs, Humphrey was finding Hudson frustratingly difficult to finish off. His size buff had worn off, reducing Humphrey to normal proportions, but he didn't relent.

The last member of Beth's team was Niko, using his fire and iron powers to clash with Rick Geller. Niko's powers included a size buff he could use on himself, but the extra space he occupied was proving more of a detriment than the strength was an asset. Knee deep in mud, against a swarm of leeches, Rick wasn't much of a fighter, but this was open ground. With free footing and a large, singular enemy, Rick was a horror to engage in melee; an avatar of speed and power whose attacks were as potent as they were relentless.

Of the fourteen combatants on the field, none of them were bad, but Rick was the leader of his team for a reason. No one would accuse Niko of lacking as an adventurer,

but Rick simply outclassed him. He unleashed on Niko all the frustration of setback after setback his team had suffered, losing not just team members, but family. Rick was relentless and overpowering, his sword finding Niko again and again, leaving Niko stumbling back, rapidly accruing injuries.

Beth bought herself time by making use of Dustin's own power. One of her quick attack spells was called water cutter, which fired a beam of water hard and tight enough to cut through at least non-magical metal. In between ice spike, she fired it directly into Dustin's face. It didn't fully penetrate his icy helmet, but the water froze over the front of it from the cold of his armour, blinding him with an opaque sheet of ice.

Dustin wasn't worried as she smashed the ice away with a fist, knowing Beth lacked the powers to harm him in the brief moment he took to clear his vision. Attacking was not the reason she had bought that time, however, which she took to scan the battlefield.

She saw her team members scattered and on the back foot. They were about to be wiped out and she knew she had to intervene, chanting a spell as Dustin cleared off the obscuring ice. He threw an ice spike at her but she swayed out of its path and continued her incantation.

"Cool waters be the crucible of deliverance, bringing the deserving into the chrysalis of peace and rebirth."

Just as Dustin reached her, giant, magical lotus flowers appeared around Beth, Emily and Niko, completely enveloping them. Beth didn't complete her spell in time to save Hudson, who had finally been finished off by Humphrey. The people attacking the three now hidden away inside the lotuses found their attacks bouncing harmlessly off.

"They can't do anything from inside there but we can't hurt them either," Humphrey communicated through the group chat. "Go for Rick's team."

Jason's sneak attack had devastated the elf sisters, who were thrashing on the ground under piles of bloody leeches. Sophie, yet to make an appearance, suddenly launched a sneak attack at Phoebe who was at a loss in front of the lotus-shrouded Emily. She dodged the sneak attack, dancing away to create distance and the women squared off.

"You should have Asano work on your aura retraction," Phoebe said. "His is practically imperceptible, while yours just gave you away."

"Sneaking is really his area," Sophie said. "I'm more about the punching and you don't need an aura for that."

They clashed in a series of strikes before one of Phoebe's special attacks blasted them apart, both women landing nimbly.

"You made a mistake even coming for me," Phoebe said. "If you'd gone for Beth, she wouldn't have shielded her team."

"But then we'd have to fight both teams," Sophie said with a malevolent grin as Phoebe's eyes went wide with realisation.

"Humphrey knows Beth's abilities," she said. "He predicted what she'd do."

"Humphrey's a good guy and wouldn't say it," Sophie said, "but I think he's sick of being called the second-best iron-ranker."

Phoebe glanced around the battle. The elf sisters weren't coming back from their predicament but Rick and Dustin had regrouped to take on Humphrey. Jason stepped out of a nearby shadow.

"It's nice that you made a friend but you're meant to be fighting her," he told Sophie.

"I'm new at this," Sophie said. "I was waiting for a big strong man to save me."

"Is that right?" he asked.

"It is," Sophie said. "If you could go get Humphrey, that would be great."

"Well, that's just hurtful," Jason said.

"You know I'm still here, right?" Phoebe said.

"I suppose we should deal with you," Jason said.

"Oh, you're going to deal with me, are you?"

"That's the plan," Jason said. "Keep her busy would you, Wexler?"

Sophie launched into the attack before he finished talking, Phoebe deftly defending. Jason looked at Phoebe.

"Bleed for me."

Blood started running from Phoebe's eyes and nose as he cast another spell.

"Carry the mark of your transgressions."

Phoebe was distracted as a sigil seared itself onto her face, taking a fist to the ribs from Sophie.

"Your fate is to suffer."

"You have some nasty damn spells," Phoebe said, still clashing with Sophie. Suddenly she broke free and lunged at Jason. As she moved, she saw him throw something at the ground and she found herself shrouded in murky darkness. It wasn't full darkness as she could see shapes moving in the strange zone of shadows. She recognised the effect as one of his throwing darts and knew it only covered a small area. Making an immediate break for the outside, she felt a light slice on her arm as she emerged into the light.

Fully aware of what Jason's powers could do, Phoebe held her hand out to purge the toxins, the way she had earlier by gathering them into an orb. Sophie didn't give her the chance, forcing her to defend against a renewed series of attacks. In their initial clash, Phoebe had the advantage. Sophie had the edge in fighting technique, but Phoebe had more powers and more experience using them. The tables were turned as Phoebe needed to get away and cleanse herself before Jason's afflictions overwhelmed her. While Phoebe was stronger, though, Sophie's powers combined defence with blistering speed. She wouldn't be able to take down Sophie quickly or outpace her and escape.

While Sophie and Jason confronted Phoebe, Rick and Dustin regrouped as their opponents were both closed off in the lotuses. Instead, they took on Humphrey, fresh from finishing Hudson. All else being equal, Humphrey and Rick were a good match with quite similar combat styles. The addition of Dustin helped Rick but Humphrey had Clive, Neil and the finally emerged Onslow the rune tortoise to back him up.

Neil's ability to buff and heal was valuable, but not difficult to use. What had arrested the attention of Rufus Remore was Neil's shielding powers. The shield abilities that he could use on allies lasted only moments and would end after absorbing only a single attack. Without good judgement and timing, both could be easily wasted, leaving them unavailable until they came off cooldown again. The ability burst shield blasted away anyone nearby when the shield intercepted an attack. The other ability, absorbing shield, replenished the mana of the shielded person. The more damage that was prevented, the more mana was restored.

Using the voice chat, Neil offered to reapply the size-growth power but Humphrey refused, not making Niko's mistake. Clive refreshed his buffs, the rune circle that triggered effects when attacked and the damage-reflecting damage buff, mantle of retribution. Neil did refresh his other buff power, armour of renewal, which reduced damage taken and gave healing over time.

Humphrey clashed with Dustin and Rick. The two opponents should have been pressuring him but Humphrey had spent weeks discovering his limits under the protection of Clive and Neil. He left openings so he could make attacks, trusting Neil's shielding and healing, while letting Clive's retributive effects trigger. Clive offered ranged support, alternate staff blasts with using his own mana to recharge Onslow's shell powers.

The three on two was disadvantageous to Rick and Dustin, but they were holding on. They had also been training hard and Dustin used his ice powers to protect Rick and set up counters. Powerful attacks from Humphrey found his sword hitting a suddenly appearing ice wall that exploded into razor shards that slashed at him like knives. Blasts of

icy air knocked him away and slowed his reflexes with cold debuffs. Humphrey fainted against Rick to strike out at Dustin, only for Dustin to be replaced with an ice clone as he teleported a short distance away. The ice clone shattered under the attack, once again peppering Humphrey with ice razors.

It was not enough as Humphrey pushed them further and further onto the back foot, their attacks either shielded or healed by Neil's life bolt spell. It was clear that if nothing changed, they would inevitably lose out.

"Go for the healer," Rick barked and Dustin disengaged, Humphrey not trying to stop him. Dustin charged at Clive and Neil as Humphrey used Rick's distraction to catch him square in the chest with a kick, sending him staggering back. To Rick's surprise, instead of pushing the advantage, Humphrey looked up at the sky and he teleported away.

Clive looked up at Humphrey, more than a hundred metres in the air, then down at the charging Dustin. He smiled and chanted a spell.

"Exchange your fates."

Suddenly Humphrey was standing where Dustin had been charging Clive. Rick looked over in confusion, then up at the sky as a sound grew louder and louder. Dustin's scream came to an end at the same time his fall did.

Rick's team were effectively done. The sisters had succumbed to Colin while Phoebe was still alive but too debilitated to fight, leaving Rick as the only active combatant. Humphrey turned back to face him but Clive's vision power could see the magic of the lotus shells was about to end and warned the team.

Humphrey directed the team to quickly gather, which didn't take long. He was already close to the Clive and Neil, while Jason appeared from a nearby shadow. Sophie moved so fast it looked like she was skimming above the ground instead of running.

Inside her lotus shell, Beth had no idea what awaited her outside. She would have to rely on quick actions and quicker thinking when her spell dropped. Losing Hudson was a blow, but Niko and Emily would be fully healed, with refreshed mana and stamina. She hoped Humphrey and Rick's teams had taken the time to tear each other apart, which would allow her team to emerge and mop up.

The lotus shell dropped and her eyes fell immediately on Humphrey's team. They looked unharmed but they were gathered together in an easy clump. She cast a spell, eager to get it off before they reacted to the shells dropping and scattered.

"Steelcutter thorns, burst forth and make the land your own."

Thorny vines erupted from the hard earth, even splitting rock as they emerged, completely encapsulating Jason's team. Sharp thorns dug into them, even piercing

Humphrey's conjured dragon-scale armour. They didn't penetrate far, but they were all bound such that any movement would cause the thorns to dig into them. As soon as the thorns started growing, Beth was moving in their direction. Emily and Niko were likewise setting themselves up to launch attacks the moment the thorns no longer obscured Jason's team.

"Clive and Neil, go," Humphrey said through the voice chat.

Not needing to move to cast spells, Neil and Clive both started chanting lengthy incantations. It was enough time that Beth was able to rush to the edge of the thorns and chant her own spell. On completion, she opened her mouth, from which streamed a wave of green spores, flooded over the field of thorns.

They all started getting messages from Jason's interface power.

-
- Spell [Spore Cloud] has inflicted [Spore Toxin] on you.
 - You have resisted [Spore Cloud].
 - [Spore Cloud] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

Stuck in the cloud, the messages kept repeating. Only Jason resisted all the spores, but Sophie's aura helped the others resist many of them. Jason used his Feast of Absolution on Clive and Neil to cleanse them as they chanted their spells.

Neil completed his and in the air above the thorns, and ornate water fountain appeared, floating in the air. It sprayed water down over the people in the thorn field, healing their wounds.

-
- Spell [Fountain of Life] is healing you over time.
-

Shortly after, Clive completed his spell. High in the sky, a magical light traced out the shape of a huge eye in red and gold light.

-
- You have entered a zone affected by the [Eye of Karma]. When you suffer damage, the originator of that damage will also suffer damage.
-

"NOW!" Humphrey yelled and the whole team started pushing themselves into the thorns. The floating fountain constantly healed them even as the thorns injured them. Beth shrieked as the retributive damage of five people being pierced all over their body tore her flesh to ribbons. When she died, the thorns withered, leaving the fountain to heal them of any remaining damage.

As the thorns withered, a hail of arrows fell from the sky and fire breath washed over them as Emily took the chance to strike. It was too little, too late, though, with the fountain still healing them. With their team outnumbering the survivors of both the others combined, the outcome was inevitable. Rick and Niko formed a temporary alliance but were overpowered by Humphrey, Sophie, Neil and Clive.

Jason, meanwhile, hounded Emily. Unlike with a normal pursuer, she never knew which shadow he would appear from and quickly realised running was pointless. Instead, she made herself ready to pepper him with arrows if he emerged. In the end, he baited her. When he appeared from the shadows she fired her strongest special attack while creating distance backing right into a waiting mass of leeches.

The control room of the mirage chamber had extra platforms installed to accommodate fourteen people. The participants all got up and stretched. Their real bodies had been lying comfortably, yet they all felt exhausted.

Beth moved over to Humphrey, shaking his hand.

"You completely anticipated me," she told him. "It was a good win."

"That's the disadvantage of being the best adventurer in the city," he told her, unable to hide his victorious smile. "Everyone's paying attention to your abilities."

"That was very good," Danielle said, standing next to the control panel.

"I agree," Emir said, standing next to her. "You will all have a good chance in my little contest."

"When are you going to fill in some more details about that?" Jason asked.

"Only once your competition has arrived in the city," Emir said. "That should be any day, now."

Chapter 144:

Arrival

“You can begin, candidate Wexler,” Vincent said. Sophie nodded and stepped off the road and into the field of crops taller than she was.

“There were nine grass darters reported,” Vincent said to the other candidates. “While candidate Wexler chases them down, we will have time to discuss the remainder of the day’s notices. Those of you who have yet to demonstrate your aptitude to a satisfactory level should be looking to volunteer...”

He trailed off and looked to the crops, where Sophie emerged, struggling to carry four dead beetles, the size of small dogs. The group watched as she dumped them onto the road, each having a fist-sized hole in its carapace.

“According to the Magic Society listing,” Sophie said, “the shells of these things are pretty valuable. You said you knew harvesting rituals, right, Clay?”

“Uh, yes,” Clay said. “Were they already dead?”

“If they were already dead, they’d be rainbow smoke already,” Sophie said. “Just harvest this lot and we’ll go even split. I’ll go pick up some more.”

“How did you catch them so fast?” another candidate asked.

“I think these ones are duds,” Sophie said. “The Magic Society listing said they were fast, but these seemed a bit sluggish. Can’t hide their auras, either, so my perception power makes them easy to find.”

Sophie ducked back into the field.

“I wouldn’t put much stock in what candidate Wexler considers slow,” Vincent advised the other candidates. “Her perspective is somewhat skewed.”

At the marshalling yard, Jason and Belinda were part of the crowd waiting for the return of Sophie’s assessment group. It was the first Adventure Society intake since the expedition, the last one having been cancelled in the wake of that disaster and the incursion of the inquiry team. For this assessment, Vincent had been paired up with a member of that team who mostly watched in silence. It was also a smaller group than usual, with families suddenly more wary about placing their young people in the path of potential harm.

“She’ll pass, right?” Belinda asked nervously.

“She should,” Jason said. “Vincent won’t just give her an easy pass but she’s better than I was when I took my assessment.”

“She’s better than you are now,” Neil said. Their whole team was waiting for her in solidarity.

“I’ll have you know, people find me very scary,” Jason said.

“You’re wearing a pink shirt with tropical flower print,” Neil said.

“They could be poisonous flowers; you don’t know.”

“My concern is the member of the inquisition team they sent,” Humphrey said. “He’s meant to be assessing Vincent’s execution of the assessment, but he may just make them fail everyone as some kind of example.”

“They could have just sent Rufus for that,” Jason said. “He failed everyone when he ran the assessment.”

“He didn’t fail me,” Neil said.

“He did me,” Humphrey said.

“He failed me before it even started,” Jason said. “He wouldn’t let me go, told me not to bother because I was definitely going to fail.”

“Was he right?” Clive asked.

“Oh, yeah,” Jason said. “A few weeks earlier I was assistant manager at an office supply store.”

“A what store?” Belinda asked.

“Office supplies,” Jason said. “The Station-Eyrie, where we’re hawkish about your office supply needs.”

“Does this make sense to anyone?” Neil asked.

“We find it best to just let him go and not ask questions.”

“I am curious about his world, though,” Belinda said.

“There are a lot of differences,” Jason said. “More pamphlets, for example. You go to an accommodation and they’ll have a stand of pamphlets for local attractions. I haven’t seen that here.”

“Pamphlets,” Neil said flatly.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Folded pieces of paper with information printed on them. Do you not have them here? Maybe I should start a business. I could be a pamphlet mogul.”

“Is it too late to change teams?” Neil asked. “Someone must be looking for a healer.”

A wagon rolled its way into the marshalling yard, Adventure Society candidates climbing out as it came to a stop. After a few words from Vincent they broke off to meet with their families, some looking confident, others morose. Vincent exchanged a brief chat with the inquiry official before following Sophie over to their group.

“How do you think you did?” Belinda asked, giving Sophie a greeting hug.

“You’ll have to ask this guy,” Sophie said, jabbing a thumb in Vincent’s direction.

“We’ll make our assessment reports today and final results go up tomorrow,” Vincent said. “I don’t think candidate Wexler has anything to be concerned about, though.”

“How was the inquiry official?” Humphrey asked.

“Tough but fair,” Vincent said. “He didn’t demand quite as high a standard as Rufus, but he certainly wasn’t going to tolerate the usual Greenstone standard.”

“So we can expect better adventurers from now on,” Clive said.

“For a while,” Vincent said. “How long it takes to fall back into old patterns, who knows. Adventure Society culture is set at the top and Elspeth Arella isn’t what I’d hoped she’d be.”

“My mother hates working with her,” Humphrey said. “She wasn’t happy Arella held onto her position, but this threat from the Builder pushes aside everything else for now.”

“Speaking of which,” Neil said, “did your mother say anything about Thadwick?”

“Not much,” Humphrey said. “After they caught him she watched the purging ritual herself. It seems to have extracted the star seed intact but Thadwick was fairly ravaged by the process. Last I heard, he hasn’t woken up from the healing, yet.”

“Thanks,” Neil said. “I hated being on his team but I’ve known him most of my life. He didn’t deserve that.”

“He tried to kill me that one time, so I kind of think he does,” Jason said. “The suffering part, at least; I’m glad he’s not dead.”

“To finish the job yourself?” Sophie posited.

“No,” Jason said. “Thalia Mercer knows her son’s a useless dimwit but she’d still kill me if I did. Then my friends would go after the Mercers and on and on. I’m going to do what I should have done when I first met the guy and let it go.”

“That’s a mature attitude,” Vincent said.

“I’m still going to make fun of him though,” Jason said. “A lot. That guy sucks.”

“That’s slightly less mature,” Vincent said, “but I’ll take it.”

Sophie vaulted over the gap between the Old City rooftops, sailing through the crisp morning air to land with delicacy and precision. The sun was only just peeking over the delta, beginning to banish the cold of night.

Gary was close behind Sophie, his leaps heavy and powerful compared to her light agility. Jason was a distant third, his cloak floating around him as it let him easily make the distance. On Jason’s heels was Humphrey, manifesting wings to cross the gap. Bringing

up the rear were Clive, Neil and Belinda, who balked at the jump, stopping at the edge of the roof.

“I can’t make that jump,” Neil said, breathing hard.

“Not with that attitude,” Gary called back.

“We don’t have movement powers,” Clive said. “I can only teleport other people.”

“Teleport me over, then,” Belinda said.

“Why should you get the teleport?” Neil asked. “You aren’t even an essence user, yet.”

“And I still have to do this awful training,” Belinda shot back. “That’s why I should get the teleport.”

“No one’s getting the teleport,” Clive said. He backed up, broke into a run and vaulted the gap, successfully reaching the other side.

“Why do I even need to do this?” Neil asked. “I don’t have any mobility powers.”

“Which makes it all the more important,” Humphrey said. “It means that if it comes down to it, the skills you’re developing now will be all you have to rely on. What happened to the man who was eager to train?”

“I want to train the things I’m good at.”

“That’s all well and good,” Gary said, “but it’s the things you aren’t good at that get you killed.”

Neil groaned, but moved for a run-up before barely clearing the gap.

“Not bad,” Gary said, thumping him heavily on the back.

That left only Belinda on the other rooftop, eyeing off the jump when an angry man climbed up from a window.

“Who’s jumping up and down on my roof, first thing in the bloody morning?”

The team looked at each other uncertainly, then Clive chanted a spell.

“Exchange your fates.”

Belinda and Neil switched position, bringing Belinda into the group and leaving Neil with the angry homeowner.

“LEG IT!” Jason yelled and they all started sprinting.

“Oh, come on,” Neil complained as he watched them go, then turned awkwardly to the man whose roof he was standing on.

“Well?” the man demanded.

“I’m with the Adventure Society,” Neil said.

“Is there a monster up here?” the man asked, casting a gaze around.

“Uh, no,” Neil admitted. “No, there isn’t.”

“Then get off my bloody roof!”

A crowd was gathered at a dock in the Old City port that had been completely cleared for the approaching ship.

“Why do you need me here for this?” Rufus asked. “I’m meant to be making final inspections of the annex site this morning before giving the go ahead to break ground.”

“You are still my contracted agent here,” Emir said. “That’s why you came here in the first place, which makes any other ventures of secondary concern.”

“Since when do you care about that?” Rufus asked.

“Since now,” Emir said. “Shut up and get ready to greet the people as they disembark.”

They had spotted the approaching ship from the cloud palace. Full of Emir’s recruited iron-rankers, it would normally have used the Adventure Society’s private dock, but that was currently claimed by the cloud palace. Instead, room had been made at the regular port.

“You realise you’ve thrown this whole port into chaos, right?” Rufus asked. “They weren’t expecting to have some gold-ranker come in and just claim a whole dock.”

“The entire point of being a gold-ranker is to have other people deal with all the mundane problems.”

“And here was me thinking it was to protect civilisation from monsters,” Rufus said. “That’s a life lesson, I guess.”

Rufus made his way through the gathering of Adventure Society officials, Emir’s staff, dockworkers, and adventurers, arriving dockside as the ship approached the dock. Rufus’ eyes went wide as he spotted a man on board with midnight skin and dark, curly hair tied back behind his head. The man spotted him to and launched off the boat, sailing through the air on a magical wind to land in front of Rufus.

“Hello, boy,” the man said.

“Hello Dad,” Rufus said. “What are you doing here?”

Chapter 145

Full Jason

As the boat was still moving into the dock, the aeronautical early arrival of Gabriel Remore drew quite a lot of attention. The curious crowd pressed in for only a moment, though, before he pressured them back with his gold-rank aura.

“I see you haven’t been working on subtlety while I’ve been away,” Rufus said.

“Gods, you sound like your mother. She told me I shouldn’t fly over.”

“She’s here, too?” Rufus asked, gaze moving from his father to the approaching ship.

“Oh, now you show some emotional investment,” Gabriel said.

“Maybe if you didn’t make everything about yourself,” Rufus said. “Flying over here in front of all these people. What were you thinking.”

“That I could comfort my precious son.”

“Then why didn’t you bring Mother?”

The mirth dropped off Gabriel’s face as he turned to look at the ship.

“She’s with the Hurins,” he said.

Rufus’ face was stricken.

“Farrah’s parents?” he asked feebly.

“They wanted to come.”

Rufus reeled on the spot. “I shouldn’t have... I should have brought her home straight away.”

“It’s alright,” Gabriel said, placing a comforting hand on his son’s shoulder. “I won’t say it wasn’t hard on them, because how could it not be. But those of us with adventurer children know that adventurers don’t always come home.”

“I was supposed to protect her.”

“You were supposed to lead her, and you did.”

Gabriel looked around at the gathered people watching them. He had already used his wind abilities to make their conversation private, but there was no shortage of onlookers.

“You’re right,” he said to his son. “I shouldn’t have jumped over like that.”

Rufus was bleary-eyed but gave his father a smile.

“If you didn’t make a spectacle of yourself, I’d suspect you of being some kind of shape-shifter.”

“That’s kind of hurtful.”

“You did an unscheduled fire-sword dance at my academy graduation,” Rufus said.

Gabriel chuckled.

“Your grandad gave me an earful for that one.”

Emir passed through the wind bubble keeping in the sound and gave Gabriel a welcoming hug.

“How was the trip, Gabe?”

“It was good,” Gabriel said.

“You know I could have had Hester portal you in,” Emir said.

“Arabelle wanted to take the long way,” Gabriel told him. “All those stops picking up the iron-rankers gave us the chance to see some new places. It was good for the Hurins.”

“With you, me and Arabelle here, you should have brought Cal, too,” Emir said. “Get the old team together for a reunion.”

“You know what he’s like,” Gabriel said. “If there’s no monsters worth fighting, he’s not interested. You couldn’t drag him into a low magic zone like this one.”

“He doesn’t change, does he?” Emir asked, glancing again at the boat. “They’ll be getting ready to disembark, soon. I’d best go greet all the tadpoles.”

Emir was in front of a gathered group of iron-rankers. Some sixty or so had been on the boat, with two more boats coming.

“Welcome to Greenstone,” Emir said. “My name is Emir Bahadir and I’d like thank you all personally for coming all this way in response to my contract. As to the specifics, there will be a large announcement meeting once all of the adventurers have arrived. In the meantime, I suggest you report your arrival to the local branch of the Adventure Society. I’ve arranged a number of carriages to take you all there directly, and they can help you find local accommodation.”

Adventurers didn’t have luggage, carrying their possessions in dimensional bags or dimensional space abilities. They were trained to travel light and with efficiency and were soon heading for the Island in a train of carriages. Not all of them took the offered ride, heading straight off to explore Old City or hanging around instead, hoping for some personal time with Emir.

Others were greeted by representatives of Greenstone’s nobility or other prominent families. Every other family in Greenstone envied the power and influence the Gellers held in other lands and leapt at the chance to make outside connections. They hoped that playing host to the next generation of leaders would get them a foot in the door of a larger world. This was reinforced by the Geller family itself, so sent representatives to collect certain people to which they had connections.

Emir sent most of those looking to make an early connection away, except for a young girl of only fifteen years, with dark skin and rainbow-coloured hair that fell back over her head in a series of tight braids.

“Ketis,” Emir greeted her warmly.

“Grandfather,” she said with a respectful nod.

“No hug for grandad?”

She gave him a hug after glancing around with the self-consciousness of her age.

“How was your trip?” he asked.

“The boat was so small,” she complained, drawing a laugh from Emir.

“Of course it was small after the cloud ship,” he said. “It’s good for you to broaden your perspective.”

“You don’t broaden your perspective by narrowing the ship,” she said sullenly and Emir laughed again.

“Did you enjoy travelling with Aunty Arabelle?”

She nodded.

“Alright,” he said. “Come along as I say hello. I have a present for you, later.”

They wandered over to where Rufus and his father were talking with three other people. Rufus’ mother, Arabelle, had even darker skin than her husband, her long hair dyed rainbow colours in the Vitesse style. Farrah’s parents, the Hurins, were fair-skinned, like their daughter had been. Emir knew that while they looked older than the Remores, Amelia and William Hurin were actually younger.

Of humble origins, they had become adventurers later in life. As young parents, they had stumbled upon the valuable potent essence. Instead of selling it for its considerable value, they kept it hidden as they worked to obtain more. By the time their daughter was old enough to use them, they had the more common fire and earth essences to go with it. It was only after their daughter found success as adventurers that she repaid the gift twice over and they, too became essence users.

Farrah’s parents had no interest in following their daughter into the Adventure Society. They were both bronze rank, having raised their abilities using the monster cores Farrah brought back from her adventures. Rufus and Gary had likewise contributed their own shares.

As Emir approached, Rufus was bowed before them, practically kneeling.

“I’m so sorry,” he told them.

“Please stop apologising,” Farrah’s mother, Amelia said. “Our daughter died as an adventurer, and she died proudly. You’re no more to blame than we are for giving her those essences in the first place.”

“We had an informal wake a couple of weeks ago,” Rufus said. “Now you’re here, I’ll arrange something more formal.”

The two sets of parents shared a glance over Rufus’ bowed head.

“You do that,” Farrah’s father, William said. “We’d appreciate it, son.”

In the cloud palace training hall, Humphrey and Sophie were clashing while Jason, Neil, Clive and Belinda rested in the observation area. Humphrey had his smaller conjured sword out, Sophie deflecting it with her fists.

“When I get my own essences,” Belinda told Clive, “I think I’ll prefer to fight at range, like you. Getting up close like that is really more Sophie’s area.”

“That can be tricky for a human,” Neil said. “Humans get more special attacks than anything else, unless you get a racial gift evolution early, like Clive. Mostly that means melee attacks. If you want range, then a bow essence would be a good choice. That’s the most reliable way to get ranged special attacks.”

“Or you could get an ability that lets you use skill books,” Clive said. “That way, you can gain whatever skills you need. The adept essence is a solid bet, in that case.”

“I looked at the bow essence, but decided against it,” Belinda said. “Adept is on my list, though.”

“You’re already picking out essences?” Neil asked.

“Clive let me look at the Magic Society essence listings,” Belinda said. “I’ve picked out a set I like the look of. They’re all common essences, so they shouldn’t be that hard to get.”

“You’ve made a decision?” Clive said. “What combination?”

“Magic, adept and trap,” she said.

“Magic and adept are popular essences, but not hard to find,” Clive said. “Trap is more of a niche selection. Mostly assassin and hunter types go for it; I think it’s an undervalued essence when it comes to monster hunting.”

“What’s the confluence essence for that?” Neil asked.

“Charlatan,” Belinda said with glee. “I was looking through the abilities it’s known to give and they sound fantastic.”

Neil and Clive shared a glance.

“Charlatan?” Neil asked.

“From recollection,” Clive said, “it’s a confluence more people avoid than seek out. Most would disagree with you on the value of the abilities it gives.”

“Then those people lack imagination,” Belinda said. “I looked through long lists of abilities. I don’t want to pick out some essences looking for fun, tricky abilities, only to end

up with a boring set of straightforward attacks. Ideally, I'd get one of those racial gift evolutions that means I'm not stuck shooting nine kinds of magic arrow."

"We fought a couple of people in the mirage chamber recently who might disagree," Neil said.

"Those people lost," Belinda said. "Maybe they would done better if they had more tricks in their pocket."

"Harsh," Jason said. "I have to agree with the value of having a few hidden surprises at the ready, though."

"As do I," Emir said as the elevating platform brought him up into the room. "Speaking of surprises, I believe you have something for me?"

Clive pushed himself out of the chair, took a heavy book from his storage space and handed it to Emir.

"Skill book. Way of the Reaper, form three."

"You aren't still holding out on me, are you?" Emir asked. "Jason told me you didn't take anything from that complex you found."

"I said no such thing," Jason said. "If you think back, you'll find I dodged the question. If I went telling high-rankers every time I found something interesting, they'd just keep taking them off me."

"Is that why you kept your and Miss Wexler's unusual combat style from me for so long?"

"I thought it was best if your interest in her was purely altruistic," Jason said. "It was her choice to tell you. She wanted to thank you for taking her in when you had no need to."

"My client is very interested in the origin of that fighting style," Emir said. "Once our business here is done, I suspect he will have an interest in tracing Miss Wexler's family history. Perhaps, once her indenture is done, she will be interested in that journey for herself."

"That's up to her," Jason said. "So, this granddaughter of yours has been learning the Way of the Reaper too?"

"My search has taken time and found many relics of the Order of the Reaper," Emir said. "That includes skill books. My granddaughter can use skill books and was very interested in practicing a lost style. I was reluctant, having only recovered books containing three of the five forms. In the end, she wore me down."

"Your client didn't want the books?" Clive asked.

"My client appreciates any relics I send his way and pays me appropriately, but I am only contracted for one item. We have found multiple copies of these skill books and had

some to spare, but only for three of the forms. We haven't found anything for the second or third."

"We found intact copies of forms one and three," Clive said. "We can't help you with a book for form two."

"I'm not so sure about that," Emir said. "My hope is that one will be recovered during the upcoming contest," Emir said. "I will share the details once the other boats arrive. Even if not, both you and Miss Wexler have knowledge of form two, do you not, Jason?"

"We do. We're grateful for all you've done for us, so we'd be happy to teach her what we can."

"That's excellent," Emir said. "You'll meet her soon. Have you met Rufus' parents, yet?"

"Not yet," Jason said. "Rufus and Gary have been with them and Farrah's parents since they arrived."

"Rufus had a request for you, for when you meet his father."

"Oh?" Jason asked.

"Rufus' father, Gabriel, likes to make a big first impression. He didn't tell Rufus he was coming, then made quite the entrance at the port."

"So I've heard," Jason said.

"Rufus requested that when you meet his father, you go what he referred to as 'full Jason,' whatever that means."

"Oh, we know what that means," Neil said.

"Yes, we do," Clive said.

"What are you two talking about?" Jason said.

"You questioned if I was even an elf, then accused me of being fat," Neil said.

"You claimed to have slept with my non-existent wife, then accused me of sleeping with your non-existent wife."

"Neil's an elf?" Belinda asked.

"Yes, I'm an elf!"

"You are quite hefty for an elf."

"My proportions are perfectly normal!"

"I see it now," Emir said. "This is exactly what Rufus was looking for."

"He had his landlady yell at me."

Chapter 146:

Versatile

Jason was sitting in a meditation pose on one of the cloud palace's open terraces when Rufus wandered along with his parents.

"This is Jason," Rufus said.

Jason turned his head and opened one eye to look before springing lightly to his feet.

"Gabriel and Arabelle Remore," Rufus said.

"So this is the Jason Asano I've heard so much about," Gabriel said.

"You have?" Jason asked, surprise clear on his face. "Most people only pay attention to the big names, you know? Staedtler, Moranse; the ones with all the fancy glazing techniques, the overdone vases that no one ever actually uses as a vase. I mean, seriously. If the form overwhelms the function, what's the point, am I right?"

"Glazing?" Gabriel asked in confusion.

"I know, right?" Jason asked. "The true enthusiast understands that it isn't about the flashy finish but the craftsmanship of the underlying product. Every aficionado who truly knows their business understands that the real collectible is also the most practical. They don't go for the weird oversized bowls or the fancy jugs with artistic flourishes that compromise volume. They know that solid, economical designs are what really endure."

"I'm sorry," Gabriel said, "but what are you talking about?"

"Pottery," Jason said. "That's why you heard about me, right? And I can tell you that the rumours are true: I have the best clay to coin ratio in Greenstone. You want practical, affordable earthenware, then I'm your guy."

"Pottery?"

"Oh yeah," Jason said enthusiastically. "I'm not just about the pots and bowls, either. You want the inside skinny on the industry, then I'm your man."

Jason narrowed his eyes, giving the Remore's an assessing look, then leaned in, conspiratorially.

"Because your Rufus' family," Jason said, "I might have a little inside tip for you."

"I think there may have been a mistake," Gabriel said.

"No mistake, my friend," Jason said, giving Gabriel a pat on the arm. "You want the inside scoop? The hidden truth the other earthenware merchants won't tell you? You can forget the vases, my friend. The bowls, pots, pitchers, planters and jugs. I know they're all the fancy, eye-catching stuff that the ordinary collectors go for. And those big-name

potters, they're more than happy to feed them the dross while keeping the real goods for themselves."

"What is happening?" Gabriel asked.

"The future is happening," Jason said. "Not just the future of pottery, as if that wasn't exciting enough, but the future of beverages themselves!"

"Beverages?"

"Oh, yes, my friend. I know it seems like everyone stores wine in bottles these days, but take it from an industry insider: amphorae are coming back in a big way."

"Amphorae?"

"That's the stuff," Jason said. "These aren't your grandmother's amphorae; they're not just for wine anymore. Milk, tea, juice, liquor, Bovril."

"Bovril?"

"Oh, I forgot you don't have cows, here. Lizard Bovril? Forget the Bovril, focus on the amphorae. I realise that every good collector has an amphora or two squirrelled away somewhere. They're always an addendum, though; a punctuation point in a piquant pottery poem, but I'm here to tell you, friend, that amphorae are about to explode onto the scene that will make vases look like little dishes people use for hard candy!"

"I really don't understand what's happening," Gabriel said.

"Of course you don't," Jason said, moving next to Gabriel and slipping a sympathetic arm over his shoulder. "Even as we speak, the potters of the world are hidden away, crafting amphora after amphora for the bonanza to come."

Gabriel pulled himself away from Jason, which did nothing to dampen Jason's enthusiasm.

"I've very clearly missed something in this situation," Gabriel said.

"Of course you have," Jason said, "but that isn't your fault. It's these so-called industry professionals, collection agents and gallery owners. They know the truth, but will they tell good, honest collectors like you? No, they won't. It's a conspiracy, my friend, an amphora conspiracy to keep you out of the game until the market explodes and they hold all the cards."

"I'm very confused," Gabriel said.

"Of course you are," Jason told him sympathetically. "Some poor, innocent pottery enthusiast can't be expected to understand the market nuances and industry secrets. That's surely why Rufus brought you to me, right?"

"Oh, I definitely brought him here for this," Rufus said.

"There you are," Jason said. "Clearly you're a gentleman of insight and means."

Jason leaned over to Rufus.

“He is a man of means, right?” Jason whispered.

“Oh, yes,” Rufus said and Jason gave Gabriel a beaming smile.

“Insight and means,” he said again. “A man who won’t miss an opportunity literally hidden away from the more ordinary collector. Let me paint you a picture. A workshop, filled with secretive but capable apprentices, all under the direction of an experienced and rakishly handsome man with almost months of experience. Rack after rack of amphorae. No bowls, no pots, no jugs. Just one amphora after another, poised for that market shift, ready to explode in prominence.”

“Are you trying to get me to give you money?” Gabriel asked.

“It’s not about money,” Jason said. “It’s about showing those with an iron grip on the industry that we can bust open their artificial scarcity! And also money. You drop seven or eight gold spirit coins now, and a few years down the track, you could very well have made some of it back!”

“Could?”

“Hold on, I have a pamphlet here somewhere.”

“Pamphlet?”

Jason patted his pockets absently, then his face lit up as he remembered and he plucked a pamphlet out of the air, shoving it into Gabriel’s hand. Gabriel looked warily at the cover.

“Step one, collect underpants?” he read.

“Oops,” Jason said, snatching back the pamphlet and shoving it back into his inventory. He then pulled out a fistful of pamphlets and started leafing through them, reading to himself as he went.

“Church of Om; not a lot of hope for that catching on. Shelving unit assembly. Wicker versus rattan furniture selection guide.”

He looked up at Gabriel. “Sorry mate, just a second.”

Jason resumed sorting through the pamphlets as Gabriel searched his still innocent-looking son’s face for any hint of explanation.

“Basic guide to yoghurt,” Jason continued. “Woven rug care in 5 easy steps; I’ve been looking for that one. Blue Oyster Bar, that one’s for Rufus. Oh, here we go; basic guide to amphora selection.”

Jason handed over the pamphlet as he shoved the rest back into his inventory.

“Note that the pictures show each amphora at the same size,” Jason said, pointing. “That’s just to make use of the space on the pamphlet, where obviously any given

amphora can come in any size. For clarity, you'll note that there's a standard reference pear in each picture."

Gabriel looked at Jason like he was some kind of madman.

"Reference pear?"

"That's industry standard," Jason said. "I thought you said you were a collector?"

"I am not a collector!"

"Then why did you say you were?" Jason asked, anger and confusion splashed across his face. "Are you just here trying to dig up industry secrets? I told you about my slave workshop!"

"Slave workshop?"

"Indentured servants, whatever. Oh, this is a shocking turn up."

"I thought you were an adventurer."

"Oh, it's always like that, isn't it?" Jason said. "You kill a few hundred monsters and suddenly all people see you as is an adventurer. Let me tell you, mate, adventuring is just a job. Pottery is a vocation."

Jason yanked the pamphlet from Gabriel's hand.

"Forget this," he said bitterly, stormed over to the terrace railing and vault over the side, dropping out of sight.

"So that was Jason," Rufus said mildly. "Next we'll head to the guest wing lounge and dining area, where I've had some lunch prepared."

"Dear," Gabriel said.

"Yes, my love?" Arabelle asked. She had remained silent throughout the encounter.

"What just happened?"

"We just met Rufus' friend, dear," she said. "Don't be judgemental."

"Judgemental? The man was a loon!"

"He's from very far away," Arabelle said. "He's bound to have some idiosyncrasies."

"Idiosyncrasies? He tried to get me to invest in a pottery workshop staffed by slaves! He wouldn't stop saying amphora and I still have no idea what Bovril is."

"I think it's a local delicacy where he comes from," Rufus said. "Don't worry about it, Dad. I have food waiting."

"Yes, do come along, dear," Arabelle said and set off with her son, Gabriel trailing after.

"You set this up," Gabriel accused Rufus. "This is for jumping off the ship in front of all those people, isn't it?"

"No idea what you're talking about, Dad."

"You actually made pamphlets?" Gary asked.

"Yep," Jason said. "Eight of them. There's a simple ritual to print images, so the real issue was finding the right card stock. For a good pamphlet, it has to be nice and thin, but firmer than just paper. Durable, with a good feel in the hand."

They were sat around a banquet table in the guest wing lounge and dining area. It was Jason's full team, plus Gary, Belinda, Jory, Phoebe, Emir and his chief of staff, Constance.

Emir was laughing as Rufus led in his parents.

"You!" Gabriel said, pointing at Jason, making Emir laugh all the harder.

"Sit down and eat, Gabe," Emir said. "Always a pleasure, Bella. You can sit next to me."

"Keep your hands off my wife," Gabriel said, sitting down.

"Connie, always a pleasure," Arabelle said, sitting next to Constance.

"Bella," Constance greeted. Emir's usually reserved chief of staff seemed a little more relaxed than normal. Only a little, but it stood out.

"Lovely to see you again," Jason said and made introductions around the table. When introducing Rufus' parents, he referred to Rufus' mother as an esteemed adventurer, venerated by kings and heroes. Gabriel, he referred to as some kind of teacher.

"I have a question," Gabriel said to Jason.

"Just one?"

"How much of what you were saying to me was a lie?"

"All of it," Jason said. "I was lying through my teeth. I'd probably mistake a kiln for a rustic barbecue and use it to cook sausages."

"I'm a gold ranker," Gabriel said. "I can see right through your aura."

"Rude, but okay," Jason said.

"Why couldn't I tell you were lying? I should have been in your aura."

"Oh, that's a technique from my world called the Stanislavski system," Jason said. "To grossly oversimplify, it's about becoming the person you're pretending to be in the moment."

"It's a formidable tool," Arabelle said.

"Especially when you run around making high-ranking enemies, the way Jason does," Gary said.

"What are you talking about," Jason said. "Everybody loves me."

“Speaking of which,” Emir said, “I was hoping you could help me with something, Jason.”

“Oh?” Jason asked.

“I thought I might take the opportunity of all these new adventurers arriving to try and bait out the Builder cultists and I had an idea that makes use of your flair for pompous melodrama.”

“Pompous melodrama?” Jason said, as laughter spread around the table at his hurt expression.

“That’s your problem?” Emir asked. “Not being used as bait for evil cultists?”

“No worries there, mate,” Jason said. “Evil cultists are kind of my thing.”

“Evil cultists are your thing?” Phoebe asked.

“Jason has a lot of things,” Gary said.

“I’m versatile,” Jason said.

Chapter 147: I Don't Like This Plan

The marshalling yard was full of adventurers, waiting for Emir Bahadir to arrive. The third and final boatload of iron-rankers had arrived the day before and a meeting had been called to finally explain the job. Along with all the imported adventurers, the locals were out in full force. After the expedition, only those confident in their abilities were going to participate, but iron, bronze or silver, everyone wanted to know what had brought Emir to Greenstone in the first place.

“Asano!”

The voice was loud and challenging, grabbing attention. Jason and his team were waiting with everyone else, looking up as someone called out Jason's name. Space was made as a young man strode through the crowd.

“Asano,” the man said again.

“Something I can help you with?” Jason asked.

“You have one of your own team members as a slave?” the man asked.

“Indentured servant,” Jason said. “Do you have a name, or should I just keep thinking about you as that loud guy who won't mind his own business?”

“Julian Cross,” the man said.

“Alright, Julian,” Jason said. “What exactly does my team or my indentured servant have to do with you?”

“Letting an adventurer be an indentured servant is a disgrace. Relinquish her.”

“That wouldn't set her free, idiot. It's a court-ordered indenture, so they'd just put her contract up for auction.”

“Then you should transfer her contract to someone who won't treat her like a slave.”

“Says the guy who's talking about her instead of to her, when she's standing right here.”

Jason half-turned his head in Sophie's direction.

“What do you think?” he asked. “You want this guy to have your contract?”

“I'm not against getting away from you,” she said. “I think I can do better than him, though.”

“Not true,” Julian said. “I wouldn't treat you like a slave. You'd receive far better treatment than he would ever give you.”

“The thing is,” Jason said, “neither of you actually get a say. You, Julian, aren’t involved at all, despite marching up and making a scene in front of all these people. As for you, woman, you belong to me.”

“Screw you,” Sophie said.

“If and when I say,” Jason said coldly.

“You think I’ll just stand here and let you treat an adventurer like that?” Julian asked. “I challenge you.”

“Challenge me?”

“To a duel. There is a mirage chamber in this city, so I’ve heard. If you win, I shall withdraw from this event and return to my homeland. If I win, then you transfer the contract over to me.”

“If you want to duel, mate, there won’t be any mirage chamber involved. You want to put something on the line, then it’s your blood. Do you have a first blood rule in duelling, here?”

“We do,” Julian said.

“Then we do it here and we do it now,” Jason said. “You and me. First blood.”

“Fine,” Julian said. “One blow is all I need to kill you, anyway.”

Space was quickly made, a circle of onlookers as the borders of their impromptu arena. Julian and Jason circled each other, around five metres apart. Julian had the lean, athletic physique of most adventurers, with sharp, predatory features, swarthy skin and a mane of amber hair. His hand rested lightly on the undrawn sword at his hip.

Jason was on the other side of the encircling adventurers, shrouded in his cloak. In his hand was his conjured dagger, *Ruin*. The pair of combatants eyed each other off, each waiting for the opening that would give them the win. They circled slowly, each careful with their footwork, ready to move at any moment. Julian was the first to act.

His sword erupted from its scabbard, a spark flashing from the blade and driving into Jason’s cloak. The cloak was already empty, Jason having left it behind as he used it to shadow teleport. He rose behind Julian from his shadow, reaching around to slash Julian’s throat.

As Jason casually tossed aside his conjured dagger, which vanished into thin air, Julian clutched a hand over his throat, blood seeping between his fingers. His other hand scrambled for a potion, which he tipped into his mouth.

“First blood,” Jason said. “You’d best have a healer look at that, mate. Your welcome for me not going deep, by the way.”

Julian pushed his way through the crowd, a hand still clutched over his throat. Jason turned around on the spot, casting a challenging gaze over everyone.

“Does anyone else have a problem with me?” he called out. “That one was a warning. There won’t be any more duels. You have a problem with me, either keep it to yourself or I will put you down. If any more people here have an issue with that, I can start right now.”

“That’s easy to say with Bahadir standing behind you,” someone called out from the crowd. “You think we don’t know you’ve been staying in the cloud palace? You can talk big all you like, but it’s not you that we’re afraid of.”

“Well said,” Emir’s voice boomed over the crowd from above. Everyone looked up to see Emir flying through the air, feet shrouded in a small patch of cloud. The cloud vanished and he dropped lightly to the ground, next to Jason.

“Jason,” Emir said, “if you want to challenge any and all who come your way then, by all means, do so. However, you must use your own strength to do so, not mine. I think it is time for my hospitality to come to an end before it starts to hinder your progress as an adventurer. The cloud palace is closed to you, now.”

“You can’t do that!” Jason exclaimed.

“I can and have. Your aura imprint will be wiped from the cloud palace’s access list. This is for your own good; relying on the strength of others with cause your own to atrophy.”

“You think I need you?” Jason asked. “You just wait. You’ll see what I can do on my own.”

“I genuinely look forward to it.”

Jason’s rage-filled face was obscured as his cloak formed around him once again. Then the cloak was empty as he teleported away, drifting down for a moment before vanishing. Emir let out a world-weary sigh, then turned to the crowd.

“I realise there will be tension between locals and the newcomers, so let me be plain. As many of you have surmised, Jason Asano is under my protection. I am extending that protection to every iron-ranker who signs on to the open contract I will be posting at the Adventure Society today, and that protection is the same for all, in both its extent and its limits. The protection is thus: every one of you must be fit for action when the contract begins in three days. I don’t care what you do to one another, so long as you can be healed and ready for action at that time. That goes for Asano and each and every one of you.”

The cloud appeared around Emir’s feet again and he floated into the air.

“Now that is dealt with, we move onto the nature of the contract. Centuries ago, there was an ancient order of assassins, known as the Order of the Reaper. They were hunted down and exterminated, but rumours always remained of a legacy left behind; a final, hidden fortress. At the behest of a diamond-rank client, I have spent the last few years searching the world for that fortress.”

Emir panned his gaze over the group.

“As you have no doubt surmised, the fortress has been found, here in the Greenstone region. There is a lake, at the bottom of which the remains of that fortress have been long hidden. My people found it, but the true sanctum is not so easily penetrated. The legacy found therein comes with a test; a trial for who seek it out. It is held within an astral space that, even once unsealed, will only admit iron-rankers. All attempts to otherwise penetrate it have fallen short. Only by activating the trials will it open, and only for those who have the longest road left to walk. Iron-rankers, like you.”

He paused, giving the crowd a few moments for his words to sink in.

“As I said, this fortress is at the bottom of a lake. My people will be on hand to grant you access, but reaching the depths – and they are depths – will be the first requirement of participation. If you cannot manage even that much, then there is no hope of you completing the trial anyway. All further details will be on the open contract, which will be posted shortly.”

With that, Emir floated away.

Many towns and village in the delta had accommodation just for adventurers. It always paid to make the people who killed the monsters for you welcome and comfortable. Certain hub locations were especially used to adventurers passing through and people knew better than to take a second glance at the often oddly dressed and heavily armed individuals.

Into one of the larger establishments went two figures shrouded in dark cloaks. This was not unusual, as more than a few young adventurers became enamoured with being mysterious. One of the cloaks was obviously magical, seemingly made from darkness itself. The other was a dark brown, plain, but high quality. The two adventurers paid for one of the larger private rooms and immediately went inside.

Jason’s cloak vanished and Hester pushed the hood back on hers. Hester was the only Asiatic-looking person he had seen in this world outside of his own reflection. Her appearance was closer to South Asian than his own Japanese features.

“Where are you from, Hester?” he asked.

“Pranay, originally,” she said.

Jason was slowly learning about his new world, including the geography. Pranay was this world’s equivalent of Sri Lanka, larger and further south than his own. It made for a huge landmass in the middle of what, in his world, was called the Indian Ocean.

“What’s it like?” he asked.

“A lot like the delta, actually,” she said. “I became an adventurer to see the world, but now travel is so easy for me that I spend more and more of my time back home.”

“That’s nice,” Jason said. “I’d like to be able to do that, someday. My home’s a little farther away, though.”

“Nothing’s impossible,” Hester said. “Working for Emir, I’ve seen enough diamond rankers to learn that much. Even from what little I’ve witnessed, they function on a scale of power that’s hard to believe.”

Hester drew a circle in the air with her hand, which shimmered into being as a portal when she was done. They stepped through, into the cloud palace. Jason had to take out his entry stone to do so, as the cloud palace’s protections worked even against portals.

For most people, their aura imprint could be set into the cloud palace to permit entry, the very thing Emir publicly claimed he would erase. In truth, the same effect that prevented Jason from being tracked prevented the cloud palace from collecting his imprint to allow him entry. He had to be given an access stone that the cloud palace could read, which was itself bound uniquely to Jason.

They arrived in the cloud palace’s guest wing lounge, where a large group was already having lunch. Emir and Constance, Belinda and Jory, Rufus and his parents, plus Gary and Jason’s team. Julian was there as well, his throat injury fully healed.

Jason nodded a greeting at Julian as he and Hester sat down.

“I didn’t go too deep, did I?” Jason asked.

“No, it was perfect,” Julian said. “The potion alone was enough to deal with the damage. You know your throat-slitting.”

“You have no idea,” Humphrey said. “I have this recording you should see.”

“Will you stop showing that to people?”

“The bit where you let the spear hit you is the creepiest,” Belinda said. “The way you pull it out and lick it? So disgusting.”

“It really was,” Jason said. “I think Jonah might have nicked a bowel.”

“You don’t have bowels,” Clive said.

“I don’t have bowels?”

“As essence users,” Clive explained, “we all go through physiological changes as we increase in rank. At iron rank, our digestion starts operating very differently. Our gold-rankers here don't even need to breathe. Each time we rank up, in addition to making our bodies superior vessels for magic, there are changes to how our bodies operate. It's one of the reasons we can suffer more damage than others. Many of the vulnerable points in the torso are less vulnerable because we use what's in there less. By the time we reach silver and gold, we are mostly just containers for a living mass that serves to rapidly heal injury.”

“Are you sure you don't want to come work for me?” Emir asked.

“Stop trying to poach my team member,” Jason said.

“I'm still unclear as to the point of what we did out there,” Julian said. “I'm grateful for the opportunity, don't get me wrong. Coming to work for you, Mr Bahadir, is a much better opportunity than some prize I likely wouldn't get, but I don't understand the purpose of setting the iron-rankers on each another.”

“Chaos,” Jason said. “You've heard about the five people who were implanted with star seeds, yes?”

“Yes,” Julian said.

“We're confident that the goal of implanting those people was to sow discord,” Emir said. “One died and we've captured and purged two of the others. Two remain at large, however, and the attention and resources we dedicate to finding them is attention and resources we aren't sending after the Builder cult.”

“Emir's declaration today basically gave everyone an opening to spend the next couple of days engaging in controlled chaos,” Jason said. “The hope is that the Builder cult seeks to tip that chaos from controlled to uncontrolled in the lead up to the open contract, making it easier to enact their plans for the astral space.”

“What's that got to do with you?” Julian asked.

“Jason is now the focal point of this iron-rank mess Emir has made,” Gabriel said. “He's close with Emir, but suddenly outside of Emir's protection. There wouldn't be a much better way to muddy the waters than implant Jason with a star seed, which we're hoping they attempt.”

“Even if they don't bite, it doesn't really cost us anything to try,” Jason said.

“What if they succeed and you actually get implanted?” Julian asked.

“That is the part that concerns me, as well,” Gary said. “I don't like this plan.”

“Jason will be watched at all times,” Emir assured him. “I've brought in a specialist.”

Emir nodded at a man sitting at the table that no one had noticed appear. He was a middle-aged man, the kind of grizzled that perpetually made him look like he should be in the wilderness somewhere, hunting something.

"You had Hester bring in Cal," Gabriel said.

"What my husband means to say is hello," Arabelle said. "How've you been, Cal?"

"Busy," Cal said, his voice as gravelly as his face. "It's good to see you, Bella."

"This is Callum Morse," Emir introduced. "If he doesn't want to be seen, no one short of diamond rank will see him. He'll be over Jason's shoulder at every moment until the contract begins. Hopefully, he'll bag us some Builder cultists."

The lunch went on, the large group chatting away. Julian, Clive and Neil were all quiet, intimidated by gold-rank company, although a born pedagogue, Clive was easily drawn out at the chance to explain one thing or another.

"You know, Cal," Gabriel said, "Jason here can keep lies out of his aura. You're the only other person I've seen do that."

"How do you all know each other?" Jason asked.

"Oh, we were all a team, back when we were young and foolish like you kids," Emir said. "After we got to gold, though, our priorities started to shift. Cal here was happy to spend the rest of his days carving his way through the monster population, but he was having to look harder for a challenge. I wanted adventures more exotic than what the Adventure Society was offering and took up fortune hunting for hire."

He waved a finger between Gabriel and Arabelle.

"These two," he said, "wanted to go off and make babies. Utterly pointless."

"Excuse me?" Rufus said. "I'm one of those babies."

"And how long did it take you to even hold a worthwhile conversation?" Emir asked. "Children aren't a time-effective proposition."

"I'd like children someday," Constance opined quietly.

"What's time anyway?" Emir asked, course-corrected rapidly. "When you live as long as we do, what's a little time in return for the joy of parenting?"

After lunch, Hester returned Jason to the guest house from which they had portalled into the cloud palace. She did not remain behind, with Sophie taking Hester's position under the brown cloak. The pair then left, ostensibly laying low after events in the marshalling yard while leaving a trail for the Builder cult to follow.

Chapter 148: Impossible to Subdue

“What is it you need me for?” Sophie asked.

“You’re not happy with enjoying a nice day in the delta?”

They were strolling along an embankment road, Jason setting their meandering pace.

“It’s not terrible,” Sophie conceded. “I’m just not sure why you need me to join you on the hook.”

“You know about fishing, but you didn’t know about rain?”

“I probably heard someone mention it, but it isn’t something that really comes up.”

“Seems like it would be,” Jason said. “Delta merchants, sailors. And you weren’t born here, right? Didn’t you come to this city on a ship? Surely that got rained on.”

“Who told you that? Was it Belinda?”

“Don’t recall,” Jason said. “One of the Berts, maybe?”

“I don’t really remember anything before Greenstone,” Sophie said. “I was very young. My earliest memories are of my father working for the Silva family.”

“My dad’s done a lot of work for the government,” Jason said. “That’s worse than working with criminals, believe me.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” Sophie said. “Humphrey warned me about that.”

“Teenagers,” Jason said, shaking his head. “No discretion.”

“That’s rich coming from you,” she said. “This whole plan is formulated on people believing that you would make a huge spectacle of yourself. Which they did.”

“Sorry about the whole ‘you do what I say, woman,’ thing. I was kind of leaning into the villainy.”

“That seems to be your first reaction,” she said. “I’ve seen the recording of that ridiculous fight.”

“It was pretty over the top, right? I was just looking for a way to win. That meant killing a bunch of teenagers, so going movie monster seemed the natural choice.”

“Why do you do that?” she asked.

“Do what?”

“Make reference to things you know people won’t understand. Is it part of the whole crazy persona you have going?”

“No,” Jason said. “Well, yes, probably. Where I come from they call it a weirdness coupon. If people expect you to do strange things, then they accept it when you do. Have

you ever noticed how people don't expect me to respect authority or adhere to ordinary codes of conduct."

"I've been waiting for someone to kick the crap out of you for that."

"It's happened, once or twice," Jason said. "But I get away with it, more than not. How many times have you seen me doing something and have someone tell you 'oh, that's just Jason?'"

"Quite a lot, actually."

"And there you are," Jason said. "I've never been good at fitting in, so I've learned how to do standing out the right way. I admit that I've taken in pretty far, here, but magic and monsters make everything... bigger. Bigger personalities, bigger dangers. Half measures don't work and you have to find a way to either make your mark or fade into the background. Getting caught in the middle will just get you chewed up and spat out. Go big or go home, as they say where I come from."

"So all this strangeness is just an act?"

"Not at all," he said. "There's method to the madness, sure, but there's also madness to the madness. It's about leaning into your strengths and working with what you've got. A lesson you could very much stand to learn."

"What are you talking about?" she asked.

"Look at your circumstances before Clive and I came along," he said. "You and Belinda, scrambling from one problem to the next. Every escape dropping you into a worse situation, the city tightening around you like a noose. You know why that is?"

"Because life sucks."

"You had some rough circumstances and no mistake," Jason conceded. "You went at them the wrong way, though."

"Is that so?"

"I told you that you have to stand out or fade away, or you'll get chewed up in the middle. You got chewed up pretty good. I've learned a fair bit about what you've been through and what you did about it, and it's plain to see what happened."

"You think you know me?" she asked.

"I'm starting to get there," he said. "You kept choosing to fade into the background, but everything you did was about making your mark. You've been telling yourself you're doing one thing while you're really doing the opposite."

"So, you know what I really should have done?"

"Not at all," Jason said. "I haven't lived your life or faced your circumstances. Compared to you, my life has been sunshine and rainbows. But you have to realise that

you're never going to fade into the background. It's not just the way you look, although that's certainly a thing."

"You have a problem with the way I look."

"Of course I don't," Jason said. "I'm a straight man with eyes. But the way you look is a perfect reflection of who you are. Your hair, your clothes; you choose them for practicality. They shout to the world that you want to do your thing and don't want anyone to bother you. But they can't hide what you are."

"And what's that?" she asked, voice thick with challenge.

"Fierce. Arresting. Indomitable. If you asked Cole Silva or Lucian Lamprey why they chased after you, they'd probably say it was because of the way you look. Maybe that's how it started, but it's not why they kept chasing so hard for so long. They'd be lying, especially to themselves. A certain kind of man is insecure about his power. If he senses a challenge to it, he has to possess or destroy whatever is making him feel challenged."

"Is that what you think? You're reading too much into a pair of sleazy guys used to getting what they want."

"That's the whole point of what I'm saying," Jason said. "They didn't get what they were after. I might have come along at the end but Lamprey was chasing you for months. Silva for years, from what I've heard. If you weren't captured by my resourcefulness and dashing good looks, you'd probably still be out there."

"Wasn't it mostly Clive who caught us?"

"I did most of the fighting and chasing."

"Like a minion, while he did all the set up. Like a boss."

"Wouldn't that make you Belinda's minion?"

"I'm alright with that."

"That's actually really nice," Jason said. "That level of trust."

"You don't have people you trust?"

"Actually, I'm thick with them," Jason said. "I didn't have a lot of friends, back home. Someone hurt me, made it hard to trust people. I did a lot of getting chewed up in the middle, of being too afraid to embrace what I really am."

"A nonsensical loon?"

"Yes," he said. "This world forced me to answer new challenges. To be more than I was and find people I could trust and rely on. I could have stayed quiet, worked my way up as another unremarkable iron-ranker. But you know what? I am remarkable. For good or ill."

He gave her a wry smile.

“So are you, whether you like it or not. Most people, faced with your circumstances, would capitulate. Endure to get by. You didn’t. You took extreme measure after extreme measure, even as you told yourself you were trying to lay low. You’re so bad at taking the quiet road that you followed it right into a storm of politicians, crime lords and adventurers. You can’t hide because you burn too bright. Until you accept that, you’re just going to keep getting chewed up.”

She didn’t respond, thinking as she threw him wary glances.

“What does ‘indomitable’ mean?” she asked, finally.

“Impossible to subdue,” Jason said.

“I’m your indentured servant.”

“Are you, though?” Jason asked. “If you wanted to be gone, could I have stopped you? I don’t imagine for a second that Belinda hasn’t figured out how to slip that tracking bracelet. You probably got something on your person right now that will let you do it if you need to.”

They walked in silence for a long time.

“You still didn’t answer my question,” she realised out loud.

“What question?”

“Why do you need me out here with you.”

“You’re easier to track,” he said.

“And you’re not easy to track?”

“Nope. I have a power that makes it hard.”

“No actual skills, then.”

“None whatsoever,” he said, pumping a fist in the air. “Magic powers for the win!”

“Why are you so proud about something you didn’t earn?”

“Pride is an easy lever to pull,” Jason said. “You should never let people know what you’re actually proud of.”

“Are you ever not manipulating people?”

“We all manipulate the people around us,” Jason said. “We all show different faces to friends, family, colleagues. Enemies.”

“You think that’s the same thing?”

“You think it’s different? You think my friends don’t see past the bombast and the bluster? Do you think Jory doesn’t know how I feel, healing people in his clinic? That Humphrey doesn’t know my pride, helping protect a village from monsters? That Rufus doesn’t feel my triumph when I push my abilities a little bit further and grow that little bit stronger?”

“Aren’t you just making it harder for them?”

“We all make it hard. Rufus can be rigid when he needs to be flexible. Humphrey can be short-sighted when he needs to look deeper. Jory needs to be more ambitious before he can truly accomplish the things he wants to. As for me, well, I’m the worst of the lot. I’m constantly causing trouble a little politeness would avoid. I pick fights I have no business being in, make enemies that would overlook me if I just learned to keep my mouth shut. I’m prickly, manipulative. Completely lacking in deference.”

“If you’re so self-aware, then why not fix all that?”

“Because they aren’t problems,” Jason said. “They’re part of who I am, and I’m happier with that now than I ever have been. I told you, this world needs you to be bigger. Maybe it takes an outsider to see that clearly.”

He gave her a smile.

“I don’t know what you are but you need to stop hiding, because I know a hider isn’t it,” he said. “I’ve been lucky to find people willing to put up with me, good and bad. Figure out what you are, and be the ever-living crap out of that thing. Then find the people willing to put up with it. You know it’s what Belinda has been waiting for, right?”

“What are you talking about?”

“She knows what you are better than anyone,” Jason said. “Better than you do. My guess? She’s been waiting for you to come into yourself for years.”

“She’s not just some addendum to me, waiting for me to get it together,” Sophie said. “She’s brilliant, inquisitive. If she didn’t keep tying herself down with me, she could accomplish incredible things.”

Jason burst out laughing.

“You think that’s funny?” Sophie asked angrily.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I’d bet money that the two of you have been pushing each other along, both thinking you’re pulling the other back. Wexler, this is your chance. Hers, too. You get those essences she’s after and then both of you find out what you’re really capable of.”

Sophie stopped, throwing out her arms.

“What is with you, Asano?” she asked. “This whole thing. Getting us out from under Lamprey. Essences, adventuring. The speeches about making something of myself. No dismissing the question, no hiding behind a mouthful of nonsense. Seriously. Why?”

Jason also stopped, turning back to look at her. The perpetual, smug, half-grin fell from his face. His eyes, normally twinkling with some joke only he seemed to know about became clear and sharp.

“Because I could,” he said. “You needed it, I could do it, so I did it.”

“Why us?”

“Why not you? Jory wanted to help you and I have a soft spot for people railing against authority when the smart move is to give in. It’s one of the things people hate most about me.”

“Just like that. You put yourself in the path of Cole Silva and Lucian Lamprey because your friend wanted to help us?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s my friend.”

“You’ll go that far for a friend?”

“How do you think I made so many great friends?”

“You’re serious.”

“Unless I’m just manipulating you.”

“Gods damn it, you’re obnoxious.”

“I’m just saying,” Jason said. “Honest vulnerability can be a powerful tool.”

“Didn’t you tell your lady friend that it was only a tool of seduction?”

“I was lying. You know what I’m like.”

“Do you ever stop?”

“Do you want me to?”

“Yes!”

“Really?” he asked a grin creeping onto his face.

“Shut up,” she said and set off again, marching past him along the embankment road. Jason looked at her, shaking his head and then followed.

“Such a tsundere.”

“I heard that!”

“Do you even know what that means?”

“Shut up!”

Chapter 149: The Price We Pay Doesn't Matter

Jason and Sophie were sitting on a fallen log, eating sandwiches.

"It's about time to head back," Jason said. "Looks like we weren't tantalising bait after all. It's a little ironic, given all the people who were chasing after you."

"They might try on the way back," Sophie said. "How likely do you think this is to work?"

"I figure it's less likely to work than not," he said. "Still worth a try, though, given the stakes."

"How bad are these people, exactly?"

"According to Clive, if they had been left to their own devices in the astral space, they would have killed everyone between here and Boko, so... bad."

"I can't even imagine destruction on that kind of scale."

"That's what makes it so dangerous," Jason said. "These people we're dealing with; the LEGO Lovecraft monster they work for operates on a scale far beyond our ability to comprehend. A strange, alien mind that doesn't care about the lives it takes any more than we do about the bugs we step on without noticing."

"How do you even fight something like that?"

"Clive said those things operate in a sort of equilibrium, balancing out each other."

"It doesn't feel balanced if they can kill us and everyone we could get to in a week's travel."

"No, it doesn't," Jason said. He wiped his hands together to brush off the crumbs and pushed himself to his feet, Sophie lightly doing the same.

"Let's head off, then."

"So, this is the last one," Danielle Geller said.

Of the five people into whom star seeds had been planted, four had been found and treated. After the disastrous treatment of Jonah, the next three had the star seeds extracted without killing the host, although they were left in dire need of healing.

They had finally found the fifth, returning her to Greenstone via Hester, Emir Bahadir's portal user. She was now strapped to a vertical platform, arms, legs, torso and head all individually bound in place. They were in the temple of Purity, in one of what they referred to as purgation rooms. Although scrubbed to immaculate cleanliness, there was a smell to the place that made Danielle think that bad things had happened there.

There was a small crowd gathered to watch the purging. Danielle had accompanied the girl's parents, who had insisted on being present, despite the archbishop's objections. He had warned them that their daughter had been affected by the star seed the longest and may not survive its extraction. Also present was Tabitha Gert, the head of the Adventure Society inquiry team. She was the de facto head of the Adventure Society so long as the inquiry continued and had yet to witness a star seed being extracted. Clive Standish was the Magic Society representative, with the other members of the group being Emir and Thalia Mercer. Like Danielle, Thalia had witnessed every star seed extraction.

The ritual went as the archbishop had warned. The wires had retracted from their infiltration throughout the girl's body before the seed was extracted, but the damage they left behind was too great. Even immediately applied silver-rank healing was unable to ameliorate the strain and she died with a jerking shudder. Danielle led away the grieving parents while the rest of the group was taken by the archbishop to a meeting room.

"That was the last of the five," Tabitha Gert said, taking control of the meeting. "Now we must completely refocus our attention on the builder cult's future activities. What progress are we making?"

"The Magic Society has made a couple of breakthroughs," Clive said. "First we know what they're after and how they are going after it. The astral magic techniques they are using are unlike anything we've seen before, presumably delivered to our world by the Builder. It's more advanced than the astral magic we have but we've already started unravelling its secrets. I can tell you that to achieve their objectives, they have to work from inside the astral spaces."

"Which brings our focus squarely on you, Mr Bahadir," Tabitha said. "Do you still intend to open this astral space?"

"I do."

"I'm tempted to prohibit you from doing so," Tabitha said, "but it may represent the best chance of catching the Builder cult's tail. Have you found a way to catch out anyone they try to slip into the group?"

"Not an effective one, no," Emir said. "The only means we have to identify them would be the presence of a star seed."

"We have found a ritual that will allow us to discover one within a person," the archbishop said. "It is quick and simple enough that we can administer it to each person before allowing them to participate."

"If they don't have one, though," Emir said, "there is no way to detect a person's true loyalty. If there were, I'm not so certain I'd approve of its existence."

“What about other angles of approach?” Tabitha asked.

“Rufus Remore continues to coordinate with my father,” Elspeth Arella said. “They are tracking what they believe to be supplies the Builder cult imported, looking for where those supplies ended up. This may give us a line on their key stronghold. They are currently trying to determine a final destination.”

“Your father,” Tabitha said. “This is the criminal leader, Adris Dorgan?”

“Yes,” Arella said.

“Good,” Tabitha said. “In times like these, we need to put aside minor concerns like criminality and use every resource available. Keep me updated whenever you find something new.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Arella said.

“What about the former star seed recipients?” Tabitha asked. “Any progress?”

“The three survivors are all awake,” Thalia said. “They have limited recollection of their time under the Builder cult's influence. Their memories are strongest right after the seeds were implanted, which they all report as being like someone else was controlling them. They describe it as being trapped in their own minds, wanting to scream for help but being unable to do so. As the seeds took further hold, their memories become increasingly scattered until nothing is left but flashes.”

“Anything useful amongst what they do recall?”

“I have people working with them,” Thalia said. “We’re being careful because it would be easy to create false memories with leading questions. Everything they can remember is being collated and examined, looking for any trails we can follow.”

“Do you need any assistance or resources to speed up the process?” Tabitha asked.

“Attempting to accelerate things is exactly the wrong approach,” Thalia said. “Doing it right will take as long as it takes.”

“And you aren’t biased because your son is one of the three?”

“It doesn’t matter if I’m biased or not,” Thalia said, matter-of-factly. “Try to interfere and I’ll rip your arm off and shove it down your throat.”

Tabitha frowned but didn’t push the issue further.

“How goes the inquiry,” Emir asked. “Will you be staying in the city for long?”

“The expedition may have been what brought us here,” Tabitha said, “but it has become clear that the way the expedition was planned and conducted was the result of a larger problem. The true concern is that the culture around this branch of the Adventure Society is a festering sore. We excised the worst people and demoted almost everyone.

Over the next few weeks we will be going through all the members we didn't revoke the membership of entirely, seeing who truly deserved their rank."

"That's good to hear," Emir said, turning a gaze on Arella. "How much influence is our esteemed director going to have on that process?"

"We have determined that the director was largely influenced by the culture in which she obtained the position, with her mistakes being attempts to operate effectively within it. It is not an excuse for certain failings, but we feel that coming from outside the local nobility remains an asset moving forward. Ultimately, she will resume full authority once the inquiry is over, therefore she will, of course, have input on the dispensation of rank for local members."

"Your concern is Asano," Arella said to Emir. "He will be assessed fairly. How is your little bait operation going, by the way?"

"Who told you about that?" Emir asked.

"There was no need," Arella said. "Asano making a spectacle of himself is nothing new but he generally does so with purpose. You wanted the Builder cult to make a play for him, trying to create a fresh distraction after we finished hunting down all their seeds."

"It seems they aren't going for it," Emir said. "There was never a guarantee of it working. They don't want to risk exposing themselves, spoiling a chance at sending people into the astral space."

"Or maybe they just don't want to risk getting involved with Asano," Arella said. "That boy is more insidious than a star seed."

"What plans do we have for intercepting any Builder cult agents they place in the astral space?" Tabitha asked.

"None," Emir said. "I don't know what's in there and I've been looking for it for years. All we can do is ask the ones we trust to keep a lookout and act if they can."

Anisa once more entered the foreman's office in the temple of Purity's construction site.

"You were right to not go after Asano," she said without preamble.

"Admitting you're wrong," the foreman said. "You don't seem the type."

"It was bait," Anisa said. "They were trying to catch your people."

"I know," the foreman said. "He had a gold-ranker following him. We lost a silver and three bronze who had to kill themselves trying to take him."

"You actually tried?" she asked. "You told me you wouldn't."

“I considered your arguments after our last little talk,” he said. “You changed my mind, only for me to discover that I should have kept my own counsel, after all.”

“You don’t seem worried,” she said. “This is a disaster for you. Losing a silver-ranker.”

“The price we pay doesn’t matter,” the foreman said. “Only the objective. Using Bahadir’s pet iron-ranker to disrupt the people looking for us was a target of opportunity, nothing more. One less silver-ranker doesn’t matter for an astral space that silver-rankers cannot enter.”

“What if they get information from the people you sent after Asano?”

“They won’t.”

Jason and Sophie looked at the four strange, crystalline stars that had once been people. Blood and flash stained the crystal where it had exploded out of them.

The gold-ranker, Callum, appeared next to them.

“That is all of them,” he said in his gravelly voice. “I was unable to disable them before they killed themselves. It may not be possible to do so.”

“I didn’t sense them coming,” Jason said.

“Me either, and I have an aura sensing power,” Sophie said.

“One was silver, the others bronze,” Callum said.

“Thanks for being on the ball, Cal,” Jason said. “They were coming in hard and fast.”

Around the village, people were watching from hiding after the unexpected explosion of violence.

“They won’t try again,” Callum said. “We should return to the city. Emir will likely take these and have them studied. Perhaps there is something to be learned.”

“I’ll go find the village head,” Jason said. “We need somewhere to put them until Hester shows up. If we leave them in the middle of the village like this, they’re going to creep people out.”

“Tell them to make sure people leave them alone,” Sophie added. “I don’t think random villagers poking these things is a good idea.”

“Sensible,” Callum agreed.

Jason found the village head and explained the situation, meaning he said there was some adventurer stuff happening and people should stay away from the pointy magic things. The elder offered them a barn on the village outskirts that was disused after suffering damage from a monster attack.

“I found a spot for them,” Jason called out as he returned to the others. “There’s something I should probably do, first. Cal, is it okay if we loot these guys?”

“Go ahead.”

“Alright. Wexler, take those two over there and I’ll get the others.”

Jason touched part of the bloody remains smeared over the crystalline stars.

- You have received permission to loot [Builder Cultist].
 - 14 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 211 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 116 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Behind him he heard coins raining onto the ground, then Sophie’s muffled complaints.

“Oh, what is this nonsense,” she complained as Jason turned around to see her encased in metal armour.

“I think you looted his armour,” Jason.

“Oh, you think?” she said, pushing up the front of the helmet to reveal her face.

“Clearly you’re the brains of the operation, figuring that one out.”

“You might want to take that off,” Jason suggested. “I don’t think it’s really your style.”

“This description that popped up says I don’t meet the requirements,” she said. “How can I not meet the requirements when I’m already wear... ouch. Hey, I think this thing is stinging me.”

“Cal, help me get it off her,” Jason said. Callum nodded, moving to assist.

“It will get worse the longer you wear it,” Callum warned Sophie as they started pulling off the various metal plates strapped to her body. By the time they finished, Sophie was biting back grunts of pain as Callum used his gold-rank strength to roughly yank off the pieces, Sophie’s clothes and skin scraped by straps and buckles as he did.

“That was unpleasant, she said. “You can do the rest of the looting.”

“Probably for the best,” Jason said, tossing her a jar of healing unguent from his inventory. He stowed the armour in his inventory, which was an uncommon bronze armour with some basic reinforcing and self-repair enchantments. Then he checked the next body.

- You have received permission to loot [Builder Cultist].
 - 2 [Gold Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 28 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 211 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 316 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - [Amulet of Intermittent Armour] has been added to your inventory.
-

“Ooh, gold coins. And they had the exact same number of bronze coins. That’s odd.”
He pulled out the magic item to take a look.

Item: [Amulet of Intermittent Armour] (bronze rank, uncommon)

A neck-chain and amulet that accumulates protective power (jewellery, necklace).

- Effect: Slowly accumulate instances of [Guardian’s Blessing], to a maximum based on your bronze-rank [Recovery] attribute.
- [Guardian’s Blessing] (boon, holy): Damage from all sources is reduced by a small amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Damage reduction is less effective against damage from silver-rank or higher sources. When an instance is consumed, gain an instance of [Blessing’s Bounty].
- [Blessing’s Bounty] (heal-over-time, holy, stacking): Heal over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- You do not meet the requirements to use this item.

Jason had several bronze-rank items collecting in his inventory. He had never actually sold the bizarre hydra whip and he had a gauntlet he took from the bronze-rank tidal troll he fought. Now he had the armour and the amulet looked like a useful item for Sophie when he reached bronze rank.

The last body produced something altogether unexpected.

-
- [Star Seed (Builder)] has been added to your inventory.
-

Chapter 150: Make the Most of It

Anisa stormed through the main hall of the temple of Purity making for the exit. The church functionary at the doors stepped out to meet her.

“You go out late, Lady Priestess,” he said. “Worship is carried out under the sun’s pure light.”

“You think you know the doctrine better than me?” Anisa snarled.

“You are the one stepping out in the hours of dark deeds,” the man said.

Anisa stopped, looking the man up and down. No essences in his aura and somewhere between forty and fifty, yet still the lowest rank of church official. She sneered.

“Using your meagre measure of authority to make yourself feel powerful is the sign of an impure heart,” she said. She reached into her robes and handed him a token. “Take this and report for personal inquisition.”

His face went as white as hers.

“Lady Priestess,” he begged. “Surely you can’t send me to inquisition for such a small matter.”

“That is the very problem,” she said. “You thought it was such a small matter that you would suffer no repercussions, but impure seeds lead to rotten fruit. Your failings will be found and scoured from your soul. It will become pristine, once again.”

She swept past him and out, into the grounds, along what was becoming an unpleasantly familiar path to the construction site. As she approached, the foreman emerged from the dormitory huts for the workers.

“It is late, Madam Priestess, and I know your people care not for the hours of darkness. If the purpose of your visit is licentious, then I will eagerly accommodate you.”

“Shut your foul mouth,” she told him. “Your ever-growing list of failures has forced the archbishop to demand your presence.”

“I thought the archbishop never wanted to see me.”

“Your repeated bungling has placed him in a position where he must look to rectify the disasters you’ve orchestrated himself.”

She reached into her bag and threw out a white robe.

“Put this on and keep your face covered,” she commanded.

The man picked the robe up out of the dirt and started slipping it on, over his clothes.

“What is this about, exactly?” he asked.

“We have moving beyond the point of having conversations,” she told him. “Your task now is to answer questions, follow instructions and otherwise keep your mouth shut.”

“I will remind you, priestess, that we are partners in this.”

“Partners implies a mutually beneficial exchange, not one side making messes and the other cleaning them up. Follow.”

She strode off, the hooded Builder cultist following behind. She led him through the grounds, using a key to open a gate in a walled garden, then locking it again behind them. Inside the walls was a private garden, with an inward-facing circle of seats in the middle. The archbishop, Nicolas Hendren, was already seated and waiting. Anisa took another seat and the cultist tried to do the same.

“Remain on your feet,” she rebuked him.

“Isn’t that a little petty, priestess?”

“That’s enough from you,” the archbishop told him. “You will stand, you will listen and you will answer.”

“This is hardly in the spirit of partnership, Archbishop.”

“If our affiliations were not spread so far beyond this city, our partnership would be over and you no more than a stain left on the ground we purged you from,” the archbishop snarled. “You have conducted nothing but a cavalcade of disasters. You lost the astral space, which is one thing, but you kept us so far out of that operation that we had no means to warn you, costing you people and resources, leaving you to crawl back.”

“I think you could have managed if you truly wished to, Archbishop. If you are going to bring it up then I must question the dedication of your efforts.”

“I will not endanger my people to mitigate the failure of yours any more than I must. Yet, even then, it seems I can never stop doing so as the only thing you do not fail to do is disappoint. You could have held the astral space if you had a clockwork king, yet your man failed to summon it properly in spite of the astounding level of resources we provided your agent. Not only did he fail to summon it, he summoned some lunatic who not only killed him but almost revealed my priestess’ involvement and now has captured one of your star seeds. Intact.”

“What?” the cultist asked. “What are you talking about?”

“You assured my priestess that even in the face of yet another failure, they could glean nothing from your people. By what twisted mode of thought does an intact, unspent star seed constitute nothing?”

“That shouldn’t be possible.”

“You shouldn’t be this bad at the tasks assigned to you,” the archbishop said.

“There’s disappointment all around.”

“You have to retrieve it!” the cultist said.

“Clean up another one of your messes?” the archbishop asked. “It was your genius plan to implant the star seeds in the first place that has put so much attention on them.”

“And put you in such a prime position to learn everything they were up to,” the cultist retorted. “You were happy enough at the time, so don’t try and retroactively admonish me now. I know hypocrisy is a core tenet of your church but I’m not a follower.”

The archbishop launched out of his seat and struck the cultist with a backhand slap, sending him sprawling to the ground.

“You will watch your rotten tongue of the lands belonging to our lord, you monstrosity-worshipping filth.”

The cultist pushed himself back to his feet.

“Did I touch a soft spot, Archbishop? You may not like harbouring the likes of me, but you do it and you’ll continue to do it.”

“The only reason I tolerate you is your kind’s wider accord with the church. Given my own way, I would burn the lot of you out and be done with it.”

“But it isn’t up to you, is it, Archbishop. So you will be a good little boy, do as you’re told and render us such assistance as we require. And what we require now is that star seed.”

The archbishop’s face twisted reluctance, but he didn’t refute it.

“What can they do with it?” he asked.

“There are many possibilities, none of them good,” the cultist said. “It could expose us all, employed the right way. If they have people who know what they are doing. A sufficiently skilled astral magic specialist will know exactly how to use it.”

“So, what can you use it for?” Jason asked.

“No idea,” Clive said.

“Really?” Jason asked. “I figured you’d take one look at it and be all ‘yeah, now we can give ‘em a good ol’ kick in the beans!’”

“You thought I’d say that?”

“You say that kind of thing all the time.”

“I’ve never said anything like that in my entire life.”

The Magic Society vault contained all manner of dangerous and restricted objects, sealed away into various rooms. Built into the very foundation of the Island, it was not just

under the Magic Society campus but under the loop line, subterranean water passages and utility tunnels that crisscrossed below ground. Jason, Clive, Rufus, Emir and Danielle Geller were in the room Clive had set aside for the star seed.

It was in a secure box of rune-covered glass. The seed itself looked like a sphere, but close examination revealed it was comprised of tiny cubes all adhered together. Oddly, the star seed was the colour of common, unremarkable brick. The pseudo-sphere was held in place by a dull metal frame; a cube with tines to hold the orb in place.

“Did the frame come with it, or did we add that?” Emir asked.

“It came with it,” Jason said. “Is it just me, or is the frame the exact size of an essence cube.”

“I think you’re right,” Emir said. “That’s a somewhat unsettling thought.”

“I’m not sure that placing it in the vault was the best idea,” Danielle said. “Leaving it in your storage space and being very careful who you told about it might have been better.”

“Stuff that,” Jason said. “I’m not going to leave that thing in my inventory and let the Builder use it to backdoor me.”

“We don’t know that’s even possible,” Clive said.

“Six months ago, I didn’t know anything that happened in the last five months was possible and a good chunk of it has tried to kill me. The things I don’t know train just keeps chugging along and I’m not going to let it park a hand up my bunghole and wave me about like a rakishly handsome sock puppet.”

The other three turned to look at him, except for Rufus, who just shook his head.

“Don’t bother,” he told the others.

“What?” Jason asked.

Danielle shook her head and turned to Clive. “Any ideas what we should do with the star seed?”

“Not off the top of my head,” Clive said. “I’ll have to do some research. I still wish you hadn’t killed Landemere Vane, Jason. Even his notes would have been good; sometimes it was like he was plucking these amazing innovations in astral magic out of thin air. His notes were all seized by the church of Purity after the blood cult revelation, though.”

“Why is it that the church of Purity got to take all his family’s stuff?” Jason asked Rufus.

“They were the ones who found out about the blood cult,” Rufus said. “I’m not sure how, but they took it to the courts, who gave them the rights to seize all their property if the claims were substantiated. They hired us to do exactly that, and you know the rest.”

“Seriously,” Jason said. “This place needs some severe legal reform. Also, you need to stop complaining that I killed that guy. He was going to eat me. He was in a blood cul...”

Jason’s eye went wide as he trailed off. He started pacing back and forth, absently tapping his head in thought. Emir was about to ask a question, Rufus gesturing him to silence. Jason stopped moving and looked up.

“We have a problem,” he said. “Ever since we found out about the Builder cult, something’s been bothering me.”

“You told me you’d seen it somewhere before,” Emir said.

“I had, and I just remembered where. Landemere Vane was a Builder cultist.”

“How could you know that?” Clive asked.

“You’ve seen my looting ability in action. When I looted Landemere Vane, it gave me the same message as when I looted the guy who gave me this. It asked if I wanted to loot the Builder cultist.”

Jason turned to Rufus.

“Remember when we first met in that basement?” Jason asked. “Cressida Vane and the guy with the shovel were talking about how I killed Landemere. What did she say about her son?”

“You’re right, I remember that,” Rufus said. “Something about ineffable things from beyond reality.”

“If Landemere Vane was a Builder cultist,” Jason said, “that means some very bad things.”

“It does,” Danielle agreed. “Very bad things, indeed.”

“I think I’ve missed a step,” Clive said. “How does Landemere Vane being a Builder cultist even matter, now? He died months ago.”

“And the church of Purity seized everything he owned, along with the rest of his family’s possessions,” Danielle Geller said. “Every note, letter and record. Even his work here at the Magic Society, right?”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “Anisa Lasalle spent most of a day sorting through all their things, even before her church moved in to claim it all.”

“You think the church of Purity is working with the Builder cult?” Emir asked. “Why would they send Rufus and his team to Landemere Vane’s home?”

“Because his family was in the wrong cult,” Jason said. “You can see how they would paint it. Landemere Vane is afraid of what his family is involved in and informs the church of Purity. The church contracts adventurers to accompany their priestess to investigate. Everyone gets captured, but Landemere manages to free the priestess and escape. Once

Rufus and his team died, his family would come down on the rest of the Vane family like the hammer of god. That would leave Landemere as the sole heir and give the Builder cult a luxurious, isolated and secure base of operations. With the church of Purity helping him 'cleanse' the taint of the blood cult from the property, who is going to trek all the way out there to look closer? Having the seizure rights for the property was a contingency in case something went wrong or they needed to kill Landemere themselves, for whatever reason. A contingency that let them put a lid on the whole thing."

"We were captured before you ever arrived," Rufus said. "Landemere could have already arranged for her escape before you killed him, while she was waiting for everyone to leave and sacrifice us. Getting taken out of the group could have been just luck, or even an idea Landemere planted in the head of an impressionable staff member. If she wasn't, she could have escaped and fled the sacrifice chamber, leaving the rest of us to die."

Rufus' face reflected his reeling mind.

"The man who betrayed us to the blood cult," he said. "He was a church of Purity contact. When we didn't die as planned and wanted to question him, she killed him outright, claiming it was her church's authority."

He turned to Jason.

"You said it was suspicious at the time," Rufus said. "We talked about it."

"We couldn't have known," Jason said. "I was just against her because she was such a... we didn't get along."

"But it all went wrong," Rufus said. "None of them were expecting a punch-drunk outworlder to show up and mess everything up. Because of Jason, Landemere died and we survived, the exact opposite of their plan."

"Not all wrong," Jason said. "There is still the Landemere estate, under the control of the church. That could very well be where the Builder cult regrouped after escaping the astral space."

"This is all highly speculative," Emir said. "Making that kind of accusation against a church is no small matter and even I'm not completely convinced yet. We have no evidence."

"I'm the evidence," Jason said. "My ability showed that Landemere Vane was a Builder cultist."

"That's tangential to the culpability of the church, even with Rufus' corroboration," Danielle said. "And your testimony is a very shaky basis to move forward on."

"What's wrong with my testimony?" Jason asked.

“Jason,” Emir said. “You might operate in high circles, relative to Greenstone, but you’re still an iron-ranker. Plus, you spend a lot of time lying and running around like an insane person. There is a difference between people in authority putting up with you and having them listen to what you say.”

“He’s right,” Danielle said. “It won’t be easy to convince anyone that the church of Purity is involved with putting these star seeds in people when we can’t even answer why, let alone provide definitive proof.”

“Agreed,” Emir said. “I’m not going to be convinced myself, without something more compelling.”

“We need to find evidence before we can act,” Danielle said.

“The Vane estate,” Rufus said.

“Yes,” Danielle agreed. “While everyone is distracted with sending the iron-rankers into Emir’s astral space, we send a small team we can trust to investigate the estate.”

The sounds of many feet moving downstairs drew the group’s attention. Soon the entrance to their chamber was filled with a combination of Magic Society vault guards and temple of Purity church militants. At the lead was Anisa Lasalle.

“Anisa,” Jason said. “I was just thinking about how you should be strung up and burned for witchcraft.”

“Still jabbering nonsense, I see. Step back, Asano, and let the adults talk.”

“I don’t think your style of negotiation is going to work here, Jason,” Danielle said. “Perhaps you’ll leave this one to me?”

Jason nodded, stepping back.

“We’re here for the star seed,” Anisa said. “Get out of our way.”

“What claim do you have on the star seed?” Danielle asked.

“Our church has taken and destroyed all the previous ones,” Anisa said. “This new one is just another artefact of impurity to be annihilated.”

“Your church took the previous ones because they extracted them. This one was obtained by an adventurer.”

“It is still our duty to destroy it,” Anisa said.

“It is likely to be useful in our struggle against an elusive enemy,” Danielle said.

“I don’t care,” Anisa said. “My instructions are to retrieve it for destruction and nothing you say will divert me from that path.”

“Your church has no authority here,” Clive said. “I’m Adjunct Assistant to the Deputy Director of the Magic Society and I had this object placed here.”

“That’s some mouthful,” Anisa said. “Director is more succinct, and in this case, permanent. Lucian Lamprey has already released it to us.”

She took a document from her dimensional satchel and handed it to Clive. He skimmed over it with an unhappy expression, giving Danielle a reluctant nod.

“Very well,” Danielle said and stepped aside. One of the vault guards removed the glass casing around the start seed and Anisa took it, placing it in her satchel. Flashing Jason a triumphant grin, she swept out, taking her extensive entourage with her. Clive stuck his head out the door to look up the stairs and make sure they were gone.

“I’m surprised at your restraint,” Rufus said to Jason. “I was expecting you to do something extreme.”

“The star seed is potentially valuable,” Jason said. “Knowing that the church of Purity is in it up to their necks, when they don’t know we know? That’s more valuable, and acting now would have tipped our hand. Otherwise, Danielle would have stopped them.”

“Just so,” Danielle said. “For the first time, we are a step ahead. Now we need to make the most of it.”

Chapter 151:

Wake

Farrah hadn't had a formal memorial, just a handful of dinners and informal gatherings story-telling and everyone getting blind drunk. With the unexpected appearance of her parents, Rufus had bounded into action, organising a formal memorial for the day before the adventurers left for Emir's contest.

After the service, the traditional wake was held not in a bar but the guest wing lounge of the cloud palace. If nothing else, it had a better stock of alcohol than most taverns. Jason looked over the group, some of them from afar while others Farrah had come to know in her months in Greenstone. Some were friends, others less so, but there was no antagonism on display as people paid their respects. Jory was present, the kind-hearted man looking red-eyed as Belinda stood beside him for moral support. She and Sophie had never met Farrah and Sophie was not present with her friend.

Elsbeth Arella and her deputy, Genevieve, stayed just late enough to be respectful and left early enough to be discrete. Madam Landry, their long-time landlady appeared. She was not an essence user and was somewhat overwhelmed by the cloud palace and the company until taken in hand by Farrah's parents. Her fellow Magic Society members were in attendance, in two contingents.

One was the group around Clive who actually knew and worked with her; the other Lucian Lamprey and his deputy, Pochard Finn. Despite the superior schooling in social niceties between a foreign nobleman and the secret child of a crime lord, Lamprey lacked the social delicacy of Arella, overstaying his welcome long after she had left. Jason was grateful that Sophie was not in attendance, struggling to restrain his own distaste for the man. Determined not to make a fuss at Farrah's wake, he diplomatically avoided Lucian to avoid triggering any of his bad social habits.

Lamprey himself, however, had other ideas. He was drinking Emir's expensive alcohol faster than anyone else in the room and, half in the bag, sought out Jason with an expression of half confused drunk and half determined anger.

"Asano," he called out loudly as he approached. Rufus moved to intervene but was arrested by Danielle Geller's hand on his arm.

"If Jason is ever going to live up to his potential," she quietly told Rufus, "he needs to show that he can deal with situations with tact instead of bombast, bravado and provocation."

"Now isn't the time for lessons," Rufus hissed at her.

“This is exactly the time,” she asserted. “We are adventurers, Rufus. Our most important lessons come from confronting monsters.”

Lamprey swaggered up to Jason, glancing around to make sure he had an audience. His deputy, Finn, tried to guide him away but Lamprey brushed him off. Jason turned from the conversation he was having to face Lamprey. Jason’s expression was schooled into blank composure.

“Director Lamprey,” Jason said. “Thank you for attending. Farrah’s membership in the Magic Society was very important to her; I know she would appreciate the strong representation the society has presented here. For you to come in person is very gratifying.”

“You think I don’t see through you, Asano?” Lamprey said in the way drunk people have of being loud while thinking themselves quiet. “You think you’re so smart, playing people off one another, bending the rules into whatever shape you like. But cleverness didn’t save your friend, did it? When she came face to face with power it cut her down in an instant. You didn’t even have the courage to be there when it did.”

Everyone in the room was watching now as Jason gave Lamprey a slight smile.

“It shows you as a man of character, putting aside personal animosities in the face of a greater threat,” Jason said, aggressively misrepresenting Lamprey’s intent. “I’m glad that such a man can come here today and put aside old problems, that we might face the new ones together.”

He took Lamprey’s hand, solemnly shaking it. “We appreciate your commiserations, Director. I believe your deputy was just saying that you have to go, which is understandable. A man of your position has so many calls on his time. We do thank you for coming, though.”

Pochard Finn rapidly stepped up as fury crossed Lamprey’s face, ready to erupt. Emir also moved alongside Finn, discretely using his aura at close proximity to squash Lamprey’s impending outburst.

“Thank you, Director Lamprey, Deputy Director Finn,” Emir said as he and Finn ushered lamprey to the door. On the other side, Emir’s staff helped Finn guide Lamprey out of sight as Emir returned, the door closing behind him.

“See?” Danielle said to Rufus. “I told you from the start; the boy has a political mind.”

Lamprey was the last of the socially obligated attendees to leave by far. In the wake of his departure, sombre, controlled expressions gave way to real emotion as the wake truly began. The drinks flowed, eyes grew damp and there was even some laughter as stories were shared.

One group of attendees was a team of iron-rankers, looking nervous at the preponderance of high-ranking people around them. It wasn't just no-name silvers of a provincial city, either. Their host, Emir Bahadir, was drinking with Thalia Mercer and the time witch, Danielle Geller. Constance, the famously unyielding head of Emir's extensive organisation, was disconcertingly expressive as she casually chatted with Gabriel and Arabella Remore. Even after years at Remore Academy, the iron-rankers were intimidated by Instructor Gabriel.

The iron rankers were a team from Vitesse, having trained at the Remore academy. Gabriel had discovered them when they were shipping out and had been the one to invite them to the memorial and wake. They had come up through the academy a few years behind Rufus, the Remore family's own prodigy whose presence had loomed over the other students.

Just the auras flowing around the room were enough to disconcert, even to those with years of aura training. There were a few other iron-rankers who were seemingly calm under the pressure, except for the one man who disregarded it entirely. They watched him swan about like he owned the place, for all the world as if the potent aura soup wasn't there. He walked up to legends and spoke to them like they were normal people. Even more startling was that they didn't seem to look down on the iron-ranker at all, welcoming him into their conversations.

"Nate, who is that?" Lance asked. Lance was an elf and the leader of the team. His long, light brown hair was cinched back behind his head.

"The outworlder we heard about," the leonid, Natalie, told him. "Asano."

Natalie was a female leonid and, like others of her kind, was smaller than males like Gary.

"He's the one Rufus has been training?" Maximilian asked. He was a member of the rare draconian race, larger even than male leonids and covered in glossy scales. His were the colour of dark leaves, green moving into purple.

"That's what I've been hearing," Natalie told him.

"What kind of training?" Oscar asked. He was a handsome celestine with dark skin and matching silver in his eyes and hair. "The aura training at the academy didn't teach us to handle auras that well."

The last member of the group was a smoulder with the typical midnight skin and burning-ember eyes. Her hair was cropped extremely short. She had her gaze locked on Jason as the others talked.

"Farrah also trained him?" she asked.

Frowning at her friend's intensity, Natalie nodded. The smoulder strode out from the group in his direction.

"Padma!" Lance called out under his breath but she ignored him.

Jason spotted the smoulder girl marching across the room like a woman on a mission. She couldn't have been any older than Humphrey, probably younger. She was the one he had been told about, coming at him with emotion storming through her aura. A Remore Academy graduate should have better control but the girl was clearly in turmoil. When she reached Jason it was like the wind dropped out of her sails, leaving her standing in front of him, becalmed.

"Padma?" he asked softly. She nodded and he gave her a gentle smile.

"I'm Jason Asano. How about we get you away from these obnoxious auras and have a chat?"

He didn't wait for a response before sweeping off, picking up two glasses and a bottle as she meekly followed him to a quiet corner of the room. Jason slowly teased Padma's story out of her as she clutched the glass of sweet liqueur in her hands like a talisman. Jason kept it refreshed from the bottle as she talked. She was hesitant at first, but with sympathetic prompting from Jason, the words were soon pouring out of her.

Padma and her team had trained at Remore Academy, a few years behind Rufus. He graduated ahead of them but his presence at the academy hardly lessened, a symbol for the students that came after. When he first brought back his team, Rufus had sought Padma out, who didn't even realise Rufus knew who she was. Rufus' new team member, Farrah, had the same essences as Padma and Rufus had introduced them. Farrah took the young smoulder under her wing, becoming something of a mentor.

Jason listened with no more than a few nods and words of acknowledgement to show his attentiveness. He quickly realised that Farrah had been more than just a mentor to Padma. Farrah had been her idol, a source of inspiration and a guiding hand. Padma had been eagerly awaiting her return to Vitesse, proud of her successful induction into the Adventurer's Society while Rufus and his team had been far away in Greenstone.

Padma had been looking forward to a reunion where she could share her pride, only for news to come of Farrah's death. When Emir's call went out for adventurers she didn't hesitate. Each berth on the ships bringing people over was a prize, Emir's people organising tournaments to bring the best. Despite her inexperience, her team supported her and won through. She wasn't even certain in herself why she had to go, but she felt driven, compelled by some internal need she didn't fully understand.

After she finished her story, Jason nodded. He shared a little of his own experience of learning from Farrah, leading to an exchange of what her mentorship had been like. Jason could plainly see that Padma had weeks of bottled-up frustration, aching to get out. He methodically used questions and little anecdotes to poke holes for it to vent out.

They sat in the corner talking for more than an hour before the speeches began. Rufus and Gary gave short speeches; anecdotes now smoothly-honed in the retelling. Jason got up to speak last. Stepping out in front of the group. His eyes lingered on Farrah's parents, who he had come to know over the last few days. Farrah's mother gave him a sad, encouraging nod.

"I've known Farrah since the day I came into this world," he said, then frowned. "That's was roughly half a year ago; not when I was a baby or something. I think everyone here knows my whole thing."

"Stop talking about yourself, you dinkle," Gary called out getting a round of laughs.

"I'm setting a scene, you hairy goon," Jason shot back. "I'm building up a narrative."

"Build faster," Gary said. "I don't want to sober up while you're prattling on."

"Maybe if I don't keep getting interrupted. Where was I?"

"You're very sad, the end," Gary said. "Let's drink more."

"That's enough out of you," Jason said, jabbing a finger in his direction. "Right, so, I met Farrah on the worst day of my life. I had no idea of where I was, what was happening or even if I was in my right mind. My first encounter with real power was when she blasted lava across the room like that was a normal thing that can happen. And that was Farrah; unassumingly awesome."

He looked down, smiling in reminiscence.

"After that, she introduced me to the world. Rufus taught me to fight like an adventurer and Gary taught me to move like one. Farrah, though, she taught me to *be* an adventurer. How to look at the world around me, literally and figuratively. I have a habit of running my mouth before my brain gets going and long before I have any idea what I'm talking about. Farrah was the one who brought me crashing down to earth before I let what I didn't know get me killed."

He looked up and around at the gathering.

"We all know that she died like an adventurer," he said. "There are people in this room who wouldn't be if she hadn't stood tall in the face of the most terrible enemy. The monstrosity that cut her down, his time will come, but this isn't about him. It isn't even about adventuring, really. At least, not for me."

Jason paused to sip at the drink in his hand.

“Yes, she taught me,” he continued. “Yes, I fought with her. By which I mean that I stood around while she blew up an apocalypse monster. It seemed very involving, in the moment. But most of my time with Farrah wasn’t as a fledgling adventurer. It was as a friend. The big moments are the tales we’ll retell but it’s the little ones I look back on and smile. Sitting around as Farrah and Clive talked some theoretical nonsense over everyone’s head. Farrah and Gary teaming up on Rufus because he’s gotten too stodgy. Sharing a meal, or an afternoon in the park. The adventures will be the stories we tell, but the friendship is the thing we’ll miss. To Farrah. Our friend.”

He raised his glass and everyone did the same.

“That is where I was going to leave it,” Jason said. “When Rufus told me to speak last tonight, I was reluctant. But he said that it should be me. That the last word should be one of legacy which, like it or not, I’m a big part of. It was convincing enough to get me up here, but this evening I met a young woman with at least as much claim to that as I. She hasn’t prepared any words, but I’ve seen for myself that she has them inside here, ready to go.”

Padma was listening to Jason with dawning horror. Smoulders were physically incapable of turning white, but she had at least gone a shade of very dark brown.

“Padma,” Jason said. “Please come over. The last word is yours.”

Everyone followed Jason’s gaze to the girl trying hard to look like a nondescript piece of furniture.

“You have things to say and I’ve already heard you say them well,” Jason told her. “They’re worth sharing.”

She stayed rooted on the spot until Gabriel’s voice pierced through the room with practised authority.

“Cadet Padma Parsell,” he said with the projection of a theatre veteran. “Front and centre.”

Padma’s body moved, Instructor Gabriel’s voice triggering a conditioned obedience. She found herself standing next to Jason, in front of the assembled high-rankers. Jason gave her a smile and an encouraging pat on the shoulder before moving off.

She started speaking. It was hesitant, with a staccato rhythm as her nervousness had her pausing and losing track of what she was saying. As she continued it became smoother, nervousness washed away by passion. It wasn’t a great speech but no one in the room doubted her love and sincerity. Jason stepped in just before she started to flounder.

“There we are,” he said. “Passion has an eloquence that transcends words and I think we can agree that none of us will top the passion of this young lady. So let the words be done and we can do what Farrah would do: get hammered on Emir’s expensive booze.”

After the speeches, the real drinking started in earnest. Farrah’s parents, Amelia and William, took Jason aside to thank him for his words.

“Farrah said you could be good with words,” William said. “A little too good, she told us. Likely to get yourself into trouble.”

“She talked about me?”

Farrah’s parents lived in the town Farrah grew up in, albeit in a much larger house, courtesy of Farrah’s adventurer earnings. There were no water-link speaking chambers there, but they had travelled to Vitesse every month to speak to their daughter.

“She certainly did talk about you,” Amelia said. “We weren’t sure quite what to expect from her description, though.”

“You should know that she thought you had an incredible potential,” William said.

“If you could learn to get out of your own way,” Amelia added. “I think she’d want that pointed out.”

“It does sound like her,” Jason said. “I’m so sorry she’s gone.”

“We always knew there was a chance this would happen,” Amelia said. “That was something we accepted when we first started working to get those essences for her.”

“Doesn’t make it hurt less,” William said. “But we were at least a little prepared for it.” Jason nodded.

“What about your family?” Amelia asked. “Farrah explained your situation to us, which seems a little unusual, even by adventurer standards.”

“I’m not sure,” Jason said. “I don’t know if they think I’m dead or missing. I make recordings for them, for if I ever get home. When I get home.”

Jason suddenly frowned.

“I’m sorry, but something just occurred to me. I’ll leave you to the condolence of others. Again, I’m so sorry.”

Jason made his way over to where Rufus and Gary were speaking with Clive, leaving Farrah’s parents seeking out Padma to speak with her.

“I just had a thought,” Jason said to Rufus, Gary and Clive. “Farrah’s parents were asking about my own parents and I thought of something. I got here because of Landemere Vane, and you think he was getting some kind of advanced astral magic from the Builder, right Clive?”

“It’s a possibility,” Clive said. “What he was doing wouldn’t get you home, though. It only served as an accidental catalyst for much larger, natural forces, though.”

“But what was he trying to summon?” Jason asked. “Something from the Builder’s world in the astral? That’s interdimensional travel. Landemere’s knowledge might not have the answers, but it could have clues.”

“All his notes and writings were taken by the church of Purity,” Rufus said. “They would be impossible to get a hold of, even if they weren’t destroyed.”

“You’ll also need to up your knowledge of astral magic theory if you ever want to understand them,” Clive said. “Skill books won’t be close to enough.”

“But they’ll be a start,” Jason said. “They bestow whatever knowledge was put into them, and I got those books from Landemere Vane himself. Even if they don’t have something that might help me get home, they might have something that helps us against the Builder.”

“You can’t use them until you hit bronze-rank though,” Gary said. “That’ll be months.”

“Oh, there are ways around that,” Clive said. “They’re a little rough, but we can look into it after Emir’s event.”

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “It’s a plan.”

Chapter 152: I Can't Trust Any of It

A crowd of hundreds was gathered at the Adventure Society campus, in front of the cloud palace as they waited for Emir to emerge. There was a sea of iron rankers, plus all manner of city luminaries and others all eager to witness the commencement of Emir's grand event. Along with the mystery surrounding it, finally on the cusp of giving out answers, many were looking for a change of pace. Ever since the expedition, a pall had been hanging over the city's adventurers and the major families to which they belonged.

Emir's contest offered danger as well as opportunity. Many Greenstone families had taken the expedition as a lesson and were not allowing their scions to participate. After the results of the last astral space incursion, they were unwilling to throw people into another. With an enigmatic enemy targeting astral spaces for unknown reasons, the idea of sending their most inexperienced members into another one gave many families pause.

Not every family took safety as the highest priority, however. The inquiry had been sweeping with the demotions and the most affected families were desperate for ways to snatch back their lost prestige. While the astral space expedition had technically been a success, having excised the problem that was affecting the astral space, many viewed it as a failure.

Most of Greenstone's major families had never cared about the expedition's actual objective, instead, seeing it as a chance for individual glory. With the massive losses sustained in the fighting retreat, from that perspective it was a failure. Emir's expedition was a chance for them to rewrite their image after the expedition.

Then there were those families who, like the Gellers, simply wanted the next adventure. They recognised that there was always danger, but that was the nature of the adventuring life. If their young people were ever going to be the equal of the Gellers or the visiting adventurers, they had to push themselves harder, confronting greater threats.

The iron-rankers in the crowd were divided into three general groups: the locals, the Gellers and the outsiders. Even with many local iron-rankers sitting out, the locals were the largest group. The Gellers were the smallest of the three groups, with seven teams participating, not including Humphrey and his team. The Gellers were mostly from distant lands, but the family's deep roots in Greenstone kept them from being true outsiders.

Humphrey's team wasn't counted due to being made up of locals, with even Humphrey himself being Greenstone born and raised. Only Jason was not local but he still counted as more of Greenstone local than he did anywhere else in the world.

The outsiders and the Gellers were throwing each other a lot of assessing glances, largely dismissive of the locals. The outsiders had answered Emir's call from many different lands, but competition had been fierce for a spot on the boats Emir had brought in. No one underestimated the abilities of those who had made it.

As for the Gellers, their high standards were known the world over. This was hammered home by the presence of Danielle Geller. The time witch was more famous than most gold-rankers and it was well known she was close to joining their ranks herself. Once she did, she would stand at the pinnacle of the adventuring world.

Amongst the visiting adventurer teams was the one who had attended Farrah's memorial and wake, although only four of the five were present. Like all the teams awaiting Emir's appearance, they were made up of people in mid-to-late teens. Less usual was the complete absence of humans from their team. The leader, Lance, was an elf whose swordsmanship relied as much on the finesse of his magic as the finesse of his hands. Like Jason, his preference was for flowing combat robes. He had fair skin and his light brown hair was cinched back practically behind his head.

Next to Lance was Padma, with the onyx skin and fiery eyes typical of her people. Also typical of her people were her heavy clothes as she was wholly unaffected by heat. The effect of the delta on the climate was to keep things hotter than elsewhere in the region, even as autumn moved closer to winter. To a smoulder, though, even the most scathing desert was as cool as a mild spring day.

The team healer, Oscar, was a celestine man whose handsomeness eclipsed even the elven team leader. The comparison was made all the stronger as he mirrored Lance's hairstyle by tying it back in a simple cinch. Of the same ethnicity as Sophie, he had chocolate skin with silver hair and eyes. His clothes were white, neat and fashionable in the Vitesse style that Rufus favoured. They were also adventure-ready, the combination of form and function speaking to their extravagance.

Standing with him was the tallest person currently in Greenstone, the only member of the draconian people present. Maximilian was an imposing figure with his size and long, hairless head. Instead of skin, his scales in dark shades of green and purple were glossy under the bright sun. His clothes were designed to show them off, little more than tasselled shoulder pads and a loincloth.

A human they didn't know was walking towards them, only for her appearance to change to that of a female leonid, their team member, Natalie. Compared to male leonids like Gary, the women were smaller, lithe and sleek, with shorter fur and facial features closer to that of humans, elves and celestines. In the case of Natalie, her lissom body was

attractive even to human eyes, her naturally sinuous movements exuding sultry like it was their job.

“Nate,” Lance greeted. “We were starting to wonder if you were going to turn up.”

“You’re the one who asked me to do some digging around,” Natalie said. “There was more to unearth than I expected.”

“Let’s start with our competition, then,” Lance said. “What do you have on the Gellers?”

“What you’d expect, mostly,” Natalie said. “Well-trained, well-resourced. Good team synergies.”

“Any stand-outs?”

“The ones to watch were apparently the team lead by a Rick Geller, but he’s had to rebuild the team after losing people. The big clash here with those people invading astral spaces. Lots of dead adventurers.”

“Like Farrah,” Padma said.

“Yes,” Natalie said. “This Geller team lost two people. The leader added his sister and a local to replace their losses but their team cohesion isn’t fully there yet. They had to change most of their methods for the new composition.”

“What about locals?” Lance asked.

“Worse than you would expect, even for an out of the way place like this. Only one team is considered to be competitive.”

“How competitive?” Lance asked.

“Enough that the Geller teams consider them a real contender. They had a mock battle with the team I was just talking about and another team led by a Geller. Danielle Geller’s son.”

“Humphrey Geller?” Lance asked.

“That’s right,” Natalie said. “He’s just recently put together a team of locals instead of using his family members and connections.”

“Interesting,” Lance said. “I chatted with Humphrey a little bit at the wake, but we didn’t talk business. I know him a little from when his mother brought him out to Vitesse a few times but that was before either of us were essence users. I don’t even know what his essences are.”

“His confluence is the dragon essence,” Natalie said.

Maximilian gave an unhappy groan.

“False dragon,” he complained. Draconians took pride in their claimed dragon ancestry and often had issues with other races wielding the dragon essence. Maximilian had the dragon essence himself.

“Don’t start with that again,” Oscar said.

“I’m not starting anything,” Maximilian said unhappily. “He just shouldn’t go around acting like he has true draconic power.”

“Max, he’s not claiming to actually be a dragon,” Oscar said. “Not any more than Lance, with his sword essence, is claiming to be an actual sword.”

“How well do you know this Humphrey?” Natalie asked Lance.

“Just in passing, socially. I’m surprised to hear his mother let him make a team of locals, though. I can’t imagine she would let him add just any local idiot to his team.”

“Oh, he didn’t add just any local idiot,” Natalie said. “From what I hear, this idiot is special. Trying to make sense of the things I heard about the guy was crazy. I still don’t know how much of it is true.”

“Who is he?” Lance asked.

“Padma’s new friend,” Natalie said. “Jason Asano; the one Farrah was helping train with Rufus.”

“Jason?” Padma asked, startled. “He was really nice. Other than putting me up in front of everyone like that.”

“Well, the things I’ve heard about your new friend are pretty wild. Some people are scared of him, others think he’s an idiot or a madman. Some have even called him a genius, working his way up the social hierarchy. He ended up on Humphrey Geller’s team, after all.”

“What’s your assessment?” Lance asked Natalie.

“I honestly have no idea,” Natalie said. “Either most of what I’ve heard is false, which would make sense, or the man is some kind of insane magic pixie. Remember at the wake, the local Magic Society director getting drunk and confronting him? Apparently, there’s some kind of feud there, where Asano somehow came out on top.”

“What would an iron-ranker be feuding with a Magic Society director over?” Padma asked. “And how would he win?”

“Word is, it was over an indentured servant,” Natalie said, “which brings us to the next thing. You remember that commotion last week before the big meeting?”

“That was over an indentured servant,” Oscar said. “I can see why, having seen her myself. An arresting woman.”

“That was Asano,” Lance realised, thinking back. “Didn’t Bahadir kick him off the cloud palace for that? They seemed friendly during the wake.”

“That whole incident was a ruse,” Natalie explained. “Turns out it was some kind of plan to bait these astral invaders. I’m not sure on the details but it apparently worked.”

“It sounds like Jason is in the middle of a lot,” Padma said.

“That was my impression,” Natalie said. “I came across to many conflicting stories about him, though. There was apparently some kind of rivalry with the Adventure Society director, but she promoted him to three stars anyway. I heard he spent months healing the poor for free. I also heard he went a dozen to one with a bunch of adventurers in a shopping arcade in the middle of the day, killing half of them. I even heard he’s an outworlder.”

“That sounds made up,” Oscar said. “You can’t just kill a bunch of adventurers.”

“Twelve against one is even less plausible,” Maximilian said.

“The locals are sub-standard,” Natalie said. “Any of us could probably go twelve against one. Apparently, there’s a recording of the people going at him first, so self-defence. I’ve heard about a few recordings of the guy floating around, including that mock battle they mentioned. He’s apparently really big on recording crystals.”

“You’re right,” Padma said. “He’s using one right now.”

She had spotted Jason, some distance away in the crowd as he spoke into a recording crystal floating in front of him. She waved in Jason’s direction, the man next to him spotting her and pointing her out. He waved back with a friendly grin.

“So, what’s your take on the guy?” Lance asked Natalie.

“Unpredictable and dangerous,” she said. “I didn’t want to spend the whole time investigating one guy, so I decided it was best if you and Padma went and asked Rufus Remore,” she said. “You two know him better than the rest of us.”

“Did you hear how he came to have Rufus and Farrah’s teaching him?” Padma asked. “When I brought it up last night he just said that they found him out in the desert, lost and confused.”

“Form what I found out, that’s a very incomplete explanation,” Natalie said. “Not that what I heard was any more likely. I was told that Asano saved Rufus’ team from getting killed before Asano was even an essence user.”

“That doesn’t sound likely,” Maximilian said.

“As I said, the things I’ve been hearing about the guy are wild. Enough of it was so obviously false that I can’t trust any of it.”

“What about the rest of Humphrey’s team?” Lance asked.

"It's an unusual bunch," Natalie said. "One is a Magic Society official. He's some kind of astral magic expert who has apparently been instrumental in finding out about these astral invaders."

"And he's an iron-ranker?"

"Yeah, but he's apparently the real thing. The locals have been digging out information the big Adventure Society branches have been keeping under wraps and I've heard this guy is a key reason."

"What kind of secrets?" Lance asked.

"Not sure yet," Natalie said. "I've got a better chance of prying out secrets here than back home, though, once we're finished with whatever Bahadir has in store."

"Who else is on Humphrey's team?" Lance asked.

"There's some local, minor nobility. Nothing remarkable that I found from a quick check around. I've heard he's a solid healer but not much else. The last member is that indentured servant we were talking about."

"Really?" Oscar asked, edging forward with curiosity.

"An adventurer is an indentured servant?" Lance asked.

"Seems she was some kind of thief. She was robbing the local nobility for months but no one could catch her. Until Asano did, then went and made her an adventurer after claiming her indenture."

"Why would he do that?" Padma asked.

"You'll have to ask him that yourself. I heard a lot of postulation, most of it fairly disgusting."

"That's weird," Lance said. "Who makes their indentured servant an adventurer?"

"A smart man with a gorgeous indentured servant," Oscar said. "That's the kind of gratitude that does some real work."

"See?" Natalie asked. "Fairly disgusting."

"Jason, that team you waved at is talking about you," Beth said.

"You can hear them from over here?" Jason asked. "Is that an elf ears thing?"

"No!" Beth said, raising her hands to her ears in a gesture of self-reassurance. "It's an essence power thing. What's wrong with my ears?"

"Nothing," Jason said, his eyes on the distant team. "Is that what female leonids look like? I hope this doesn't awaken anything in me."

"What are you talking about?" Neil asked.

"I don't like what's happening in my head," Jason said. "Am I a furry now? I don't want to be a furry."

"Why would you be furry?" Clive asked.

"I'm not above exploring new things," Jason said. "I just don't have time to work on the costumes. Making them, cleaning them, dear gods. Maybe Jory has something that could help."

"Is any of this making sense to you?" Beth asked, looking at Jason's team.

"Best not to ask," Neil said. "You learn that lesson quick"

"I bet it's a sex thing," Sophie said. "It's a sex thing, isn't it?"

"Uh... no," Jason said.

"Who are they?" Niko asked. The smoulder member of Beth's team, he was looking at Padma. "She looks sad. Should I go see if she needs comforting?"

Beth slapped the back of his head.

"Don't be a sleaze," she scolded.

"How am I the sleazy one?" Niko asked. "Jason has a sexy slave girl."

"I don't have Sophie," Jason said. "That's just a necessary legal fiction."

"Damn right, you don't," Sophie said.

"Unless I want to," Jason said.

"Do you want a slap too?" Sophie asked.

"Would you think less of me if I said yes?" Jason said. "My safe word is munificent."

"You are impossible to deal with," Sophie said.

"I told you he was the sleazy one," Niko said.

"Could everyone just act with a little decorum?" Humphrey asked.

"That would be excellent," Beth agreed.

"Humphrey, you really put together the wrong team for that," Neil said.

"Everyone quiet," Clive said. "Emir's coming out."

Chapter 153:

Legacy

Emir and Constance were walking toward the cloud palace main exit.

“Who did the voice projection circle?” Emir asked.

“Trent,” Constance said.

“Do you mean ‘the glass definitely won’t break’ Trent or ‘can’t hold up a fish’ Trent?”

“We’re not calling him that,” Constance admonished. “It was a suppurating grease fish. No one could have held it up.”

“Elspeth Arella could have,” Emir said. “We should have gotten her fired so we could hire her ourselves.”

Constance shook her head in weary exasperation.

“You need to stop doing that.”

“Danielle wanted me to do it.”

“We stay hands-off in local politics,” Constance said. “That’s your policy.”

“It seems warranted, here.”

“It always does to you, which is why you put me in charge of not letting you.”

“We’re already neck-deep, with this astral space business.”

“That’s not local politics,” Constance said. “It’s international politics. Interdimensional, if Standish is to be believed.”

“Clive,” Emir said with a sigh. “I can’t believe Jason snaked him out from under us.”

“That is exactly how you described your own recruitment attempt.”

“He’s a good lad, Asano.”

“It wouldn’t have worked, you know,” Constance said.

“Oh, I reckon we could have won him over. He’s wasted in this backwater.”

“No, I mean the fish,” Constance said. “Arella actually couldn’t have held it. Suppurating grease fish oil is resistant to telekinesis.”

“It is?”

“That’s why we went to so much trouble to find it.”

“I thought we were just going to cook it.”

“You thought we spent three weeks, using over a dozen people to find and catch a very specific and hard to find fish just so we could eat it?”

“No,” Emir said unconvincingly. “What did we want it for again?”

“The Rimaros job.”

“Oh, right. Where we dug that tunnel through the bottom of the floating island and slipped out with the... what were we stealing again?”

“We weren’t stealing,” Constance said. “We were repatriating the royal ceremonial armour of Kodin.”

“Right, yes. That ridiculous armour that looked like someone inflated it. I’m surprised they even wanted it back.”

“It has cultural importance to the people of Kodin,” Constance said.

“It felt like stealing. Did they figure out it was us?”

“They did,” Constance said. “Greg didn’t get the mango cart in place in time. On the bright side, they couldn’t admit they had the armour in the first place, so everyone’s pretending it didn’t happen.”

“Right,” Emir said, nodding. “‘Not enough mangoes’ Greg.”

“No, that was ‘fruit cart’ Greg. We got rid of ‘not enough mangoes’ Greg after what he was caught doing to those hairless oxen.”

“That was him? Good riddance, then. We lost a bundle cleaning that mess up. What happened to him?”

“We released him to the local authorities. Have you ever considered not basing your hiring policies on getting people with the same name?” Constance asked.

“I tried that in the early days,” Emir said. “People are much more resistant to nicknames when there’s no one else with the same name as them.”

“Are the nicknames an essential part of the operation?”

“Why do you think I do all this?” Emir asked.

“Money, power, travel, excitement and connections.”

“Those are the tawdry goals of the weak,” Emir said loftily. “We gold-rankers strive for higher purpose.”

“I think you’ve been spending too much time with Jason. You’re talking increasing amounts of rubbish.”

They reached the exit and started walking across the cloud bridge to the shore where the iron-rankers and other attendees were assembled next to the reception building.

“Is everyone out of the palace?” Emir asked as they surveyed the crowd of adventurers.

“We’re the last,” Constance said. “It’s ready to change over.”

At the end of the platform, in front of where everyone had assembled was a faintly glowing ritual circle. After he and Constance stepped off the cloud bridge, Emir reached into his jacket and pulled out a large, round-bottomed flask. He shook the flask, then took

out the stopper, releasing four streams of mist that each took different shapes. One looked like a house, another like a large vehicle. The third was a small replica of the cloud palace, while the fourth was a ship. Emir put his hand through the mist ship and the four images returned to the flask. As he put the flask back into his dimensional jacket, the cloud palace slowly started to warp out of shape.

Emir turned from the palace which was beginning the process of turning back into a cloud ship. He stepped into the glowing ritual circle and began to speak.

“Greetings, fellow adventurers,” he said, the magic circle projecting his voice over the crowd. “As you all know, I have come to this fine city with a purpose. Many, I’m sure, have heard whispers and rumours, but today, all shall be laid bare. Centuries ago, there was an ancient order of assassins. Known and feared the world over, their enemies came together to scour them from the face of our world. Today, only hidden remnants can be found, and those only with time and effort. Myself and others have undertaken that time and effort, which brings us to today.”

He panned his gaze over the crowd.

“This order of assassins was known as the Order of the Reaper. Going all the way back to the days of their organisation was wiped out, there have been legends of a legacy they left behind. Of a test, for those with the potential to receive this legacy. For years now, I have been seeking that legacy, and finally, I have found it. In the days before this city was founded, the last fortress of the order was hidden away in what was then a remote and unpopulated region.”

Not everyone had their full attention on Emir as the cloud palace deformed behind his back in the transition from grand residence to ocean-going vessel.

“As you have no doubt surmised,” Emir continued, “the purpose for which you have been gathered is to claim this legacy. The ancient, hidden fortress is now in ruins, but the true heart of the complex remains unpenetrated. It lies within an astral space of its own, waiting for those brave and skilled enough to face the trials within. This is no ordinary astral space aperture, however. To protect their secrets the Order had it sealed, the means of opening it scattered across the world. Those means have now been gathered and the aperture is ready to be opened. The trials are ready to begin.”

He made a sweeping gesture, taking in the crowd.

“Just from the fact that I have gathered you all here, you have all certainly realised that things are not so simple as I have described. Even once opened, the aperture still comes with restrictions, for within lies the true test. A series of trials left by the Order of the Reaper. Tests, to see who can live up to their ideals. Only those with the most untapped

potential, iron-rankers, may enter. The first of those to pass every trial will receive the legacy left behind. As a warning, the trials shall remain open for eighteen days, after which they will again seal themselves closed. Any of you who have not returned by then will not return at all.”

Emir took an object from his jacket and held it in front of him. Above his head, a large image of a gold and black scythe appeared.

“No one knows the full extent of the order’s legacy. What we do know is that it includes this object. It is the ancient symbol of the order and the object of years of searching. The goal for each of you is to bring me this item. Anything else you find in that place, part of the order’s legacy or not, is yours to keep. Additionally, whichever team brings the scythe to me will receive five legendary awakening stones, which you may be chosen freely from my stores. If you are a team of one, then all five shall belong to you. Beyond the stones, however, is another prize.”

Emir gestured behind him, where the cloud palace was still deforming.

“My cloud palace is a wonder, but it did not come to me as you see it here. It is a growth item I had the good fortune to come across when I, like you now, was only an iron ranker. Many years later I came across the man who created it, a diamond ranker. In payment for a service rendered, he gave me a second one, still at iron rank. Whomsoever brings me the scythe will receive it for themselves.”

A susurrus of noise rippled through the crowd. The cloud palace had been dominating the skyline of the Adventure Society skyline for weeks. Every person assembled wanted to claim one.

“So, you all now know what you are here for. Once the cloud palace has returned to the form of a ship all the iron-rankers participating may come aboard to see it for themselves. We will sail along the coastline to the closest location to our objective and travel overland from there. Our destination is one the locals may know of: Sky Scar Lake. The ruins are at the bottom of the lake, which is very deep, so you have until my ship leaves in four hours to prepare for that dive. Consider it your first challenge. Be here and ready to board at that time.”

Emir stepped out of the speaking circle. People immediately tried to approach but a portal appeared next to him, which he stepped through with Constance before it vanished.

The crowd was thrown into turmoil as Emir finished his speech. Some were being exhorted by their family elders to obtain a cloud palace at any cost. Others were already

dashing in the direction of the trade hall, looking for items to let them handle the water of the lake.

Jason and Beth's teams were caught up in the swirl of people pushing their way out of the crowd.

"Does your team have a way of getting through the lake?" Beth asked once they were free.

Jason nodded. "There's a ritual I know. I assume you do too, Clive."

"I know the one you're talking about. I'd have to look it up, though."

"I can do it, no worries," Jason said, then turned back to Beth. "What about you?"

"I have the water essence," she said. "One of my abilities will do the job."

"I guess we'll make some final preparations and see you in a few hours, then."

Many people were eager to get aboard the cloud palace, now transformed back into a ship the size of an ocean liner. Boarding did not go as smoothly as planned for some when it was revealed that a requirement of participation was a simple aura test. Anyone whose aura didn't match the Adventure Society records from prior to the expedition was excluded. Only a handful of people were caught out like this but were vocal in their protests. Instead of being heard out, however, they were taken away for closer examination.

On the ship, Jason's team were given their own cabins, alongside those assigned to Rufus, Gary and Farrah's parents. Rufus' parents were staying in Greenstone, making discrete inquiries into the church of Purity. Their teammate, Cal, had already left to check out the Landemere estate. The bulk of the iron-rankers were all bunked together in crew dorms, while the actual crew enjoyed cabins like Emir's guests.

As with the guest wing when it had been a cloud palace, the ship had a guest lounge with access to a broad side-deck. Humphrey quickly went off to invite their friends out of the press of people domiciled together below decks, bringing back Rick and Beth's teams. He also brought along Lance and his team as well.

"Mose!" Jason greeted happily. "It's been a while. What's up, mate?"

"Beth finally let me in her team," Mose said happily. "I think she wanted some extra power after you beat her like that."

Mose Cavendish was Beth's cousin, who Jason had known longer than Beth. They had met on a mission to escort spirit coins, where Jason had witnessed the destructive power of Mose's spells.

"That wasn't me," Jason said. "You can blame Humphrey for that one. He's predicted exactly how your cousin would react if we could put her on the back foot."

Rufus and Gary soon joined them and the group socialised as the ship sailed its way south down the coast. It was only a few hours before it sailed into shore at an unremarkable patch of desert. Emir's people started unloading sand barges from the ship. None were the size of the great Ustei tribe barge, but three of them were enough to transport the whole group inland to Sky Scar Lake.

It was hours more, going into the night by the time the barges arrived at the lake, vast almost to the point of an inland sea. It was a vast oasis in the desert, a blessed eye of blue and green in the hard, yellow face of the desert. The lights of villages situated all around the shore of the lake shone in the early dark. There were towns and villages situated all around the lake and the sand barges disembarked their charges at the largest.

The adventurers were gathered and notified that they would begin in the morning. The townsfolk had been warned ahead of time about the coming influx and had beds for those who wanted them or food and drink for those who didn't. Emir brought out the cloud palace again, right on the surface of the lake, allowing selected people to use that for accommodation.

The next day, the locals set out tables and brought out food and drink en masse to feed the anxious horde of adventurers. Not even the elite adventurers from overseas were immune to the nervousness. For all their training and prestige, they were still iron rankers and, coming from high-magic regions, they didn't have the individual monster hunting experience of the locals.

Some didn't eat out of nervousness while others couldn't wolf down food. Humphrey walked around with Neil, Sophie and Belinda.

"Next time you'll be an adventurer, too," Sophie told Belinda.

"Very likely," Humphrey said. "An astral space untouched for centuries will likely have accumulated a good number of essences and awakening stones. If we're lucky, they'll be unusual ones, although that's down to the nature of the astral space."

"People don't talk about it much, because of how it went," Neil said, "but the expedition was quite a good haul."

"That's how Jason got you so many awakening stones on the open market," Humphrey said to Sophie. "Did you see him leave this morning?"

"I saw him duck out early with Clive," Sophie said.

"Is that them there?" Belinda asked, pointing. The others followed her gaze to see Clive and Jason behind some kind of cooking stall in aprons. There was a line of people leading up to them as they rapidly worked a large grill plate in front of them. Jason was

wearing some kind of puffy white hat and his aprons had the words 'you can't fight monsters on an empty stomach' emblazoned on it.

"Oh, hey!" Jason called out as he spotted their approach. "Clive is teaching me to barbecue eels properly!"

Chapter 154: A Rash Decision

“Now,” Jason said happily, “this is what adventuring should be like.”

Adventurers were spreading out over the surface of Sky Scar Lake like a huge flock of geese, using all manner and means of transportation. There was a wild array of essence abilities, rituals and items from water-walking books to cloaks that let the wearer swim like a manta ray. Jason himself had a useful item he had acquired from the tidal troll he defeated.

Item: [Necklace of the Deep] (iron rank, uncommon)

A necklace containing the power of the deep ocean giants (jewellery, necklace).

- Effect: Ignore the effects of high pressure and pressure variance.
- Effect: Breathe water.
- Effect: Your weight is increased. You cannot use iron-rank weight reduction abilities or items.

Jason could use it to walk along the bottom of the lake but his team couldn't, so it was staying in his inventory. It was nice to have on hand, though, and he could always test it out later.

His team were near the edge of the shore, a few of hundreds making their way into or onto the lake, depending on individual methods. They were geared up and ready, Jason's starlight cloak already in place, which he was beginning to regret.

“Nice cloak,” an adventurer said to him. “How much to buy it off you?”

“It's an ability,” Jason said. “Can't sell it.”

“He's lying, Brandon,” a second adventurer said. She was plastered to Brandon's side. “He just doesn't want to sell it to you.”

“Come on, how much?” Brandon asked.

“It really is an ability,” Jason insisted.

“Guy, you do not want to mess with me,” Brandon said. “Just sell me the damn cloak. Do you have any idea who my father is?”

Standing next to Jason, Neil winced, pinching the bridge of his nose. The cloak vanished from around Jason.

“See?” Jason said. “All gone.”

The cloak reappeared.

“It’s an ability,” Jason reiterated. “Try an awakening stone of the stars; that where I got it.”

“Forget this guy,” Brandon’s hanger-on said and Brandon nodded.

“Neil, your new teammate is a rolling turd wagon,” Brandon said and they hurried off to catch up with their team. The girl slapped Brandon on the arm for eyeing Sophie as they went. Neil and Humphrey let out a sigh of relief.

“You know that guy?” Clive asked Neil.

“One of Thadwick’s peripheral hangers-on,” Neil said. “His family are want-to-be aristocrats and he’s the dregs of the bloodline. If his family knew he not only failed to recognise Humphrey but mouthed off in front of him, they’d drown him in this lake.”

“I’m just grateful Jason didn’t take the bait,” Humphrey said.

“Farrah tried to hammer into my head that I should only start trouble when trouble is what I want.”

“Since when do you ever not want trouble?” Sophie asked.

“You’ve been listening to other people too much,” Jason said. “When did you ever see me start trouble?”

“You killed a bunch of people in a shopping arcade in the middle of the day!”

“I didn’t start that,” Jason said.

“He’s right,” Neil said. “Thadwick sent them to kill him when he panicked over Jason uncovering his lumber mill scam. Dustin and I didn’t find out until later, so by the time we went to Thadwick’s father to stop it, Jason had already killed them and given a recording of him doing it to Thadwick’s mother.”

“Some guy tried to have you killed and you just let that go?” Sophie asked. “If you let that go, what’s to stop him from trying again.”

“I would have liked to deal with him at the time,” Jason said, “but there were mitigating circumstances. Even disregarding the power of his family, I wasn’t going to kill my girlfriend’s brother.”

“Wait,” Sophie said. “That Cassandra girl’s brother tried to kill you?”

“He did,” Jason said. “It was a rash decision.”

“Does he have a weird sister thing or something?” Sophie asked.

“Not that I know of,” Jason said. “Neil?”

“No,” Neil said. “Thadwick isn’t the greatest guy in the world, but he isn’t that kind of creepy.”

“That’s where the indignation comes in?” Jason asked. “We were just talking about how he tried to kill me.”

"I'm pretty sure you sleeping with his sister helped that decision along a little," Neil said.

"I eventually realised it's for the best," Jason said. "What would killing him get me? Killed by his Mum, that's what. Then Emir and Rufus come down on the Mercers."

"My family too," Humphrey said. "My mother and Lady Mercer are close, but Mother wouldn't tolerate her killing you."

"Exactly," Jason said. "The wheel doesn't stop turning until someone steps off and forgives and it might as well be me. Besides, Thadwick has problems enough to be going on with."

Thadwick had been in the constant company of Mercer family bronze-rankers since having the star seed purged out of him. They stood watch as he slept for days in recovery, then they stood by his room at his parents' 'suggestion' that he stay put and focus on getting better.

Although his rooms in the Mercer family home were the opposite of prison-like, he chafed at the confinement. His sister had visited, only to be chased-off by screamed accusations of whoring herself out to outworlder trash. His father would not tolerate such tantrums and had not been back since teaching that lesson with the back of his hand. His mother was more gentle but no less unyielding. She probed him with incessant questions until he told her to leave him to rest.

Thadwick's memories of his time with a star seed were hazy. His last clear thoughts were of being taken in the astral space and knocked out. From there it was only disconnected flashes; fleeting moments without context or comprehension. Clarity only came when he woke up out of recovery, the star seed removed.

His mother had told him that the others had experienced much the same. She wanted to know everything he could remember, everything he could piece together. She was meant to be his mother but instead giving him the things he wanted she pestered him again and again with questions. In the end, she was just one more person who only wanted something from him. Like everyone else, she was blinded by whatever strange methods Asano was using to make everyone love him.

She was so enamoured of that filthy, interdimensional bastard. She had made no secret of her plans to match him with Cassandra. At least the family had put an end to that sordid idea. The thought of his beautiful, capable sister being wasted on such a vile creature filled him with anger.

Everything had started going wrong the moment Asano appeared. Showing him up in front of everyone at the field assessment gathering. Winning over the Gellers, the out-of-town big shots and even Thadwick's own mother. She once even had the gall to say that he could stand to be more like Asano.

Every step of the way, Asano was plotting to bring himself up by putting Thadwick down. He wormed his way into Cassandra's affections, just to rile him up. How long had Asano worked to uncover Thadwick's brilliant plan to show his father that he was ready to step up in running family affairs? Asano must have been looking for some way to undermine him from the moment he arrived in the city to figure it out.

Every since Asano's arrival in the city, Thadwick had been feeling increasingly powerless. The sheer magnitude of Asano's plotting was mind-boggling, and Thadwick was the only one smart enough to see through it. The only time he had felt powerful in months was in a handful of moments he didn't understand. The memories were scattered, but one thing had been present in all of them: an incredible sense of power.

His memories included a few faces and places he recognised. Scraps of conversation he hadn't told his mother when she was questioning him. He had a better use for those snatches of memory: he wanted that feeling of power back.

He got up and stripped out of the bedclothes he had been wearing throughout his confinement. He picked out some street clothes, yanked them on and marched out the door.

"Young master Mercer," one of the bronze-rankers said as Thadwick strode past.

"Your mother told us it would be best if you stayed in your rooms to rest," the other said.

"I've rested enough," Thadwick said, not stopping. One of the two followed him, the other going off in the other direction. As Thadwick reached the ground level and was just leaving the tower, his mother teleported in front of him, along with the guard that had gone to fetch her.

"Thadwick, dear," she said. Her sincerity might fool others but he saw right through it.

"I'm going out, mother. I've been cooped up long enough."

"I don't think that would be best," she said.

"Am I a prisoner in my own home?" he asked.

"Of course not, dear."

"Then I'm going out," he said firmly.

“Very well,” she said, having no way around his masculine confidence. “With so many out of the city things should be quiet, so now may be the best time. But Geoffrey and Kyle will be going with you.”

“Who?” Thadwick asked.

Thalia gestured to the guards that had been stationed on Thadwick’s room for weeks, the one that had followed him and the one that had fetched her.

“I need them with you,” she said. “To keep you safe.”

“Fine,” Thadwick said. He didn’t care what they would suffer where he was going.

Almost two hours later, Thadwick and his escorts were walking through the streets of Old City. Close to the fortress ruled by the Big Three, many establishments were offering the kind of very specific services only the wealthy could afford.

“I don’t think this is where your mother would like you to be, young master Mercer,” one of his guards said.

“You aren’t paid to think, Geoffrey.”

“I’m Kyle, young master.”

“I don’t care.”

Thadwick took a familiar path down some stairs to an unmarked basement shopfront. A slat opened up, the eyes behind it taking in Thadwick and his guards.

“You know better than to bring people wearing house colours here,” a voice came from behind the door. Thadwick’s guards were indeed clad in the uniform of the Mercer household.

“Take it up with my mother,” Thadwick said. “You don’t have the stones to keep that door closed in my face, so hurry up and open it.”

The eyes glared but moments later the door swung open. Thadwick smirked at the doorman as he went past, his guards trailing behind. After a short hallway was a large, luxurious lounge. There was a long bar and a variety of booths that offered convenient seclusion. The room was adorned with beautiful men and women in provocative clothes; elves and humans, celestines, smoulders and even a few burly male or lithe female leonids.

Thadwick’s guards drew attention but people quickly turned back to their own affairs. Thadwick glanced around and spotted the person he was looking for. An indolent man splayed in a booth with a woman to either side of him.

“Thadwick,” the man greeted him, glancing over the Mercer guards. “I see your mother let you out, so long as you wore your leash.”

“I knew you’d be here, Timos.”

“I take my pleasure where I can find it,” Timos said. “You can hardly blame me for being so good at looking for it.”

“We need to talk.”

“Then, by all means, take a seat.”

“You’ll want this little chat in private, Timos.”

“Oh? Finally learning to explore all the tantalising treats life has to offer, Taddy?”

Thadwick leaned in, grabbing the front of Timos’ clothes and whispering in his ear.

“I’ve been having these very interesting flashes of what I went through, Timos. Some faces I recognised when I was captured during the expedition. If you don’t want to talk about them, I bet my mother will.”

Thadwick stood back up, looking with satisfaction at the Timos’ face, the dismissive sneer wiped right off of it.

“What about your boys, here?” Timos asked.

“I don’t care what happens to them.”

With all the auras, abilities and magic items being used, the ambient magic had become turbid. Clive closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath, sending out a wave of magical stillness that even those without magic perception abilities could feel.

-
- Party member [Clive Standish] has used [Mana Equilibrium].
 - Ambient magic has entered a harmonious state.

 - The next spell cast in this area will cost reduced mana, and the harmonious state will be disrupted.
-

“So handy,” Jason said. “Thank you, Clive.”

Jason quickly enacted the ritual whose circle had been inscribed into the flat top of a large, lacquered board, ideal for marking with inscriptions. After a short chant from Jason, a shimmering bubble appeared around the board. Humphrey reached through the bubble unimpeded, picked it the platform and dropped it onto the water. It didn’t strike the water, instead, stopping in the air over the surface. The water was visibly indented by the bubble.

The team all stepped into the bubble, onto the board which remained completely stable. It was a good-sized board, but it was standing room only with the five people on it. They watched as nearby, Beth’s team sailed off on a boat made of condensed water that somehow didn’t get the people in it wet.

“Maybe we should have used a bigger board,” Neil said.

“This as big as we can go before the ritual starts getting costly in materials,” Jason said. He concentrated on the board and it started floating slowly out onto the lake.

“Exactly right,” Clive said. “It may not be fast or big, but it will do what we need.”

They floated out, part of the mass of adventurers. Eventually, they found Rufus standing on the surface of the lake. On his feet were large, garish, blue boots, from which mist was drifting in wisps. He was directing people to descend to the bottom of the lake at that spot. He gave them an encouraging wave but didn't pause his task to speak with them. Jason directed the board to go down, the water enveloping their bubble as they descended into the lake.

Chapter 155: It's A Good One

Jason and his team descended through the water as the daylight shining through the surface of the lake above grew increasingly dim. They stood close together on the platform as the sphere around them held off the water, encapsulating them in a perfect orb. As it grew too murky for anyone but Jason to see, Humphrey took out a light crystal, tossing it up to float around his head. In the dark around them, other teams took similar steps. The result was a rain of light, plunging down through watery depths.

"This is awesome," Jason said, looking at the lights descending through the dark. "I know I'm from another world and maybe you all get to see things like this all the time but I'm loving this."

"It's certainly impressive," Humphrey agreed. "We may not get to see such things all the time, now, but we're only beginning our time as adventurers. We have lives of wonder ahead of us."

Jason looked at Humphrey's handsome face and broad shoulders as Humphrey gazed winsomely out of their bubble.

"Damn, Humphrey," Jason said. "You must be beating the ladies off with a stick."

"I do alright," Humphrey said. "Things didn't end well with Gabrielle, but the start and middle were good. I don't regret our time together and it gave me some important perspective."

"Listen to you all mature," Jason said. "What happened to that nervous guy from half a year ago?"

"He got a friend who pushed him into trying new things. Even if those were sometimes poison soup."

"Oh, that was one time," Jason said. "How was I meant to know they swapped out the regular cook instead of closing for the day? And it wasn't poison soup, it was just... improperly prepared."

Jason glanced at Sophie, looking around as wide-eyed as the rest of them.

"If you'd decided against being an adventurer right now, where would you be?" he asked her.

"No place good," she said. "I'm glad Belinda talked me into it."

"This is just the beginning," Humphrey said. "We'll have many days like this."

As they neared the bottom of the lake, they saw domes of air over dark ruins lit up by cheap magic lamps.

“Those domes are big versions of what we’re using, right?” Jason asked Clive.

“I’m not sure,” Clive said. “I’d like to take a look for myself.”

“Which one do you think Emir was talking about?” Jason asked. “He said the middle dome but there’s a whole cluster of them.”

“There’s meant to be tunnels connecting them,” Clive said. “Just pick one and we’ll figure it out.”

Jason directed the orb of air they were floating in to the base of one of the domes. The dome held out only the water, so once the dome and their bubble connected they could easily step into it and off the platform, without getting wet. As Clive put the platform away, they saw plenty of other adventures were likewise finding their way in.

Looking around at the inside of the dome, their surroundings were an ancient stone village. Long claimed by the lake’s water, the village was once again dry from the dome holding back the lake. The borders of the village were an exact match for the dome of air. Slimy growth was everywhere, fortunately giving traction to what would have otherwise been slippery cobbles underfoot, worn smooth by water. As the others looked over the buildings, Jason and Clive turned their attention to the dome. In what looked to be a circle around the entire village, a stone ring engraved with runes was set into the ground.

“Look at this,” Clive said, pointing it out to Jason. They crouched down to examine it more closely.

“The cobbles end right at this ring,” Jason said. Outside the stone ring and the dome of air that followed its curve around the village, the lake bed was all silt, rock and submarine growth. On the inside of the ring was cobbled ground.

“I’d say this ring was once used to keep this dome up permanently,” Clive postulated as he examined it. “See these repairs? I’m guessing the domes collapsed when this place was abandoned and Emir’s people used the ring as a platform for these new domes. They’ll only be temporary, though. Re-establishing permanent domes would be prohibitively expensive, even using the existing infrastructure.”

Now Jason was working more on grasping magical theory, he was becoming more interested in the functionality of magic. Clive was more than happy to play the role of mentor.

“We might want to get moving,” Neil suggested. “If we stop to examine everything we see, we’ll never get anywhere.”

“He’s right,” Humphrey said. “We need to find our way to the right dome because I don’t think this one is it.”

“Do you all feel that?” Sophie asked. The rest of the team looked at each other and collectively shook their heads.

“Outside the dome,” Sophie said. “A half-dozen iron-rank auras.”

As the only team member with an aura sense power, Sophie had detected the approaching monsters first. She pointed and the others looked, spying a group of monsters moving along the bottom of the lake. They were large with shark bodies and crab legs, all covered in shell plating. They were heading straight for the dome.

“Shabs,” Jason said. “How nostalgic.”

“Take a three-two formation,” Humphrey instructed and the team moved into position. Humphrey, Sophie and Jason formed a line behind which were Neil and Clive. Clive had his hands up in front of him, where a magic circle appeared vertically in the air. He was feeding mana into it, ready to trigger. Humphrey conjured his large sword and waited while Sophie stood, relaxed, beside him. Jason's cloak was already in place and he conjured his dagger, looking between it and Humphrey's giant dragon wing sword.

“Ready?” Neil asked as the shabs neared the dome.

“Go for it,” Sophie said and Neil immediately chanted a spell.

“Let your power fulminate.”

Sophie started shimmering slightly with silver-gold magic.

Ability: [Bolster] (Growth)

- Spell (magic, boon)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 6 (19%)

- Effect (iron): The next essence ability used by the targeted ally has increased effect. This can affect parameters including damage, range and number of targets, depending on the affected ability. Cannot be used on self.

Sophie sliced her leg upward in a vertical kick that demonstrated impressive flexibility. A blade of wind slashed out, passing through the dome unimpeded and striking one of the approaching shabs. It exploded in a wash of red liquid and a storm of bubbles that obscured the others.

“You weren’t kidding about that explosive effect in water,” Humphrey said.

“Split, please,” Clive requested, Humphrey and Sophie moving aside to give him an unobstructed line to the enemy. The remaining five shabs passed through what was left of the first and Clive chanted a spell.

“Feel the power of reality remade.”

A beam of rainbow light passed out of the magic circle floating in front of Clive’s hands, locking onto the next-closest shab. The red faded from the rainbow, which then vanished. The shab stopped dead, fluid boiling out from under its shell plates.

“I figured heat would be enough,” Clive said. “I didn’t want to burn through too much mana.”

Ability: [Wrath of the Magister] (Magic)

- Spell (fire, magic, curse, poison, wounding, ice, dimension)
- Cost: Moderate mana plus additional mana per effect.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Iron 5 (38%)

- Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to alter the target’s reality, using any combination of the available colour effects. This cannot be used in conjunction with the other variant of this spell, which requires an alternate incantation.

- Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to unmake reality in a localised area, creating an annihilating void sphere inside the target. This effect requires magic to be channelled into the target at an extreme mana cost until sufficient mana has been channelled to trigger the effect.

- [Red] (high mana): Target’s temperature is significantly increased (frost burn if combined with blue).
- [Yellow] (high mana): Target’s abilities have increased mana cost.
- [Pink] (moderate mana): Target’s resistances are reduced.
- [Green] (moderate mana): Target’s blood is poisonous to itself.
- [Purple] (very high mana): Expend mana harms the target.
- [Orange] (very high mana): Target suffers increased damage from all sources.
- [Blue] (high mana): Target’s temperature is significantly decreased (frost burn if combined with red).

Humphrey and Sophie slid back in front of Clive and Neil. Three shabs were down before they even reached the dome.

“What’s that?” Neil asked, pointing at another shape approaching through the water. It looked something like an octopus made of thorny vines. “It looks nasty,”

“That’s Stash,” Sophie said, who could sense the shape-shifting dragon’s aura. Humphrey had let his boisterous familiar make his own way through the wake. Jason’s summoned familiar had many advantages over a bonded familiar like Humphrey’s, but a bond had its own advantages. Where Jason could only sense Colin while the leech swarm was subsumed into his body, Humphrey and Stash could always sense one another. They

would each know the other's general condition and could find one another over any distance.

Stash wrapped his thorny tentacles around the rearmost shab, seeking out vulnerable crevices between shell plates. The other two shabs finally reached the dome. One was met by a huge sword swinging down, cutting through the front half of the monster and leaving a ragged split.

In a more competent version of his very first shad fight, Jason rolled under the monster, coming up and slitting his dagger through the monster's vulnerable underside. Ichor splattered down over his cloak and he extracted himself as the monster fell dead. He tossed away the despoiled cloak which then vanished. The ichor that had been on it was suddenly unsupported and fell to the ground.

"That was good," Humphrey said, right before Stash splashed through the dome, his giant octopus from drenching Jason and Humphrey with shab guts and water. Sophie vanished before being struck, reappearing nearby. Stash turned into a puppy, looking up at Humphrey with innocent eyes.

"Ew," Jason said unhappily.

"I guess we know which of us is going out there to loot the monsters," Neil said. "No point me getting all messy if you're already like that."

Jason groaned, taking out his necklace of the deep, a series of round, colourful stones strung on a sinewy cord. Clipping it around his neck, he closed his eyes and mouth, holding his nose as he stepped through the dome.

The necklace shielded him from the pressure of the depths and weighed him down as he walked blindly through the shab-tainted water. He held his breath in spite of the necklace's power to let him breathe water. Its fierce chill would have made it an unpleasant proposition in any case. Unwilling to open his eyes, he stumbled about until he felt he had touched enough shab goo to trigger three loot notifications. He kept his sense of direction enough to find his way back without opening his eyes.

Everyone backed off as he remerged, drenched in water and semi-liquid shab remains. Opening his eyes he saw the notices were there and accepted them, all the goo in the water and on Jason and Humphrey dissolving in rainbow smoke. Outside the dome, the rainbow smoke bubbled its way up towards the surface of the lake.

The coins looted from the shabs appeared in the dimensional storage abilities of Clive, Humphrey and Jason. Neil, experienced from his own looting ability, stepped back and neatly caught his own bag of coins as it fell from overhead. Sophie, less experienced, had it bounce off her skull.

“You could have warned me,” she told Jason.

“When you go wading into a freezing cold lake to fish out money for everyone,” he said. “We'll see how much your mind is on the little details.”

He pulled a vial of orange liquid from his belt and drank it.

“Ooh, spicy.”

Steam started rising off of Jason's body and clothes. After a few minutes his skin, hair and clothes were all dry.

“Glad I bought those,” he said. “Remind me to thank Jory for suggesting them.”

Jory was actually participating in the event, although Jason hadn't seen him. The various crafting associations had decided there was a good chance of lost crafting secrets being found and had formed several teams to join in. To avoid conflict, each team was made up of different kind of magic craftspeople, from leatherworkers to weapon-smiths, engravers to alchemists.

They had no intention of seeking out Emir's scythe, instead intending to scour the hidden astral space for item-making secrets. Jory had travelled with the craft association contingent and hadn't run into Jason.

After handling the shabs, Jason and his team went looking for the central dome. While they had been fighting, other teams had found the tunnel and they followed the other adventurers. The tunnel sloped down under the lake bed, leading underground between domes. The central area was obviously more important than the dome they had come from. The buildings were larger and more impressive, looking more like the central location of a city than the village of the dome they had come from.

Following the crowd, they found Emir standing near to archway of dark stone, right in the middle of a large square. This allowed the adventurers to spill in around it. Gary was present, along with Constance and some of Emir's people who were drawing an elaborate ritual circle around the archway. Placed at various points within the ritual diagram were more than a dozen items, all long-weather stone artefacts. Emir's people kept the adventurers back, warning them against using abilities that would interfere with the ambient magic. Just the presence of so many essence users and their magic items was bad enough.

There was a long wait as all the adventurers either arrived or were rescued from their poor preparations for underwater travel and returned to the surface, destined to participate no further. One of the main culprits was the difficulty of getting rituals right amongst all the adventurers. Without a power to smooth out the ambient magic, like Clive had, rituals could easily go awry. Emir had a ritualist with a similar ability on staff for that exact reason.

Once Emir confirmed it with his people, he addressed the crowd.

“And here we are at last,” he called out loudly. He wasn't using a voice projection circle this time, again to not disrupt the magic. “Here we have reached, together, the limit of what I can tell you. The door will open soon and my people will direct you through it. I ask that you are patient while waiting for your turn to enter, as my people will deal with anyone acting in a disorderly manner. Remember, the team that brings me the scythe is the team that wins the grand prize.”

Quest: [Legacy of the Reaper]

You have joined the mission to retrieve the Order of the Reaper's legacy.

- Objective: Pass the reaper trials 0/5
- Objective: Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes.
- Objective: Obtain [Scythe of the Reaper] 0/1.
- Objective: Deliver [Scythe of the Reaper] to Emir Bahadir 0/1.

- Reward: Racial gift transfiguration.

“I've been waiting for that,” Jason said. “Oh, it's a good one.”

It was not the first time the party had seen a quest appear, having cleared various contracts together. This was the first time they had seen a reward that wasn't just spirit coins, however. Neil's eyes were transfixed by the listed reward.

“Is that what I think it is?” he asked.

“I think so, yeah,” Jason said. “Should be for all of us, since we all got the quest.”

“How is that even possible?” he asked.

“Not sure,” Jason said. “My theory is that once you reach a certain threshold for handsomeness, it flows over and starts having weird effects.”

Despite the astounding quest window in front of them, the team all turned to look at Jason.

“What?” he asked.

Chapter 156: The City of Fallen Echoes

There was some pushing and jostling from the adventurers eager to pass through the aperture until a few low growls from Gary pulled the stropy ones in line. Emir stood with Gary, watching from the side as they went through, one at a time. When his team drew close to Emir, Jason greeted him.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got any insider tips, Emir?” Jason asked as they went past. This drew the attention of the adventurers around them.

“Jason,” Emir said with a wry smile. “If I had anything else to tell you, I would have told everyone. The goal to have the scythe brought to me. If it was to have the scythe brought to me by you, then you would be the only one I sent.”

“Fair enough.”

Jason had encountered two astral apace apertures before, both to the rainforest astral space that supplied water to the delta, along with many of the desert’s oases. Those had been shimmering blue, floating unattached as if not really connected to the world. As he got a look at this astral gate aperture, it was very different. It was contained within an archway the size of large double doors. The archway was made of stone, a single piece with the black, smooth gloss of polished obsidian. Unlike the buildings around it, centuries of submersion had done nothing to mar its surface or dim its lustre. The aperture itself, within the archway, held a strange darkness that almost seemed to have substance, devouring the light around it.

“Is it just me,” Neil said, “or does anyone else think that looks like Jason’s cloak?”

Jason dimmed the stars on his cloak down to nothing. The result was a void draped around him that, as Neil suggested, looked very much like the dark aperture before them.

“It does,” Clive said. “My guess would be a dark essence ability was used as the foundation for this archway, likely even the-”

“We should keep it moving,” Humphrey said, stopping Clive before his fascination overcame his awareness of the situation. This got a look of gratitude from the member of Emir’s staff standing next to the aperture. His task was to keep things moving but he also didn’t want to annoy people his boss obviously thought highly of.

Humphrey stepped up to the aperture. “See you on the other side,” he told the others and stepped through. Like Humphrey, it was not a first time entering an astral space for Neil and he followed without hesitation. Jason prompted Clive through next, not wanting to leave him to his curiosity. Sophie paused in front of the aperture, reluctance and uncertainty saturating her body language.

“Are we sure that thing isn’t just devouring people?” she asked. “It kind of looks like it’s devouring people.”

She was hardly the first adventurer to hesitate when looking at the lightless void of the aperture. Jason gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder, stepping past her.

“No one is going to push you,” he said. “If you don’t want to do this, go back with Emir and we’ll see you in a few weeks.”

Jason paused in front of the aperture himself, an anticipatory grin crossing his face before he stepped through.

“Miss Wexler,” the staff member said. “I’ll need you to either go through or move out of the way.”

Sophie looked at him, nodded to herself and held her breath as she stepped through the portal.

Different modes of teleportation had different feels to them. The feel of travelling through the portals created by Hester felt different to Jason’s own ability. It, in turn, felt different again to Danielle Geller’s ordinary teleport power. She had the same one as her son, but her higher-rank version allowed her to take more people. She would sometimes teleport around with the Geller family teams, including Humphrey’s, to help them acclimatise themselves to such abilities.

These benefits were not available to everyone, as evidenced by the state of people Jason found when he emerged from a dark archway, identical to the one he had stepped into. They ranged from looking slightly peaky to being on hands and knees, throwing up. Jason had no such issues.

Ability: Astral Affinity

- Increased resistance to dimension effects and astral forces. Dimension abilities have increased effect and transcendent damage is increased.

His racial gift made him more tolerant to the effects of teleportation but, more than that, the sensation of going through the portal had been incredibly familiar. Travelling through the dark aperture had felt exactly like using his shadow teleport.

As Jason emerged, system messages immediately started popping up. He dismissed them to the periphery of his vision so he could take a look around. He started by getting out of the way before more people arrived, stepping around those loudly vomiting.

At a glance, he was on some kind of very large tower with a flat top. It was made of dark, grey brick, with lichen growing in the crevices. The archway stood right in the middle

and the tower was apparently quite tall as he could mostly see sky over the edges. A sun was high in a sky, blurred by summer haze. The air was humid and heavy, as much as the delta on its worst day. He could hear water splashing against rocks from below, the unmistakable sound of the sea. The breezeless air carried none of the ocean's salty freshness, however.

The adventurers who had already recovered from being magically transported were turning their faces to the sky or wandering over the edges to look around. Others were looking for their party members and Jason noticed that most were not finding them. Jason himself could find no trace of Humphrey, Neil or Clive. As he waited to see if Sophie would emerge after him, he took a bracelet of sandy yellow stones on a loop and slipped it over his wrist.

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

- *A bracelet that draws on the power of water quintessence to bestow the blessings of a personal oasis (accessory, bracelet).*
- **Effect:** Keeps the wearer cool and refreshed. Bracelet energy is consumed at a varying rate according to climate.
- **Effect:** Reduces incoming fire and heat damage. This rapidly consumes bracelet energy.
- **Effect:** Consume a water quintessence gem to completely refill bracelet energy.

Taking out a water quintessence gem, he touched it to the bracelet and it melted away. The yellow stones turned blue and Jason immediately felt the benefits of his magical item as the muggy and oppressive air felt suddenly cool and refreshing.

Sophie emerged from the archway just as Jason was taking a deep, satisfying breath. Looking startled, she started waving her hand in front of her like she was swiping at insects. Jason walked back over to the archway.

“Just imagine the screens moving out of the way, to the edge of your vision,” he told her. She frowned at the space in front of her.

“Why so many?” she asked as they moved out of the way for the next adventurer to appear.

“I haven't read them yet,” he told her.

She looked around.

“So this is an astral space,” she said. “Where are the others?”

“Not here,” he said. “This is only a fraction of the people who went through, so there may be other arrival locations.”

“Unless the magic void door is eating people,” she said.

“Let’s hope not,” Jason. “Take a look around?”

“It’ll get us away from all these people throwing up. What’s going on with that?”

“They can’t handle teleportation as well as us,” Jason said. “Notice all the celestines are fine. You have an ability to endure dimensional effects that I happen to share.”

“Is that we didn’t get eaten?”

“They weren’t eaten. Probably. As for whether it affected us arriving in the same place, I’m not sure.”

They walked over to the edge of the tower, which had no railing of any kind, simply ending in a precipitous edge. Their tower was huge, some twenty metres across and at least seventy high. It would have loomed over even the tallest building in Greenstone.

Looking out from the edge, the tower was located right on the coastline, with water from a seemingly boundless sea stretching out to their right. To their left was an ancient, abandoned city. It was staggeringly vast, sprawling off into the distance as far as they could see. Plant life had long ago reclaimed it, with vines crawling over the building and trees growing in the boulevards through the gaps left by broken and dislodged flagstones. Although larger than Greenstone by at least several times, it was more jungle than metropolis.

Stopping to look and listen, they heard the sounds of creatures; the warble of birds, the distant roaring of some predator, be it animal or monster. They were even able to pick out a few inhuman figures shambling and prowling through the overgrown streets.

The tower Jason and Sophie were on was not the only great tower that could be seen. Maybe twenty kilometres distant was another, also right on the waterline. They moved around the edge of the tower to get a better look at the city below.

-
- [You have used a panoramic view to unveil parts of the City of Fallen Echoes map. Visit unveiled locations to add additional details.](#)
-

Other adventurers were likewise moving over to the edge. There did not appear to be any way of getting inside the tower from the roof, but some adventurers found the top of a stairwell that wound its way down the outside. Some started rushing down immediately to try and get some kind of lead on the competition. Most chose to stay and take stock. All of the teams present were missing members, it seemed, and none of them was clear on exactly what they should be doing. Sophie and Jason found their own spot, sitting on the edge with their legs dangling off.

“We should start with those messages we put aside,” Jason said, pulling the screens up out of the corner of his vision.

-
- You have entered a zone of high magical saturation. Magical manifestations will occur at an increased rate.
-

“What’s magical saturation?” Sophie asked. “Are magical manifestations good?”

“Ambient magic, the invisible magic all around us,” Jason explained, “is graded in two ways. One is magical density, which is kind of like the strength of the local magic. It determines how powerful a magic item can be and work normally and the power of rituals that can be performed. The most important effect, though, is it determines the strength of what monsters will appear. Emir said the magical density here should be the same as the world outside, so we can expect mostly iron-rank monsters, plus some bronze. Silver should be extremely rare, but a silver rank monster can linger for years before breaking down back into magic, so there may be one or two around, somewhere.”

“That’s good to know, but doesn’t actually answer my questions,” Sophie said.

“I’m providing context,” Jason said.

“You’re starting to sound like Clive.”

“Clive’s a smart guy,”

“But he also likes to waffle on. You should hear him and Belinda. It’s interminable.”

“Anyway,” Jason said, “while magical density is how strong the magic is, magic saturation of how much of it there is. If you get higher magical saturation, you get more magical manifestation. That means more essences, more awakening stones and more monsters, which is all good.”

“More monsters is good?”

“Our ability to grow stronger is reliant on throwing ourselves into challenge after challenge,” Jason said. “Here, we have all the challenge we could ask for. This is a holy land for adventurers looking to get stronger. It’s a shame, now, that we only have eighteen days.”

“Then our first step should be regrouping with the others,” Sophie said. The other messages screens stacked up were all variations on a theme.

-
- Party member [Humphrey Geller] has gone out of range. Voice communication and loot sharing with out of range party members are unavailable.
-

Clive, Neil and Humphrey were all out of range, while Jason and Sophie had only been out of range for as long as Jason had been on one side of the aperture and Sophie the other.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has re-entered range. Voice communication and loot sharing are restored. Voice communication and loot sharing with out of range party members are unavailable.
-

“So, how do we find them?” Sophie asked.

Jason took a furtive glance at the other adventurers. Some were huddled together, having discussions like Jason and Sophie. Others were looking to form makeshift groups after being separated from their own. Jason recognised a few faces but no one he knew well. A few people seemed to recognise him by his cloak, a couple of whom were heading in their direction.

“Jason Asano?” one of them asked.

“That’s right.”

“We’ve been separated from our group and it looks like you have been, too. You could join up with us if you like, until you find your own people.”

Jason glanced at Sophie, who gave a little head shake.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “We’ve lost people but our most mobile people are still together. We’re going to use that to cover more ground. Thank you for the offer though. It’s very kind.”

After a little more polite chatter they walked away.

“I don’t think they were being kind,” Sophie said quietly. “I think they were trying to glom onto someone they’d heard of.”

“They’re just trying to survive in a situation that’s gotten away from them,” Jason said. “You of all people should understand that.”

Sophie glanced at the other adventurers more sympathetically.

“I can see that,” she said. “You think maybe we should put a team together?”

“No,” Jason said. “I was also inclined to keep it to just us. I wasn’t lying about the speed thing, and trying to mesh a new group together in a dangerous environment could cause trouble a critical moment.”

“Just us, then,” she said. “So what are we doing?”

“Pull up the quest,” Jason said, doing the same himself.

Quest: [Legacy of the Reaper]

You have joined the mission to retrieve the Order of the Reaper's legacy.

- Objective: Pass the reaper trials 0/5
- Objective: Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes.
- Objective: Obtain [Golden Scythe of the Reaper] 0/1.
- Objective: Deliver [Golden Scythe of the Reaper] to Emir Bahadir 0/1.

- Reward: Racial gift transfiguration.

“This is the City of Fallen Echoes,” Jason said, quietly. “The objective is to get to the middle. Knowing that might be a good edge for us against other teams. It also means our team knows where to go. As long as we head for the middle, we’ll find them eventually.”

“And where is the middle exactly?” Sophie asked. “Do we just head away from the water?”

Jason pulled up his map. It was a separate ability from his party interface, which meant Sophie couldn't use it herself, but it did allow her to see it when Jason did. The corner of the map listed their location.

➤ Zone: City of Fallen Echoes (Gate Tower Three)

The map showed a perfectly circular city, surrounded by water. All but the area around one tower with a marker for Jason's position on it was veiled.

“I can't see places I haven't been on the map,” Jason said. “The centre is pretty obvious from the outline though.”

He got to his feet and Sophie did the same.

“Let's get down,” he said. “The stairs start over there.”

“Forget that,” Sophie said, walking backwards away from the edge.

“That looks suspiciously like a run-up,” Jason said.

“I won't go too hard,” she said. “You should be able to follow it you put some guts in it.”

She ran to the edge of the tower and vaulted off without hesitation. Jason watched her sail through the air plunging toward the ground until she activated her leaf on the wind ability, slowing into a gentle descent. She landed in the middle of a wide boulevard overgrown with trees that headed in the direction they would be going. Jason looked down at her and shrugged, taking his own run-up and leaping out after her.

Chapter 157:

Shade

Jason's cloak fluttered around him as he drifted to the ground.

"Clive said that some people think the powers we get are reflections of who we are," Sophie said.

"So?"

"So, floating out of the sky with an attention-grabbing cloak made out of sparkles seems very much like you."

"I can't help if I'm pretty," Jason said. "I like your new armour, by the way. It's a very 'killing things for money' kind of look. Professional."

Gilbert Bertinelli, who supplied Jason's armour dealt exclusively in men's apparel, but Jason had asked for his recommendation for someone who worked with trap weaver leather. He suggested someone who developed armour specifically for women. The result was a simple outfit with clean lines, compared to the flowing lines of Jason's combat robes.

In shades of dark grey and black, Sophie's outfit reminded Jason of combat fatigues more than anything else. It had a neat but loose fit for maximum mobility, with hardened panels over critical areas and plenty of loops and pockets for gear. Compared to the body-hugging clothes Sophie normally wore it was all business, masking her lithe body.

"I would have preferred something in white," Sophie said.

Jason acknowledged to himself that she looked exceptionally good in white, but didn't say anything. As much as the indenture contract was in practicality a fiction, he was very conscious of the men who had sought to exert power over her for their own gratification. He didn't want to be one more guy piling it on.

"So I guess we head off," Jason said.

"If those noises we're hearing are anything to go by, we'll be running into plenty of monsters. Especially if they're spawning faster because of the extra magic."

"I reckon you're right," Jason agreed. "If we come up against anything nasty, you grab its attention and I'll set up the damage. Otherwise, we take it as it comes."

"Sounds good," Sophie said. "With all these trees and broken buildings throwing shadows, this place should be a playground for you."

"If you don't mind," a voice said from behind them, "I would like to have a word before you set off."

They both turned around, startled at whoever had approached them undetected. Standing in the middle of the overgrown street was a dark figure, like a person made of the same shadow-stuff as Jason's cloak. He was a living silhouette, a person-shaped hole in the universe.

"Who are you?" Sophie asked. "What are you?"

"Why do you sound British?" Jason asked.

"I don't know what British is," the shadowy figure said.

"That's for the best," Jason said. "Don't tell them you don't have guns or they'll colonise the crap out of you."

"I lack the context to grasp the exact scenario you are positing," the figure said. "I assume you are introducing a confusing tangent to the conversation to gauge my response to an unanticipated reaction to my approach."

"Yeah, that's pretty much it. I like you, British shadow guy. You got a name?"

"I am Shade."

"That's rough," Jason said. "You're a person made of shadows and your name is Shade? That's like my name being Human."

"You are not human," Shade said.

"Yeah, but I was when I was named. I'm Jason and this is Sophie. Are you a local, Shade?"

"In a manner of speaking," Shade said. "I am the invigilator of the Legacy Trials. I will administer each of the five tests you must pass to receive the legacy of the Order of the Reaper."

"If you're running the show, why have you appeared before us?" Sophie asked.

"My nature is multifarious. I am currently appearing before every person who has entered the trial grounds. I am here to introduce you to the trials and instruct you on what you must do to pass them."

"Well that sucks," Jason said. "And here was me thinking we had a head start. Why did we not appear in the same place as our other team members, Shade?"

"There are twelve gate towers. Each person that enters arrives at a random tower."

"Twelve," Sophie said. "We could have been split up entirely, so it could be worse."

"I'm worried about Clive," Jason said. "Humphrey will be fine on his own and Neil is a healer, so he'll have no trouble finding some people to roam around with. Clive is a harder sell, especially with Clive as the salesman."

"There's not much we can do about it here," Sophie said. "All we can do is head for the middle and trust that he can do the same."

Jason gave a reluctant nod.

“If I may interject,” Shade said, “part of my task is to instruct you on the trials to come and what will be required of you.”

“Go ahead, Shade.”

“Thank you,” Shade said. “The legacy of the Order of the Reaper is here to be claimed. The one to do so will be the one who proves that they can embody the ideals of the Order. Courage, intellect, resolve, capability and wisdom. Over the course of five trials, you will need to demonstrate these five virtues.”

“And these trials are located in the middle of the city?” Jason asked.

“The final three are located in the heart of the city,” Shade said. “This City of Fallen Echoes is itself the second trial; the trial of capability. It constitutes the longest of the five trials and not everyone will successfully navigate the dangers therein.”

Quest: [The Second Trial]

The second of the Reaper's trials is to reach the heart of the city.

- Objective: Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes.
- Reward: Random magic item.

“The city is the second trial?” Sophie asked. “What about the first?”

“The first trial I will administer now. It is the simplest in that it cannot be failed. Instead, it is a choice that will be important once you reach the final trials.”

“It can't be failed?” Jason asked. “That seems like a gimme but I can't help thinking there's a catch.”

“The trial is simply this,” Shade said. “Do you wish to enter the second trial with wisdom or courage?”

“What's the difference?” Sophie asked.

“To enter with wisdom means you will receive two items. One will allow you to escape the trials entirely. You will not be allowed to enter again but it can extricate you from an inescapable situation. The other is a recovery item that can save you in a critical moment.”

“And courage means entering the second trial without them,” Jason said.

“Exactly so,” Shade acknowledged.

“It seems like wisdom is objectively the better choice,” Sophie said.

“That is why it is the path of wisdom,” Shade said.

“Then why would anyone choose courage?” Jason asked.

“Each of the final trials will test the virtues that have yet to be demonstrated,” Shade said. “But to reach the trials of intelligence and resolve, one must pass a trial that tests that which they did not demonstrate here, in the first trial. For those who have already proven their courage, the test of wisdom will assess their judgement. Failure means being removed from the trials, but there is no danger in it. For those who have proven their wisdom, they must face a test of courage. The test is simple but dangerous. To pass is to move on and to fail is to die.”

“So it’s a choice between safety now and danger later or safety later and danger now,” Jason said. “What can you tell us about the later trials?”

“Only that you will be informed of the nature of each trial you face, immediately before you face it. Once you have navigated the city, each future trial will be explained, after which you may choose to face the next trial or be safely removed from the trials altogether.”

“So you can tell us about the second trial now?” Sophie asked.

“I can, yes,” Shade told her. “There is no limit on time beyond the closure of the trials in eighteen days.”

“What happens if we’re still here after eighteen days?” Jason asked.

“Then you will be trapped here,” Shade said. “There are dangers in this place, of which the monsters are not the greatest. There are two larger threats to be aware of.”

“We appreciate the warning,” Jason said. “What can you tell us about them?”

“I can explain the practical dangers,” Shade said. “If you would prefer, I can explain the origins of the trials and the dangers you will face in undertaking them.”

“I’ll take some context, if you’re offering,” Jason said.

“This astral space was originally a training ground for the Order of the Reaper,” Shade explained. “You travelled here from the ruins of the Order’s final and most hidden redoubt. It was once a hidden place to instruct the Order’s initiates, turned into a final hiding place as the churches sought to purge the Order.”

“The churches purged the Order of the Reaper?” Jason said. “I found an underground fortress that had suffered some kind of attack, centuries ago. I think that belonged to the Order as well.”

“The Order did have an underground facility that was wiped out. At first, it was believed that the hidden training centre had escaped the churches’ attention after they attacked that location. The Order was betrayed, however, and the hiding place under the lake revealed. The churches came, shattered the magic domes that held back the waters and drowned all within.”

“That’s horrifying,” Jason said.

“Which churches?” Sophie asked. “It can’t have been all of them.”

“It was not,” Shade said. “The Order of the Reaper served a number of important purposes. In a world of kings and queens, leaders are chosen by blood instead of virtue. A fool or mad person can, by virtue of birthright, be given the power to consign countless lives to chaos, suffering and death. In such cases, a knife in the dark can be the deliverance of nations.”

“Royal assassins,” Jason said. “I’d say you should try democracy but the results where I come from are very mixed.”

“Though the Order remained hidden in the shadows,” Shade continued, “its function was known and accepted by the nations and organisations of the world. The Adventure Society, the Magic Society, even the churches.”

“But not all of them,” Sophie said.

“No,” Shade said. “There were two churches. One is the church of The Unliving. More than just assassins, the Order were also hunters of the undead. The peace of final rest is the Reaper’s most core principle and more necromancers fell to the Order than princes or kings.”

“The Adventure Society does that, now,” Jason said.

“In the Order’s absence, others must take up their tasks. The church of The Unliving did not act against the Order alone. There was another church that, like the Order, was inimical to the church of The Unliving. Nonetheless, they formed an unholy compact to remove what this church called the unclean methods of the Order.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Jason said. “The church of Purity?”

“It is as you say,” Shade confirmed.

“How is that church even vaguely pure?” Jason complained loudly. “They team up with the worst people they can find at the drop of a hat.”

“I do not know of what you speak,” Shade said.

“They’re at it again,” Jason said. “The church of Purity have teamed up with some interdimensional turd nugget to strip-mine astral spaces.”

“That can wait until we’re back outside,” Sophie said. “Right now, we need to focus on these trials. I assume you were working your story towards the danger you mentioned.”

“Yes,” Shade said. “When the churches discovered the training facilities beneath the lake, the last grandmaster of the Order sent all the initiates here, into the city. They then sealed the entrance, that the churches could not follow. The keys to the entrance were taken and scattered across the world. The goal was that someday, someone could prove

themselves worthy of the Order's ideals and reclaim that which was left behind. That day should now be coming soon, but if all you who have entered fail, there will be another chance."

"Oh?"

"After eighteen days, the trials will close. The keys can be used to open them again in a year, that others may try where you failed."

"What about all those initiates?" Sophie asked. "What happened to them?"

"The churches were unwilling to leave behind the threat posed by the initiates, but could not reach them in the astral space. In the early days of the Order, one of the grandmasters found this astral space. It was unstable, a proto-astral space that was as likely to dissolve into the astral as become a true realm."

"Obviously it did," Sophie said.

"The Order of the Reaper has long used such places," Shade said. "There was ancient knowledge of how to anchor such realms, provided by the Reaper itself."

"So, the Order really is connected to the great astral being," Jason said.

"It was," Shade said. "The grandmaster who built this place was akin to you, Jason Asano. Like you, he was an outworlder with the dark essence. Many of the functions of this place are based on his abilities. I was his summoned familiar, once."

"You were a familiar?" Jason asked.

"I was. Now, I am bound to this place until the trials are completed and the legacy claimed."

"He was from my world?" Jason asked.

"He was not," Shade said. "You were originally humans, which do not exist in the world he originated in."

"You didn't tell us what happened to the initiates," Sophie said.

"As I said, the churches were unwilling to leave the initiates be, but the means by which this astral space was anchored to the world left the those hunting them locked out. So the churches made a second bargain, this time with entities of the deep astral. Known as the vorger, they have the power to violate dimensional boundaries."

"Like those of an astral space," Jason said.

"Yes," Shade said. "They cannot enter a truly physical realm, but astral spaces are partly of the astral and partly of the physical. It is unknown how they lured such creatures as they are animalistic entities, acting only on primal urges. Lure them the churches did, however, and the vorger remain here to this day."

"What are these vorger, exactly?" Sophie asked.

“They are creatures intangible in nature, for they are not physical beings. They take many shapes but their nature is the same. Their touch warps flesh, twisting it into hideous new shapes.”

“That’s what happened to the initiates?” Jason asked. “They were killed by the vorger?”

“Worse,” Shade said. “The vorger do not kill. Their victims do not enjoy the sweet release of death. In what is perhaps the greatest insult to the Reaper, the initiates were warped into unaging abominations of flesh. They never die, their souls trapped inside twisted shells of rage and pain, cursed to eternal madness. They roam this place still, striking out against anything they encounter.”

“Those are the dangers you mentioned,” Jason said. “The vorger and these flesh abominations.”

“Yes.”

“What can you tell us about how to fight them?” Sophie asked.

“The vorger have no physical substance,” Shade said. “Magical weapons will have some limited effect on them but unless you find them in isolation, it will be insufficient to handle their numbers. They tend to appear in swarms and without specialised tools or abilities, they are difficult to deal with. They will warp your bodies until the city gains another flesh abomination. As you both possess an affinity for astral energy, you will be far more resistant than most, however.”

“Your abilities should work well,” Jason said to Sophie. “My sword should be effective enough as well. What about the flesh abominations, Shade?”

“If you can kill them and release their souls from torment, then that would be a mercy. My advice, however, is to avoid or escape them. Their power is at the bronze-rank level and they are no easy match. Their bodies will adapt to your attacks and defences, making them more effective and you less so, with every passing moment. If you must fight them, then I would recommend fighting one after another instead of working together. When they adapt to one form of attack they may create a weakness to another which you can exploit.”

“Thank you,” Jason said. “We’ll remember your words.”

“Then your next step is the first trial,” Shade said. “Your choices remain: courage or wisdom.”

“What do you think?” Sophie asked Jason.

“I’m thinking wisdom,” Jason said. “I feel like courage is probably the best choice for getting to the end, but as much as I would love a cloud palace, I’ll take alive and no cloud palace over dead and no cloud palace.”

“I would have thought you would have gone for courage,” Sophie said. “All the stories I’ve heard about you paint you as pretty reckless.”

“I used to be,” Jason said. “Probably still am, to be honest, but Farrah’s death brought some things home for me. Death is easy enough to find as an adventurer. I don’t need to go looking for it.”

“Alright,” Sophie said with a nod, then turned to Shade. “Two for wisdom.”

“Very well,” Shade said and raised his shadowy hands. Resting in each was a small vial and a medallion. They took them, feeling the cold of Shade’s shadowy hand as they picked up the objects.

Jason looked at the medallion first. It was made of the same glossy black stone as the archway through which they had entered the astral space and was embossed with a scythe symbol. It was small and on a cord that could be easily slipped over the neck.

Item: [Medallion of Escape] (silver rank, uncommon)

A path of escape for those with the wisdom to know when to let go (consumable, teleport).

- Effect: Project your aura into the medallion to be immediately evacuated from the astral space. Only functions within the City of Fallen Echoes.

“Project your aura into the medallion,” Jason read. “Doesn’t that mean anyone without aura control can’t use it?”

“Part of wisdom is knowing which challenges not to accept,” Shade said.

“Good thing you picked up an aura power,” Jason told Sophie. They both slipped their medallions over their necks and tucked them under their armour. They then looked at the second item, the vial.

Item: [Lesser Miracle Potion] (iron rank, legendary)

Salvation in a bottle (consumable, potion).

- Effect: Fully restore health, mana and stamina. This potion is only effective on normal and iron-rank individuals. The magic of this potion lingers in the body longer than normal potions, meaning additional recovery health and recovery items will not be effective for a longer period.

“Strewth,” Jason said. “Now, that’s a potion.”

“I didn’t realise potions like this were even possible,” Sophie said.

“Me either,” Jason said, carefully placing it into his potion belt. Like him, Sophie had an enchanted potion belt that would protect the vials from breakage unless a concerted and directed effort was made to do so.

“One last thing,” Jason said to Shade. “I don’t suppose you can tell us where our teammates are?”

“I can,” Shade said, “but I won’t.”

“That’s what I figured. We’ll see you in the middle of the city?”

“You will,” Shade said. “Good luck.”

With that, Shade vanished in a swirl of darkness.

Chapter 158: Seriously Hardcore

The monster was mostly identical to a leopard, except for the legs. They were still covered in spotted fur, like the rest of the creature, but there were eight of them, multi-jointed and emerging from the monster's side like the legs of a spider. The legs were not as good for running but it was an excellent and rapid climber. That didn't much matter when Sophie's wind blade cut half of those legs off and it tumbled to the ground where she finished it with a brutal stomp to the head.

➤ You have defeated [Spotted Tree Cat].

"Spotted tree cat," Jason said. "It lacks imagination but at least it's what it says on the tin. I was worried it would be called a spidard or something. Some of these monster names are just daft. Some of them have got people killed, I'm certain of it."

"How does a monster name get someone killed?" Sophie asked.

"Well, take sloth demons and demon sloths. Demon sloths are iron rank, strong and relatively tough, but slow. Not that hard to take down, as long as you're careful. A sloth demon is a gold-rank monster with a soporific power that cripples your speed, making you easy meat."

"I see your point," Sophie said. "You wouldn't want to get them confused."

"No, you would not. Did Humphrey get you reading the Magic Society monster records? He said he was going to."

"He did," Sophie said. "It's actually pretty interesting, learning about all the crazy stuff that's out there."

"It might seem odd to say this," Jason said, "but you don't want to be too efficient with your kills. You'll do better if you use as many of your abilities as you can."

"It's not like I won't get another chance," Sophie said. "I don't think it's even been an hour. Besides, these easy fights won't do me much good. I need something tougher, or that comes in numbers."

"That's true enough," Jason acknowledged.

He wandered over and touched the creature.

➤ Would you like to loot [Spotted Tree Cat]?

“Hold on for a second,” Sophie said, pulling off her boot and sitting it on a low, broken wall before backing off as Jason did the same. Jason mentally accepted and the creature went up in rainbow smoke, along with the muck on Sophie’s boot. There was some minor spattering on her pants and trouser legs that dissolved as well, causing Sophie to wince at the smell as Jason moved aside.

“Do you ever get used to that?” she asked.

“A little but not really,” Jason said. “On the bright side, after that you can handle pretty much anything. A fought a monster called a belch bug that has this stink that’s meant to make you vomit. Barely a stomach twitch.”

They were making their way down a wide boulevard that went in exactly the direction they wanted. There were eighteen days in which to make the most of the excellent training environment but they decided to start by making their way to the middle of the city. It gave them the best chance of finding their errant party members and they could just roam around fighting monsters from there.

The boulevard was uneven ground, the once neatly-fitted flagstones cracked, pushed up by root growth or displaced entirely by trees. It was still the most open path, though, and offered an easy passage toward the centre of the city. On either side, what had once been impressive buildings rose up, half-collapsed and covered in creepers and other growth.

“We should have a rummage through some of these buildings,” Jason said.

“What happened to going straight to the centre of the city?” Sophie asked.

“We at least have to have a bit of a look around,” Jason said. “Let’s just pick the next awesome-looking building and take a gander. Maybe we’ll find an essence or something.”

“You think?”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “In fairness, we could just as easily find one sitting in the middle of the boulevard. With the increased manifestations and this place having gone untouched for centuries, there could be a veritable hoard just waiting for us to find it.”

“Maybe we could check out one building,” she said. “What about that one?”

Most of the buildings they passed by were two or three storeys tall. The one Sophie pointed out was six, and more intact than most.

“It looks a bit fortressy,” Jason said. “Some kind of military barracks?”

The front entrance once must have been a pair of towering metal doors, but centuries of humid air had left little but rusted scraps behind. The looming doorway was large enough to wheel a siege engine through, as evidenced by the remains of just such a siege engine. It was in some kind of a marshalling courtyard beyond the huge doors, abandoned

to a state of disrepair. Now it was a pile of wooden beams, rusty metal bars and leather straps.

“That’s awesome,” Jason said, looking at it. “Also, suspicious.”

“Suspicious?”

“It may look like a dilapidated pile of junk,” he said, “but its not really dilapidated enough. That wood should have been long rotted away, and that metal might be rusty but compare it to what’s left of the doors. I’ve been on farms and seen what fifty years of abandonment does to a place. This has been here what? Ten times that, at least? In this wet climate, there shouldn’t be any of that thing left.”

“What are you thinking?” Sophie asked.

“I’m thinking you move closer, carefully. See if you can sense an aura off of it.”

Sophie did just that, approaching the large doorway. Before she could sense anything, the fallen pile of metal and wood started moving. What was little more than a pile of rotted wood, rusty metal and leather scraps started re-assembling itself into a vaguely humanoid form. It towered almost four meters high, enough that as it stood upright it became obscured as it was taller even than the huge doorway.

The construct creature was asymmetrical and looked very uncoordinated, with two arms on one side and one on the other. Of the two arms that shared the same side, one was stubby and ended in a crude, rusty claw. The other was longer but less agile, looking like a long box terminating in a rusty ball. The single arm on the other side was actually a platform for a ballista. As it stood up, they both sensed its bronze rank aura.

“Is this one of the Builder cult creations?” Sophie asked as the construct creature assembled itself.

“Unlikely,” Jason said. “It looks like it fits right in here. Probably a monster or something left behind from long ago.”

“Do we run?” Sophie asked.

“Fight,” Jason said, drawing his sword. “Something tells me that some practice fighting construct monsters will pay off, down the line.”

Knowing his core abilities would be useless against the construct creature, Jason silently thanked Gary for making his sword.

“I’ve never fought a bronze-rank monster before,” Sophie said.

“That’s why it will help us get stronger,” Jason said. “If you think you can’t handle it, just run. It doesn’t look like much of a chaser.”

The creature was ducking slowly under the doorway with jerky movements, the monster’s height too much even for the oversized gap. Jason took advantage of its

awkwardness to dash forward. It lashed out crudely with its ball arm but Jason easily dodged, raking his sword against one leg, then the other as he ducked under and passed the creature. His sword did nothing more than scratch the wood but that was all he needed.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Siege Golem].
 - [Siege Golem] is immune to curses.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.
-
- Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
-

The golem was caught halfway under the door, almost through only to start turning back after Jason. As it did, Sophie moved in to the attack, lashing out with rapid strikes.

-
- Special ability [Immortal Fist] has dealt resonating-force damage to [Siege Golem].
 - [Siege Golem] has an extremely rigid body and suffers additional damage from resonating force.
-

The fight started out strongly in Jason and Sophie's favour, catching the golem in a bad position. Neither Jason nor Sophie had any big attack powers to capitalise, however, and their iron-rank attacks had limited effect of the bronze-rank enemy. Sophie started off stronger with her resonating-force damage, while Jason's attacks did next to nothing as his sword accumulated power. With each attack it dealt increasing amounts of the same resonating-force energy but he would need some time to have a real impact.

The golem focused on Sophie as the greater threat, working its way toward the outside. Just as it was about to get free of the door, she nimbly dodged past it to join Jason on the inside, followed by Jason making his way back out. The mindless construct creature could do no more than react, the same lack of internal spirit that made it immune to Jason's curses making it too stupid to understand it was being played back and forth.

Finally it worked its way loose, courtesy of Jason's sword. It was accumulating enough power to affect even the hardy, bronze-rank construct body and when Jason carved a protrusion from its body it staggered free of the doorway and back into the courtyard.

Jason had reached the point where he could do some real damage, but free of the door, the golem had its own tricks to use. The stubby claw yanked back the ballista arm, and from within the arm a ballista bolt jerked out, ready to be fired. The golem launched it at Jason but the crude, massive weapon was easy to dodge. He moved aside, the

creature's aim obvious and the bolt missed him, the huge metal head digging into the stone floor.

Just as Jason was about to renew his attack, the shaft of the ballista bolt explodes, firing out finger-length shards of piercing wood, sharp as needles and hard as iron. Sophie, on the other side of the golem, was far enough away that she could duck out of the doorway before the shards reached her. Jason, on the other hand, took the full brunt. The attacks carried the inherent power of bronze-rank attacks, shredding his cloak and piercing his armour. He shielded his face with his arms as he turned his body to present a smaller profile and protect certain delicate areas. His arms, legs and sides were riddled with the wooden shards, which were left sticking out of him like echidna spines. He snatched a potion from his belt and chugged it, the healing power doing little more than pushing out all the spines.

The golem, in the meantime, had brought its ungainly box-arm with the rusty ball-hand up in the air. It brought it down in Jason's direction as he was still staggered and inattentive, the ball coming loose on the end of a cable, extending out as it swung down hard. Jason realised the danger too late, only for Sophie to appear in front of him using her mirage step power. Her feet braced, she threw a punch out at the descending ball.

Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 2 (14%).

- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional resonating-force damage, which is highly effective against physical defences. Suffer no damage from making unarmed strikes against objects and negate all damage from actively intercepted attacks. Not all damage from very powerful or higher-ranked attacks will be negated.

The huge metal sphere was deflected but the power of it was too much for Sophie's ability to negate. She was hammered into the stone, bouncing off herself as her arm was brutally mangled. Jason, protected and recovered, looked down at her. Under the hood of his cloak, his face contorting with malevolence as he saw what was left of her arm. He turned that gaze onto the golem, the sword in his hand practically humming with power, even as blood from Jason's punctured arm ran down it.

He ran at the golem, having fought it enough to know that its ungainly size and sluggish speed were the weaknesses he needed. His sword flashed as his body danced,

slicing into the creature again and again. With each strike the damage grew greater while the golem flailed at the cloaked figure flittering around its feet. Soon, even bronze-rank damage resistance was not enough. Jason had burned most of his mana on special attacks it was immune to, trigger the sword until every strike was blasting away chunks of wood and shearing apart strips of metal. He went for the joints, the legs first, then the arms as it toppled, finally going to work on every part of it still large enough to hit.

➤ You have defeated [Siege Golem].

Jason dropped his sword on the destroyed golem, rushing over to Sophie. She was struggling, one-armed, to get to her knees and he carefully helped and she grimaced silently through the pain. Her right arm dangled limply, the hand coming out of her sleeve. Jason pulled the lesser miracle potion from his belt but she waved him off.

“I’d be a pancake if it wasn’t for you,” he said, still pushing it on her.

“That’s for the middle of a fight,” she snarled through the pain and clenched teeth. “Don’t be an idiot and waste it now. I can use this to practice my recovery power.”

Jason looked at her as she fought through the pain to take a kneeling meditation pose as best she could.

Ability: [Equilibrium] (Balance)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 1 (76%)

 - Effect (iron): Meditate to slowly accrue instances of [Integrity], up to an instance threshold based on the [Recovery] attribute. Instances quickly drop off when meditation ends.

 - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

“At least take some kind of potion,” Jason said.

“This is kind of hard, so how about you shut your damn mouth for once.”

“Lady,” Jason said, putting back the lesser miracle potion and pulling out a regular healing potion for himself. “You are seriously hardcore.”

“What did I just say?”

Chapter 159: Mixed Medication

Sophie's arm was more serious than any of Jason's wounds. Her arm was severely damaged, requiring an extended period to heal back up with her self-recovery power. Jason had been needled quite badly but it only took a few potions to eliminate the minor, if numerous wounds. His blood harvest power normally allowed him to heal up after fights using the remnant life force of fallen enemies, but it only worked on enemies with blood. The siege golem was largely impervious to Jason's abilities, even after being destroyed.

The puncture points in his armour were slowly recovering as well, due to his armour's self-repair properties. Gary's advice to find armour with that particular quality had saved Jason a good amount of money on repairs. Now he was isolated from a place to get repairs, it was all the more valuable.

Sophie's healing power was meditation-based and concentrating was proving difficult with the state of her arm. She took regular breaks, panting and sweating in spite of doing no more than sitting in place. Jason tried to distract her from the pain each time she took a break.

"I'm going to loot the monster, now you're not in the middle of meditating," he told her during the first break. "I didn't want to interrupt you, before."

He wandered over to the fallen golem, which didn't look much worse than when it had been mimicking a broken siege weapon. He placed a hand on a chunk of shattered wood.

➤ Would you like to loot [Siege Golem]?

"Head's up," he warned Sophie as he walked away. The golem started dissolving into rainbow smoke.

-
- [Meteor Hammer] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Monster Core (Bronze Rank)] 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.

 - [Siege Grips] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 10 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
-

Sophie ducked out of the way as two bags of coins dropped from where they appeared over her head with a flash of rainbow light. There was also a pair of gloves, which she picked up to examine.

Item: [Siege Grips] (bronze rank, rare)

A pair of combat gloves containing the power of a siege weapon (clothing, gloves).

- Effect: Add explosive power to a physical attack, inflicting additional resonating-force damage and creating a powerful knock-back effect. 20 second cooldown.
 - Effect: Conjure a ram that flies through the air to make an extremely heavy resonating force attack. 5 minute cooldown.
 - You do not meet the requirements to use this item.
-

“I got bronze-rank gloves,” she said. “What about you?”

“A ball and chain,” Jason said, showing her the weapon in his hands. It was, as he said, a metal sphere at the end of a chain. Like a smaller version of the ball-hand of the siege golem, the metal orb was pitted with rust.

Item: [Meteor Hammer] (bronze rank, uncommon)

A magical chain weapon taken from an animate siege weapon (weapon, chain).

- Effect: Inflicts additional resonating-force damage based on how long the meteor hammer was swinging prior to the attack.
 - Effect: Chain length can be extended or retracted as it swings.
 - You do not meet the requirements to use this item.
-

“I don’t think this really suits me,” Jason said. “It’s bronze-rank anyway.”

“So are these but I could see myself using them later.”

Jason stashed the items and Sophie’s coins in his inventory. He glanced down at her arm, still hanging limp, her hand purple and distended. She was careful to jostle it as little as possible when she moved.

“How’s that coming along?” he asked.

“Not much progress on the arm,” she said unhappily. “I’m feeling better otherwise, though. That big ball thing really hit hard.”

“Thank you for that, by the way,” Jason said. “I don’t think I would have taken the hit nearly as well.”

“This is going to take longer to heal than I thought,” she said. “Maybe I should take a potion. Not one of the good ones, just a regular healing potion.”

“No, you were right in the first place,” Jason said. “Healing it up will be good training for your ability and we have time to burn. You hole up in the courtyard here while I check out the rest of the building. I’ll look for a good spot to set up camp. Use voice chat if anything happens and I’ll come running.”

“Alright,” Sophie said. She went back to meditating as Jason went further into the building.

Jory wasn’t happy. He had only agreed to participate as part of a joint activity between the craft associations, only to be immediately separated from his assigned team. As people formed makeshift groups from the people they found themselves with on the tower, Jory didn’t exactly have his pick of teams. His alchemy-related essence abilities made for a certain amount of healing but the people assembling groups were competing to attract the more conventional healers.

Jory was geared out in a heavy coat, covered in pockets. It was enchanted to protect both him and the contents of the pockets from harm. Fortunately for Jory, it was also enchanted to keep him cool, despite the jacket being as thick as the humidity. Along with the jacket, Jory had two belts around his waist and two bandoliers across his chest. They were full of vials containing potions and reagents Jory could use his essence abilities on to make potions on the fly. Like his coat, the belts and bandoliers were enchanted to protect their contents. Slung over his shoulder was a dimensional bag satchel.

The group Jory ended up with clearly viewed him as a better than nothing option, but they were the most seemingly capable group left. The best people had already formed teams and headed off. The group Jory joined at least had three members from the same team, a trio of leonids who had the luck of arriving on the same tower. They then added Jory and a solid guardian-type named Keane who could conjure heavy armour and a huge shield.

If they weren’t so clearly disgruntled at not getting a better healer, Jory would have been fairly happy. As it was, he was regretting the entire enterprise until they encountered the strange personage of Shade. Jory wanted to take him up on his offer to explain the place they found themselves, but the rest of his group were eager to press on. The three leonids all chose courage, while Jory and Keane chose wisdom.

The lesser miracle potion Shade gave him was an object of fascination for Jory, who had an essence ability that allowed him to determine its effects. His intention was to take it

back to his workshop and see what he could learn from it. He wouldn't be able to reproduce it from a sample, but he had no doubt that anything he could glean from it would be invaluable.

Of the leonids, the leader was named Laramie. He and his fellows were in no rush to reach the centre of the city, more interested in the search for treasures. Every building they spotted that looked mostly intact was a prime target.

Jory was initially annoyed but was forced to acknowledge their choice was a good one as they dug out more than a few worthwhile finds. The advantage of magical items was that they stood out, having withstood the passage of time better than ordinary objects.

The leonids gave themselves first pick, but otherwise distributed the loot evenly. They found a magical box of unknown purpose, a magical staff that Jory claimed, some leather armguards and no less than four awakening stones. They were mostly commons, but the plant, snake and earth awakening stones were all desirable enough to sell well. The one rare stone, an awakening stone of ruin, would sell the best though, inevitably ending up in Laramie's possession.

Jory's essence ability that identified items revealed the properties of each, aside from the magical box that eluded his ability's power. All it revealed was the name of the item which was, appropriately enough, mystery box. Jory could have used his ability to undersell the value of the rare awakening stone but his ethical nature never led him to even consider it. He was satisfied enough with the loot sharing that he was happy to continue on.

Trouble came when they searched what turned out to be a sprawling, multistorey alchemy workshop. Even with the expansive renovations on his own workshop and the dilapidated nature of the building, Jory couldn't help but be envious. He even managed to dig out a few magical alchemy tools that found their way into his dimensional bag. The others didn't begrudge him as they would be hard to sell and gave them an excuse to cut him out of the next round of loot. They told him that anything alchemy related was all his. This lasted until Jory's honest nature caused him to reveal a discovery.

Inside a magical cabinet sealed to protect the contents from the elements, Jory found a whole catalogue of alchemical formulas. Many were out of date compared to superior modern equivalents, or used ingredients too expensive or rare for what the potions did. There were a few gems amongst them, however, and one huge prize. The requirements and ingredients were outrageous in both rarity and price, but there was a complete formula

for the lesser miracle potion Shade had given him. When he revealed this fact, Laramie immediately demanded he hand it over.

“You said everything alchemy-related was mine,” Jory told them.

“That was before you found something so valuable,” Laramie said. “Hand it over.”

“You three have already been taking the most valuable goods for yourselves,” the heavily-armoured shield-bearer said. “We agreed he could have the alchemy stuff, so you should stick to the deal you made.”

He had been quietly stewing over what he saw as unfair loot distribution and used their move on Jory as a chance to push the issue. They were still in the alchemy building, in a large room once used for the preparation of alchemical components, with a series of long benches dividing the room.

“The deal has changed,” Laramie said.

Jory watched as the two men squared off.

“Let’s just keep talking,” Jory said. “There are monsters enough out there, without us fighting one another.”

“There’s no need to fight,” Keane said, the big man’s eyes not leaving Laramie. “They just have to give you what they promised.”

“I promise I’ll put a hole right through that helmet if you don’t back off,” Laramie said. The Leonids were all-powerful damage dealers.

The three squared off against one, with Jory in the background, his calls for de-escalation going unheeded. The tension ramped until one of the three finally twitched, lashing out with a conjured whip of fire. The other two were only a beat behind, their coordination proving too much of an onslaught for Keane.

His defensive powers were strong but it was three against one, with the trio's practised teamwork overwhelming the protector. He held out briefly under a terrifying barrage as Jory yelled at them to stop, but soon he fell to the ground. Most adventurers would have died but Keane was only debilitated, his wounded flesh already starting to heal itself. Laramie turned his attention back to Jory.

“I’ll hand it over,” Jory said. “Just take it and go while I look after him.”

“You had your chance,” Laramie said. “Now you’re going to be unfortunate victims of the many dangers, here.”

“You don’t need to-”

Jory’s fruitless words were cut off by a spear made of solid stone being launched at him. To his surprise, a bubble-shield snapped up around him, disappearing again as it absorbed the spear’s attack.

“There’s no reasoning with some people,” Neil Davone said, stepping into the room. A golem made of dull glass stepped in ahead of him, Neil’s chrysalis golem summon put itself between the trio and Neil, who grabbed Jory and yanked him behind a bench. “Time to go, Jory.”

“Davone? I’m not leaving that guy to them,” Jory said, pointing at Keane, whose sprawled feet they could just see past the edge of the bench.

“Don’t fight it, Jory,” Laramie called out. “Your friend isn’t going to save you.”

“The hell I’m not,” Neil told Jory with quiet insistence. “I can’t do anything about the guy on the ground, though, unless you have some awesome power that will let you fight all those guys by yourself.”

Jory grimaced.

“If that’s what it takes. The after-effects are bad, though, so you’ll have to take care of me.”

“Wait, you seriously have something like that?”

“Yes,” Jory said soberly. “I don’t like to use it, though.”

“I think now might be the time you’ve been saving it for,” Neil said.

Jory held his hands out and vials started floating out of their loops on his belt, floating in the air. The vials started opening, spilling their contents into the air. Instead of dropping to the ground, they flowed together into a sphere of liquid that grew darker as each new ingredient was added. As they did, Jory pulled off his coat and unbuckled his belts and bandoliers, even as more vials flew out of them to disgorge their contents into the air.

Attacks were now lancing into the glass golem, chunks shattering off it as they did. With every piece of damage, runes were engraved onto its surface. It didn’t fight back, remaining steadfastly planted between its attackers and Neil.

“I thought it was a really bad idea to mix potions like that,” Neil said, watching all the liquids and powers from the vials splash together in front of them.

“It is,” Jory said.

“So why are you doing it?”

“To show those idiots what happens when you push an alchemist into using a very bad idea.”

The liquid started streaming into Jory’s waiting mouth. Immediately, from the head down, Jory’s body started grossly distending. His whole body grew, his skin turning a patchy mishmash of sickly yellow, purple, blue and green. His hair fell out and his head bulged out like the rest of his body, now too large to hide behind the bench. He was unrecognisable as Jory, now just a monster of muscle.

A bolt of flame struck him, releasing a stench of acrid chemicals and burning flesh, which Jory didn't seem to notice. A stone spear pierced his torso, which he dismissively yanked out, throwing it back with the force of a ballista. Then he picked up the bench in front of him and threw that too, despite it being affixed to the floor. Accompanied by the sound of shattering tiles, he ripping it right off the floor and hurled it at the leonids.

Neil watched the process with horrified fascination. The three adventurers scrambled out the door on the other side of the room. Monster Jory moved after them in a lumbering pursuit but not at a pace likely to catch them.

Jason led Sophie through the building. Day had turned to night as Sophie worked to heal herself, Jason wondering how the sun worked in the astral space. Her arm wasn't fully recovered but she had control over it again and her hand looked like a hand instead of a potato someone had taken to with a hammer. She couldn't see in the dark like Jason, so she had a glow-stone floating over her head.

"Did you find anything, searching the building?" she asked.

"I did," Jason said. "I found an armoury with a couple of magic weapons, although they were fairly mediocre. More importantly, I found an awakening stone."

"You did?"

"It's an uncommon one," he said. "Awakening stone of preparation. I know the others said to just collect what you can so you can choose which ones to use after, but maybe you could use just one."

"You think I should?"

"Probably not, but I would. I can do the ritual in the morning if you like. Give it some thought, overnight."

They reached where Jason had set up the aura tent, which would mask their presence from most monsters. He had also set up some alarm rituals, just in case. It was on the top floor of the building, close to the steps leading up to the roof.

"I only set up the one tent," he said, "but I can put the other one up if you want."

"It's fine," Sophie said. "Just know that if you get handsy, you aren't getting those hands back."

Chapter 160: Giving People Choices

Sophie awoke to enticing breakfast smells. She was aching and tired, her damaged arm having given her a restless night. Only in the last few hours did she snatch away some precious, uninterrupted slumber. She crawled delicately out of the tent and followed the smells up a stone stairwell and onto a flat roof. Jason had set out a folding camp table and pair of chairs, one of which he was sitting in.

“Morning,” he greeted her. “Join me?”

He gestured at the other chair with a fork, on the end of which was skewered a piece of sausage. The rest of the sausage was on a plate in front of him, along with poached eggs and hot, buttered toast. As she sat down, he pulled a second plate of food from his inventory, as fresh and hot as the moment he put it there. A pitcher of juice was already out, Jason filling an empty glass to match his own.

“This is surreal,” Sophie said. “I can more or less accept the whole adventuring life. Magic powers, alternate dimensions, astral spaces. Monsters, cultists, even an ancient order of assassins. Yet somehow, seeing you sitting in the middle of it all, comfortably eating breakfast is just too much.”

“Believe it or not, you aren’t the first woman to tell me I was too much.”

“Oh, I believe it,” she said and took a sip of juice. “That’s really good.”

“It’s a blend of delta fruits. I bought a bunch of it from Arash.”

“The guy who sells juice from a cart and keeps calling you a heretic?”

“That’s the one.”

“So when you making preparations to enter this unexplored astral space full of unknown dangers, you went with picnic furniture, plates of hot breakfast and pitchers of fruit juice.”

“Life isn’t for surviving, Wexler. Life is for living.”

Jason had set up the table to overlook the street below. The building was quite high, as were many of the other nearby buildings. It turned the overgrown boulevard they had been walking down into something of a jungle canyon. Jason looked it over with a smile as he sipped at his juice.

“You really like this, don’t you?” Sophie asked him.

“I do,” he said. “I get what you mean about everything being crazy but my advice to you is to surrender to it. I know you’ve spent a lot of time wondering why I helped you so much when I could have gotten you out of the city and been done with it. It wasn’t long ago that I was the one sitting at a table with a more experienced adventurer, no idea what lay

ahead and wondering what to do. He helped me realise that I had a chance to start things fresh. To become the person I wanted to be.”

He smiled in reminiscence.

“Give yourself over to the experience, Wexler. This is your chance to take control. The river may be raging but you’ll be amazed how fast you go working with the flow, instead of against it.”

“That seems strange, coming from you,” she said. “I’ve never met a person who went more against the flow in my life.”

“It’s about picking your moments,” Jason said. “I came into this world with the naivety of someone who lived his life in safety. I’ve had a lot of illusions shattered, about the world and about myself. But sometimes when the world tries to bend you, you have to stand straight until one of you breaks.”

“You think the world will break before you do?”

“Probably not. But there’s no chance if I don’t try. I decided early on that with my second chance, the one regret I would never have is that I never tried. So I do the things that feel right. When I heard about your situation, I felt for you and Belinda. I know what it’s like to be in an untenable situation. I found friends to guide me out. I know Jory wanted to help you, so I gave the help I had. Now I’m giving you the advice I received. Take this chance to be who you want to be.”

“And if I don’t know who that is?”

“You do, on some level. Just do what feels right until you figure it out. It’s what I’ve been doing and I don’t regret any of it, mistakes and all.”

He gestured at the astral space around the with his fork.

“In my old life, I never had the chance to visit places like this. Yes, this world has brought its share of challenges, but facing those challenges has been more fulfilling than anything in my old life. At some point, I’ll be going back to my world but I’m not going to put this world behind me when I do. There’s a means to travel between worlds and I’m going to find it.”

“How?”

“I’ve been talking with Clive, him being the expert. These builder cultists seem to have more advanced astral magic than this world does. Clive thinks they have some means of crossing dimensional boundaries that doesn’t require a diamond ranker, or they wouldn’t have so many agents here to be active all over the world. If I can get a hold of their magic, it may well put me on the right path, if not deliver what I need on a platter.”

“A way home.”

“No,” Jason said. “A way here. I’ve been told that I will be going home, sooner or later. I can’t help but feel that I need to go back and deal with the things I left behind. Once I have, though, I’m coming back to this world, even if that trip is one way. My old world is my past, and while I’m compelled to settle that past, this world is my future.”

“And if you can’t find a way back?”

“The thing I realised when I truly came to accept that magic is real is that the impossible is just a limitation I put on my own thinking. If you have the time and the resolve, you can do just about anything. But you already know that.”

“I do?”

“Of course you do. You were in an awful position. Caught between two crime lords and a powerful aristocrat, with none of the connections and power I’ve been enjoying since coming to this world. All you had was a loyal friend. Most people would have capitulated. Found the least awful path and accepted their fate. Not you and not Belinda. You came up with a plan and you threw yourselves into it.”

“It probably wouldn’t have worked, even without your interference.”

“But it could have and you went for it. You saw that glimpse of light that most other people would have dismissed as unreachable and you reached for it. I really admire that.”

He held his glass up in a casual salute.

“Thank you,” she said uncertainly, shifting in her chair. “I don’t... not a lot of people look at me for who I am. My whole life, men have looked at me like an animal they need to break in.”

Jason nodded.

“I have this philosophy in life,” he said. “My brother always had this knack for fitting in. For becoming what he needed to be, but I can’t do that. Every time I tried I ended up losing it and doing something crazy and self-destructive. So, I decided early on that I was going to be who I am and people could take it or leave it. Like me or hate me, I’ll take passion over ambivalence. It lets me know who to avoid and who to be friends with. It makes for a better life.”

“But a lot of times you must have to deal with people who don’t like you.”

“Of course,” Jason said. “I’m from a whole other world, so people were always going to find me strange. I just play that up sometimes to disorient them a bit. If you need to tip someone over, it helps to unbalance them first.”

“I don’t know I entirely believe that,” she said.

“Oh?”

“I’ve been watching you and I’m willing to bet you’re strange, even where you come from. If it was all an act, you wouldn’t be the same around your friends as your enemies.”

“It’s not an act,” Jason said. “I told you that I’m just being who I am and people can take it or leave it. I just crank it up or dial it back a bit for any given situation.”

“And that works?”

“When you take a very specific approach to things, the way I do, you have to accept that some people will respond to it and others will reject it wholesale. It’s a numbers game and you have to accept that a certain number of people are going to tell you to sod off. Some people like what I’m selling, others can’t stand it. I work with the ones that do and don’t bother with the ones that don’t.”

“It sounds like you’re just making excuses for doing whatever you like,” Sophie said.

“Oh, I’m absolutely doing that,” Jason said. “I told you it’s a life philosophy. I’ve just found out how to make it work.”

“By manipulating people.”

“You say that like we don’t all do it every day. We all put up fronts, adjust who we are, how much we show of ourselves to the different people around us. I just do it more consciously than most. Take Neil, for example. When I went to recruit him, I could have taken a different approach. Presented something more universally appealing to get him on board. Instead, I showed him who I was, cranked up a bit to make the point. I figured he was more likely to turn us down than join but I didn’t want the best person we could find for our team; I wanted the best fit. So I presented a certain version of myself, not to get him on board but to help him decide if the place he wanted to be was with us.”

“You gave me that choice too, didn’t you? Join your merry band of misfits or vanish into some distant land to start over.”

“I like giving people choices.”

“That’s because you like control. If you’re the one giving the choices, you get to decide what the choices are. Otherwise, people might go finding their own options that don’t fit your narrative.”

Jason chuckled, not denying it.

“How’s the arm?” he asked.

“Not fighting strength but a couple more hours using my meditation power should do it.”

“So now you’ve experienced the power of a bronze-rank monster,” Jason said.

“According to Rufus, a good adventurer should be able to handle monsters one rank up, so long as the match-up is good. Meaning only pick fights with the big ones when your powers counter theirs.”

They started discussing the fight, their teamwork in confusing the unintelligent monster to keep it stuck in the doorway. They discussed what they did well, what could

have been improved. Jason was impressed with Sophie's ability to break down the fight, find the errors and look at how to correct them.

"My big mistake," Jason said, "was getting into a mindset of my powers not working on it. My execute power would have worked just fine but I'd fallen into the trap of dismissing the effectiveness of my abilities. When I was first training, one of the things Rufus said was to think about what every ability can do and how to use each one effectively in a situation."

"My mistake was trying to counter such an obviously powerful attack," Sophie said. "I should have hit you instead."

"What?" Jason asked.

"I could have knocked you out of the way," she said.

"Oh, right."

After breakfast, Jason started packing everything into his inventory.

"Did you decide if you wanted to use that awakening stone?" Jason asked.

"I don't think I will," Sophie said. "I don't think this is the best situation to break-in a completely new power."

"That's sensible."

Jason continued packing up. Sophie didn't have a dimensional bag of her own, yet. She wanted something that wouldn't impede her very mobile fighting style, much like Emir's dimensional storage jacket. Something like that was hard to find, locally. So, for the moment, she was relying on Jason the way Gary and Rufus had done with Farrah.

Sophie settled into a meditation pose as Jason went downstairs. Pausing at the top of the stairwell, he called out to Sophie.

"Hey, Wexler."

"What?"

"Thanks for stopping my head from getting smeared across the floor."

He went down the stairs before she could reply. He negated the alarm rituals he put in place and packed up the aura tent. Then he went up and joined Sophie, who had settled herself on the edge of the roof. They sat, meditating side by side. Eventually, a smile crept over Jason's mouth as he experienced a breakthrough.

-
- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 8 (100%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 9 (00%).
-

As a perception power, midnight eyes was the ability Jason was always using and for this reason, it had advanced the most quickly. Like his other abilities, though, it had slowed

to a crawl as it drew closer to reaching bronze rank. Despite not being a big part of the fight, taking on a bronze-rank monster had helped it edge up the wall.

After almost two hours, Sophie declared her arm fully restored. To test it, she and Jason did some sparring on the open space of the roof. Sophie had been trained hard since becoming an adventurer but it was not a one-way street. Having someone with her skill who understood his style better than he did was immensely useful for Jason. She had pushed him to use it not just for escapes and sneak attacks but to become stronger in a straight-up fight.

Before he ever met Sophie, Jason had already been working on a deceptive style that baited out the enemy. What Sophie had pointed out was that Jason was massively wasting what could be one of his best combat abilities: his cloak. Because it only had physical substance when he wanted, it could obscure his movements without obstructing them. What's more, the ability to be real or insubstantial at will offered powerful utility.

Using his cloak to hide his stance, Jason feinted a forward motion, only to duck back as Sophie threw out a fist to counter and wrap her arm in his cloak. He yanked her forward, pulling her arm out of the way as he stepped in with a rising knee. She couldn't see it coming but anticipated the move, halting Jason's rising knee with a leg block before it gathered force. She yanked back on her arm and he let the cloak become insubstantial. Without the resistance she used too much force, briefly stumbling back. It was only a moment of lost balance but Jason moved in to capitalise.

Soon after, Jason was sprawled face down on the rooftop.

"You did well," Sophie said. "You're improving."

"Then why does it feel like I'm getting worse?" he groaned.

"You're getting better but I'm also learning how you fight," she said. "Given that I know your style and have been doing this a lot longer, it only makes sense that I'll improve against you faster than you do against me."

"Doesn't that mean you should take it easy on me?" he asked as he pushed himself to his feet.

"Probably," she acknowledged. "Something about hitting you repeatedly is really satisfying, though."

"Thanks," he said, disgruntled look. "I'm glad you can use me for your personal gratification."

He started stripping off his clothes, taking out some healing unguent to rub into the muscles Sophie had tenderised.

"You're very skinny she said, unashamedly looking him over as he stood there in his boxer shorts."

“Are you kidding?” Jason asked, looking himself over. “I’ve totally filled out. I used to be way skinnier than this.”

“You did? Do come from a race of twig people?”

“No!”

“You seem very defensive,” she said. “You’re a twig person, aren’t you?”

“I’m not a twig person! I’m a regular person!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Yeah, well, you aren’t so great, with your...”

He waved his arm up and down at her lithe body, her caramel skin set off by the matching silver of her eyes and hair.

“...how is that fair,” he finished limply. “I’m going to put my clothes back on now.”

“What are those things on your shorts?”

“Love hearts,” Jason said.

“That’s not what a heart looks like.”

“How do you know what a heart looks like?” Jason asked. “You don’t strike me as someone who took lessons on internal anatomy.”

“I did, after a fashion,” she said. “A few years back, during my first time in the fighting pits, there was a guy who would rip people’s hearts out and eat them. He had some power where it made him stronger.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“And they let him participate?”

“It got the crowd riled up.”

“They surely wouldn’t just let that go on, would they?”

“The idea was to build up tension,” she said. “They threw in scrubs to fight him, get some interest in the lower card fight before putting him up against real fighters. Kind of a ‘who can take down the monster’ situation.”

“So he was killed in the arena?”

“No, the Adventure Society came in and did it. Turns out they don’t like essence abilities that require you to eat people’s hearts.”

Chapter 161: A Well-Informed Man

The City of Fallen Echoes was teeming with monsters. On their second day, Jason and Sophie had an encounter almost hourly as they made their way. Sometimes they followed streets, other times they went across rooftops. Either way, there was no shortage of monsters willing to come after them.

There were similarities between the jungle-covered city and the delta where they usually hunted monsters, with the muggy heat and the lush plant life. The monsters they encountered were similar, if not the same. They fought snake monsters, spider monsters and, especially unpleasant, a snake-spider the size of a transit van that slithered on its hairy abdomen and had eight snake heads instead of limbs.

The big difference between fighting monsters in the delta was in numbers. The magically-saturated astral space produced far more monsters than the outside world. Jason and Sophie had already realised this, but as they surveilled their potential next encounter, the point was really rammed home.

Crouched on a rooftop, Jason and Sophie looked down at a teeming mass of margolls. They had both handled the dog-headed humanoids in the past, but they were looking at a throng of monsters four times the size of a normal pack.

"I count forty-one," Jason said quietly. From six storeys up they had a good vantage. There was little breeze to carry their scent and the poor eyesight of the creatures made being spotted unlikely. The ravenous creatures had just taken down a smaller group of monsters and were loudly feasting on the bodies, jostling for position around the corpses.

"That was my count, too," Sophie said. "What do you think?"

"Honestly? I want to try it. We have to do it right, though. If we just fight them on the street they'll overrun us."

"You're looking at that building, across the way?"

"I am," Jason said. "We complicate the environment. Bottlenecks, escape paths. Bunch them up until their numbers help us more than hurt us."

"How do you want to lure them?" Sophie asked.

"They're aggressive, relentless and not all that bright. I say we just drop down and run straight in. They'll chase us all through the building and we escape from the roof if it gets too much."

"Split up or stick together?" she asked.

"Lady's choice."

“Split up. I’ll do better finding a choke point and holding my ground, while you’ll do better on the move.”

“Sounds good,” Jason said. “Just make sure you always have an exit and keep in touch through the voice chat. Calculate your risk.”

They leapt off the building, drifting over the street to land in front of the one they had chosen on the other side. The margolls smelled them before they landed and were already looking around as they touched down and rushed for the building. They dashed through the open doorway into darkness, Jason immediately vanishing as Sophie made for a set of stone stairs that rose along one wall. Everything else in the large room had long since rotted away, except vines and mushrooms that thrived in shadows more than the bright sun outside.

Stopping halfway up the stairs, Sophie turned and began a slow, fighting retreat. The margolls were forced to face her two at a time, the rest stuck crowding behind. She fearlessly met the attack of their huge claws, and powerful jaws, trusting her powers to shield whatever body part she used to block. She retaliated with brutal punches and savage kicks, sending crippled margolls tumbling off the side of the stairs. When she bought herself some room she would send a wind blade slicing its way down the stairs, the monsters shoving for position had no space to dodge.

The margolls gathered at the bottom of the stairs howled their frustration as they pushed each other in the race for prey. Some swiped at each other with their wicked claws as they fought for access to the stairs, others tried climbing the vines growing on the side of the stairs. The dark interior of the building was not as overgrown as the exterior, but there was growth enough that some of them eventually made their way up. Sophie kicked them back down as their heads popped up over the side of the stairs but it drew her attention from the monsters in front of her. Unwilling to let herself be flanked, she backed up the stairs to the next level, where she fled in search of a new bottleneck.

In the large room, the margolls left at the back started to notice something wrong. They were catching snatches of a scent that vanished as quickly as it appeared. They noticed one of their number, dead on the ground, far from the commotion of where the woman was kicking them back down the stairs. A second backline margoll fell dead with no more sound than its body hitting the ground and a third soon followed.

Margolls had poor eyesight, relying much more on their sense of smell. Having just come in out of the bright sun, their vision was all the worse. Several more of their number were silently slain before they noticed the dark figure moving amongst them, appearing and disappearing just as quickly.

The monsters milled in confusion. Their baseline aggression, their large numbers in a relatively tight space and the frustration of enemies they couldn't pin down were becoming a toxic brew as some of them started turning on one another. If it weren't for Sophie being forced to fall back, letting the monsters vent up the stairs in pursuit, the margolls may well have killed each other.

Sometime later, Sophie and Jason were on the rooftop, fighting the last of the margolls. Despite having their numbers whittled down as they pursued the pair through the building, the savage monsters never faltered in their furious assault until the last of them had fallen. Jason and Sophie then made their way down through the building, finishing off those too crippled to continue the chase. Jason touched each one to tag it for looting.

➤ **Would you like to loot [Margoll]?**

He would only accept once they were away from the bodies and the stink they would produce as they dissolved. As they scoured the building, Jason made a pleasant discovery. A dark cube lay in an alcove under a stairwell, in a place that the light outside would never reach. If it weren't for his ability to see in the dark, he would have never seen it at all.

Item: [Dark Essence] (unranked, uncommon)

Manifested essence of darkness (consumable, essence).

- **Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.**
 - **Effect: Imbues 1 awakened dark essence ability and 4 unawakened dark essence abilities.**
 - **You have absorbed 4/4 essences.**
 - **You do not meet the requirements to use this item.**
-

"Nostalgic," he mused to himself.

"What's that?" Sophie asked, walking up to him.

"I found an essence," Jason said. "It's a dark essence, which was my first."

"Should go for a good price, right?"

"It should," Jason said. "It's only uncommon and there'll probably be a glut of essences on the market after all this, but dark is a popular one. It has great utility and is the last word in stealth essences. You should take it when we split up the loot after all this

is done. The essences Belinda wants are all common, so you can probably trade this for two of them, or at least the magic essence and some solid awakening stones.”

They went out on the street, in front of the building, before Jason accepted all the loot messages. Soon, rainbow smoke was streaming out of windows from the plume rising up of the building generated by all 41 bodies being converted at once.

-
- 41 [Monster Cores (Iron)] have been added to your inventory.
 - 410 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 60 [Dog Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Myriad Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.
-
- 410 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 60 [Dog Quintessence Gems] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 10 [Myriad Quintessence Gems] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
-

Sophie stepped back, her loot-dodge timing having improved enough that the three bags fell to the ground in front of her.

“So, your power conjured the bags, right?” she asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. “As I understand it, a looting power like mine or Neil’s takes the magic from the monster as it merges with the ambient magic and makes items with it. Usually magical manifestations like spirit coins or these quintessence gems we just got, but sometimes items.”

“Belinda said Clive spent a whole day examining one of those bags to see if there was anything special about it.”

“That does sound like him,” Jason said.

Sophie opened up one of the bags, taking out a quintessence gem to examine. It was like a diamond, almost spherical but covered in tiny facets.

Item: [Myriad Quintessence] (iron rank, legendary)
Manifested essence of multiplicity. (crafting material, essence).

- Effect: Crafting material for items with multiplicative attributes.
-

“Pretty,” Jason said as she held it up for him to see. It caught the bright sunlight, refracting rainbow colours.

“Legendary rarity,” she said. “Should be valuable, right?”

“I imagine so,” Jason said. “The myriad essence is legendary, too. Emily, the archer from Beth Cavendish’s team has it.”

“She’s the celestine?” Sophie asked.

“That’s right.”

Sophie dropped the gem back into the bag and handed her loot to Jason for storage. He took out a notebook and recorded all the loot for splitting up later. As he wrote in it, Sophie craned her head back to watch the rainbow smoke from more than forty monsters rising up from the building.

“All those monsters,” she said. “It’s like this place has a monster surge going on.”

“It essentially does,” Jason said, putting his notebook away. “A monster surge is a weeks-long increase in magical saturation.”

“You haven’t experienced one, right?” she asked. “They don’t have them in your world?”

“We don’t have monsters at all,” Jason said. “I’ve only been learning about how they work studying astral magic with Clive. I hope he’s doing alright.”

Clive had become worried once he realised that none of his team had arrived with him through the archway. As people started forming makeshift teams, he didn’t expect to find anyone looking for his eclectic selection of powers. His unconventional abilities worked best when used in conjunction with people who knew and were prepared for them. A hastily-formed team would do better with a ranged attacker with straightforward powers that they could readily adapt to.

He considered pulling a Jason and “adjusting” the perspective through which he described his abilities but immediately dismissed the idea. Worse than no one wanting him on their team would be getting abandoned in the middle of a monster-infested city for misrepresenting what he had to contribute.

One of the people present had the exact opposite problem. He wasn’t a large man, his slight physique reminding Clive of Jason. If the man’s blond hair and fair skin hadn’t marked him as one of the foreign adventurers, the impressive equipment Clive recognised did. Once equipment passed a certain level of expense, it started to move from ostentatious back to unremarkable, and this man’s equipment looked very unremarkable indeed. Clive knew it to be the kind of expensive that was wasted on iron-rank gear unless you had so much money to throw around it was laughable.

The man looked to be wearing light and simple clothes, but Clive picked out the subtle signs in the way the cloth draped that signalled incredibly powerful reinforcement magic. It was the kind of armour favoured by adventurers with mobility and high-skill power sets. He had a sword at his hip, with a ring at the top of the scabbard that most would

dismiss as part of the design. Clive recognised it as a magic item that would impart extra damage to the first strike after drawing the blade. The man's jacket was made of supple leather, protective without being constrictive. Clive knew from the odd way it conformed to the body shape underneath that it was a dimensional jacket, much like that used by Emir Bahadir.

The other foreign adventurers clearly knew who he was, all clamouring to form a team with him. To Clive's surprise, the man's eyes picked him out. Clive watched as the man walked away from the people inviting him to their groups and straight over to Clive.

"You're Clive Standish," the man said.

"That's right," Clive said. "I'm not sure who you are but you're wearing more expensive gear than I've seen on a bronze ranker."

The man let out a friendly chuckle.

"Which means either someone didn't trust me to survive," he said, "or thinks I'm worth it."

"You're worth it," Clive said. "If someone doesn't have the skill, you spend that money very differently."

The man laughed again and held out his hand for Clive to shake.

"I'm Valdis. You live up to your reputation, Mr Standish."

"Clive is fine," Clive said. "I have a reputation?"

"I like to keep informed. The authorities in Greenstone know a lot more about the Builder cult than most provincial areas and your contributions have been a very large part of that. Word just hasn't gotten around yet because of how closely information is being held, right now."

"But not from you, it seems," Clive said.

"My father has some small standing overseas, which affords me a little more influence than I really deserve."

"My father's an eel farmer, which affords me more long, slimy fish than I really want."

Valdis laughed once more, clearly more comfortable with their circumstances than most of the adventurers present. Clive was noticing the unhappy looks from the adventurers who had been courting Valdis' attention.

"Would you like to form a group with me, Clive?"

"I should warn you," Clive said, "my abilities can be a bit complicated. My damage comes in bursts and a lot of my abilities require anticipation and set up."

"Your confluence is the karmic essence, if I recall correctly, yes?"

“Yes,” Clive said. “You really do like to keep informed. I have some retributive damage buffs and a lot of mana recovery. Mostly I attack with staves and wands but I have a big, versatile attack spell.”

“I know someone with the karmic essence,” Valdis said. “She says that judgement and timing are the keys to success.”

“I’d have to agree,” Clive said.

“I’m a classic swordsman myself; sword, swift, adept, master. More mana-intensive abilities than you’d expect with that combo, though, so I’ll look forward to that mana recovery you mentioned. Assuming you want to join me.”

“Definitely,” Clive said.

“Great,” Valdis said, rubbing his hands together as he turned his attention to the group listening in on them. “Let’s find ourselves some team members.”

Chapter 162: The Danger is Us

In the time they had spent allowing Sophie to recover, some other groups had moved deeper into the city. They started seeing traces of that as they went, the plants and building showings traces of essence abilities having been used on them. They knew they weren't far behind another group when they found monsters that had yet to dissolve into smoke.

"Can you loot them?" Sophie asked.

"Probably not," Jason said, touching a finger to the dead monster.

➤ This monster kill was not yours. You are unable to loot this monster.

"Nope," Jason said. "It only lets me loot when the killer is me or someone in my party."

"Does Neil's ability have that restriction?"

"Not exactly, but the monster has to die inside his aura, so it works out about the same."

"Should we veer off our straight line?" Sophie asked. "We aren't going to get much training in if all the monsters we find are dead."

"May as well," Jason said. "So long as we're going more or less the right way, it should be fine."

The pair started finding their most effective tactical patterns as days passed and they encountered monsters almost hourly. It was mostly some variation on Sophie grabbing the monsters' attention while Jason moved into flank. Sometimes she would lead them around, other times standing her ground or staging running fights through buildings.

Every day in the city was like weeks of monster hunting outside it, with both Jason and Sophie unrelenting in the hunt. For Sophie, it was a chance to grab at power, both the share with Belinda and to give herself freedom from anyone who tried to control her fate.

For Jason, it was the culmination of a long wait. He had been putting off advancement and getting more awakening stones in the anticipation of Emir's grand event. He was now determined to complete his power set with the best awakening stones he could find. If nothing else, he was determined to get the necrotic damage affliction that had been absent from his kit from the beginning. Rufus kept telling him it would come, but with each new awakening stone it had remained elusive.

As the days passed, they also encountered other adventurers. None were people they knew well, if at all, but the Greenstone adventurers tended to recognise Jason, or at least his cloak. The encounters ranged from the friendly to the wary, with the foreign adventurers being especially careful.

From the brief interactions, Jason and Sophie realised the foreign adventurers were most wary of each other, with concern over rivals trying to remove the competition directly. Given that all the groups were now mixed, Jason and Sophie agreed that they were better off out of it and sticking together.

Each night, they would alternate meditating, sleeping and keeping watch. Sleep got the shortest shift, as they both had effective stamina recovery powers that kept them powering forward through the day. Not to say that there wasn't distraction in the downtime.

"What are you doing?" Sophie asked as she crawled, bleary-eyed, out of the aura tent.

"I'm trying to teach Colin to spell," Jason said. The leech collective was laid out in the shape of the word PLURB.

"I think he might be evil after all," Jason said. "He only gets the rude words right."

Their abilities improved rapidly, just the first few days seeing almost every ability Jason had advancing at least a level. His lowest abilities, his conjured dagger and his execute power, advanced twice. Sophie's abilities advanced even faster, having started off lower.

On the fifth day, they once again encountered an adventurer, but this one was dead. Sophie frowned as she crouched down to examine the body. He was a male leonid, much of his fur burned off in patches matching localised scorch marks on his clothes and skin.

"I've seen this before," she said. "Bodies, left like this."

"A monster you've seen?"

"No," she said. "A person. There's an arena fighter they call fire fist. One essence, one ability, like me. You can guess what it is from the name. He liked to play with his opponents; take his time, killing them. This is what it looked like when he did."

"You think someone did what I did, with you? Gave him the essences to become an adventurer?"

"I doubt it," she said. "The last I saw of him was when I left him dangling from a cage by his broken arms. People aren't inclined to lift up losers."

"You never actually met Thadwick Mercer, did you? I see your point, though. Maybe it was a monster with fire powers."

“I don’t think so,” Sophie said. “Enough adventurers are worried about people thinning out the competition that it’s likely a real concern. Also, I’m not sure this is an environment likely to produce fire monsters. Plus, I think this body has been stripped of magic items. The boots are gone and these clothes are under-armour padding. There isn’t any magic jewellery and no dimensional bag.”

“Fair points,” Jason said. “If he was a Greenstone adventurer, he might have just been poor. I don’t think there were any Greenstone participants who were leonids, though. They were all in the foreign group and the worst of them were equipped as well as the best local.”

“Whether a monster or a person did this,” Sophie said, “this man was mostly likely in a group. If his companions didn’t take him, they were either driven off or killed. We should look for more bodies.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Let’s hope we don’t find any.”

Every adventurer with a storage space or dimensional bag was carrying a number of specialised caskets for storing corpses. The Adventure Society, in acknowledgement of the risks the iron-rankers faced, had placed a reward for anyone who retrieved the remains of the fallen. The reward had been high to incentivise the return of the dead but not so high as to incentivise murder for profit.

They found a second dead leonid out on the street and a third leonid, even worse for wear than the others, in a nearby building.

“This was definitely torture,” Sophie said as they crouched over the third corpse. “There aren’t any big burns like with the other body. Whoever did this took their time.”

“Look at bruising on the wrists and ankles,” Jason said. “They were tied up. The neck, too, but not as bad. Whatever was around it was padded. Like a suppression collar.”

He stood up, frowning and Sophie did the same.

“They took this man’s powers, tied him up and then tortured him,” Jason said. “This wasn’t just taking out the competition. Whoever did this wanted something. Information?”

“There’s no way to know what the foreign adventurers have going on between them,” Sophie said. “I know you like to get your head around things but don’t get distracted by something we don’t have enough information about. For all we know, it could just be sadists getting their thrills or some weird leonid hater.”

Jason nodded. “You’re right. This is an easy place to get away with blaming the deaths on misadventure.”

“So, what do we do?” Sophie asked.

“We put him in a casket,” Jason said, “then we see if there are any more before we keep going. It’s not like we weren’t being cautious already.”

“And if whoever did this tries to do it to us? Trying to capture them and lug them around why we finish the trials and take them back won’t work.”

“No, it won’t,” Jason said. “Rufus once told me that when you’re out on an adventure, sometimes all the justice you get is putting the other guy down. So, if we get attacked, we put them down. All the way down.”

“Good,” Sophie said. “I was a little worried you’d want to try some half-measure that would put us in danger.”

“No,” Jason said grimly. “We need to make sure that the danger is us.”

The giant lizard monster lunged at Humphrey, its huge jaws open wide. Humphrey opened his own mouth in turn, fire blasting from it into the monster’s gaping maw. It wasn’t critical damage to the bronze-rank monster but the flame licking the inside of its mouth made it flinch back and snap its mouth shut. This exposed the rest of its face and Humphrey stepped forward, swinging his most powerful special attack into the side of the monster’s head, cracking bone and bursting one huge eye.

It was the turning point in the fight, the rest of the group pouring attacks into the staggered monster until it fell still.

“Impressive as expected, from Danielle Geller’s son,” Lowell said.

Lowell was one of the foreign adventurers and had the good fortune to have four of his six team members arrive on the same tower. Humphrey had joined them for the journey to the centre of the city where he could rejoin his own team but Lowell had other ideas.

“I know you have some affection for that team of locals you put together,” Lowell said, “but clearly you’re a good fit with us.”

“I’m quite happy with my current team,” Humphrey said coldly. His normal social graces were being steadily eroded by Lowell’s constant efforts at recruitment, which had moved from the oblique to the direct.

“I understand that,” Lowell said, “but to be frank, your time is wasted with the inferior team.”

“Agreed,” Humphrey snarled. “But I was separated from them by the archway, so I’ll have to make do.”

“Wait, what?” Lowell asked, his smarmy veneer cracking. “You think some grab-bag of provincials is better than us?”

“Actually,” Carly interjected, “he’s just running out of patience with you disrespecting his team. Sorry about Lowell, Humphrey. He’s a good guy but he has trouble seeing things from other people’s perspectives. He gets an idea in his head and it’s hard to dislodge.”

“Carly’s right,” Hampstead agreed. “If I was Geller, I’d have already dislodged your whole damn head, Lowell.”

“It’s fine,” Humphrey said. “Let’s just keep moving.”

Outside the astral space, Emir’s cloud palace was sitting on the lake. Rufus was with his parents, who were strongarming him into relaxing properly for the first time since Farrah died. They recruited Farrah’s parents just to make sure he had no recourse.

It was morning and they were taking tea with Emir and Constance, looking out over the lake and the picturesque towns and villages around it. The bright, lush greens of the shoreline were an appealingly stark contrast to the desert beyond. There were too many of the small communities to count, around a lake that was practically an inland sea.

“Sky Scar Lake,” Farrah’s mother, Amelia, mused. “I wonder where the name came from.”

“It’s a local legend,” Constance volunteered. “It’s said that people settled this land long ago but angered the gods, who struck them down. The force of the gods’ wrath withered the land, turning fertile ground into desert and producing the hole that became the lake as we see it today.”

“There are elements of truth to that,” Emir said. “There were indeed people who settled here long ago and they were struck down. By the churches, rather than the gods themselves, but still. Of course, the desert and the lake were already here, when this all happened.”

“I’d love to visit some more of those villages,” Amelia said. “The ones nearby have been quite delightful. It would be nice to see some not quite so thrown into a tizzy by the sudden appearance of a giant, floating palace at their doorstep.”

“You wouldn’t know it,” Rufus’ father Gabriel said, “but there is actually a less grandiose form of the palace. I’d bet Emir hasn’t used it since our adventuring days, though, back when we made him use it.”

“I’m hosting a grand event,” Emir said. “It requires grandeur.”

“Emir, you think putting on socks requires grandeur,” Gabriel said.

“That’s because I have exceptional socks,” Emir said. “It’s not my fault you don’t treat your feet with the care they deserve.”

One of Emir’s staff came in, whispering something to Constance, who frowned.

“Can I borrow Rufus for a moment?” she asked. She and Rufus were soon walking through the cloud palace together.

“What is it?” Rufus asked.

“Adric Dorgan is here,” she said.

“In person?”

“Yes.”

“He must have found something, to come in person.”

Constance led Rufus to a receiving room where Dorgan was waiting. She left the two men together and departed.

“Dorgan,” Rufus said as they sat. “I take it from your personal presence that you have something.”

“Yes and no,” Dorgan said. “Partly I came because I didn’t think they’d let any of my people through the door. I’ve been doing as you asked and I’ve definitely turned things up. I keep running into strange dead ends, however.”

“Strange how?”

“Someone is hiding things. Someone with the kind of power and influence that I would normally jump back from like a scalded snake. Even I know what’s at stake here, though, so I kept digging.”

“And?”

“And I started losing people. Someone is disappearing any of my people that touch on certain areas and they clearly don’t fear reprisal. I’m not going to keep sending people to their deaths.”

“That’s fair,” Rufus said. “So, what have you managed to get?”

“I have a lot of pieces that don’t quite fit,” Dorgan said. “Private shipping expeditions with way too much secrecy. Bribes in amounts that boggle the mind. Whole companies set up, doing one quiet job and then closing down again, all to hide whoever was really behind the deals. If you look at it all together, it very nearly adds up to something.”

“You came out here for a reason,” Rufus said. “What do you need from me?”

“I need someone to ask the questions I can’t,” Dorgan said. “To poke the dark corners my people keep vanishing into.”

“Anything more specific?”

“Whoever is covering this thing up on the top end is powerful and influential,” Dorgan said. “More than the local powers can manage because they have foreign influence and no small amount of it. I can’t go looking harder than I have into who they are. If you can find that out for me, then I can maybe put all the parts into place. I can’t look in the dark

corners, but if I know who they are, I can follow their open activities. I have enough of the shady stuff that if I know what legitimate activities to watch, I think I can bring you something you need.”

Rufus took a long, slow breath, his eyes glued to Dorgan’s face.

“I might know who you’re talking about,” Rufus said. “Nothing is confirmed, however, and telling you would be no small thing. This is information that is still very restricted and we’re keeping it that way until we have some proof. We haven’t even shared our suspicions with the Adventure Society, yet.”

Dorgan got to his feet, Rufus doing the same.

“Well, when you get around to telling people, you come see me,” Dorgan said. He took a paper folder from his jacket and handed it to Rufus.

“This is everything my people were able to find, with some observations from me about what various bits of it could mean. Until that information you’re sitting on gets a little less restricted, this is as much as I can do for you. I’m not saying I won’t help, just to be clear be clear. I’m saying I can’t.”

Rufus was leafing through the notes as Dorgan spoke. He looked up at the crime lord, giving him an assessing gaze.

“Please wait here,” Rufus said. “I’ll have some refreshments sent in while I talk to some people.”

Rufus left and when he returned, Dorgan was enjoying tea and scones.

“Dorgan,” Rufus said, without preamble. “I’m going to tell you something and you are going to do your very best in all your dealings to obfuscate the fact that I did.”

“Alright,” Dorgan said warily, putting down his teacup and getting up from his chair.

“You said you needed to know what influential power was hiding things.”

“That’s right.”

Rufus visibly steeled himself, taking a long pause before speaking again.

“Church of Purity,” he said quietly.

Dorgan’s eyes grew wider and wider as the implications of what Rufus had said settled in. He ran his hands through his hair and started pacing back and forth before he stopped and turned back to Rufus.

“What kind of madness have you dragged me into?”

Chapter 163: Surplus to Requirements

Jason and Sophie continued their way through the city. More cautious than ever, they exposed themselves to long sightlines as little as possible. Sometimes they used narrow streets to hide themselves from above, at other times, rooftops, to hide themselves from below.

Helping them remain unobtrusive was the quiet nature of their essence abilities. Only the sound burst accompanying Sophie's wind blade made any real noise and, compared to the cries of the monsters they fought, it wasn't especially loud.

The evening of the day they had found the three dead leonids, something finally happened that they had been waiting for.

-
- Party member [Neil Davone] has entered communication range.
 - Voice chat with [Neil Davone] had been restored.
 - Full [Party Interface] functionality has been restored to party member [Neil Davone].
 - Party member [Neil Davone] has been located on ability [Map].
-

"Neil?"

"Jason?"

"Good to hear from you. Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I've got Jory with me, plus another guy who's a pretty good front-line. We could use a good damage dealer, but you'll do."

"Oh, thanks for that vote of confidence. It's just me and Wexler, here. Humphrey's probably fine but I hope Clive's alright."

"Hello Sophie," Neil said.

"Neil," Sophie reciprocated. "We'll need to figure out where we each are."

"I've got that covered," Jason said.

He pulled up his map, quickly locating Neil.

"Looks like your east and a little south of us," Jason said.

"This place has an east?" Neil asked.

"It may have been arbitrarily designated by my map power, I'm not sure. Find somewhere to hole-up and We'll come to you."

Jason and Sophie reoriented themselves, heading in the direction of Neil's location on the map. They had been moving around for around ten minutes when they received a

chat from Neil. It had the whispered tone that came with a communication sent silently, via a thought.

“Someone is here,” Neil’s voice came. “From the way they’re acting, I think they were following us and got thrown when we stopped to wait for you.”

“Hang tight and we’ll get there as fast as we can,” Jason said.

“What does hang tight mean?” Neil asked.

“Come on, you can get it from context,” Jason complained.

“Clear communication is important in tactical scenario,” Neil said.

“Boys, we can sort this out later,” Sophie said. “Asano, shut up. Neil, we’ll be as quick as we can.”

Sophie and Jason gave up on stealth for speed, rushing along streets as quickly as they could. Jason was no match for Sophie’s speed, even just using her abilities passively. Once she started using them actively, navigating the complicated terrain like it was a track course, only his shadow teleporting allowed him to keep up. At each junction he checked his map and kept them on the right heading.

“They found us,” Neil said through voice chat.

“We’re getting closer,” Jason said. “A few more minutes.”

Jason and Sophie had no more speed to pour on as they raced through the overgrown streets.

“We’ve got a fire user, a wind user and a big guy with a hammer,” Neil kept them updated. “Jory is laughing like a loon for some reason I don’t under... oh, damn.”

“What happened?” Sophie asked.

“Give me a second,” Neil’s hurried voice came back.

“We’re doing okay,” Neil said a few moments later, his light with surprise. “Keane, that’s a our front-liner, is holding off their big guy just fine. “The two women with the elemental powers are throwing everything at us but Jory is soaking up all their elemental attacks and using them to fuel his own abilities. What’s that guy doing, spending his days in a clinic?”

“Just hold on,” Jason said. “We’ll be there soon.”

“Shouldn’t be an issue,” Neil said. “They just keep throwing elemental attacks... what in the world is that?”

“Neil?” Jason asked.

“The other adventurers are running,” Neil said. “There’s a wave of some ghost-looking things coming down the street. I think they might be those things the shadow guy warned us about.”

“The vorger,” Jason said.

“Yeah,” Neil said. “The people we were fighting had movement powers and bolted, but we can’t move faster than these things are going.”

“Regroup and protect each other as best you can,” Jason said. “Sophie and I should be well-equipped to handle them. Probably.”

“Probably?” Neil asked.

“It’s better than definitely not.”

Jason and Sophie spotted the vorger before they spotted Neil, Jory and the other man they picked up. The vorger looked like something between a fog bank and a swarm, their forms white and ethereal, taking all manner of shapes. Some looked like animals, others monsters or even humanoid shapes, although Shade had told them the shape didn’t matter. Whatever their form, it was the touch of the creatures that would warp and distend flesh.

Jason and Sophie got a look at the results, sprinting past what used to be a person, judging from the pieces of armour and scraps of cloth on the hideous blob of flesh. They didn’t pause, continuing the rush to help their companions.

“I think we found one of your run-off adventurers,” Jason told Neil through voice chat. “The big guy, from your description. I guess he wasn’t as fast as the others.”

In the midst of the vorger swarm, Neil was alright for the moment, but things were rapidly getting worse. His mana shield power held off any vorger who rushed at him but each time the bubble-like barrier flashed, it ate away at his mana to keep him safe. Keane had left his sword in its sheath. His hands were both occupied by a large shield, a translucent, blue object that was obviously a magical construct. He used it to intercept and push back the vorger as they swept in at him and Jory, who was crouched down beside him.

Jory’s leg had been brushed by one of the creatures and was locked into a folded position, forcing him to kneel down. In front of him, vials and little bottles were lifting themselves out of his belts and pockets, disgorging liquids and powers to float together. Unlike the black blob that had formed the last time he used the ability, this one was a shimmering, pale blue.

“I’ll show you flesh warping,” he muttered and the blob streamed into his mouth. His body grew skinny and long, his limbs stretching out. Sweat oozed out of his skin, coating him in a shimmering oil. He stood up, his elongated leg no longer afflicted. He started flailing his arms around like whips, the vorger dissolving into nothing at the touch of the oil coating Jory’s limbs.

For his part, Neil decided to act before his mana was so drained he could no longer cast spells. Even as the vorger continued lashing themselves against his mana shield he started chanting.

“Come forth, wheels of fortune; let destiny, fair and foul, be brought upon those here to receive it.”

In the air above Neil’s had, three stone wheels, translucent and immaterial, came into being. They were stack horizontally atop one another and each had a series of images inscribed on their edges. Most of the images were of vorger, but each wheel also had an image of Neil, Jory and Keane’s faces.

Ability: [Reels of Fortune] (Prosperity)

- Spell (this ability has variable subtypes, contingent on effect).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 10 minutes.

- Current rank: Iron 7 (41%)

- Effect (iron): Conjures three immaterial reels. Channel mana into the reels to generate random effects on random individuals within the area. If an individual is affected more than once by the same use of the reels, the effect is increased for each reel.

Just conjuring the reels had eaten a good chunk of his dwindling mana and he immediately spent even more, channelling it into the reels. By their nature, the reels had mixed reliability at best, but as Neil’s mana plunged, he was betting everything on how much the vorgers’ numbers stacked the odds.

He had chosen to use the reels, not just for its potential power but because they were so outnumbered by the vorger that the odds had become skewed. This was borne out as the wheels stopped turning and the images on the front lit up, each one showing a vorger.

Strange lightning shot out of the wheels a black streak limned in white, chaining through the vorger, one to another. Each vorger struck burst into nothing, like mist under the bright sun. For each vorger that dissolved, a matching image disappeared from each of the wheels, but there were so many of them that the difference was slight. As the vorger rapidly died, Neil and everyone else was rejuvenated as the dying vorger triggered Neil’s aura power.

Ability: [Spoils of Victory] (Prosperity)

- Aura (recovery, conjuration).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 8 (19%)

- Effect (iron): Allies within your aura recover mana and stamina for each enemy that dies within your aura, as well as a minor healing effect. You can loot enemies that die within your aura.

Neil's depleting mana was noticeably replenished as the vorger rapidly died. With his mana pool restored, Neil's mana shield was, once again, a safe refuge from the ghostly creatures. It also helped Keane, who had suffered a number of vorger strikes, in spite of his conjured shield. The healing uncramped joints that flesh-warping attacks had locked up.

Neil channelled more mana into the wheels and they started turning again.

While Neil and Jory were in the process of turning the tables, Jason and Sophie finally reached the fight, ploughing straight in at full speed. Jason's sword was already out, slashing away at the ghost-like vorger.

-
- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Vorger].
 - [Vorger] is immune to [Bleeding].
 - [Bleeding] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Spell Breaker].

Instances quickly stacked up on Jason's sword and it was soon slashing apart the vorger with ease while Sophie's unarmed attacks had a similar effect. She was also seemingly impervious to the vorgers' touch, while Jason enjoyed his own protection.

-
- Special attack [Vorger's Touch] has inflicted [Vorger's Flesh Warp] on you.
 - You have resisted [Vorger's Flesh Warp].
 - [Vorger's Flesh Warp] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].

As Jason and Sophie appeared in the fight, their faces also appeared on the reels, but the second turn of the spell also ended in triple vorger. This time an energy wave rolled out of the reels and touched the closest of the vorger. Its translucent body turned from

white to black, then it exploded. A nearby vorger caught in the explosion similarly started turning black and exploded in turn. The effect kept chaining until it finally petered out, the vorger spreading out until the explosions no longer caught them. Between the explosions and the previous chains of dark lightning, Neil had eradicated a full third of the vorger swarm.

The next turn of the reel rested on images of two vorger and a picture of Jory's face. An explosion in the midst of the vorger took out a further chunk of their number, although not close to as many as the three reel effects.

-
- [Human] has been affected by [Reels of Fortune]. Duration of ability [Alchemical Abomination] has been increased.
-

The vorger fought to the last but accomplished little. Jory's new form was as immune to their attacks as Jason and Sophie, all three laying into the vorger with abandon. The magical protections of Neil and the other man, Keane, still held, protecting them until the fight was over.

In the end, Jason and Sophie felt rather surplus to requirements. They shredded their share of the ghost creatures but most were eradicated by Neil's spell, followed by Jory and his weird shape-changing power. Once the vorger were gone they regrouped, relieved to have weathered the ordeal so well.

"Good to see you," Jason said, clapping Neil on the shoulder as Jory greeted Sophie warmly.

"We should find a quiet place to spend the night that isn't here," Jason said.

"We need to be careful," Neil said. "Those people are still around somewhere."

"I think we might have passed one who didn't run fast enough," Sophie said. "There was a big blob of flesh back there that I think used to be a person."

"He got killed?" Neil asked.

"The vorger do not kill," Shade said, his shadowy figure suddenly standing next to them. "They alter."

They all turned in the direction from which Jason and Sophie had come. Shambling towards them was a flesh monstrosity, a four-legged, asymmetrical mound that as much undulated forward as walked.

"Wexler," Jason said, looking at the creature. "Am I imagining things, or is that thing a lot bigger than when we ran past it?"

Chapter 164: A Worse Plan

Clive's team were making their way up through a building that became more precarious as they went. It was the tallest building they had encountered in the city, almost as tall as the archway towers on which they had arrived. This section of the city was more akin to forest than jungle, with the remnant buildings in the shadow of towering trees.

The building they were climbing up through stood higher than the trees around it. It held its structural integrity despite one especially tall tree growing right up through the building itself. The building appeared to be some kind of elaborate palace. The expensive construction gave it a sound foundation but every floor they climbed showed increased signs of collapse.

"I'm starting to think the danger outweighs the promise of treasure," Clive said.

"If his Highness says we should check it out, we check it out," Abarca said.

Abarca, Campos and Hildebrand were the team members Valdis had picked out to join them. Valdis had suggested a voting system rather than picking a leader for their makeshift team. The three agreed immediately, as they had with every subsequent idea Valdis had come up with.

Valdis, it turned out, was a prince from the diminutive but influential Kingdom of Mirrors. Small, affluent and geographically blessed, it had neither expanded its borders nor been had its borders encroached upon in more than eight centuries. This was due to the diamond-ranker known as the Mirror King, who founded the kingdom and ruled it through to the present day. Through the centuries, the Mirror King had a series of queens, reportedly doting on each, even as they grew old and died beside him. Valdis was one of the current queen consort's sons.

Valdis was convinced there must be some great treasure at the top of the towering edifice and the other three agreed on principle. Clive had known there was no point arguing with Valdis' three yes-men but was compelled to ask what made Valdis so confident.

"No one tells the story of the thing they found in the safe, sensible place," Valdis told him. "A grand treasure atop a crumbling palace with a mighty tree growing right through it? That's a story that gets you waking up in someone else's bedchamber, Clive my friend."

Valdis threw a friendly arm around Clive's shoulder.

"Stick with me and you'll have yourself a wild time."

“I’m pretty confident that we’ll be having a wild time, regardless,” Clive said. “I’m mostly interested in surviving to tell that story.”

Valdis just laughed and continued on, confidently leading the way. Clive liked Valdis, whose reckless enthusiasm reminded him of Jason. Clive had let himself be dragged by Jason into enough things he ended up enjoying that he wasn’t opposed to Valdis’ idea. That same comparison also compelled him to be the voice of reason.

They navigated the main part of the building, the most intact section, without incident. Then they reached a set of six towers, interconnected at various heights by different walkways. It reminded Clive of the Mercer family home, whose interlocking towers were a signature of the Greenstone skyline.

The towers were not as solid as the building below them, which became all the more evident as they ascended the crumbling stairs inside them. They started with the most intact-looking tower, but internal damage forced them to switch towers via the walkways more than once. The walkways, however, were even sketchier than the towers. Once fully enclosed tunnels, sections of the floor had long given way.

They crossed one at a time, Clive trying to convince himself he was imagining the feeling of the bricks shifting under every step. Valdis lightly pranced through, using a light-step power usually used for water-walking that reduced the pressure he placed with each footstep. Clive was not so blessed, carefully wending his way past the holes in the floor.

The first two tunnelled walkways were crossed without incident. They reached the third to discover it had mostly entirely collapsed away. The roof was gone, as were most of the walls and a large section in the middle of the floor. The only thing connecting one side to the other across the gap was a mostly intact section of wall.

“This is really not a good idea,” Clive said. “I think we should call it off.”

“We’re almost there,” Valdis said.

Above them was a huge, stone platform, the towers holding it up like the legs of a giant beast. Valdis was still convinced something amazing awaited them at the top. Looking at the missing middle section of the walkway, though, even the other three were becoming wary.

“Surely, there’s a way to get us all across,” Valdis said. “Clive, you’re clever. I bet you can figure something out.”

Clive frowned.

“Yes,” he said reluctantly. He opened his storage space, a circle of runes he reached through to start plucking out items. He took out four pitons, a hammer and two lengths of rope.

“We fasten the ends of these ropes at each end,” Clive explained. “One high, and one low. We run them along the wall where the gap is, edging our way along the low one as we use the wall and the high one for balance.”

“So, you need me to go over and fasten the other end,” Valdis said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “I would like to point out that you’re the only one of us with a slow fall power, so your enthusiasm isn’t tempered like the rest of us.”

“It’ll be fine,” Valdis said, and for most of the crossing, it was. Valdis used a wall run to cross the gap and secured the ropes at the other end, allowing Clive, Abarca and Campos to cross. The final member of the group, Hildebrand, let nerves get the better of him, the rope slipping through his fingers as he fell. Clive rushed to the edge, his gaze moving from Valdis to the falling Hildebrand as he quickly incanted a spell.

“Exchange your fates.”

Hildebrand vanished, his mid-air position now occupied by a startled Valdis. Hildebrand was standing in the spot from which Valdis had been looking over the edge himself. Clive grabbed the disoriented and still screaming Hildebrand before he fell off again.

Abarca and Campos were still yelling at Clive by the time Valdis made his way back up. Without the others, Valdis had made much better time than when they had ascended together, both Abarca and Campos express their relief at his reappearance.

“What’s the issue?” Valdis asked. “You knew I had a slow-fall power. That was some sharp thinking, Clive.”

“I told you this was dangerous,” Clive said.

“And I told you it would be fine,” Valdis said. “Did these guys give you a hard time?”

“It’s doesn’t matter,” Clive said.

“Should I go back and grab the rope?” Valdis asked.

“We have to get back down, remember?”

“Right, yes.”

After the slow and almost disastrous crossing of the walkway, they were able to climb the tower all the way to the top. The stairs emerged through the floor of the massive platform that spanned the towers, which looked to have been cut from a single piece of stone. There were six statues in the middle of the platform, standing in a circle and facing inward. They each had a plinth in front of them with various items, but the group’s attention was drawn to the centre of the circle.

In the middle of the circle was a large creature, a wingless dragon the size of an elephant, with powerful legs and a tail that ended in a wicked stinger. Its scales were

brown and grey, matte to the point that it looked rather like a large rock. The creature had sensed them, languidly getting up from where it had been sunning itself in the middle of the platform. Stretching its limbs, it eyed them hungrily.

“Mountain wyrm,” Valdis said, the usual amusement absent from his voice. “A little one, only bronze rank, probably, but still powerful. It can draw strength from stone to heal and toughen itself. Honestly, I don’t think we can beat it here. The rest of you go back down and I’ll distract it for as long as I can, then jump over the side. Use your escape medallions if you have to.”

Clive and the others had all chosen the path of wisdom, receiving the life-preserving items from Shade. Only Valdis had taken the courage option.

Hildebrand didn’t hesitate at Valdis’ words, bounding back down the stairs. Abarca and Campos followed, after a quick glance at Valdis’ determined gaze, locked on the monster.

“Edge!” Clive yelled, running away from the stairs and towards the side of the platform.

“What?” Valdis asked, looking at Clive in confusion, before grinning in realisation and also running.

“Are you sure that will work?” Valdis called out.

“Probably,” Clive called back.

“Probably?”

“You have a better plan?”

“You heard my plan.”

“That was a worse plan,” Clive yelled. “You go over the side, either way.”

Valdis easily caught up with Clive. Behind him, the wyrm was moving in their direction on powerful legs, but its heavy body moved no more quickly than Clive did and they made it to the edge of the platform well ahead of it. Clive came to a stop, pulling out a silver spirit coin.

Clive knew the bronze-rank monster would likely resist his spell. Consuming a spirit coin to boost his attributes past the monster’s rank to silver would make Clive’s spell more likely to take effect. It presented a dangerous risk-reward proposition, for if his spell failed anyway, he would be left weak and helpless in front of the monster.

Clive shoved the coin in his mouth without hesitation as Valdis leapt off the side of the tower. Clive looked between him and the dragon, casting his spell as he felt the power of the coin surge through him.

“Exchange your fates.”

-
- You have used spell [Juxtaposition] on [Valdis Volaire] and [Lesser Mountain Wyrn].
 - [Lesser Mountain Wyrn] has resisted. [Juxtaposition] does not take effect.
 - Spell cooldown is reset due to spell failure.
-

“Crap.”

He tried again.

“Exchange your fates.”

“Exchange your fates.”

“Oh, come on...”

He could feel the fleeting power of the about to drain away. He looked at Valdis, drifting slowly downward, then back at the draconic monster that was almost upon him.

“Exchange your fates.”

The monster vanished, replaced with Valdis. Valdis ran over and they looked over the side, seeing the monster crash through the tops of the trees below. Clive dropped to his hands and knees at the edge of the platform, panting in exhaustion as he looked over the side.

“Think it’ll kill it?” he asked. “Maybe the trees will cushion its fall.”

“Maybe,” Valdis said. “If it survives, it can heal itself up with the stone on the ground.”

-
- You defeated [Lesser Mountain Wyrn].
-

“No, it’s dead,” Clive said with relief. He had no interest in facing the monster again after they went back down.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“I should probably go get those three before they try that rope again, then.”

“You go right ahead,” Clive said, rolling onto his back to lay spreadeagled on the platform. “I’m just going to lay here for a bit.”

Valdis eventually returned with the other three who, despite Valdis’ assurances, poked their heads up over the edge of the stairwell warily before coming all the way up. Valdis walked back over to Clive.

“Ready to get back up?” Valdis asked.

“No.”

Valdis laughed, holding out a hand to pull Clive to his feet. Clive groaned as he went to examine the ring of statues. The statues were around twice Clive’s height, each one

depicting a different person. From the equipment carved onto each statue, they were all adventurers. The most interesting part was that each stature had a plinth in front of it, on which rested what looked to be actual versions of some of the gear the statues had. For each statue, there were two pieces of gear, waiting to be claimed.

Each of the five adventurers gravitated to certain gear. Valdis to a sword and scabbard, Clive to a staff and wand. The other sets were an orb and circlet, a cloak and dagger, a sword and shield and a single glove, paired with an amulet.

Clive saw no magic with his perception power but didn't rule out some trap too powerful for his ability to pluck from hiding. He pulled out some tools, examining the plinth carefully, even as the others had already started picking up items. When he was convinced any traps that might be present were beyond his ability to uncover, Clive turned his attention to the staff and the wand.

The staff was carved from a dark coloured wood, engraved with magical symbols. On the end was a bass cap, with a large purple gemstone set into it. The wand was a blue metal rod with intricate lines worked into flowing patterns that ran down its length.

Clive had his own ability to identify magic items which, like most such abilities, worked by giving him a sense of the item's properties when he touched them. Compared to the way Jason's power gave a visible explanation he found it disappointing.

While out of range of Jason, powers like the voice chat and identifying items didn't work. To Clive's delight, however, the party interface power combined with Clive's own identification ability to restore that functionality. Thus, he was happily able to read the properties of the staff.

Item: [Spell Lance of the Magister] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

The staff of an ancient sorcerer, this weapon is focused on priming enemies for a potent magical assault (weapon, staff).

- Requirements: The power to wield magical tools.
- Basic attack: Explosive disruptive-force bolt. Inflicts [Spell Impetus].
- Basic attack: Disruptive-force beam. Consumes mana. Sustaining the beam on a target periodically inflicts [Spell Impetus].
- Effect: Increase the mana consumption when casting a spell to increase the effect. Effect is further increased if wielding both [Spell Lance of the Magister] and [Magister's Tithe].
- [Spell Impetus] (affliction, magic, stacking): All resistances are reduced. When the recipient suffers an offensive spell from someone wielding [Spell Lance of the Magister], all instances of [Spell impetus] are consumed to increase the effect of the spell.

The Magister was a potentially mythical figure, whose actual existence was hotly debated. Many items and abilities were named for him or her, including two of Clive's own abilities. Regardless of the history, finding a growth weapon made the trip to the astral space a success, whatever else he encountered. He took a look at the wand.

Item: [Magister's Tithe] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

The wand of an ancient sorcerer, used to sustain combat effectiveness (weapon, wand).

- Requirements: The power to wield magical tools.
- Basic attack: Disruptive-force beam. Inflicts [Mana Siphon].
- Basic attack: Mana draining beam. This effect is increased if wielding both [Spell Lance of the Magister] and [Magister's Tithe].
- [Mana Siphon] (affliction, magic): The strength of mana drain effects against the recipient are increased.

Clive stared in awe at the items in his hands. A matched set of legendary growth weapons were so good he would do well to shut up and not tell anyone, so as not to get robbed. He placed them in his inventory and turned to find four people holding out items. Valdis gave him a wry smile.

"You can identify items, right?"

Chapter 165: No One Has That Coming

In the aftermath of the fight with the vorger, Jason and Sophie had no time to catch up with Neil and Jory. The flesh abomination lumbering in their direction posed a new, albeit very slowly approaching, problem. They stood together, watching as it didn't so much walk in their direction as vaguely amble. It was basically a huge, vaguely spherical mound of muscle, skin and fat on four short, blobby legs. Scraps of clothing and pieces of armour could be seen wedged into fatty crevices where layers of flesh and skin had folded on top of themselves.

"Is it attacking us?" Neil asked.

"It will move sluggishly until it is engaged," Shade said. The shadowy entity who governed the trials had chosen to make a reappearance. Also with them was Keane, the adventurer who had been travelling with Neil and Jory.

"So we could just leave?" Neil asked.

"Yes," Shade said. "If you were alone, I would advise you to do so. Your collective capabilities should be sufficient to kill it, however, so I ask that you do. The soul within is trapped in excruciating pain, denied the release of death until its flesh prison is destroyed."

"Is that one of the people that attacked us?" Jory asked.

"It was," Shade said. "He did not flee as swiftly as his companions."

"Forget it, then," Neil said. "He had it coming."

"No one has that coming," Jason said.

"He was trying to kill us."

"And if he'd still been fighting you when we arrived," Jason said, "I'd help you kill him right back. But death is one thing and having your soul trapped in pain for eternity is another."

"I agree," Jory said firmly.

"Sophie, new guy," Jason said. "What do you think?"

"Put him down," Sophie said. "You were right about no one deserving that."

"Am I the new guy?" Keane asked.

"Yeah," Jason said, "but it's three to one already. Your vote doesn't matter any more, sorry."

Jason looked at the hideous blob abomination. It had at least five times the amount of flesh a person would have.

"Shade, do you not have conservation of mass, here?"

“We do,” Shade said. “We also have magic, so the laws of physics are more like strong suggestions. It's best for everyone if you adhere to them, but if you are truly reluctant, there are still modes of recourse.”

“You know about the laws of physics?” Jason asked.

“I have been a familiar many times, across many worlds. I know much.”

“You must be handy to have around,” Jason said. “And you've done a lot of familiaring, you say? I don't suppose you're looking for a new gig?”

“My time here ends when all the trials are passed. Pass the trials, gain the right essence ability and we'll see.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said. “What kind of awakening stone would that take?”

“All who survive this stage of the trials shall receive an awakening stone available nowhere else,” Shade said.

“Clive will be glad to hear that,” Jason said.

“Doesn't he have his full set of abilities already?” Neil asked.

“Yeah, but you know what he's like. Give him something new and he's a kid at Christmas.”

“What's Christmas?”

“It's a religious holiday that we appropriated to stimulate the economy once a year,” Jason said.

“That thing is getting closer,” Sophie said. “Slowly, but it's getting closer. Shade, can you tell us again about the best way to fight it?”

“A flesh abomination will adapt to how you engage it. If you are fast it will become faster. Strong, and it will become tougher. Hide and its senses will improve. Attack from afar and it will develop ranged attacks. Its weakness is that it cannot be all things at once. If it becomes fast and flexible, it becomes vulnerable to cutting attacks. If it develops a chitinous exterior, it becomes inflexible and slow. I advise you to use Jason Asano's necrotic powers as the main source of damage. Whatever changes it makes, flesh is flesh, and flesh can die.”

Jason surveilled what was about to be their battleground. It was typical of what they had seen in the city; jungle filling the space between overgrown buildings. The broken stone road had soil and roots pushing up through the pavers, along with plants and full-blown trees. The footing was unsure and the terrain complex with plenty of shadows he could use.

“Alright,” he said. “Sophie, you start us off. Get it picking up the pace to chase you around so it's nice and squishy. Then, Neil, you tie it up so I can introduce it to Colin. Sound good?”

“Works for me,” Sophie said.

“If it’s bronze rank, I won’t be able to hold it for longer than a few moments,” Neil said. “You’ll need to get your timing right.”

“Call it and I’ll be ready,” Jason said. “Jory, stick with Neil. New guy, put yourself between Jory, Neil and the bad guy.”

“Not a problem,” Keane said. “I’ve been doing it for days.”

“Everyone knows their job, then. Sophie, will you kick things off?”

Sophie flashed him a grin and dashed in the direction of the abomination. She leapt high into the air, kicking off the top of the misshapen lump of flesh before landing on the other side, hitting the ground at a run.

“Reckless,” Jason said, shaking his head.

“Then why are you grinning?” Neil asked.

“I have a soft spot for poor but flamboyant choices.”

The creature reacted quickly, its body rapidly morphing. It shrank, moving into the shape of a fleshy beetle with six legs and scurrying after Sophie. Growing out of its back were four, long, skinny arms. Lengthier than its entire body, the arms were articulated by multiple joints.

“That is very disturbing,” Jory said. “A giant flesh bug with four arms sticking out of it? I think the worst part is all those extra elbows.”

Sophie led the creature on a merry chase, running away and deflecting the long, grasping hands when they came close enough to grab at her. After its initial transformation, the changes in the creature had slowed but not stopped. As it chased after Sophie, it made incremental changes to its form to help in the pursuit. The body continued to shrink the legs changed shape to better handle Sophie’s speed and rapid shifts in direction. Its arms, which she continued knocking away, went from eerily human hands to long fingers with webbing stretched between them.

“Get ready to go,” Neil told Jason, who nodded.

Neil chanted a spell and the overgrown plant life started sprouting masses of vines, lashing out to wrap around the creature. Its many arms and legs were bound up, along with its long body, completely arresting its movement. Jason emerged from a shadow, slicing the back of his hand with the razor hidden in a wristband for the purpose. From the wound, a pile of Colin spewed out onto the flesh abomination, the leeches immediately digging in with their horrifying rings of teeth.

System messages scrolled before Jason’s eyes in rapid succession, notifying him of the afflictions Team Colin was placing. Most were resisted but Jason’s familiar power was increasing, as was his resistance-penalising aura. He gleefully noted that as many as one

in three afflictions were taking hold, which was better than previous bronze-rank encounters. With sheer numbers of Team Colin, the flesh monster was quickly loaded with afflictions.

Colin only had a few moments to lay in afflictions before the abomination altered its form, undertaking another massive, rapid transformation. Shifting from the horizontal alignment of a hexapod to an upright biped, four of the six legs shrank away while the remaining pair grew bulky and strong. Its body became larger and heavier, the fleshy exterior growing thick, tough skin with protrusions of razor-sharp bone poking through. The four arms grew shorter but more powerful, the webbed hands replaced with savage claws. The result was something like a hairless, four-armed gorilla, covered in elephant skin with bony blades growing out of its body.

The new skin was too much for the leeches to bite through. The blade-bones sliced through many of the vines and it pulled itself free of the rest brute strength. The vines tried to entangle it again but the creature powered free of their grasp, shedding leeches like droplets of water in the process.

During the transformation, Jason was not idle, taking the opportunity to lay in with his spells. They lacked immediate impact and were repeatedly resisted but were quick to cast. By the time the abomination broke free and resumed its angry pursuit of Sophie, Jason had afflicted it with his key powers.

The abomination was now loaded up with ongoing necrotic damage from Colin, plus bleeding and blood poison that would reapply the bleed effect every time it absorbed enough healing to end. This was important as the abomination had altered itself to accelerate healing in an attempt to adapt to Jason's afflictions.

The other pillars holding up Jason's house of affliction were the sin affliction, which increased all necrotic damage suffered and inexorable doom, which added to any affliction in place. The combination of leech necrotoxin and the necrosis-accelerating sin both increasing over time was a multiplicative escalation of the damage, while the bleeding and anticoagulant leech toxin kept the monstrosity's regeneration in check.

The escalating effects of Jason's afflictions had placed the abomination's life on a clock. That left the question of how much damage the abomination could inflict before that clock ran out. In the immediacy, the creature's inevitable demise was not apparent as the abomination thrashed at the leeches still falling off its body.

Jason retreated to the shadows and recalled the leeches, which started disappearing as they contacted the blood on the hand he lowered to receive them. They were quite spread out, however, and could only slowly make their way to his hidden position. The flesh monstrosity lacked the intelligence to follow their direction to Jason's hidden location.

His cloak melded him perfectly into the shadow, hiding him even from whatever senses the flesh monster relied on without eyes or ears.

The abomination furiously stomped on leeches to little avail, as they had been quite scattered by the monster shaking them off. Unable to catch the elusive Sophie, it stopped. Its four arms and the bony protrusions retracted as its body returned to a more blob-like shape, while keeping the thick hide. Welt-like marks started appearing all over its surface, with tiny bone needles shooting out in every direction a moment later.

Keane used his shield to shelter Jory, Neil and himself. Neil had cast his giant's might spell on Keane shortly after Sophie had begun combat and the shield-bearer was twice his normal size, as was the conjured shield in front of him. It was Sophie, Jason and Colin who should have taken the brunt of the attack, but Neil was on the ball, a bubble-like shield snapping up around Sophie. It only lasted a moment but a moment was all she needed to shift behind a tree with her mirage step power. The after-image left behind by her ability didn't seem to fool the abomination's eyeless, earless senses and it didn't keep attacking her.

Jason's hidden position meant Neil couldn't see him to provide another shield, leaving Jason as the only person who didn't avoid the attack. The needles that dug into him were light but they were also a bronze-rank attack. They pierced through his cloak and, in many places, the armour underneath. All Jason had time to do was turn his body away from the attack and shield his face before the needles struck, ducking behind a tree as more of the bone needles poured out of the abomination.

Team Colin took the worst of it, with only a fraction of the leech mass having returned to Jason before the rest were skewered with bone needles. Some, still clinging to the abomination, had been shot off by needles. Most were exposed on the ground and riddled with needles.

Generally, Jason didn't have to worry about the welfare of team Colin. Very few monsters had the kind of area attacks that could pose a danger to the regenerating leech swarm. Jason had only absorbed a fraction of Colin's full mass, which would take a day or two to replenish itself in the safety of Jason's bloodstream.

As the accelerated healing Jason received from Colin was based on how much of the mass was currently residing in his blood, the effect would be significantly reduced until the leech swarm recovered. Fortunately, the healing they offered had grown stronger as Jason's familiar power advanced, so what was a reduced effect now was similar to when he first obtained the ability.

While all the afflictions were locked in and its death was now inevitable, the abomination was, for the moment, still full of life. The necrosis was causing patches of

blackened flesh to ooze blood but the monstrosity did not yet appear impeded. Of its opponents, Jason and Sophie were hidden and what remained of the leeches were dead. That left Keane, Neil and Jory to its attentions and there was no hiding Keane's enlarged body. The abomination morphed again, bulking up and dropping to four powerful legs as a huge, bony spike emerged from the front. It now resembled a rhino whose entire head was a horn and it started charging directly at Keane.

It was building up speed quickly as it charged, but it was no match for Sophie who emerged from her hiding spot and raced ahead of it. Putting herself between the monster and the others, she was suddenly thrown violently sideways as Jason emerged from a nearby shadow, crash-tackling her out of the way, letting the monster pass.

"What are you doing?" Sophie yelled at him as he extricated herself from his rough embrace.

"Your ability can only stop so much, remember?" Jason yelled at her. "Trust your allies."

Sophie glared at him, then down at the arm, remembering the broken mess it had been the last time an attack overwhelmed her defensive power. That had taken even her magic power the better part of a day to heal and the flesh monster's charge would certainly have been more powerful.

Neil, Jory and Keane had been moving and fighting through the city together for several days. With monsters so thick on the ground, that was enough time and enough fights to find each other's combat rhythms. It was an unusual mix, with no dedicated damage dealer, but Neil and Jory both had powerful buffs that could turn Keane into a walking fortress.

Already giant-sized from Neil's spell, Neil gave him another spell, bolster, that would enhance his next active essence ability use. Jory, meanwhile, had a cluster of small, clear orbs floating around him. Materials started floating out of his pockets and belts, floating in front of him. Trace elements mixed with a substance he conjured out of thin air, resulting in a small, red blob that one of the orbs floated over and absorbed. The orb then flew over to Keane, passing straight through his armour and being absorbed directly into his flesh.

Jory had three powers that were the basis for his effectiveness as a field alchemist. The orbs were an ability called eldritch eyes, which could deliver potions across a battlefield, to enemies and allies both. The orbs also allowed him to safely scout at a distance, a valuable support skill for any team.

His telekinetic power, potion mystic, allowed him to alter and combine ingredients without touching them, turning Jory into a walking alchemy workshop. It wasn't an ability

that replaced a real workshop for making proper potions, but for working on the fly it was perfect.

The reason Jory could throw out potions without exhausting his materials was the universal reagent ability. It conjured a versatile potion base he could use to make short-lived potions using only trace elements, letting him save materials compared to regular potion-making. These quick potions rapidly became inert if not used, but took only a fraction of the materials a regular version of the same potion would. This allowed Jory to massively output potions, a key element of both his clinic's financial viability and his sustained effectiveness in the field.

So long as he didn't overuse his material-hungry shape-changing power, he could carry enough materials for numerous encounters. With the versatility of his potions, Jory could be a makeshift healer, buffer, debuffer and even throw around some afflictions using poison and other noxious concoctions.

Between Jory and Neil's buffs, Keane was as ready as he could be for the monstrosity bearing down on them. Just before it hit, Neil's burst shield power bubbled into place around Keane. Keane used a power of his own that absorbed the force of an attack and turned it back on the attacker, which was boosted by Neil's earlier use of the bolster power.

Not even the combination of buffs, Neil's shield power and Keane's enhanced ability were enough to fully withstand the raw force of the bronze-rank abomination's attack. Neil's shield popped as easily as the bubble it looked like, while the shield in Keane's hands warped and shattered, the conjured object dissolving into nothing as it broke apart.

All their efforts in stacking defence were not in vain, however. Keane had leaned into the blow and while he was sent stumbling backwards, he stayed on his feet. The retaliatory force of Neil's burst shield and Keane's damage reflection power had blunted the abomination's terrifying momentum. Attack and defence were both spent and for a brief, oddly still moment, Keane stood looking at the motionless monstrosity.

The moment passed, Keane conjuring a fresh shield as the monster started changing its form once more. Keane backed off, keeping himself between the abomination and the two supporters behind him as Sophie renewed the attack, opening with a wind blade before laying in with attacks. Her unarmed strike powers offered only limited damage but her two special attacks added damage to every strike. The nature of that damage was such that one type or the other would always be effective, regardless of her opponent's protections.

With Sophie once again on the attack, the monster engaged her, shifting thick-legged quadruped with eight arms emerging from every side of its body. The arms were long and

multi-jointed like they had seen before, but this time ended razor-sharp blades of bone. Sophie held her ground, a combination of stubbornness over Jason's earlier intervention and a need to give the others time to reposition.

Bone blades lashed out at her but she dodged or deflected them with arms, legs, even her head. So long as she actively intercepted the attacks, her powers absorbed the damage. The monster might be bronze rank, but it could put only so much power into such rapid, multitudinous attacks.

With Sophie successfully fending it off, the abomination did what it always did, shifting its form to adapt. Its arms changed into tentacles, still sporting blades at the end. It reduced the power of each attack while making them more flexible and hard to predict.

Sophie countered by activating her between the raindrops ability, which enhanced her reflexes for a high mana cost. The result was that rather than defend less effectively, she handled the tentacles with more ease than she had the arms.

The mana consumption of the power was high but several mitigating factors allowed her to keep it up. One was the natural ability of the celestine race that reduced the mana cost of ongoing abilities. Another was Neil, using a replenish spell to restore her mana, and Jory, quick-brewing a mana potion and floated to her in an orb. Her confrontation has allowed them to regroup behind Keane, ready should it turn on them again.

Faced with a continued inability to harm Sophie, the abomination started shifting again, but the effects of Jason's afflictions finally made themselves known. As it tried to change shape again, its skin cracked like a rotten egg, complete with hideous smell. Black fluid spilled out onto the ground, filling the air with the only smell any of them had encountered to rival rainbow smoke for sheer nauseating power. As the monstrosity collapsed, Sophie ran off to throw up, having caught the largest dose.

The abomination flopped wetly on the ground in a pool of its own blacked, runny flesh. It had adapted to the exponentially accelerating necrosis by isolating it, continuing the fight even as it grew inside like a hyper-accelerated cancer until there was nothing left to contain it. The group watched from afar, cloth held over their noses as what was a person, an hour ago, melted into a black, red and purple puddle.

"Thank you," Shade said, once again appearing amongst them. "There are many that suffer so, in this place. I am grateful for any that you can put to rest."

Chapter 166: Part of Being a Team

After defeating the flesh abomination, Jason's temporary team had grown to five. With two defenders in Keane and Sophie, two healers in Neil and Jory, Jason was their only dedicated damage source. They were heavy on sustain but light on immediate damage, with Jason's powers bringing certain, but eventually death to the monsters they encountered.

This setup made for slower going than they might have with someone like Humphrey on hand but it wasn't without benefits. With the oversized monster groups they were encountering, fights were long and everyone's abilities were getting a workout. The results of all that practise were showing each night as at least one member of the group experienced ability advancement.

-
- Ability [Castigate] (Sin) has reached Iron 6 (100%).
 - Ability [Castigate] (Sin) has reached Iron 7 (00%).

 - All [Sin] abilities have reached [Iron 7].
 - Linked attribute [Recovery] has increased from [Iron 6] to [Iron 7].

 - Progress to bronze rank: 35% (2/4 essences complete).
-

The top end of iron rank represented the peak of human potential in a given attribute. Jason's power and recovery attributes had both reached seven, vastly improving his cardiovascular health while making him stronger and tougher than his slight frame would suggest. As his skinny physique transitioned to lean muscle, he felt incredibly empowered.

"If it feels this good to advance through iron rank," he said to the others as they prepared to set off for the morning, "I can't wait for bronze rank."

"Where I come from, you can randomly throw a rock and you'll hit a silver rank," Keane said. "They say you aren't even a real adventurer until bronze."

They had got to know Keane over the last few days. He was a dark-skinned human, from an island city located in this world's Caribbean Sea. He had none of the arrogance they had seen from some of the imported adventurers, just looking to be the most effective member of the group that he could.

They fell into a daily pattern. From early morning to late evening, they would move toward the centre of the city, fighting monsters as they went. At the end of the day, they

would find a promising-looking building, search it for treasures and clear out any monsters lairing inside before setting up camp.

“What do you think this building was?” Jory asked as they regrouped from searching the latest building. “Some kind of huge inn?”

“Brothel,” Neil said absently, then noticed that everyone had turned to look at him.

“What?” he asked.

“That was a very confident response,” Jason said.

“You spend a lot of time in brothels?” Sophie asked.

“Yes,” Neil said with a sigh. “Hang around with Thadwick Mercer long enough and you’ll see the inside of a lot of brothels.”

“He’s seventeen,” Jason said. “How many brothels can he have been to?”

“I think I’ve seen the inside of every bordello in Greenstone,” Neil said. “High class, low class; high class pretending to be low class. He doesn’t care. He’s spent a lot of money at the church of the Healer in the last year or so.”

“At least he’s using paid volunteers,” Jason said. “He gives off a very strong date-rapey vibe.”

They occasionally met more adventurers, but none of those encounters led to further conflict or team-ups. There was some exchanging of supplies, with many adventurers having been separated from the team members carrying most of the team's gear. Jory proved popular in this regard, with his specialised dimensional bag overstuffed with potions.

They also met more vorger and flesh abominations. Building on their previous experience, by the third and fourth encounters they had a good idea of what worked and what didn't.

“We’re lucky they’re both fairly mindless,” Keane said as they discussed tactics one evening. “The most dangerous thing about higher-rank monsters isn’t their more exotic powers, but their intelligence.”

“You’ve seen a few higher-rank monsters?” Neil asked him.

“Yeah,” Keane said. “In areas of high-magic density, we iron rankers aren’t allowed to hunt by ourselves, like you Greenstone people. We get to go along and see some higher-rank monsters in action, though.”

One thing Jason finally got going was practice for his execute ability. Even without burst-damage members on the team, only the toughest iron-rank monsters could actually survive enough damage for it to be effective. It was only against the bronze-rank enemies,

be they the flesh abominations or regular monsters, that he could actually get some use out of it.

The team were strong enough to handle a bronze-rank monster, but while the flesh abominations roamed alone, the actual monsters did not. With the city so saturated in magic, even normally solitary monsters were appearing in packs. In the face of this, the team's usual strategy was to make a fighting retreat, using their two defenders and two healers to keep the group intact while Jason loaded up the enemies with afflictions.

This gave Jason the chance to use the two abilities he had the most trouble practising. They were both direct damage abilities, but neither were effective to just open up with. Both required setting up and were quite similar in their use, which, at least meant that when he could get some use out of one, he could get it from the other as well.

Fighting a trio of monsters, the team was being pressured. Their strong defensive strategy was highly effective against iron-rank monsters, even in large numbers, but bronze-rank beasts with powerful attacks threatened to overwhelm them.

The monsters looked like four-armed gorillas, covered in lizard skin instead of fur. They liked to climb and leap, making rapid attacks with their four arms before leaping away to set up for the next rush attack.

Sophie and Keane intercepted each attack while Neil and Jory supported them with buffs, shields and healing. It was enough to hold on but just barely, the team's mana being rapidly depleted as they used their abilities to the full. If it weren't for Jory delivering mana potions and Neil's replenishing spells, they would have already been exhausted and overrun. Jason was nowhere to be seen, although the patches of black flesh and the blood oozing from the monster's wounds marked his active presence.

"I see what you mean by smart being dangerous," Sophie said to Keane during a lull in the action. "They're starting to coordinate better."

The monsters were starting to attack all at once, or attack in rapid succession with little or no pause for the adventurers to regroup, attempting to break up their formation. They had a strong defensive line and good individual synergies but the raw power of the bronze-rank monsters was beginning to beat them down.

A pair of the monsters started hammering on Keane's shield, which began to buckle until one of the monsters abruptly stumbled away after Jason cast a spell on it from the darkness.

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 6 (91%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.

While the bronze-rank monster had inherent damage reduction to Jason's iron-rank spell, that same damage reduction meant that the afflictions it was suffering from had time to multiplying without killing it. The result was that the spell, boosted for each one of those afflictions, ravaged the monster's body, even though the damage reduction. The monster staggered away as dead flesh replaced healthy, passing across the creature like a shadow. Jason finished it off with his execute ability.

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

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

- Current rank: Iron 5 (38%)

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

Shimmering light of blue, silver and gold shone down on the monster. Transcendent damage ignored the difference in rank and the creature dissolved directly into rainbow smoke.

-
- You have defeated [Grizzard].

 - [Grizzard] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
 - [Monster Core (Bronze)] 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.

The others ignored their share of the loot that fell over them, still caught up in the midst of combat. By the time the fight was over, they were battered, exhausted but grinning in triumph at having overcome such powerful enemies.

“That sparkle power,” Keane said as they sprawled inside a building to hide from more monsters. “You should have been using that from the start with those flesh abominations.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Those flesh abominations are hard to time it with, though. It’s an execute power, so they need to be badly hurt for it to have any impact. Normally, you can see the condition a monster is in, but whatever the flesh things do to try and adapt to my afflictions hides their condition. I’m just left guessing.”

“I like this interface power of yours,” Keane said. “I can feel it when my abilities cross a threshold, obviously, but having it show up for me to see gives a real feeling of progress.”

“We appreciate your powers too,” Jory said to Keane. “Standing in front of me and taking all the hits is something I really like in a team member.”

“Being able to take the hits is nice,” Keane said, “but some hits I really wish I could dodge. I envy your ability to get out of the way, Sophie. Or into the way, as you need. I’ve had plenty of times where I’m wasn’t fast enough to be where my team needed me to be. I hope they’re doing alright without me.”

“Huh,” Clive said as a system notice appeared in front of him.

-
- [Jory Tillman] has been added to your party.
 - [Imran Keane] has been added to your party.
-

“What’s up?” Valdis asked.

“It looks like some of my friends have found each other,” Clive said. “And someone new. It’s good to know they’re alright.”

“That’s a useful ability, working from that far away.”

“A lot of its usefulness is lost at this distance. Better than nothing, though. At least it lets me know they’re still alive.”

Valdis nodded. “Far from a given, in this place.”

After their traversal of the towering building, the other three members of their group were more respectful of Clive. He had proven himself multiple times, including identifying the hoard of growth items they had found at the top. Each member of the team had picked out one pair of items for themselves, from the six pairs. The rest of the team agreed that the last set should go to Clive, as the strongest contributor to actually obtaining them. That last pair was the orb and circlet, which weren’t useful to Clive himself but he knew would be very useful to Neil.

After they climbed back down the building, they set off through the city again. Clive glanced back at the building behind them, then at Valdis.

"You remind me of a friend of mine," Clive told him.

"Oh?" Valdis asked.

"He's outgoing, like you. Good at pulling people into his own pace. You both have a dangerous habit, though."

"And what's that?"

"You take risks, ignoring that it may be the people around you that suffer the consequences. My friend, for example, has this indentured servant he had become an adventurer."

"The outworlder," Valdis said. "The one who made that big fuss at the meeting. The indentured servant was that gorgeous celestine?"

"That's them," Clive said.

"I heard about how he had his indentured servant made into an adventurer. That's an unusual choice."

"He was trying to help her because she was a friend of a friend," Clive said. "Then he overestimated his own political acumen and almost handed her off into what amounts to sexual slavery. If you ask him, he'll say he did it because he sympathises with her circumstances. Really, though, I think he feels guilty over what he almost dropped her into."

"I would never do something like that to someone," Valdis said.

"No?" Clive asked. "Climbing up those towers, you didn't face any real risk, but Hildebrand was literally dropped off the building."

"But we got out, safe and sound, with no small reward for our trouble."

"This time," Clive said. "But how many times can you take that kind of risk without it going wrong? And when it does, will you be the one paying the price? My friend has done a lot of good for me. His enthusiasm helped me find the part of myself I'd lost that made me want to be an adventurer. In turn, I need to try and help him avoid making the kind of mistakes that will haunt him. Covering each other's weaknesses and blind spots is part of being a team."

Clive nodded his head at the other three, having their own conversation, further ahead.

"I hope your actual team isn't like them," Clive said. "They have skills, certainly, but you need people who'll tell you when you're wrong."

“I think I do,” Valdis said, frowning. “There aren’t a lot of people in my life who’ll talk to me like this, though. I don’t suppose I can talk you into changing teams?”

“I’m good, thank you,” Clive said. “I’m pretty sure running around with an outworlder will give me plenty of chances to see some interesting things. Especially this outworlder.”

Chapter 167: Making a Spectacle of Himself

“We’re getting closer to the centre,” Jason said, looking at his map. “We could get there today if we went straight for it.”

“That explains why we ran into so many groups, yesterday,” Neil said. “Everyone is converging.”

“Do we go straight for the middle?” Jory asked. His abilities had been growing as fast as anyone else’s, but that had never been his goal. He had gotten more than he could ask for with the alchemy recipe his previous group had come to blows over and was ready to leave. The lesser miracle potion formula would guarantee his clinic’s funding in perpetuity.

“I like the training,” Keane said. “It’s like our own private monster surge, without innocent people getting caught up in it. I like the treasure’s we’ve been finding, too. That said, there are six days left. I vote we make for the middle and decide what to do after seeing what we find there.”

Agreement with Keane’s reasoning was unanimous and they set out directly for the heart of the city. The monsters, unsurprisingly, had no interest in accommodating their accelerated schedule and continued their regular attacks. They didn’t stumble on anything more dangerous than they had previously encountered, however, and kept to their anticipated pace through the morning. They stopped for lunch, all sitting on the edge of a high building eating sandwiches.

“This is a good sandwich,” Keane said. “I’m not sure why you brought food along, though. Spirit coins sustain us just fine and take up a lot less space.”

“Sure,” Jason said, “but of all the time you spend here, will you ever think back on that time you ate a spirit coin while trudging on? Of course not. You’ll remember the crazy fights and the amazing treasure. The dashing affliction specialist with great hair. And now, you can look back on a quiet moment where you stopped to eat with friends and take in this amazing place. If this isn’t what you became an adventurer for, then you’re doing it wrong.”

Keane looked at Jason, looking out at the city laid out before them with a contented smile. Keane turned to take it in himself. With Jason’s words he realised that he had been so caught up from the start that he’d never stopped to appreciate what he was experiencing.

When Keane arrived on the archway tower, he had been startled to be separated from his team. Then he had formed a temporary group, only to have them fragment over

treasure. After that came a new group, more cohesive than the first but also more unusual in their sensibilities. The team leader was prone to nonsensical ramblings, the celestine was somehow his indentured servant and an adventurer. The healer seemed normal enough, but Jory, who Keane had been with the longest, didn't actually seem to like adventuring. That was a distinctly unusual position for an adventurer.

Since then, they had faced fight after fight, coming closer to death than he'd like more than once. In all that time, through losing one team, then a second, only to fight his way through with the strangest of the three, he had never taken the time to really stop and consider where he was and what he was doing. Now he took the time to look out over the city, which was actually quite beautiful with nature having reclaimed the ruins. He glanced at the people sitting with him on the rooftop, eating sandwiches like it was an ordinary day.

"I wish my team were here," he said.

"They are, somewhere," Jory said. "We get to the middle and you'll find each other."

They finished eating and resumed their course through the city. A few hours and a couple of monster packs later, a welcome message popped up in front of Jason.

-
- [Contact \[Niko Tomich\] has entered communication range.](#)
 - [Contact \[Bethany Cavendish\] has entered communication range.](#)
 - [Contact \[Hudson Kettering\] has entered communication range.](#)
-

Jason immediately opened a voice chat.

"Beth," Jason said. "Are you all alright?"

"We are," Beth's voice came back. "Niko and I were dropped on the same tower and we found Hudson along the way. No sign of Emily or Mose, yet. How about you?"

"Missing two as well; Clive and Humphrey. Want to meet up?"

"I do," Beth said. "We're kind of stuck here, anyway. There's a bunch of people all looking for a way to the centre of the city."

"Something's blocking the way?"

"Yeah. Come find us and you can see for yourself."

Jason added them to the party, allowing him to find her with his map ability. Not long thereafter, Jason and his group were arriving at what turned out to be a sizeable camp of adventurers. From the looks of it, some of them had been here for days. The wariness the adventurers had been treating each other with was absent here, with all looking to find a way forward.

The Greenstone adventurers were easy to pick out from the imports, just from their auras. The foreign adventurers had clean, controlled auras. Outside of Jason and Beth's groups, most Greenstone adventurers had shoddy aura control at best.

"What's going on?" Jason asked, after greetings and introductions between his team and Beth's.

"Some kind of plant monster infestation," Beth explained. "Anyone trying to get closer to the city centre than this is faced with tentacles and plant monsters crawling out of the ground. People have tried going around, but the infestation seems to be encircling most of, if not the entire the central region of the city."

"How do you know it's encircling the central area and not covering it entirely?" Jory asked.

"We don't," Beth said. "We're just hoping, because otherwise, how is anyone going to complete these trials. A few groups have tried fighting their way through but we have no idea if they made it or if they're mulch, now. We know from the people who've tried going around that there are a few camps like this one, with people gathered to see if anyone can figure out a way through. Assuming there's a way through at all."

Quest: [Reclaimed by Nature]

Plant life has not just reclaimed this part of the city but actively defends it. Find a way past the aggressive flora to reach the heart of the city.

- Objective: Circumvent aggressive plant life 0/1.
- Reward: Varies by effectiveness of method.
- Some party members are too far away to participate in this quest. They will not receive this quest until they re-enter proximity to party leader.

"What the heck is that?" Beth asked.

"That's Jason's ability," Sophie said. "He gets free stuff for doing what he was going to do anyway. It's basically a scam."

"I can drop you out of the party if you don't want to participate," Jason said.

"I can drop you off a building," Sophie told him.

"I can float down, remember?"

"Not if I knock you out first."

"Look, I love some sexually-charged banter as much the next girl," Beth said, "but we have a bunch of plant monsters to deal with."

While Jason and Sophie looked at Beth with matching expressions of silent affront, Beth turned her attention to Jory.

“You’re an alchemist, right? Plant monsters can often be handled with alchemical solutions, so is there anything you can do.”

“Maybe,” Jory said. “I’ll need to know what we’re dealing with before I can look at solutions.”

“There are a lot of impressive adventurers, here,” Neil said. “I have to imagine someone knows something.”

“There’s a little council, of sorts,” Beth said. “Each team sends one or two people to discuss a way past it. People are trying all sorts of things, so we’ve been meeting every few hours to talk about results.”

“How’s that going?” Jason asked.

“It’s a bunch of adventurers used to getting their own way, so about as well as you’d expect.”

“Jory,” Jason said. “You’re about as close to a plant expert as we’ll get. Beth, can you take us around to people with firsthand knowledge of this thing?”

“I can,” Beth said. “I told you that some groups have tried to make it through. Some didn’t come back, so we don’t know if they made it through. Others tried and came back when things got too rough.”

Jason nodded his thanks, and suggested the rest his group to ask around, see what they could find out. While the others roamed the camp, Beth took Jason and Jory to speak to some of the other teams, Jory taking notes on anything they could tell them. After speaking to enough teams that they were just getting the same information over again, they regrouped to take stock.

“What do you think?” Jason asked Jory.

“This is potentially very bad,” Jory said.

“How so?” Beth asked.

“I think what we’re dealing with might not be plant monsters,” Jory said. “I’ve heard of something like what’s been described to us before, and that wasn’t a monster at all. It was a magical plant.”

“You think these plants have taken over this section of city?” Keane asked.

“Not plants,” Jory said. “Plant, singular. One single, massive plant mass, buried underground and sending up parts of itself to find prey.”

“Prey?” Neil asked. “Since when are plants predatory?”

“I’ve heard of predatory plants,” Jason said. “The one on my world are small, though. They lure in bugs, that kind of thing.”

“The one I’m thinking of is bigger,” Jory said. “Much bigger. It takes centuries, but they have been known to grow to the size we’re looking at, here. It thrives underground, slowly expanding. It forms symbiotic relationships with the other plant life in the area, which become like sensory organs for it. Then it starts preying on anything that wanders into its area. Animals quickly learn to avoid it and it goes dormant. It lets the animals come back, waits until the area is teeming, then strikes. Tentacle vines and spawned, semi-independent plant creatures.”

“And you think this is what we’re dealing with?” Jason asked.

“I can’t know that for sure,” Jory said. “It’s what I can think of that fits.”

“You think this whole section of city has a giant plant monster under it? One monster?”

“Not a monster,” Jory said. “We know from the people who fought them that the spawned plant creatures are iron-rank, while the tentacles, which will be appendages of the main body, are bronze rank. No bronze-rank monster spawns that big, or occupying that much space underground.”

“What’s it called?” Jason asked.

“It’s called a blood root vine,” Jory said. “It’s named that because it straddles the line between plant and animal, with its predatory behaviour and blood sap. That was what really gave it away, when people started saying the tentacles bled when cut. The sap of a blood root vine is almost identical to blood and has a number of alchemical uses. Most of the big ones you hear about are from alchemist grow houses that were abandoned and the blood root vine slowly expanded until someone found it again. It’s a story that goes around in alchemy circles but you never actually expect to see it.”

“So, what do we do about it?” Beth asked.

“Assuming I’m right,” Jory said, “the key is the main body. That means an underground root network. From what I hear, when clearing out a blood root vine that’s gotten out of hand, there’s two ways of handling it. One is to dig the whole damn thing up and burn it. That’s logistically infeasible, especially in five days. I have heard, however, of another method. A method we have the good fortune to have on hand.”

Jory turned a pointed look on Jason.

“Me?” Jason asked.

“You,” Jory said. “I can’t guarantee the authenticity of this story, but I have heard of using afflictions to infect the main body and rot the whole thing. You have to get

underground, at the root system itself, though. If you just try it on the tentacles, it will let the tentacles fall off to protect itself.”

“We’ve already tried that,” Beth said. “There’s a few people in camp who can use afflictions, including me. We blasted a chunk out of the ground and poured every affliction we had into the roots. They withered up, but it didn’t spread.”

“Were any of you focused affliction specialists, like Jason, or were they all area abilities like yours?” Jory asked.

“Area, like me,” Beth said. “Not to put you down, Jason, but who afflicts one person when you can affect whole groups.”

“That’s your problem,” Jory said. “We’re talking about a plant spread over an area the size of Old City. The afflictions you fed it were like trying to turn the sea yellow by taking a sneaky wee in it. You need afflictions that grow worse and worse, faster and faster, instead of petering out.”

“Will my afflictions even work on it?” Jason asked. “We’ve seen a few plant monsters since we got here and my abilities have been very inconsistent on them.”

“They should,” Jory said. “As I said, the blood root vine is more akin to animals than other plants.”

“Blood is one thing,” Jason said, “but to get the kind of damage escalation we need, I’ll need my curses. That requires a soul, or at least the motive spirit most monsters have instead of one.”

“I can’t guarantee anything,” Jory said, “but once it reaches a certain size, it even has a dim, animalistic intelligence. Hopefully it’s close enough to an animal that there is something inside it for your curses to hold of.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then we get out and come up with something new,” Beth said. “Unless you have a better plan, we may as well try.”

“The trick will be getting access to the root system,” Jory said. “You said you had someone who can open up a hole in the ground?”

They all turned to Hudson, the large man who served as the front-liner for Beth’s team. He had been staying quiet through the conversation, leaving things like planning to Beth. His earth powers were the most prominent abilities in his power set.

“It’s not me,” he said. “I have the earth essence, but not a hole-digging power.”

“It was another earth user,” Beth said. “We can get her again.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Beth, talk to this council you mentioned. See if you can’t find us some extra muscle to fight our way in with. Jory and I will try and get more specific about what we can expect when we try this.”

“What about the rest of us?” Keane asked.

“Get some rest,” Jory said. “This thing will be relentless in fighting back against us. You’ll need all the stamina you can muster.”

The group they gathered had twenty six members, including the five from Jason’s group and three from Beth’s. Keane had found a member of his own team in the camp and pulling him into the endeavour, along with that team member’s own temporary group. Aside from that was another earth essence user and a few more people Beth had wrangled into participating.

The region of the city occupied by the plant was more overgrown than other parts of the city. The buildings were mostly rubble, the paved streets long overturned by roots and other plant growth. As they moved into the area, tentacle vines crawled out to the ground to ensnare legs, thorns covered in soporific toxin biting through skin. The team fought back, cutting away vines as healers purged the poison, a task in which Jason participated using his own cleansing power. It was highly effective, although the way Jason consumed the cleansed afflictions did not go unnoticed.

“Did you just say ‘feed me your sins?’” another adventurer asked him.

“There’s a lot of people chanting spells,” Jason said. “You probably misheard.”

A variety of plant creatures came shambling into the attack. Plodding mounds of fibrous matter that whipped at them with tentacle arms, they weren’t very dangerous but they were tough, their numbers swelling as the group struggled to put them down as fast as new one appeared.

“This should be far enough!” Jory yelled after he determined that they should have definitely made their way over the root system.

“Alright!” Beth called out. “Everyone knows what to do. Gather on me!”

The group pulled in tight on Beth as Hudson, beside her, started casting a spell. Shortly after, a stone dome rose up out of the ground in two halves, closing over them. As it sealed them in, crystals embedded in the dome lit up the interior with luminescence.

The other earth user called for more room and the people inside the dome moved up against the walls. The creatures outside were shut out, but tentacles still came up through the ground. Beth designated a team to protect the earth user while she used her spell to

dig. Her spell did not take long and soon gobbets of wet earth were geysering out of the ground and over everyone inside the dome.

“Sorry,” she called out. “I don’t normally do this indoors.”

With the earth user’s spell completed, Jason glanced at Jory, who nodded back. Jason then walked up to the hole, even as more tentacles crawled from the ground to attack the people under the dome. Beth directed the people who had been shielding the earth user to switch their protection to Jason. Looking in the hole was a vertical tunnel from which the wet ground had been excavated. Left behind, scraped but intact by the digging spell, were thick roots, looking like thick green and yellow veins.

“Moment of truth,” he muttered to himself. Loaded up with every buff the whole group could muster, he chanted a spell.

“Bleed for me.”

A crack appeared on the thickest root, blood red sap trickling out. The sap was, as Jory surmised, close enough to blood that Jason’s ability took hold.

➤ Special attack [Haemorrhage] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Blood Root Vine].

“Now the real test.”

He chanted another spell.

“Carry the mark of your transgressions.”

-
- Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Sin] on [Blood Root Vine].
 - Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Mark of Sin] on [Blood Root Vine].
 - [Blood Root Vine] have resisted [Mark of Sin].
 - [Mark of Sin] does not take effect.
-

Transcendent damage burned a symbol into the root as the spell took hold. The bronze-rank vine resisted one of the effects, even with all the buffs Jason was under, but it was the one Jason didn’t need. He let out a relieved breath, then remembered he couldn’t afford to relax as a thorny vine wrapped around his leg.

-
- Special attack [Vine Thorn] has inflicted [Subjugating Toxin] on you.
 - You have resisted [Subjugating Toxin].
 - [Subjugating Toxin] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

Before Jason could cut away the vine, one of his protectors had done it for him.

“Need a cleanse?” the man asked.

“All good, thanks,” Jason said, turning his attention back to the hole.

He cast another curse on the vine, which it resisted, then a second and third time before it took hold.

➤ [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Blood Root Vine].

Jason held a hand out, slicing it with his wrist razor. Leeches went spilling down into the hole.

“Sorry to drop you in a hole, Colin. See if you can’t suck some blood out of that vine.”

At another of the adventurer camps around the aggressive plant zone, Clive and Valdis watched a heavily injured group retreat from the danger zone.

“I think you were right to urge caution, Clive,” Valdis said. “It looks like something has set the vines right off.”

Previously, the tentacles would only emerge from the ground to attack intruders. Now, however, they were erupting from all over the ground, thrashing about wildly.

“I think something is happening to them,” Clive said. “Are you seeing those black patches?”

“I am.”

They watched as the black patches grew larger, some vines even rotting and falling dead to the ground.

In another part of the city, Humphrey and his temporary team were deep into the territory of the aggressive vines. Their intention had been to fight their way through, but the deeper they went, the more plant monsters and tentacles appeared to meet them. They were a powerful group but they were slowly being overwhelmed.

“Do we keep pushing forward, or go back?” Carly called out, panic tinging her voice.

“Forward,” Lowell called back. “There has to be an end to it. We could be almost clear.”

“There’s no guarantee of that,” Humphrey countered. “We go back.”

“We can’t make it back,” Lowell objected. “We have to risk it.”

“No, we don’t” Humphrey held firm, not pausing as he hacked away at the tentacles. “Our chances may be slight but at least we know there is one, going back.”

The tentacles started growing more and more numerous but flailed wildly, rather than grab at the adventurers as they had done previously.

“What’s happening?” Carly asked.

“Something’s rotting the tentacles,” Lowell said, and as he said, pointing to where the tentacles were turning black from the base. Some rotted away and dropped dead, even as more emerged from the ground. Then a silver, blue and gold light lit up all the tentacles, dissolving them to nothing. As it did, the plant monsters became inert collections of plant matter.

“Was that transcendent damage?” Carly asked.

“It was,” Humphrey said.

They looked around, seeing that whatever had destroyed the plants around them had affected everything within sight. Hurt and exhausted, they dropped to the ground to rest.

“What do you think did that?” Carly asked.

“Not what; who,” Humphrey said with a smile. “I know who did this.”

“You’re telling us some iron ranker did all this?” Lowell asked.

“I know these powers,” Humphrey said. “They belong to a man who can’t help making a spectacle of himself. Thankfully.”

Chapter 168: Team Change

Only seven groups had managed to breach the centremost region of the city before the blood root vine had been killed. One was made up of people with flight powers. Such abilities were mana intensive at iron-rank, requiring them to chug mana potions as quickly as they could without poisoning themselves and stopping to rest atop every building not reduced to rubble by the plants.

Another was made up of adventurers from a jungle kingdom who had managed to find their entire original team. They had come up as adventurers fighting plant monsters and decided to bet on their abilities and experience to get them through. It was even worse than they expected; a seemingly endless, unrelenting slog until they finally reached ground not bursting with tentacle vines. They were hurt and exhausted, their willpower and supplies both spent. It was a near thing, but their experience, teamwork and mutual trust had seen them through.

Of the five remaining groups to get past the plants, all had found methods to do so when searching buildings around the perimeter of the zone. For some, this was an active search. Having concluded that the plants were a part of the test, they reasoned that the means to pass it had to be somewhere somewhere. For others it was serendipity, stumbling onto a way past the plants while searching for treasure.

Only two of the groups had come through in the original teams they had before entering the astral space. Separated at the start of the trial, like everyone else, they had found each other in one of the camps. One of these teams included Padma, Farrah's former mentee. Filled with determination after finding one another, they had no illusions of fighting their way through and looked for another path. Their intensive searching finally turned up an abandoned alchemy workshop, containing bottles of a liquid that repelled the plants.

However they arrived, each group was elated to have made it past the aggressive plants. Their efforts were difficult and costly but they knew that same difficulty made each team who struggled through more likely to be the ones who snatched the prize. It was largely to their dismay, then, that other teams started reaching the middle en masse, mostly in waves from the three camps. It quickly became evident that one of the camps had found a way to kill off the plants entirely.

Compared to the rest of the city the adventurers had been making their way through, the true centre of the city was much more intact. The buildings were still empty, time and

the wet air corroding away anything not magically sealed. It was also a relatively small area, allowing separated team members to reconnect as the three camps worth of adventurers swarmed in.

All the adventurers ended up in what Jason's map marked as the very centre of the city. There was a vast open space, like a city square, with a circular tower in the middle. This was the one building anyone had seen in the city with no signs of damage whatsoever and was both wide and tall. Every adventurer who attempted to get close to the tower encountered a disorienting magical field which sent them staggering back. This was true approaching from above, one flier getting injured as the field tossed them away through the air. The invigilator, Shade, finally appeared to announce that the tower would open on the final day of the trials, several days hence.

Previous conflicts were largely put aside as the adventurers arrived in the square. People found their original teams, even as they celebrated new bonds, forged in the fires of shared adversity. Not every reunion was happy, as someone started organising the counting of the fallen. Those who had collected remains returned them to their teams, where possible. Some teams had fallen entirely, while others lacked the resources to carry the caskets of their dead.

Others weren't dead but gone, having used their escape medallions to preserve their lives at the cost of further participation in the trials. Shade appeared to inform teams which of their members had escaped to safety. While many of the adventurers were able to reconstitute their teams, others were once again looking for new companions in the face of their original teams being absent or dead. Some, left alone, used their escape medallions to leave the astral space behind.

Humphrey's team staggered into the city, ragged from their narrow escape. If it wasn't for Humphrey hacking through the plants like a maniacal, magically-empowered lumberjack, they wouldn't have survived to see their reprieve as the plant monster died. Heading into the city, afterward, they had collected up the bodies of two separate groups that had died trying the same crossing.

The group, aside from Humphrey, were four of a team of six, having the luck to mostly arrive in the city together. They thanked Humphrey, sober in the knowledge that without him they would have been amongst the fallen. Lowell had lost much of his arrogance on their trek through the city. Humphrey still didn't like him, but they shared the respect of dangers weathered together. The group set out to find their remaining team members in the growing crowd as Humphrey went to find Jason and the others.

Clive, Valdis and the rest of their temporary team arrived in a far better state than Humphrey. After the dangers of the tower, Clive had won the rest of the team over against Valdis' proposal to fight their way through. Clive had proposed seeking out alternate means forward but the plant zone had cleared before they had the chance. They had an easy time passing through the rubble of what had previously been the plant-infested region. They were wary of danger, but the surviving jungle was made up of regular plant life. It was even monster free, courtesy of the now-dead carnivorous plant.

Clearing the zone, Clive was glad to hear from his team over voice chat. He announced his intention to go find them, signalling the end of their temporary alliance. Each member of the group was from a different team and had their own people to find, but Abarca, Campos and Hildebrand were reluctant to part from Valdis. Their teaming with the prince was an opportunity they were loathe to relinquish, each seeking to secure promises of meeting up after the trials. Valdis, clearly no stranger to such encounters, saw them each away smoothly. He, in turn, secured a promise of future dealings from Clive.

Jason already had two of his team members, thus waited for Humphrey and Clive to find them. Keane, who now had one of his own team with them, made friendly farewells before they went to find the rest. Jory was about to head off and seek out his own team, who were all fellows from the various crafting associations. Shade promptly appeared to inform him that every other member of his team had used their escape medallions, so Jory remained with Jason.

There was only an hour or so of good light left. There were days left to seek out the city's treasures and everyone took what was left of the day to reorganise. Adventurers reconnected with their teams, collected their dead and sometimes made new teams again. Many teams had members who were dead or, for preference, safely extracted via escape medallion. As when they first arrived, then, temporary teams were built from the scraps of those that remained.

Jason had the fortune to have all his team survive to regroup. As he used his map and the voice chat power to collect his team, he did the same for Beth Cavendish's absent team member. It was the archer, Emily, who had likewise arrived safely in the heart of the city.

Many groups were staking out territory around the square, Jason and Beth's team doing the same while waiting for their disparate members to find them. Groups were rapidly claiming the largely intact buildings that were closest and they picked out a five storey building that turned out to be a square around an open space in the middle. The courtyard inside meant that every floor of the building was splashed with natural light.

As they were taking stock, another group tried to bully them into giving it up, Beth and Jason going outside to meet their challenge. One of the team went pale when Jason responded by manifesting his cloak, rapidly whispering to the others. Jason and Beth shared a querying glance as they watch the group mutter in a huddle. The one who had recognised Jason cloak was using some very aggressive body language.

“What are they saying?” Jason asked quietly. “You have that elf-ears power, right?”

“It’s not an elf ears power!” Beth hissed back at him.

“Yeah, but you have it, right?”

“I can hear them, yes.”

“So, what are they saying?”

“They’re talking about that ridiculous rumour about you killing a bunch of adventurers in a shopping centre.”

“Oh?”

“He’s claiming you killed six people.”

“It was only five,” Jason said. “I bet people think six because there were twelve of them and people just say I killed half.”

“Wait,” Beth asked, turning on Jason. “That actually happened?”

“You didn’t know? Thadwick sent some bottom-feeder thugs to kill me so I wouldn’t reveal his shady land-grab scheme.”

“So you killed them?”

“Some of them,” Jason said defensively. “If you’re fighting twelve guys and they think you aren’t willing to kill them, they aren’t going to back off.”

“You really beat twelve guys?”

“They were all rubbish,” Jason said. “I don’t think any of them even had a full set of powers.”

“You don’t have a full set of powers.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t know that.”

“What does that have to do with…”

Beth trailed off as the other group finished their conversation.

“My friend here thinks you’re some kind of hard man,” one of them challenged Jason.

“Doesn’t really matter what I am,” Jason said. “My friend Humphrey is standing behind you with a sword bigger than you are, so I suggest you jog on, cobber.”

The man turned to find Humphrey standing there, as promised, with his dragon-wing sword slung over one shoulder.

“Yeah well,” the man said as he shuffled off to leave, waving a finger at Jason with transparent bravado. “You should count yourself lucky.”

“Why?” Jason asked. “Are you holding a raffle?”

They watched the group leave, Humphrey dismissing his sword with relief.

“I hate putting it over my shoulder like that,” he said. “It feels like I’m going to tip over the whole time.”

“It was just right,” Jason said. “Casually intimidating, like you might kick the snot out of them as a hobby.”

“You do have very large arms,” Beth said.

“They are quite large, aren’t they?” Jason said. “Do you do any special exercises?”

“We train together,” Humphrey said, giving him a flat look. “You know exactly what exercises I do.”

“So, you’re saying you rub special oil on them when no one’s looking?”

“What?”

Jason dropped his cloak and headed back into the building, calling out loudly.

“Hey Jory! Have you been selling Humphrey special arm oil?”

Three more teams ended up joining Jason and Beth’s in the building they shared. Valdis was his bombastic self, inviting himself and his team in as Clive tried to explain Valdis to the others.

“Imagine Jason, if his father was a diamond rank king,” Clive said as Valdis was already picking out rooms for his people.

“Two of them?” Neil asked. “I’m going up on the roof.”

Neil made himself scarce and Valdis was happily introducing himself, picking each person out from Clive’s descriptions. A celestine woman on Valdis’ team, Sigrid, was quietly apologising for him.

“No worries,” Jason told her. “If Clive says he’s alright, it’s fine.”

“Don’t blame me for this,” Clive said. “I never said it was fine.”

Jason and Sigrid both looked at him.

“Okay, it’s fine,” Clive conceded. “He’s just, you know, a lot. One of you is bad enough.”

“Indentured servant,” Valdis was saying as he greeted Sophie with enthusiasm.

“That’s strange. It’s not rude to say that, right? I mean, it is strange. Look at me, though. It’s not like being a prince with an eight-hundred year-old father is normal.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said, “but one is strange in that people give you everything you could possibly want and the other is strange in that people keep trying to give me to sleazy men.”

“I can see how that’s different,” Valdis said. “Now that you say it, though, I have heard some stories about the prince of Calute and a rather unconventional cattle market...”

“Val,” Sigrid said pointedly, cutting him off.

“Right, yes. Not meant to talk about that. Lovely to meet you though.”

The next group to find them and more politely ask to share accommodation was Keane’s. Keane’s team leader was clearly in two minds, but Keane had been insistent. On discovering the presence of Prince Valdis, Keane’s team became significantly more enthused.

The last team to join was that of Padma. The team from Vitesse had already been in the city when most of the teams arrived and had heard a lot of stories while everyone else was reorganising themselves. Padma was keen to hear more about Farrah from Jason and had convinced her team to ask if they could share the building.

That made for thirty-one adventurers, turning the excessive five-story building into a comfortable fit. With so many people, Jason decided to have an impromptu celebration for reaching the centre of the city and recruited Valdis to get everyone involved. Shortly thereafter, all five groups were on top of the roof, music playing courtesy of a recording crystal from Valdis’ collection.

“I kind of just wanted to sleep,” Beth said.

“I think everyone just wanted to sleep,” Humphrey said.

“So why are we having a party?”

“We were outvoted by Jason and the prince.”

“How do two people outvote twenty nine?”

“I’m not sure,” Humphrey said, “ but I think we may need to keep those two apart.”

Chapter 169: Company Worth Keeping

Since they were the impetus for the rooftop party, Jason and Valdis provided the supplies. Jason set up a buffet, putting out a couple of tables, an array of large bowls full of food, tongs and a stack of plates. He also laid out a good supply of drinks, tapping casks of wine, beer and mead.

"I've only got a dozen mugs," he announced, "so I hope you all have something to drink out of."

Valdis raided the dimensional space of his offsider, Sigrid, from which he retrieved a small sea of cushions so no one was left sitting on the hard, stone roof. He also supplied glow stones as the day's light died and recording crystals full of music. Jason and Valdis stood side by side, looking over the setup with satisfaction.

The thirty adventurers were mingling, all sharing the exhaustion of having traversed the city. Beth's cousin, Mose, approached Jason and Valdis, standing next to them to likewise survey their efforts.

"Not bad for an ancient city in the middle of a sealed-off astral space, right Mose?" Jason asked happily.

"This is what you brought to explore an astral space that was home to an ancient order of assassins?" Mose.

Jason and Valdis shared a nodding glance.

"Yep," Jason said.

"Getting your priorities right is important in the adventuring game," Valdis added.

Of the five teams, Valdis' were the most standoffish, clearly unsure why Valdis was choosing to camp with local teams over more well-known groups. Sigrid took him aside to advocate making connections with the more prominent teams. She knew full well the futility of trying to direct him, but knew that if she started early, then he might actually start to listen sometime in the next few days.

"I'm a prince of the Mirror Kingdom," Valdis told her. "If I want to meet big-name adventurers, I can do that any time."

"Val, it isn't about meeting," Sigrid told him. "It's about making connections."

"Agreed," Valdis told her, laughing again. "Here's the thing, Sig. You make connections when someone's already a big deal and they become someone you know. Make the connection when they're a nobody and they become a friend."

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you only really know one of these people, right? What makes you think they’re worth making friends with?”

“Call it an instinct,” Valdis said. “I’ve spent enough time with Clive to get a sense of the company he keeps and that it’s company worth keeping. Danielle Geller’s son is here; you can’t complain about that. And that Asano is worth keeping an eye on. Dangerous, that one.”

“Really?” Sigrid asked, casting a sceptical look in Jason’s direction.

“Tell me this, Sig,” Valdis said. “You have two men who carve through people like a butcher with slabs of meat, taking on opponents in job lots and leaving seas of blood behind them. Both have mastered murderous skills that kill quickly and horrifying powers that kill slowly. One of those men spends his days dressed all in black, barely speaking. The sobriety of a killer. The other cleans himself off, has a nice meal with his friends and gets a good night’s sleep. Which of those two men would you keep an eye on?”

“You seem fairly certain about someone you just met.”

“He’s like me, I can feel it,” Valdis said. “The way he watches people. The way he seems to be off-kilter but is actually being controlling. I’m not sure he even realises how much he’s doing it. There’s something dark inside that boy and he doesn’t want it to be who he is. I know that feeling. Ask around and I bet you’ll find he’s dropped bodies that weren’t monsters.”

“I already have,” Sigrid said. “And he has. Should I keep an eye on him?”

“No, just tell the boys to behave. He’s not intimidated by my background.”

“He should be.”

“Be nice, Sig. Outworlders make good friends and terrible enemies.”

Night fell and they activated the glow stones they set up earlier. Thirty-one tired adventurers, stuffed with food and plied with drinks lounged on the cushions in the warm night air. With full bellies and full cups, Valdis’ team had finally loosened up as well.

“Mr Asano,” Valdis, said with exaggerated, drunken pomp.

“Your royal princeness,” Jason greeted back.

“I have heard tell,” Valdis said, “that the rather inconvenient plant monster we encounter was a single, giant entity. I’ve also heard that you are the one that killed it.”

“It wasn’t, strictly speaking, a monster,” Jason said. He had bronze rank booze he could have used to get drunk but didn’t want to risk the hangover.

“As for being the one who killed it,” Jason continued, “I was far from the one behind it. There were twenty-five more people there. If it had just been down to me, we’d all still be in the outer city, scratching our bums.”

“But your abilities were what destroyed it.”

“It was just a lucky confluence of enemy and the specific nature of my abilities,” Jason said. “It could just as easily have been completely immune.”

“I’m more interested in the treasure you got from it,” Emily said. The archer from Beth’s team hadn’t been present to participate, hearing about the shared quest from her team mates. Niko, the smoulder from Beth’s team who had been present laughed.

“You should have seen everyone’s faces,” he said. “One moment we’re fighting for our lives against all these thorny tentacles, and the next, treasure starts falling out of the air. A bunch of items, even essences. I got hit in the head by a whole sack of plant quintessence gems. A sack! It was crazy.”

“People got a bit crabby that we were the only ones who got loot,” Neil said. “Jason ended up sharing out the spirit coins. The ones that everyone saw, anyway. Those of us with dimensional spaces split the extra between just our teams after.”

“Why don’t we do a little showing off?” Beth suggested. “I’ll start.”

She stood up, picking up the dimensional bag next to her and taking out a long robe, holding it in front of her. It was green and brown with a forest motif, hanging like a dress. The colours setting off the pretty elf woman’s tawny skin, chestnut hair and vibrant green eyes.

“Bronze-rank spellcaster robe,” she said with a bright smile. “It enhances plant abilities and poison.”

“Sorry, where did this come from?” asked Lance, the leader of Padma’s team. “A looting power?”

“Neil and I both have looting abilities,” Jason said, cutting off anyone from giving more of his abilities away.

The people who participated in the plant monster raid went around one at a time, revealing their haul from the quest to get past the plant. The results of not just bypassing the plant but eliminating it entirely had made for impressive compensation. There were sets of armour, weaponry and items that affected essence abilities, usually with some kind of plant aspect. Hudson, the earth-essence user from Beth’s team, had received a wrist band that looked like a looped vine and added effects to his earth conjuration powers. Jason had looted a similar-looking vine wrist band that could produce a variety of vine conjurations.

All the magical equipment was bronze rank, like the plant creature, so none of them could use theirs, yet. Instead, they had a jump on useful items for when they ranked-up. Then there were the essences, Jason taking out a pair of green cubes and setting them

down in front of where he sat, cross-legged, on his cushion. They were both green, one ephemeral and swirling, like the cube was full of liquid. The other was appeared more solid, like an opal with a rich green colour as its base underpinned by lush, overlapping shades of darker green.

“Plant and growth essences,” Jason said. “Both fairly common.”

“Wasn’t there a third one?” Beth asked.

“Indeed there was,” Jason said, taking a third cube from his inventory with a flourish and laying it next to the others. It was the blue of an open summer sky, complete with clouds that seemed to float through the cube.

“Vast essence,” Jason said. “This one’s as rare as they come.”

“How much do you want for it?” Valdis said immediately, eagerly leaning forward.

“What do you say, Clive?” Jason asked. “Should we cut him a deal?”

“Gods, no,” Clive said. “Bilk him for everything you can.”

The group broke up into laughter at the exaggerated look of affront Valdis turned on Clive. The loot reveal continued as everyone showed off their hauls from their journey through the city, accompanied by stories of the tribulations faced to get those treasures.

The storytelling culminated with Valdis and Clive retelling their tower ascent and the items they found at the top. Valdis regaled them in the form of an epic saga, Clive drawing laughs as he periodically interjected with more grounded descriptions. Finally their story reaches the incredible find of growth items at the base of the buildings statues, Valdis pointing out to Clive that it was exactly the kind of haul he had told them would be there.

They ended the story with a presentation to an incredulous Neil of the last pair of items. The first was a fist-sized orb and the other a circlet of gold with a blue gem set into the forehead. With Jason’s ability, Neil could immediately see their effects. He started by looking over the orb.

Item: [Sentinel’s Orb] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

On object with the power to refine barrier energy to its most perfect form (tool, orb).

- Effect: Increase the effect of shield-based essence abilities.
- Effect: Cooldown of shield-based essence abilities is reduced.
- Effect: If wielding both [Sentinel’s Orb] and [Sentinel’s Crown], your shield abilities bestow a heal-over-time effect.

“Well that’s just ridiculous,” he said, then looked at the circlet.

Item: [Sentinel's Crown] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

The headpiece of the king of guardians (accessory, circlet).

- Effect: Mana recovery is increased. Mana recovery rate is increased briefly after using a shield-based essence ability.
- Effect: Mana cost of shield-based essence abilities is reduced.
- Effect: If wielding both [Sentinel's Orb] and [Sentinel's Crown], your shield abilities bestow a mana-over-time effect.

“And so is that,” he said, looking up at Clive. “You can’t just give me these.”

“Of course I can,” Clive said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “You’re on our team.”

Neil looked around at his other team members. Humphrey nodded encouragingly. Jason had the usual, self-satisfied grin that gave Neil a near-constant urge to punch him in the face. Sophie simply shrugged.

“Thank you,” Neil said to Clive. “Really, thank you.”

“Pay us back by keeping us alive,” Clive said.

“And you’ll need to buy some new clothes,” Jason said. “A gold headband with a honking great gem in the middle is a bold look. You’re going to have to dress around it.”

The next day saw adventurers washing through the city centre like a flood. The more intact nature of the buildings would seem to indicate more remnant treasure but a day of teams turning up nothing more than a few essences and awakening stones between them proved otherwise. The teams in Jason’s building did not participate in the day’s searching, in no small part due to hangovers. Valdis had been eager to participate but his team was loyal rather than obedient and collectively told him to shove off before crawling back into their camp bedding.

Those who had weathered the night’s festivities better were still exhausted from days of every moment not spent fighting still being in full combat readiness. They were happy to join the hungover in staying inside their bedrolls until the sun was high in the sky. In the late morning there was group meditation session on the roof, Valdis leading a dozen adventurers through a sword-dance meditation, much like the one Rufus had taught Jason. Given the athletic attractiveness of adventurers in general, Jason felt like he’d somehow joined a group of models doing tai chi in the park.

The adventurers that had scoured the central city shared the fruitlessness of their search as they mingled in the tower square in the evening. Most teams would be searching further afield the following day, returning to the outer city where treasure hunting that had proven more rewarding.

Jason and Beth's teams elected to stay put, waving off Keane, Padma and Valdis' teams in their "quest for epic loot." Rather than risk something else happening, Jason and Beth's groups chose to spend their time recovering their best form before the final trials unlocked.

Beth, Humphrey, Jason, Clive and Neil were spending a languid afternoon in the shade of their building's top level. They were sat by a window on some cushions Valdis had left behind after the party. The side of the building was open as if there was a missing bay window, allowing them to look out at the central tower within which the final challenges of the trials were located. From the roof above, they could hear Sophie practising with the rest of Beth's team.

"Why do you think all the rest of the trials only become available on the last day?" Beth pondered.

"Clearly, the city itself is the core component of the trial," Humphrey said. "I assume the tower has more direct, specific tests. Shade did tell us at the start that the purpose of the trials was to test for five virtues. Choosing whether or not to take the items he offered was the first trial and reaching the tower was the second. Presumably there are three trials remaining, inside the tower."

"I'm curious about the next one," Neil said. "The trial for those who chose courage is meant to be easier, now. I didn't use the items Shade gave me. It makes me wish I hadn't taken them."

"I don't know about that," Jason said. "We all took bold steps to make it this far. Would we have, if we didn't have some live-saving protections? Even with them, people died. I'm not sure I would have been willing to take the risks I took without them."

"Did any of you choose the courage path?" Clive asked. "I know Valdis did."

The others all shook their head.

As the sun set, Shade appeared before them.

"Greeting, adventurers. I am appearing before you all to announce that the second trial is coming to an end in one day. Anyone present in the tower square at the centre of the city when the sun goes down tomorrow will pass. Those who have not reached it at that time may leave by escape medallion. Those who do not have the medallions will be provided with them. They must be used before the trials completely close, however, or you

will be trapped inside. As a final note, the reward for the second trial will be granted tomorrow as the second trial concludes.”

“One more day,” Humphrey said. “It was good to relax and recover, but should we join the treasure hunting tomorrow?”

“Bad idea,” Sophie said, coming down some nearby stairs. She was covered in sweat and poured herself a glass of juice from the refreshments Jason had set out.

“It’s not just the last day for treasure,” she continued after a hearty swig. “It’s also the last day to quietly remove the competition. Either way, there’s a good chance we’d have to kill some people before they killed us if we went out there. I think I’d rather stay here.”

“Perhaps we could socialise with the other adventurer groups who stayed behind, like us,” Humphrey said. “Most of my family’s teams occupied a couple of buildings not far from here and some of the other foreign adventurers were nearby.”

“Not the worst idea,” Beth said. “I’m curious about this trial reward, though. What do you think?”

“Specialty equipment, maybe?” Clive postulated. “This place was originally a training ground for assassin trainees, right? It would make sense that they would receive some kind of reward for joining the order, like a uniform or something.”

“Would secret assassins have uniforms?” Neil asked.

“Probably not, now you say it,” Clive conceded.

“Awakening stones,” Jason said. “I’m certain Emir knows more than he told us and he implied to me more than once that there would be a chance at some unusual awakening stones.”

“That makes sense,” Clive said, sitting up enthusiastically. “The great astral beings can’t make essences the way that gods can, but they can produce their own awakening stones.”

“I have no interest in divine essences and awakening stones,” Jason said. “The idea of some god repossessing my magic powers doesn’t appeal.”

“No, that’s the interesting thing,” Clive said. “The stones the astral beings produce aren’t divine stones that the astral beings can revoke. They’re just ordinary awakening stones whose aspect aligns with the great astral being in question. I’ve used some of them myself, although the Celestial Book is a lot more approachable than the Reaper. The question is, what kind of powers would a higher-dimensional death entity grant?”

“Powers like Jason’s I’d have to imagine,” Neil said.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see,” Jason said. “I don’t imagine we’ll be using them until the trials are over, though.”

“That would be the sensible approach,” Clive agreed. “People are going to get impatient to find out what they do, though.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I’m willing to bet there are a bunch of people who’ll be annoyed at how long it takes to reveal what the awakening stones we’ve found here do.”

Chapter 170: He Who Fights With Monsters

In the heart of the city, a crowd of adventurers were gathered in the tower square as the sun dipped below the horizon. Clumped into teams, they formed a ring around the grand tower in the centre of the square. While the plain brickwork of the tower was uninspiring, its sheer height and width left it looming over everything else in the central city.

Jason's party was now reformed, with the addition of Jory, whose own group had already escaped the trials. The teams of Keane, Valdis, Padma and Beth were all gathered around them, waiting with everyone else for the next stage of the trials.

Quest: [The Second Trial]

- Objective complete: Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
- [Ritualist's Umbrella] has been added to your inventory.

The other members of Jason's team also received items. Humphrey and Clive both had personal storage spaces for them to appear in, while Sophie, Neil and Jory's rewards dropped out of the air. They started comparing items.

"Mine is a belt that accumulates power as I move," Sophie said, already slipping it around her waist. "I can unleash the gathered power as one attack."

"I got a wand that conjures and throws metal needles," Jory said.

"Can you use wands?" Neil asked.

"Yes, I have the same power to use items that Clive has," Jory said. "But I'm not high up in the Magic Society, so I can't requisition magic vehicles whenever I like to go swanning about the delta."

Clive gave the back of his head an embarrassed scratch.

"If you all got such good stuff, why did I get an umbrella?" Jason asked.

"An umbrella?" Humphrey asked.

"Yeah," Jason said, pulling it out of his inventory. It did look high-quality, with a shaft and tines of a pale blue, lightweight metal. The cloth was thick and a much darker blue than the shaft. When Jason opened the umbrella, he discovered a magical diagram drawn onto it in silver.

Item: [Ritualist's Umbrella] (iron rank, epic)

An device made to improve the convenience of using the rituals in the field (tool, umbrella).

- Effect: When open will float in the air and follow the person who opened it.
- Effect: Repels liquid while opened, while extracting breathable air from surrounding liquids. Can be used for underwater travel, but provides no means of propulsion.
- Effect: Harmonises nearby ambient magic while opened, sufficiently to make iron and bronze-rank rituals easier to enact. The use of nearby magic can disrupt this effect.

"I take it back," Jason said. "This thing is awesome."

"We might want to deal with this later," Neil said. "We're drawing a little bit of attention."

As Neil said, the nearby adventurers were all looking in their direction.

"Good looking out, Neil," Jason said as he put the umbrella away.

Not long after, the attention of the adventurers was diverted from Jason's group to their actual purpose in being there as Shade appeared. Not just one of him, but one for each adventure team present

"Congratulations," the Shades said. They spoke quietly but their voices carried through the square, eerily layering the words. "You have survived the second trial and the time has come for rewards."

The Shades handed out black awakening stones, one for each adventurer. There was almost no sensation of pressure from it in their hands, as if it wasn't really there. The black of the stone wasn't as much a colour as an absence, the same light-devouring darkness Jason's cloak could achieve.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Reaper] (unranked, legendary)

An awakening stone sharing affinity with the Reaper. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 3 unawakened essence abilities.

"Highest rarity," Clive said with excitement. "That means the list of abilities it could awaken is much smaller than normal, usually restricted to just one or two types."

Jason and Clive were not the only adventurers with the power to identify items and a susurrus moved over the crowd as word spread that they had all received a legendary awakening stone.

“You seem excited for someone who can’t actually use his,” Neil said to Clive.

“Clive’s more interested in new knowledge than new power,” Jason.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “Do you know how rare this opportunity is? Information about the rarest essences and awakening stones is incredibly limited because only so many people ever get to use them, and those people might have no interest in helping the Magic Society fill out their records. But look at how many people we have here! We’ll get so much information on who got what power, across different races and essences. This is going to be great.”

“What will you do with your stone, then?” Humphrey asked.

“Until we have better records,” Clive said, “I can only assume that an awakening stone of the Reaper will best fit Jason.”

Clive lightly tossed his stone to Jason.

“Thanks, Clive,” Jason said brightly.

“Well, I know you’ve been holding off on new awakening stones for a while,” Clive said. “Also, an extra sample of what an outworlder gets from it would be very appreciated.”

“Now your motivations become clear,” Jason said. “I suppose next you’ll be asking for chunks of flesh, to compare outworlder flesh with regular peoples.”

“That’s not a bad idea, now you say it,” Clive said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Something out of the torso would be best, maybe slice a bit off the internal organs.”

“Not a chance,” Jason said.

“We could heal you right back up,” Clive said. “Right, Neil?”

“As long as I get to watch you cut the bits off, I’m willing to participate.”

“I said no.”

“We could put you into a magical sleep,” Clive said.

“You so much as try it and I’ll do you to the Adventure Society for necromancy.”

“I’m in the same position of having awakened all my abilities,” Jory said, pulling the conversation back on track. “I think I’ll give my stone to Belinda, since she’s going to be getting her own essences, soon.”

“Thank you,” Sophie said.

“The next trial,” the Shades said arresting everyone’s attention, “will test wisdom or courage. For those who chose the path courage in the beginning, your boldness shall be rewarded now. The test of wisdom is now before you and you may take it without fear.

Should your judgement be insufficient to the task, there is no danger in failure. You shall simply be led from the trial grounds in full safety.”

The tower the adventurers were surrounding was blank brickwork, but with a loud grinding of stone, that began to change. Bricks pushed out from the walls or retreated back, forming a series of rectangular doorways. Every second doorway opened, retracting slowly up into the ceiling to reveal dark passages beyond. The others remained closed, the brickwork marking their positions.

“Those who selected courage,” the Shades said, “choose a door and step through. Each must face their trial individually and you must each choose a door for yourself, and yourself alone.”

“Is it just me, or does the weird voice thing make it all the more portentous?” Jason asked. “Don’t get me wrong, the ancient tower of trials in a ruined interdimensional city has portent enough to be going on with, but it really seems to cap it off.”

“Is he always like this?” Sigrid asked.

“Pretty much,” Humphrey told her.

Sigrid looked from Jason to Valdis, letting out a light shudder.

Shade’s words had brought up a buzz from the adventurers who, having just reunited their teams, were required to split up again. It was not long before the first person stepped forward to accept the challenge. Predictably enough, it was Valdis, with others quickly following. They only made up a fraction of the gathered adventurers, with only one in five or six having chosen the path of courage from the start.

The adventurers picked their doors and passed through, the stone sliding slowly back down behind them. In one case, however, the door slammed back down, not behind the adventurer but on top of him, easily crushing him to death.

“The test of wisdom is for those who have already chosen courage,” the Shades announced. “Those unwilling to take the test of courage will be allowed to leave in safety. Those who seek to move forward without proving their courage will see that choice also demonstrates a failure of wisdom.”

A number of other adventurers moving forward scurried back to the main group.

When the last of the adventurers to move had chosen a door or returned to the group, the remaining doors closed and the alternate doors opened.

“The trial of courage is not for the uncertain,” Shade warned. “You will each encounter an entity known as a nightmare hag. These are diamond-rank entities from the astral that have no physical existence in this place and cannot harm you directly. What

they can do is warp the reality around you, manifesting that which you fear most. If you are unable to face this fear, it will most certainly kill you.”

Short lines of dark energy appeared on the ground, all around the tower. Rising up from the lines were a series of archways, each made from a single piece of glossy obsidian. The dark lines from which they emerged rose up to fill the archways with consuming darkness, making each archway identical to the ones that first brought the adventurers into the city.

“These shadow gates will return you to the archway towers,” the Shades announced. “If you do not wish to face the next trial, these gates will return you to the archway towers. You may then use the tower gates to leave the city. If you so wish, you may take this final day to further explore the city, but know that if you remain here when the sun sets tomorrow, then here you will stay.”

“I’m out,” Neil said as soon as Shade stopped talking. “I’m not foolish enough to think I can beat out all these other adventurers and I’m not going to die trying. Also, getting killed by your own fears is literally the worst way to die I can imagine.”

“Me too,” Jory said. “Between the recipe I found and enough plant quintessence to fill a wheelbarrow, I’ve gotten everything I could want and more from this place.”

“I’m not going either,” Sophie said. “I’ve managed to avoid some unpleasant fates over the last year and I have no interest in some magic ghost lady throwing me into everything I fought so hard to escape.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “Just you and me, Humphrey?”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “My family has sheltered me from a lot. I’ve never been confronted with the kinds of challenges you faced, Sophie. If I’m going to be a good adventurer, I need to face up to my fears, whatever form they take.”

Quest: [The Third Trial]

The trial of courage will put you face to face with your greatest fear. Resolve will see you through, while a lack of will shall see you dead.

- Objective: Successfully confront your greatest fear.
- Reward: Random magic item.

“I know what my greatest fear is already,” Jason said. “It isn’t a threat to me.”

“That suggests it isn’t actually your greatest fear,” Neil said.

“No,” Jason said, “it is. See you all on the other side.”

With that, he marched off for the open doors. Humphrey nodded a farewell and did the same. Along with many other adventurers, they each picked a doorway and walked through. The doors closed behind them with finality.

Humphrey regained consciousness sprawled in soft earth. His head rung and his body ached. The air was full of noise and thick with the taste of blood. Shrieks of fear and pain were punctuated by the screeches and roars of monsters.

He scrambled to his feet, casting his gaze around. He didn't know where he was at first, then realised he hadn't recognised his home because it was half-collapsed and on fire. He was outside the main building, surrounded by the corpses of people he recognised. Some were burned, others savaged by monsters, all laying dead where they fell.

He could see a half-dozen monsters just from where he stood, and heard many more beyond. He started moving, calling his sword into his hands. He began a slaughter, one monster after the other but there was no end to them. As he fought his way through the grounds he found only the monsters and the dead. His team, his friends, his family. Finally he found his mother, clinging to the last vestiges of life.

"You were supposed to be the best of us!" she accused with a ragged dying breathe. "You weren't strong enough! You failed us..."

As he watched her die, monsters were charging in on him. Instead of fighting, he let his sword drop from his hands, casting his gaze around at the monsters lunging at him.

"No," he said flatly, his face stony and eyes sharp. "I won't let this happen. I will be strong enough."

The world around him shimmered like a mirage and vanished, leaving him in the dark. He took out a glow stone, revealing his location as a circular room made from the same brickwork as the tower. Shade was standing nearby, as was a cage with silver bars etched with gold runes. Inside was a figure that looked a lot like Jason in his shadow cloak, although this creature's cloak of darkness seemed ragged and torn. There were two ways out of the room, both stairwells alcoved into the walls. One led up, the other down.

"Congratulations on passing the third trial," Shade told him.

Jason followed the stairs up into a dark, circular, empty room. There was another stairwell, alcoved like the one he stepped out of. Down the stairs and into the room came a person, Jason himself, but different. His features were more handsome, with a greater resemblance to his brother. His combat robes were more elaborate and in shades of dark

purple and gold, instead of grey. At his hip was a sword, matching the one on Jason's own. On his head was a simple crown of dark gold.

The two Jason's moved closer, sizing each other up.

"My humble beginnings," the other Jason said. "Fancy meeting me here. But you knew you would, just like you know that one day, you'll be me."

"You aren't inevitable."

"Aren't I? Maybe if you gave it all away and led a quiet life, but we both know you won't. You've got that hero complex. That need to feel important."

Other Jason laughed.

"You can't hide it from me," he continued. "You'll follow this life and you know you'll have to make the hard choices. You'll keep making them because deep down, you like them. You like how important it makes you that you're the one in the middle of everything. And sooner or later, that leads you to me. What's the saying? He who fights with monsters should look to it that he does not become a monster?"

"Don't pretend you've read Nietzsche," Jason told his double. "You got that from a video game."

"I'm you from the future," the double said. "I've done all kinds of things you haven't."

"But you haven't read Nietzsche," Jason said. "Turning evil didn't change me that much."

The double laughed. "Fair enough. But I'm not evil, you know. I've just lost my illusions."

"There's nothing wrong with illusions. Justice is an illusion. Civilisation, morality. They're illusions we all agree to share because they make us better."

"Do they really? You think people won't disappoint you? They always fall short. I have the power to fix that and you will too."

"Is that what the crown's about? You're some kind of tin-pot dictator?"

"Something like that," Other Jason said. "Democracy is a pack of gullible idiots being exploited by the selfish and immoral. When you have the power to take control, you can fix things."

"Can I?" Jason asked. "You were right about people always falling short and that includes us. I've fallen short plenty, but you've clearly fallen all the way down."

"So you think now. How many bad days are you from becoming me?"

"That's from Batman," Jason said. "Not even good Batman."

"You don't like The Killing Joke? I forgot what a social justice wanker I used to be."

"Alright, we're done," Jason said, "I'm definitely not turning into you."

“Are you sure?” Other Jason asked, moving closer with a sinister grin. He stopped as they each realised the duplicate was taller, then Other Jason gave off a smirk.

“Looks like I’m better than original recipe in every way. Do you want to measure...”

“Don’t even,” Jason said. “You know Kaito’s still taller than us.”

“Oh, I dealt with our dear, older brother. The man married the love of our life.”

“How are you not over that when I am? Also, if you break up when you’re nineteen, it wasn’t the love of your life. It was the love of your adolescence.”

“You keep telling yourself that because you’re too weak to do anything about it,” Other Jason said. “You’ll get stronger, never fear.”

“Really? Never fear, during a fear trial? Evil me has some weak jokes.”

“Hey, I’m just a physical manifestation of your fears,” Other Jason said. “Anything I do is on you.”

“Aren’t you meant to be menacing me?”

“Would it work?”

“No. It’s good that I seem to have gotten over that chuuni phase.”

“Yeah, it got pretty bad there,” Other Jason conceded.

“If you’re the future me, did I ever get home?”

“I’m not actually from the future,” Other Jason said.

“Right. You’re a manifestation of my potential future self.”

A third figure shimmered into place. It was a figure made of darkness in a ragged cloak.

“Kill him!” it hissed at the duplicate Jason.

“Ooh, Mum’s not happy,” Other Jason said.

“That’s the.. what was it called?” Jason asked.

“Nightmare hag. Yeah, that’s her. She doesn’t really have control of what she conjures up and she’s not very bright. Why would I kill you before you’ve had the chance to turn into me. That’s like your fears vanquishing themselves.”

“KILL HIM!” the hag hissed again, the sound filling the chamber. The duplicate’s hand twitched in the direction of the sword at his hip, his face twisted with sudden fury. His hand finished the movement to the sword, which he drew, turning a furious gaze on the hag.

“NO ONE TELLS ME WHAT TO DO!” he roared, lashing out with the sword. It slashed through the ephemeral hag and both she and the duplicate vanished. In their place were shade and an empty cage.

Quest: [The Third Trial]

- Objective complete: Successfully confront your greatest fear 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
- [True Light] has been added to your inventory.

“Congratulations on passing the third trial,” Shade said as Jason took out his new item to examine. It was a fist-sized lump of golden crystal.

Item: [True Light] (diamond rank, rare)

True light of the sun, trapped in a single moment (consumable, crystallised light).

- Effect: Consume to release the true light of the Sun.

Jason raised an eyebrow at the rank of the items, although he wasn't sure how useful it would be. Maybe it produced some kind of powerful, burning light, but he couldn't use it to tell.

“Was the test meant to go like that?” Jason asked, putting the item away again.

“It is what it is and goes how it goes,” Shade said. “Assassins adapt to their situation.”

“I'm not an assassin.”

“Yet here you are, taking an assassin's trials.”

“That's true. I've been thinking something was off about this whole thing for a while.”

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.

-
- 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.

-
- 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.”

Chapter 176:

Relief

On his return to the cloud palace, Emir's first action was securing the scythe. His second was seeking out Jason and his team on the balcony terrace and enjoying a light lunch.

"Join us," Jason said as Emir arrived.

"I'm a little busy right now," Emir said.

"Are you sure?" Jason asked. "We've got gold plum soufflé."

"Well," Emir said. "I suppose we can talk over lunch."

"So, have you come to give us some top-end awakening stones?"

"Actually, I've come to give you four hundred and nineteen time-displaced priests who came out of the archway very confused and asking for you by name."

"Oh, right," Jason said. "Shade actually came through on that. Are you really leaving them to me to deal with? I'd have thought you'd be all over those people and what they knew."

"Actually, yes," Emir admitted. "I have a historian on staff who practically had a fit when I told her about them. I think we'll end up thoroughly debriefing them, then turning them over to their various churches to deal with. Whatever we may think of certain religious organisations, right now, I don't see much of a better option."

"They may not all want to go back," Jason said. "I could see some of them being disillusioned by what they went through."

"Not everyone is as cavalier with the churches as you, Jason," Emir said. "If any of them do put their faith aside, you can coordinate with the Adventure Society to sort it out."

"I imagine they'll take it out of my hands," Jason said. "It sounds like more of a three-star adventurer problem, which is too difficult for simple old me with my solitary star."

"True," Emir said, earning him an affronted look from Jason. "And about those rewards, I'll have Constance bring you a list of the awakening stones we have. You can choose any five you like."

"What about the cloud palace?" Humphrey asked. "That was the reward that had all the adventurers salivating."

"Obviously there's only one cloud palace to be had," Clive said. "It's a bonded item, so you'll need to decide which of you it will be bonded to."

"That'll be Jason," Humphrey said. "He's the one that got the scythe, after all."

"We should at least talk about it," Jason said.

“We did,” Humphrey said. “We all agreed.”

Jason looked around at the team and they all nodded.

“If you don’t want it, I’m happy to take it off your hands,” Sophie said.

“No, that’s fine,” Jason said. “I’ll take it.”

They were able to choose five stones, which was one for each team member. A legendary stone was the nearest thing to actually selecting a specific power, which made picking from a selection of legendary stones an unparalleled luxury. Constance brought them a list of the stones in Emir’s supply, which turned out to be startlingly large.

Neil and Jason both selected awakening stones of the avatar, known for most often producing summoning powers and powerful buffing abilities. Humphrey selected an awakening stone of rebirth, hoping for a powerful recovery power. Sophie, on Constance’s advice, selected an awakening stone of the celestials. Clive chose an awakening stone of karma, the same as his confluence essence, although he would not be able to use it.

They waited in the guest wing lounge as Constance left and came back with a long wooden box, the top of which she slid off to reveal five awakening stones, sitting on velvet.

“We had three of these, originally,” Constance said as she handed the stone of the celestials to Sophie. “They were created from an outworlder’s ability, like Jason’s, and I’ve never heard of them appearing anywhere else. The only reason they appear in the Magic Society records at all is that we allowed the Magic Society to examine them.”

“So you don’t know what their power inclinations are?” Clive asked.

“The other two were both used by celestines,” Constance said. “In both cases, the abilities enhanced their natural racial gifts.”

Clive handed his stone to Sophie.

“It should pair well with your balance essence and give you something formidable,” he said.

Sophie looked down at the stones she was holding in each hand. Each one was valuable on a level she could barely conceive of. Even most essences would not fetch as high a price as these, should someone squander them on the open market. She looked up at Clive who placed his hand over her, closing her fingers as she tried to hand it back. He gave her a warm smile.

“This is just the beginning,” he told her. She looked around uncertainly but found supporting smiles all around. Even Jason looked uncharacteristically sincere, without his usual expression of thinking of a joke no one else knew about.

“So, whose stones to we use first?” she asked.

“Jason’s,” Clive said. “I want to see what those two reaper stones produce. Also, he’s faster, because he doesn’t need a ritual.”

“Actually, I do want to use one,” Jason said. “Shade said I should incorporate this into a ritual.”

Jason tossed an object to Clive, a square of obsidian with a scythe engraved in silver, along with writing he couldn’t read. Clive looked at it, then up at Jason.

Item: [Reaper Token] (transcendent rank, legendary)

??? (consumable, ???).

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

“This is an astral blessing token,” he said. “For the Reaper, right?”

“Yep,” Jason said.

“What’s an astral blessing token?” Sophie asked.

“Its something great astral beings give out to bestow blessings, as signs of approval,” Clive said. “They trigger racial gift evolutions, just like the one we all went through. I used one of these myself, back when I was Humphrey’s age.”

“So, it’s like those star seeds?” Neil asked, shrinking away.

“No,” Clive said. “The blessings are harmless. The great astral beings give them out for all kinds of reasons, to those that venerate them or that they approve of. Some astral beings have even given them out to those who work against their interests because they are enemies worthy of respect.”

“And you use them as part of an awakening ritual?” Jason asked, thinking of the other token in his possession. The one the goddess of knowledge claimed would send him home.

“Some you can,” Clive said. “They tend to arrange for specific abilities if you do. That’s something only transcendent beings like gods can arrange. Every token has an additional effect, and some can only be triggered in certain ways. If Shade told you to use it with an awakening ritual, it should probably be with one of the Reaper stones.”

“Agreed,” Jason said. “How did you get your token, Clive?”

“It just showed up one night while I was studying,” Clive said. “There was this patch of moonlight in my room, even though the curtains were closed, and there it was. My mentor knew what it was and helped me use it with my next awakening ritual.”

Clive frowned in thought.

“That’s one interesting point,” he said. “Your token came from your ability, right? A quest reward.”

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Clive said. “Your quest system’s ability to produce items is just another loot power variant. It shouldn’t be able to produce an astral blessing token. Only great astral beings can do that.”

“Maybe I’m secretly a great astral being,” Jason said. “I could have knocked up a crappy body, chucked in some fake memories and shoved a chunk of my consciousness into it to get a mortal perspective. Or for laughs, whatever.”

Clive’s eyes went wide in horror as he stared at Jason.

“That... no... that can’t be... no... but... no. Wait... no... that can’t be right.”

“Mate, calm down,” Jason told him. “I’m not secretly the Reaper.”

“But, I mean, conceivably...”

“No,” Jason said firmly. “These beings can just make the tokens appear if they like, right? Surely the Reaper, having about a squillion times more power than me, could have tweaked my ability to produce it this one time. Just a reward for getting his magic farming tool.”

“Yeah,” Clive said, nodding to himself. “That makes more sense.”

“Exactly. Now, do you know how to incorporate this thing into an essence ritual?”

“Oh, Absolutely,” Clive said, perking up. “Let’s get into a ritual room and do this.”

Clive was as good as his word, setting up a more elaborate magic circle than he had for Sophie’s awakenings. Jason stood the middle, the awakening stone of the Reaper in one hand and the Reaper token in the other.

“Ready?” Clive asked him.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

“What are you hoping for?” Clive asked.

“Well, apparently Shade is looking for a new gig,” Jason said. “I thought he’d make an awesome familiar.”

“Seriously?”

“Why not? Colin’s great, don’t get me wrong, but the conversation isn’t exactly sparkling.”

Clive shook his head and conducted the ritual. It went as normal, aside from the Reaper token melding into his body along with the awakening stone, and felt to Jason no different to absorbing them normally.

-
- You have awakened the dark essence ability [Shadow of the Reaper]. You have awakened 4 of 5 dark essence abilities.

Ability: [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Familiar (ritual).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Summon a [Shadow of the Reaper] to serve as a familiar.

“That looks like a winner,” Jason said. “I think I might have actually done it?”

As the others read his ability through the party interface, Blue-grey light started shining from Jason’s body.

“As expected,” Clive said.

-
- [Reaper Token] has been consumed.

 - Outworlder racial ability [Mysterious Stranger] has evolved to [Dark Rider].

Ability: [Dark Rider]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Mysterious Stranger].

- Language adaptation.
- Essence, awakening stone and skill-book absorption.
- Immunity to identification and tracking effects.
- Shadow-based familiars may take adopt the form of a mount appropriate to the environment.

“Oh, a mount power, sweet,” Jason said. “Now I don’t have to farm all that gold.”

Then he looked at the requirements for the summoning ritual his new familiar power would require.

[Shadow of the Reaper] summoning ritual material requirements:

- 343 [Dark Quintessence Gems (Iron)].
- 2401 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins].
- 500 grams of [Midnight Onyx Powder].
- 1 [Midnight Jade].
- 24 small, square [Night Stone] plates.

“Mat farming isn’t entirely off the table it seems.”

“What are you talking about?” Sophie asked.

“The ritual to summon my new familiar. It takes a bunch of stuff I don’t have.”

“It should have been the same for your first familiar, right?” Clive asked. “Even more costly, if anything. Your first familiar is an apocalypse beast, after all?”

“Did you just say apocalypse?” Neil asked.

“Don’t worry about that,” Jason said. “It’s fine.”

“Apocalypse?” Neil asked again.

“I said it’s fine. Tell him it’s fine, Clive.”

“He’s right,” Clive said. “Until he reaches diamond rank, it definitely won’t be able to wipe out an entire world’s worth of life.”

“WHAT?”

“Clive, I said to tell him it's fine, not anything about scouring the world of life, which Colin would never do.”

“He might,” Clive said.

“He wouldn’t eat the plants, would he?” Jason asked.

“Oh, you’re probably right,” Clive said. “Do you still have the book from the blood cult? It might be in that.”

“Yeah, Farrah gave it to me when she was done with it. Because of my familiar. Actually, the blood cult is why I had such an easy time summoning Colin. They took off with all the high-end goods but left behind a pile of iron-rank materials. And being a blood cult, there was plenty of iron-rank materials to knock out the ritual. When Rufus was splitting the loot he gave me a spare set in case something happened and I had to resummon the little guy.”

“You’ll have to do some shopping,” Humphrey said. “In the meantime, how about your other awakening stones?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jason said, rubbing his hands together, then plucked another awakening stone from his inventory. “Another Reaper stone. I’m running out of chances to get that necrotic affliction I’ve been after, and I think this is the one.”

After the ritual he used to absorb his last stone, quietly absorbing the next one seemed anticlimactic.

-
- You have awakened the dark essence ability [Hand of the Reaper]. You have awakened 5 of 5 dark essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all dark essence abilities. Linked attribute [Speed] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank dark essence ability.

Ability: [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Conjunction (disease).
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
- Effect (iron): Conjure a highly flexible, semi-substantial shadow-arm that can extend or shrink. Conjured items can be conjured into the shadow hand. Can be used to make melee special attacks. Special attacks made using the arm inflict [Creeping Death] in addition to other effects.
- [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

A huge grin spread across Jason's face. The lack of a necrotic damage affliction in his repertoire of abilities been preying on his mind increasingly as his available slots diminished. The relief at closing the gap in his power set was like finally taking a wee after desperately holding it in for too long and he let out a contented sigh.

"That power sounds strange," Sophie said, reading the description. "It also sounds creepy. A flexible hand sneaking about?"

"It seems like it'll be versatile," Humphrey said. "You can use it to make special attacks, but also just increase your ability to reach. It's no telekinesis power but I imagine you'll get some use out of it."

"I'll give it a try," Jason said. He reached out with his arm, which transmuted into the same shadow-stuff his cloak was made of. It extended out to slip around Humphrey's ankle like a constrictor snake.

"I can use this in combat for more than just making attacks," Jason said and yanked back hard with the shadow arm. Humphrey didn't budge, Jason instead yanking himself off his feet and falling to an undignified heap.

"It doesn't seem to increase my strength at all," he said from the floor.

"You'll need to test it extensively to see what you can and can't do with it," Humphrey told him. "For now, move onto the next stone."

“Right,” Jason said. “I can knock out the last one and someone else can jump into the spotlight.”

He took out the last stone, the awakening stone of the avatar.

“It’s going to be a doom power,” Jason said. “Do you think it will be some super-hideous affliction?”

“I think it’s more likely to be a summoning power,” Clive said. “Maybe one that runs around, causing afflictions for you?”

“I already have Colin for that,” Jason said.

“Other than summons,” Clive said, “avatar stones are known for enhancement and transformation powers. If it’s from the doom essence, maybe it turns you into a blob of pustulant flesh that spurts gobbets of poisons from the sores all over your body.”

Everyone gave Clive a wary look.

“What?” Clive asked.

“That isn’t actually an option is it?” Jason asked.

“Sure it is,” Clive said encouragingly. “I’ve read a case study about someone with a very similar power. It was actually a fascinating case because the permanent nature of the transformation made it resistant to suppression collars.”

“Permanent?” Jason asked, his face wan.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Neil said happily, giving Jason a pat on the back. “If it’s really bad we can push you around in a wheelbarrow or something.”

“I’m not going to be the one pushing it,” Sophie said.

“You’re his indentured servant,” Neil told her. “I think it has to be you.”

“The guy I read about was more or less humanoid,” Clive said, “so that shouldn’t be an issue.”

“More or less?” Jason repeated.

“He certainly had something that could pass as legs,” Clive said.

“Maybe I should find an awakening stone more special-attack oriented,” Jason said.

“Don’t let them talk you out of using such a precious stone,” Humphrey said. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. We would never push you around in a wheelbarrow.”

“Thanks,” Jason said gratefully.

“We’d have someone make a little magic cart,” Humphrey continued. “Probably with something to seal in the smell, because I have to imagine it would be bad.”

“Oh, it definitely would,” Clive said. “Instead of sweating, the guy secreted this oil that kept him cool and killed insects, but was apparently very pungent.”

“Alright, you all need to stop talking,” Jason said.

Chapter 177:

Glory

Despite the best efforts of his team to unnerve him, Jason used his final awakening stone, albeit with eyes closed and whispering to himself.

“Don’t turn into a blob, don’t turn into a blob, don’t turn into a blob...”

-
- You have awakened the doom essence ability [Avatar of Doom]. You have awakened 5 of 5 doom essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all doom essence abilities. Linked attribute [Spirit] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank doom essence ability.

Ability: [Avatar of Doom] (Doom)

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

“Another familiar power,” Jason said. “I’m turning into a pet character. I don’t suppose anyone knows what an avatar of doom is?”

“It isn’t something I’ve heard of,” Clive said, pulling out his monster archive tablet. After looking through for a few moments, he shook his head.

“Not here,” he said. “You get that with summoned familiars quite a lot, though, seeing as they’re all beings from the deep astral. It’s an endless supply of bizarre and terrifying horrors.”

“We don’t know it’ll be terrifying,” Jason said.

“It’s called an avatar of doom,” Neil said. “I doubt it’s going to be a healer-type familiar.”

“That’s an option?” Jason asked. “Having your own personal healer?”

“My sister has one,” Humphrey said. “But she’s a summoning specialist, so she has one of just about everything.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Jason said, looking over the summoning ritual requirements.

[Shadow of the Reaper] summoning ritual material requirements:

- 108 [Radiant Quintessence Gems (Iron)].
 - 108 [Void Quintessence Gems (Iron)].
 - 1296 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins].
-

“These ritual materials are awful,” Jason said. “Void and radiant quintessence?”

“Ouch,” Clive said. “That’s going to be worse than the other one.”

“Lucky we just got a haul of treasure, then,” Sophie said. “That plant quintessence might be common, but we have piles of the stuff, and it’s bronze-rank.”

“That’ll put a dent in the price,” Jason acknowledged.

“The problem will be sourcing the materials,” Clive said. “I know the Magic Society has some radiant quintessence, although it won’t part with it cheaply. I think the void quintessence will be your main obstacle. It’s actually harder to get at iron than it is at higher ranks.”

“We can worry about that later,” Jason said. “It’s someone else’s turn to use their stones.”

“Right,” Clive said. “I’ll set up a ritual while you all decide who goes next.”

“We still need to organise my stones,” Sophie said. “I’ll wait until later.”

“Sensible,” Humphrey said. “Would you like to go next, Neil?”

“Is there any chance of Neil turning into a blob monster?” Jason asked Clive hopefully.

Clive hummed thoughtfully as he used his power to draw out a ritual circle.

“If I recall correctly,” Clive said, “you have open spots in the Shield and growth essences, right, Neil? The avatar stone could have some blob-related results in the growth essence. As for the Reaper, stone, who knows?”

“That’s comforting,” Neil said. “I was more looking for another summon, or maybe a buff spell. A shield golem would be nice.”

“Shield golem?” Jason asked. “That actually does sound awesome. I hope you get that.”

Neil’s ritual of awakening went off without incident in Clive’s capable hands.

-
- You have awakened the growth essence ability [Hero's Moment]. You have awakened 5 of 5 growth essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all growth essence abilities. Linked attribute [Spirit] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank growth essence ability.

Ability: [Hero's Moment] (Growth)

- Spell (boon, recovery).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Bestow a powerful boon on an ally, increasing all attributes and resistances by a significant amount. They receive damage reduction, their maximum mana and stamina are increased and they gain ongoing mana and stamina recovery. They ignore the effects of rank-disparity. When this effect ends, they are temporarily debilitated, suffering the inverse of all previous effects.

“There’s that buff you were looking for,” Jason said. “That’ll turn Humphrey into a monster.”

“I think the more interesting application will be Neil’s summon,” Clive said. “We’ve barely tapped into what we can do with it. You may or may not remember that when heavily damaged, it undergoes a transformation based on what it was subjected to before the change. Imagine what it would get out of having that spell used on it.”

“That’s an interesting point,” Humphrey said. “One of our strategic thin spots is our summons. We have a few strategies build around Jason’s leech swarm, but mine and Neil’s summons have been rather underutilised. Once we add in Jason’s new familiars, we’ll have quite the selection of allies at our command.”

As Clive set up the next ritual, the others postulated Neil’s last ability.

“The only unawakened ability I have is from the shield essence,” Neil said. “What kind of ability will come from a stone associated with death?”

“Another one of your quick bubble-shields?” Jason guessed. “It could have retributive damage, like your burst shield ability.”

“What about a death wall?” Humphrey said. “I remember during the last monster surge I was up on the outer walls with my father. A swarming pack of margolls came pouring at us and one of my family members put up this sheet of energy. Every monster that went through it died on the spot.”

-
- You have awakened the shield essence ability [Reaper's Redoubt]. You have awakened 5 of 5 shield essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all shield essence abilities. Linked attribute [Power] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank shield essence ability.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- Spell (dimension).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death].
- [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

"I know I'm new at this whole adventurer thing," Sophie said, "but that ability sounds really strong, right?"

"That's the same affliction as my ability," Jason said. "Must be a favourite of the Reaper."

"The fact that it takes six hours before becoming available again suggests it certainly is strong," Humphrey said. "The other ability takes a whole day. Judgement of when to use your powers will be key, Neil."

"Nothing new there," Neil said.

"The utility of that new ability will depend on how close we have to be to Neil to be taken into the dimensional space," Humphrey assessed. "I don't think being left behind for those other effects would be a pleasant experience."

"It feels like I can take in anyone within about a dozen metres," Neil said. "I think we can work with that range."

Essence users all had an instinctive understanding of their abilities as the awakening stones imprinted them on the user's soul. Even without using them, there was an intrinsic understanding of an ability's properties. This was only ever hampered in unusual instances, like Jason and his shadow teleport.

Until he had broken through the mental block to give himself completely over to magic, Jason had been unable to make the shadow-jump work. Even then, however, he

had an understanding of how it should work. Neil's estimate of his new power's parameters was therefore considered trustworthy.

After Neil, they moved onto Humphrey. The awakening stone of the Reaper gave him a special attack, unsurprisingly for a human.

-
- You have awakened the magic essence ability [Spirit Reaper]. You have awakened 5 of 5 magic essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all magic essence abilities. Linked attribute [Spirit] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank magic essence ability.

Ability: [Spirit Reaper] (Magic)

- Special attack (melee, dimension, drain).
- Cost: Low mana and stamina.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Inflicts additional disruptive-force damage and drains mana. Has additional effect against incorporeal or semi-corporeal creatures.

"An attack specialised in fighting incorporeal opponents," Humphrey said. "I might have been disappointed if I hadn't just spent weeks fighting those vorger creatures. Magic weapons could affect them, but not well."

"Also, don't overlook the use of disruptive-force damage at breaking through magic defences," Neil said. "It can break down magical shields like mine much faster than normal."

They moved on to Humphrey's final stone. He had chosen an awakening stone of rebirth, hoping for a recovery power that would increase his staying power in an extended fight or let him run at full steam for longer in a short one. He had chosen it specifically, on the advice of his mother, she wanted him to avoid the flaw in her own ability set. Her powers were outrageously potent, but at a cost of rapidly consuming mana and stamina. In short bursts, she was close to invincible within her rank. Extended conflicts would leave her vulnerable, however; too drained to use her formidable abilities.

-
- You have awakened the might essence ability [Immortality]. You have awakened 5 of 5 might essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all might essence abilities. Linked attribute [Power] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank might essence ability.

Ability: [Immortality] (Might)

- Special ability (healing, recovery).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Instantly restore a large portion of health, mana and stamina. Amount restored is based on how depleted health, mana and stamina are when the ability is used.

“Seriously?” Jason asked. “I was happy with my shadow-arm power and this guy gets immortality?”

“In fairness,” Sophie said, “what would you say if asked whether you or Humphrey deserve the better power?”

“I’d say me, obviously,” Jason said. “I’ll lie through my teeth if there’s immortality in it.”

“You’ll lie through your teeth if there’s a halfway-decent lunch spread in it,” Neil told him.

“That’s fair,” Jason acknowledged cheerfully.

“Congratulations,” Clive said to Humphrey, slapping him on the arm. “You just acquired what may be the single most sought-after power in the world. Of course, it won’t actually bring you back from the dead until gold rank.”

“So, it’s real immortality?” Sophie asked.

“It’s a famous power, for obvious reasons,” Clive said. “The Magic Society has extensive records on it. There are various limitations on its power to bring back the dead, of course. It’s rumoured those limits are reduced or even eliminated at diamond rank, but I don’t have the authority to access those kinds of records.”

“Looks like Humphrey won the essence power lottery,” Jason said.

“You should remember that you’ve already come back from the dead,” Clive said to Jason, grabbing the attention of the group.

“It’s an outworlder thing,” Jason said dismissively. “Clive can explain while we go shopping.”

Jason turned to Sophie.

“You said Belinda was checking out the market, right?”

“That’s right,” Sophie said.

“Let’s go see if we can find her, then.”

A market had sprung up in the adventurer camp between the cloud palace and the nearby town. Adventurers had come from the trials with dimensional bags overflowing with loot and Greenstone’s brokers had anticipated exactly that. A series of tents, even bamboo buildings hastily erected with magic had formed an impromptu trade fair. Jason’s voice chat allowed them to contact Belinda and arrange a meeting place, but Constance intercepted Jason and the others on their way out of the cloud palace.

“Jason,” she said. “Emir would like to meet with you about the priests you liberated.”

“Oh,” he said, frowning. “Alright. You lot go ahead to the market and I’ll meet up with you later.”

Jason followed Constance to Emir’s tower-top office. It was the same as his previous visit, a flat space under a translucent dome, broken up by pools of water with plants growing from them. To Jason’s surprise, the head of the Adventure Society Inquiry team, Tabitha Gert was there. She gave Jason an assessing glance but said nothing, leaving with Constance via the elevating platform as soon as Jason arrived.

Emir was sitting behind a desk that, like his chair, was made of cloud-stuff. On the opposite side of the floor, a similar chair rose from the floor as Emir waved at Jason to join him. Jason sat down, glancing at the piles of paper in Emir’s desk.

“As it turns out,” Emir said, following Jason’s gaze, “no small part of treasure hunting is logistics. I signed up for the world travel and derring-do, yet somehow ended up buried in administration. I still need to present you the cloud palace but I want to carve out a proper amount of time for that. Such an unusual item requires a certain amount of instruction that I don’t intend to rush, and there are other concerns to be going on with.”

“You need something from me regarding these priests who escape the trials?” Jason asked. “You brought in their churches right?”

“Yes, although there are inevitable problems. One is with our old friend the church of Purity, of whom a full quarter of the priests belong.”

“Did Cal check out the Vane estate?” Jason asked.

“He did. From what he can tell, it was the regrouping point for the Builder cult members that scattered after escaping the desert astral space. They moved on afterwards, however.”

“Did he find enough to put the clamps on the church?”

“No,” Emir said. “They can just claim they hadn’t been doing anything with the site due to its isolation and that they knew nothing.”

“That’s a shame,” Jason said. “I almost feel bad handing these priests over to the church.”

“Not an issue, as it turns out,” Emir said. “The church has declared them tainted from their time in the astral space. I suspect they don’t want a bevy of fresh faces while they’re in the middle of conducting a huge conspiracy.”

“Don’t underestimate good old intolerant zeal,” Jason said.

“Either way,” Emir said, “we have a hundred confused, time-displaced, freshly excommunicated clergy.”

“How does that even work?” Jason asked. “Did Purity show up and take their essences?”

“Yes, those that had divine essences and awakening stones.”

“So what happens to them now?”

“Either they are received by another church or they replace their missing essences with regular ones. Fortunately, they’re only iron-rank, so the loss of their essences isn’t crippling. You saw the Interim Director leaving; she will be organising what to do with them.”

“She didn’t look eager to involve me in the process,” Jason said. “What do you need me for?”

“It seems that the being administering the trials informed them that you were the one who stood up for their release. They, and the church representatives who actually welcomed their lost people back, are rather keen on meeting you.”

Jason groaned. “Why did he have to go and tell them?”

“Don’t you want your moment of glory?” Emir asked with a smile.

“I’m more comfortable claiming unearned glory than getting the real thing,” Jason said. “All I did was ask the guy to let them go and he said yes. Hardly worth making a fuss over.”

“Consider it practice,” Emir said. “Adventurers become the heroes to many, and I doubt these are the last lives you’ll save.”

“I suppose,” Jason said. “Next time I save someone, though, I’m telling them my name is Humphrey.”

Emir laughed.

“Have you used your awakening stones yet?” Emir asked, changing the subject.

“Constance caught us just coming from a ritual room,” Jason said. “We need to sort out Sophie and Belinda’s stones and essences, plus I have two familiar summonings worth of materials to get. I’m not holding out hope of getting the quintessence I need locally.”

“I might be able to help with that,” Emir said. “Have your team refrain from selling their goods here. There’s going to be a flood of essences and awakening stones, dropping the price. Buy what you can here for cheap, and I’ll have Hester portal you somewhere you can sell your spoils at a tidy profit. You’ll also be able to access a larger market for what you need.”

“That would be amazing, thank you,” Jason said.

“Go meet with the church representatives and I’ll arrange things with Hester. Constance will be waiting to show you the way.”

“How are things going with you and Constance?” Jason asked. “She seems to be warming up around you.”

“Well, I think,” Emir said. “Our longer than expected stay here has everyone acting a little more casually. Something is holding her back, though, and I can’t for the life of me figure it out. I thought perhaps it was that she works for me, but that isn’t it.”

“Maybe it’s her rank,” Jason suggested. “She might not want to take that step in your relationship until you’re on the same level.”

“It’s an interesting idea,” Emir said.

“Have you tried asking her?” Jason asked.

“It’s not that easy,” Emir said. “We’ve been dancing around each other for a long time now. There’s a lot of heavy air in the space between us.”

“You shouldn’t be taking advice from me, anyway,” Jason said. “I’m barely older than your granddaughter. She used the skill books alright?”

“Oh yes,” Emir said. “She’d have trained through the night if I let her. I had to pry her away from Gabriel to make her go to bed. He dotes on her almost as much as I do.”

“I’ve been wondering about something,” Jason said. “I recall you having certain views on children, yet you have a granddaughter.”

“I had a son I never knew about,” Emir said. “The result of a youthful dalliance, before I even had my essences. The young lady in question never told me and I didn’t find out until he died, during the last monster surge.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason said.

“My son’s wife died with him, leaving only my granddaughter, Ketis. She went to live with her grandmother, my son’s mother, but she was not a woman of means. She knew who I was, but never sought me out for money. From what I hear, she raised my son into a

fine man. She only reached out for Ketis' sake. Her grandmother is well taken care of now, of course. Money, essences and enough monster cores to rank her up to bronze. Ketis will have her from some time yet."

"And Ketis herself will get the best of everything."

"Not everything," Emir said. "I would like for her to end up more like your friend Humphrey than your friend Thadwick."

"You know Thadwick? Oh, he was one of the ones the cult seeded."

"I don't know if you've heard," Emir said. "The cult has taken him again, in the time you've been gone."

"Why?" Jason asked. "No offence to the bloke, but he's not good to anyone for anything."

"The cult has been driven into hiding," Emir said. "Deeper hiding. We've managed to identify and curtail many of their operations in the city. They've been using Thadwick's knowledge of the considerable holdings of the Mercer family to make supply raids."

"Not even Thadwick deserves to have one of those things inside him," Jason said.

"Didn't he try to kill you?"

"Yeah, but he botched it, like everything he does. His family must be going wild, looking for him."

"Indeed they are," Emir said.

"Well, it's not my business," Jason said, getting up from his chair. "All this cult nonsense is above my pay grade and I have enough to be going on with. I think I'll go get this business with the priests over with."

Chapter 178: Display of Gratitude

The adventurer camp was divided into three areas. The first was the actual campsite, where opulent tents were set out for the prestigious visiting adventurers. The second was the market tents, plain but large, where Greenstone's brokers and the returned adventurers haggled over loot. The last camp was also the most modest, where the returned priests had been collected together.

Jason skirted the crowded market area, taking a moment to contact his team via his chat ability. He let them know he would be a while longer and passed on Emir's advice to not to sell their loot for cheap market prices. Once finished, he made his way through the tents toward the section where the priests and others liberated from the astral space were encamped. He knew that not all the people recovered had been actual clergy, many simply belonged to the divine militant factions of their various religions.

He was getting looks as he passed through the camp. Word had spread about his acquisition of the scythe, and those who had seen him hand it over recognised him and pointed him out to others. No one actually approached him until he was almost through the camp when an adventuring party stepped into his path.

"Something I can help you with, mate?" Jason asked the obvious leader.

"How did you get the scythe?" The man asked without introduction or preamble.

"You remember that archway that took us out, after the trials?"

"Yeah."

"It could also take you to the location of the real scythe."

"How?"

"Turns out it had a sexiness threshold. You're a good looking man, but..."

Jason ran a sensuous hand down his own body.

"...up against all this, you were bang out of luck."

"You mock me?"

"You don't have to tell me, mate; I'm the one doing it. Do you not know how mockery works?"

"Do you have any idea who I am?" the adventurer asked.

"My first thought was the lyrical gangster but I just don't think you've got the flows."

"What?"

The sun was behind the adventurers, leaving the man's shadow under Jason's feet. While he looked at Jason in anger and confusion, Jason dropped through the man's shadow like a hole had opened up under his feet. The adventurer looked around, wildly.

"Where did he go?"

Jason had teleported into a tent whose flap was open just enough for him to see the darkened space inside. It was an extremely large tent, like many others, with an opulently appointed interior. A thick rug covered the floor, while cushions were piled high into lounging furniture. There was also a trio of hammocks on stands, and a low table in the middle of the room. Shooting upright at the sudden intrusion was a trio of women, two of whom drew swords and pointed them with disturbingly steady hands at Jason's throat.

"Hello, ladies," Jason said, giving them a friendly grin as he raised his hands in surrender. "Sorry to barge in."

Body language told Jason that the third woman in the room was the one in charge. All three were celestines, although a different ethnicity than the silver-haired Sophie or the golden-haired locals. Their skin was caramel to Sophie's chocolate, while their eyes were sapphire orbs. The striking blue was matched by their hair, which spilled down like light passing through a waterfall.

Jason hoped the startled expression he knew was on his face was put down to the swords and not the mesmerising beauty of his captors. They were all garbed in wrap-style clothing that draped loosely, the muted colours flatteringly highlighting the vibrant colour of their hair and eyes.

"You're Jason Asano," the woman in charge said, looking him up and down. She tilted her head curiously to the side, as if looking at an animal that had wandered into her tent. Jason had the unsettling impression she was deciding if he was cute enough to be a pet or juicy enough to be food.

"Uh, yep," Jason said.

"What brings you into my tent?"

"Would you believe happenstance?" he ventured.

She made a dismissive gesture as she moved toward Jason and the other two backed away, resheathing their swords. He could see she knew exactly what effect the sultry gait of her lithe body had and exactly how to weaponise it. She walked right up into Jason's personal space, looking down as she was slightly taller than his slight frame. He dropped his surrendering hands to his side.

"What price are you going to pay for your rude intrusion, Mr Asano?"

"I suppose taking you to dinner is out of the question?"

The hands of the other two jerked back toward their swords, anger flashing on their faces. They were stilled by another dismissive gesture from their leader.

“You haven’t asked who I am,” she said. “Do you already know, or do you not care?”

“I’m pretty ignorant,” Jason said. “It probably wouldn’t mean anything if you told me.”

She gave him the smile of a snake that just found an unattended egg.

“You are as your reputation suggests, Mr Asano. Hiding behind the face of a fool.”

“What’s wrong with my face?” Jason asked, affronted. He gave it an exploratory poke with one of his fingers.

The woman laughed.

“I can hear an actual fool causing a commotion outside,” she said. “Is that on account of you?”

“I met a bloke who was curious about how I got the scythe,” Jason said. “His approach was a little rude.”

She raised an eyebrow.

“I recognise the irony,” Jason said.

“So, how did you do it?”

“I told the guy outside it was sexiness,” Jason said. “I recognise that trying that here would be insultingly implausible.”

“You didn’t answer my question,” she said.

“I noticed that too,” he said with a sly grin. “What’s your name?”

It was one of the two offsidiers that answered.

“You have the honour of addressing her royal highness...”

“I didn’t ask for a job title,” Jason interrupted. “I’m not big on nepotism, in any case. I asked for a name.”

“Does it matter?” the woman in front of Jason asked. “We haven’t decided if you get to leave this tent alive, yet.”

“Oh, I’m going to leave and I’ll be just fine,” Jason said.

“You’re confident.”

“No, but I’m good at faking it.”

He held a hand up and a plate piled high with red and white confectionary squares appeared in his hand.

“What’s this?” she asked.

“Gem berry and milk nut squares,” Jason said. “You asked about the price I would pay for barging in.”

His arm turned into shadow-stuff, bending around the woman and stretching out to set the plate on the table. One of her offsideers drew a sword and slashed at the shadow arm, the blade passing harmlessly through. Jason retracted his arm back and it returned to normal.

“Once you try those,” he said, “you’ll regret not taking me up on that dinner invitation.”

He made to leave and she didn't stop him, but she spoke up as he lifted the flap to leave.

“Mr Asano.”

“Jason’s fine,” he said, pausing at the entrance to the tent.

“Zara,” she said.

“Zara?”

“My name.”

Jason flashed her a grin.

“It’s been a genuine pleasure to meet you, Zara. Enjoy the slices.”

He left the tent, letting the flap drop down behind him.

“You should of let us cut him for his impudence,” one of Zara’s servants said.

“Nothing lethal. Just a lesson in respect for his betters.”

Zara let out a weary sigh. Her party members had been hand-picked by her father for loyalty over intelligence.

“You already tried that and it didn’t exactly accomplish anything,” Zara said. “That was Jason Asano. Cutting him is a quick path to becoming leech food.”

Jason arrived at the priest camp, keeping an eye out for the adventuring team he had annoyed along the way. He was quickly noticed and approached by a small delegation of church officials. He recognised the symbols of the Healer, Dominion and a few others. Conspicuously absent were Purity and Undeath, the two churches he had been told made up the bulk of the forces that had attacked the Order of the Reaper’s lake-bottom fortress.

As the church officials approached, the whole camp was suddenly inundated with a clashing maelstrom of overwhelming auras. One god was bad enough, but the manifestation of several at once, even with their auras tamped down to their minimum strength, threw the camp into chaos.

Some of the iron-rankers with less control of their own auras dropped to their knees, violently throwing up. Many of them lived entirely on spirit coins, consigning them to painful dry heaving. Most of the iron-rankers were fine, however, as the camp was a gathering of

exceptional adventurers. This included Jason, who retracted his own aura in tightly and let the divine auras wash around it like an island in a storm.

A handful of figures appeared before Jason. They looked like much like the church officials standing behind them but there was no mistaking the power radiating out of them. People were dropping to their knees like a religious Mexican wave before the unexpected appearance of their gods. Soon only Jason remained standing, right in front of them.

“And I thought I had a thing for melodrama,” he said.

One of the gods laughed. Each was wearing the robes of their own orders, complete with holy symbol. Jason recognised the one laughing as Dominion from his symbol. He appeared young and handsome, with a hint of perpetual disdain behind the eyes. His robes were purple and gold and he had a simple crown around his head. The outfit was troublingly similar to what the manifestation of Jason's evil future self had been wearing.

“You don't fail to disappoint,” Dominion said.

“I'm not sure how to take that, coming from you,” Jason said, getting another laugh from the god. Another God stepped forward, Jason recognising the symbol of the Healer.

“We wanted to give a display of our gratitude for returning our people, long lost to us,” Healer told Jason. “Astral spaces, not being truly of this world, exist beyond our influence. We understand you have complicated views regarding we gods and decided the best gift we could give you was to thank you in person. The simple fact of our having done so should help you establish your reputation as you advance your adventuring career.”

“Setting them loose wasn't exactly out of my way.”

“I think, perhaps, it was not so simple as you make out, but I shall say no more. We have given our thanks and shall take our leave.”

“No worries, bloke.”

The gods vanished, the sudden absence of their aura felling like ears popping under a pressure change. People started getting to their feet, all eyes on Jason. He looked around, then his shadow cloak formed around him and he teleported immediately through it, leaving the cloak to drift down for a moment before likewise vanishing.

Jason teleported rapidly through the camp, jumping from shadow to shadow. He finally reached the cloud palace, striding inside. Once through the door, he collapsed against the wall, drawing heaving breaths. It had taken everything he had to keep his cool in the face of not just one but a handful of gods, all while people looked on.

The sheer force of multiple divine presences had pressed down on him like the weight of the sky. For the first time he could feel his own soul. Even now, having escaped that inconceivable power, he could feel the pressure. Rather than lessen, he felt like was

descending into the ocean depths, every moment increasing the chance that the fragile vessel of his soul would collapse. By the time the pressure finally subsided, he was curled up on the floor of the cloud palace atrium, arms clutching his head.

New Title: [Godless Prophet]

- Your aura has been damaged through by the direct, concerted focus of multiple transcendent-level entities. The process of damage and recovery has refined the strength of your aura, increasing its suppressive force and resistance to suppression from higher-ranked auras.
 - Your aura signature has changed. An echo of transcendent power can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power of when projecting your aura.
-

Jason continued to lay on they floor, letting out exhausted, wheezing coughs.

“Jason?” Humphrey’s voice came through the party chat. “We all felt multiple divine auras and then we started hearing some strange things.”

“You should try it from my perspective,” Jason responded weakly. “You should all go ahead and shop without me. I think I’m going to have a lay down.”

“What happened?” Humphrey asked.

“I’ll tell you later,” Jason said. “Just spot me for anything Sophie and Belinda want to buy, alright?”

“I can do that,” Humphrey said.

In the guest wing lounge of the cloud palace, Sophie and Belinda were going over the awakening stones Sophie had chosen with Clive. They had obtained the essences for Belinda but had decided to leave those until Sophie's power set was completed. Although they had found several interesting essences during the trials, Belinda was adamant about the combination of three common essences she had already chosen. They had no trouble trading for the magic, trap and adept essences she wanted.

Sophie also had her remaining awakening stones sorted out. Clive had extensive knowledge of attempting to engineer power sets through stone choices, although he was the first to reiterate that he could make no promises.

Aside from the legendary awakening stones, her strongest acquisitions were a pair of epic awakening stones of the moment. Adventure Society representatives were offering good trades for restricted essences to take them out of the market and Sophie had traded a death essence for the two epic awakening stones.

“These really were a great trade,” Clive said for the third or fourth time since urging Sophie to take them in the first place. He had convinced her by explaining they were perfect for a skill-based power set. The abilities they were known to produce required precise timing but were incredibly impactful.

Rounding out Sophie’s selection were two uncommon stones picked out from the ones they found during the trials. Because Sophie’s power set was very skill-oriented, the awakening stone of preparation would hopefully give her an ability that acted as a failsafe when things inevitably went wrong. They hoped the awakening stone of the surge would bestow a buff power that would help in critical moments.

“The hallmark of a good high-skill adventurer is coming through in the critical moments,” Clive had explained. “If your abilities reflect this, you’ll find yourself far more effective. Be warned, though, that such abilities require skill, judgement and timing. Get them wrong and they may do more harm than good. To you, obviously. Doing harm to the other guy is kind of the point.”

“We should get everyone together to use the stones,” Sophie said. “Asano still hasn’t come out of his suite?”

“Not that I know of,” Clive said. “Having a bunch of gods turn up in front of you would be a straining experience for anyone.”

“You should go check on him,” Belinda said to Sophie.

“Why me?”

“He does own you.”

“He does not own me.”

“A lease is kind of like owning you.”

“It’s not a lease!”

“Still, you should be the one to...”

Sophie and Clive looked at the startled expression on Belinda’s face as she trailed off and followed her gaze to the terrace outside. Jason was wandering along, looking lost. More noticeably, he had a bushy moustache and no clothes whatsoever. Sophie, Belinda and Clive looked at each other in confusion, then went out to meet Jason.

“Uh, Jason,” Clive said. “You aren’t wearing any pants.”

“Fair point,” Jason said brightly.

“I think what Clive meant to ask was why,” Belinda said.

“The topic of this conversation is kind of my thing!” Jason said.

Sophie, Belinda and Clive shared another look.

“Asano,” Sophie said. “Is everything alright?”

“Biscuits!”

“Biscuits?” Sophie asked.

“Biscuits!”

Suddenly, Humphrey’s voice rumbled in their direction in an angry roar.

“STASH!”

Jason’s eyes went wide and he clambered onto the terrace rail, transforming into a puppy before leaping off, into the air. Humphrey then came pounding along the terrace at a run.

“WHAT DID I TELL YOU?” he bellowed before vaulting the rail in pursuit of his fleeing familiar.

Sophie, Belinda and Clive looked at each other one more time.

“Anyone else want a drink?” Clive asked.

“Yes please.”

“Absolutely.”

Chapter 179: The Person I Decided to Be

The only person who could open a guest suite door they were not attuned to was Emir. He did so when Jason didn't answer the chime and walked out to where Jason was staring, shell-shocked, out over the lake. For all that he reacted, Jason didn't even appear to notice Emir's arrival.

Emir joined Jason in leaning on the rail, enjoying the cool breeze sweeping over the water to refresh from the desert heat. Even as autumn turned to winter, the desert was unforgiving. More so than it should be this far south, by any reckoning Jason would recognise. Another difference between this world and his own.

"It's quite a thing, soul damage," Emir said.

Jason turned to look at him for the first time since he arrived.

"How did you know?" Jason asked.

"Your aura signature changed. I'm connected to the cloud palace and it didn't want to let you in because you don't match the aura imprint you gave it. I changed it to match your new one or you wouldn't be able to move around in here."

"The cloud palace can take my aura imprint when my Adventure Society badge can't?"

"Your badge can take your aura imprint just fine," Emir said. "It just can't be tracked. You should get your badge redone, by the way."

"My aura changed," Jason said. "Like the people with star seeds. Is everyone going to suspect me, now?"

"Not after what happened, with everyone watching. It would be strange if there wasn't some after-effect of getting up close and personal with gods like that. Gary was shaky for a while after meeting with just two and he's bronze rank. "You met six at iron rank? Damn right there's an impact."

"You said soul damage," Jason said.

"That's right. Do you know how magic healing works?"

"I'm more focused on astral magic," Jason said.

"There's actually some interesting crossover," Emir said. "Think of your soul like a plan, or maybe a memory of everything you are. What magical healing does is look at the difference between the plan and the reality and move one toward the other."

Jason's brow creased in thought as that information ticked over in his mind.

"That's how my soul was able to construct a new body when it arrived in this world," Jason said. "It was like a blueprint. And that's why I don't remember anything between disappearing in my world and arriving here. The soul has a backup copy of my brain-state, but no actual brain to think with in a space without physical reality."

"If you say so," Emir said. "I'm not really versed in the whole outworlder process."

"You should talk to Clive," Jason said.

"You should convince him to come and work for me."

"No chance."

"He's wasted as an adventurer."

"He was wasted not being one," Jason said. "He's gained so much confidence in the time I've known him. He needs to be an adventurer. At least for now."

"That's an unhelpfully good argument," Emir conceded.

"Tell me more about soul damage," Jason asked. To his surprise, Emir untucked his shirt and lifted it up to reveal a scar running horizontally across his chest and around his left side.

"I didn't think scars were possible with healing magic," Jason said.

"Normally they aren't," Emir said. "As I said, the soul is like a memory of how you should be, but some things change you forever. Some scars you carry on your soul."

"Your aura signature was changed once?" Jason asked.

"Nothing so drastic," Emir said. "My soul was marked. It wasn't enough to change my aura, but the events of that day are a part of who I am now. This scar represents a choice I once made about the I decided to be. It happens, sometimes. An injury marks a fundamental change in who you are and you carry it with you. Find any veteran adventurer, a real one who puts themselves out there, and you'll find they have scars like this. It takes something a bit more soul-shaking to not just mark your aura but change it, though."

"Soul shaking is right," Jason said. "I spent the whole night just trembling. It was like someone took my soul in their hand and could crush it like it was nothing. It's one thing to know a god has power beyond imagining. It's something else to feel it. To really feel it, all around you. It's like drowning."

"By all accounts, you didn't let it show," Emir said. "I did hear you left very quickly."

"Are you kidding?" Jason asked. "I thought I knew what vulnerable and exposed felt like but this was walking naked through the desert. Is this how people feel when their auras are suppressed?"

"I imagine what you experienced was similar, but worse," Emir said. "I know you handle having your aura suppressed strangely well, but for the rest of us, it feels like having your soul exposed for someone to see. I think yours actually was."

"The others must be worried," Jason said.

"We are all rather used to you taking everything in stride," Emir said. "I think you're being so rattled has taken away a little of your mystique. Also, the girls saw you naked."

"They what?"

"It seems Humphrey's familiar..."

"Oh, right," Jason said. "Stash has gotten it into his head that if he turns into me, he can make biscuits appear."

"He can't mimic your abilities, can he?"

"No," Jason said. "He can only take on the magic powers of things lower rank than him, which basically means lesser monsters. Sparkler worms, that kind of thing. Otherwise, it's just the normal, physical properties of the things he turns into. Claws, flippers, wings; that kind of thing."

"So, once he reaches bronze, he could mimic an iron-rank adventurer?"

"That's the theory," Jason said. "As Clive points out, there isn't a large sample size for mirage dragon familiars. There's actually more records of apocalypse beasts. A lot of them are swarms, like Colin. Helps cover ground to get that apocalypse going, I guess."

"I can't believe you named an apocalypse beast Colin."

"He's a good boy. Girl. Leeches can switch it about."

Suddenly Jason started laughing.

"What is it?" Emir asked.

"Back in my world," Jason said, "there are certain sections of society that think transgender people will bring about the end of the world. Colin's a transgender person that actually could, which I have to imagine would change their perspective on the issue. Probably not in a good way, though."

"You are a very strange man," Emir said. "I don't envy the gods having rummaged about inside your soul. I suspect it's very twisty."

"That may be the single rudest thing anyone has even said to me."

"Really?"

"Yeah," Jason said. "Thadwick tried to kill me and this actually feels worse. Probably because you aren't an idiot trying to salvage a bad plan with a worse overreaction."

"Did you really accuse a group of gods of being melodramatic?"

"Probably," Jason said. "It's all bit of a blur, to be honest."

“Well, your team is waiting to hear that you’re alright,” Emir said. “I believe Miss Wexler has a full set of awakening stones ready to use.”

“I should get to it, then. They’re probably sick of waiting.”

“I think you’re underestimating the degree to which they support you,” Emir said. “You’ll find them in the guest wing lounge.”

“So, it ultimately strengthened your aura?” Clive asked as the team walked through the cloud palace, in the direction of a ritual room.

“I think so,” Jason said. “I’ve been wondering if that was their intention or if I’m just so weak it never occurred to them.”

“I think it would be wise not try and guess a god’s motivation,” Humphrey said. “These are beings of unimaginable power, with experience longer than history and a perspective beyond our comprehension.”

“Agreed,” Sophie said. “I know you can’t stop yourself from poking a hornet’s nest, Asano, but at least pick hornets that can’t strike you down with a bolt from the heavens.”

They reached the ritual room and Clive started setting up.

“What do you think?” Belinda asked Sophie. “Start with the most common stones and work our way up to the good stuff?”

“Sounds good,” Sophie said.

Clive had been storing Sophie’s awakening stones and sat them on a shelf on the wall. Sophie went over as Clive started setting up the ritual. In a rare display of nervous fussing, Sophie went over and set them out neatly in a line until Clive announced he was ready. She grabbed the first stone and marched into the ritual circle he had drawn, and held up the uncommon-rarity awakening stone of preparation in her hand as Clive completed the ritual.

-
- You have awakened the swift essence ability [Alacrity's Reward]. You have awakened 4 of 5 swift essence abilities.

Ability: [Alacrity's Reward] (Swift)

- Special Ability (holy).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Accumulate instances of [Blessing of Anticipation] over time, up to an instance threshold determined by the [Spirit] attribute. Rate of instance acquisition is increased proportionally with speed of movement.
- [Blessing of Anticipation] (boon, holy, stacking): Consume instances to negate an amount of incoming damage per instance consumed. Additional instances can be accumulated.

"That's a winner," Jason said.

"Exactly what we were looking for from the stone of anticipation," Clive said with satisfaction. "Something to compensate when skill doesn't work out. We couldn't ask for a better start."

He started setting up the next ritual.

"The next three stones are all designed to give you strong abilities that you can use at the right moment to critical effect," he said as he worked. "We'll start with the awakening stone of the surge."

-
- You have awakened the wind essence ability [Wind Wave]. You have awakened 4 of 5 wind essence abilities.

Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 6 seconds.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.

"I'm not sure that's exactly what we were after," Clive said.

Sophie raised an arm at Jason, whose eyes went wide as the air of the ritual room kicked into a gale and he was slammed into the mercifully soft cloud palace wall. The gust settled as quickly as it roared up, leaving behind an empty silence.

"I like it," Sophie said.

"I'm not a fan," Jason groaned as he pushed himself to his feet.

"This next awakening stone should be a good one," Clive said. "Awakening stone of the moment."

Sophie walked over to take the next stone as Clive set up the next ritual circle. His ability to draw them in their with his power, along with balancing out the ambient magic, saved immense amounts of time when going through many rituals in sequence.

-
- You have awakened the swift essence ability [Eternal Moment]. You have awakened 5 of 5 swift essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all swift essence abilities. Linked attribute [Speed] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank swift essence ability.

Ability: [Eternal moment] (Swift)

- Special Ability.
- Cost: Extreme mana-per-second and stamina-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Operate at a highly accelerated speed for one second of actual time, which is extended in subjective time.

"It lets you move fast," Jason said. "I guess the question is how fas... argh!"

Sophie had vanished, reappearing a moment later behind him, driving a fist into his lower back. From her perspective, the world had slowed to a barely perceptible crawl.

"Bloody hell," Jason exclaimed as he lay on the ground, clutching his back. "What was that for?"

"I had to test the ability," she said.

"Like that?" he asked, pulling himself to his feet.

"If you don't like it," Sophie said, "go complain to your god friends."

"We're more like work acquaintances," Jason said. "We generally stay out of each other's way unless something comes up in the course of our normal employment."

"Did you just call the god of Dominion a work acquaintance?" Neil asked.

"I don't think he's someone I'd get after-work drinks with," Jason said. "I bet he'd cause a lot of trouble."

"My mother has the exact same power," Humphrey said to Sophie, getting the subject back on track.

"Rufus has one that's quite similar, too," Jason said.

While the others messed about, Clive set up the next ritual.

-
- You have awakened the balance essence ability [Moment of Oneness]. You have awakened 3 of 5 balance essence abilities.

Ability: [Moment of Oneness] (Balance)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Extreme mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: 2 minutes.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Become immune to all damage and afflictions for 1 second. The next melee attack within four seconds inflicts all damage and afflictions on the struck enemy. If no enemies attack, the damage and conditions are suffered retroactively.

"I'm going to need a volunteer," Sophie said after reading the power.

"I think it's your turn Hump," Jason said.

"Someone with afflictions would be best," Sophie added.

"Oh, come on," Jason said, walking up to Sophie. "What did I do?"

"How do you know the Hurricane Princess?" Humphrey asked.

"The who?" Jason asked. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"Zara Rimoros," Humphrey said.

"Oh, Zara," Jason said brightly. Looking at Humphrey, he didn't notice the distasteful expression on Sophie's face. Belinda did, hiding a smile behind her hand.

"How did you know I know her?" Jason asked Humphrey.

"She came by last night, while you were... still in seclusion," Humphrey explained. "I think she wanted to check on you."

"Really," Jason said rubbing his chin thoughtfully as an intrigued smile crossed his face.

"Back to the task at hand, Asano," Sophie said. "You can moon over some girl later."

"Jealous?" he asked with a teasing voice as he turned around, spotting neither Belinda's wince nor Sophie's fist, ramming into his gut. With an expression mixing confusion and pain, he slumped to the floor.

“Why?” he asked between wheezing breaths from the ground. “Aren’t I meant to hit you to test that power?”

“Sorry,” Sophie said. “New ability. I’m still figuring out how it works.”

Chapter 180: You Have Friends to Help You

In the ritual room, the group continued to watch as Sophie went through her awakening rituals. She had three unawakened abilities left, one from the wind essence and two from the balance, along with three legendary awakening stones to use on them. She decided to save the Reaper stone for last, leaving the awakening stone of the celestials that Constance had suggested and the stone of karma that Clive picked out. She started with the stone of the celestials.

-
- You have awakened the wind essence ability [Child of the Celestial Wind]. You have awakened 5 of 5 wind essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all wind essence abilities. Linked attribute [Power] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank wind essence ability.

Ability: [Child of the Celestial Wind] (Wind)

- Special Ability (dimension, holy).
- Cost: None
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Your celestine racial powers have increased effect. You gain damage reduction to disruptive-force damage.

“What are the celestine racial powers?” Neil asked. “I know you have a utility power aptitude and can use ongoing abilities for less mana. That one’s your ability that evolved, right?”

“Yes,” Sophie said. “We also recover mana more quickly, we’re faster and have astral and holy affinities.”

“What does holy do, other than improve holy abilities?” Neil asked.

“It increases the effect of healing magic and holy boons used on me.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Neil said. “Those are abilities you want to have increased.”

They moved into the awakening stone of karma.

-
- You have awakened the balance essence ability [Karmic Warrior]. You have awakened 4 of 5 balance essence abilities.

Ability: [Karmic Warrior] (Balance)

- Special Ability (holy).
- Cost: None
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Gain an instance of [Agent of Karma] when subjected to damage or any harmful effect, even if the damage and/or effect was wholly negated.

- [Agent of Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): The [Power] and [Spirit] attributes are temporarily increased by a small amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

“So basically,” Jason said, “Whenever you take damage, even when you negate that damage with your cheesy powers, you get stronger, tougher and your magical abilities get stronger get more powerful.”

“The spirit attribute actually has several functions,” Clive said. “Obviously, affecting the potency of essence abilities is the important one, but don't overlook its impact on our perception. As our spirit attributes move past bronze rank, our senses will go beyond what they are now. Colours, sounds and smells to which we were oblivious will suddenly be made plain to us.”

“So, you can move so fast it amounts to stopping time, become immune to damage, then heap all the damage you should have taken onto the other guy,” Jason said. “Now you have another overpowered ability. Humphrey got bloody immortality, and I got stretchy arms? Not even arms. One stretchy arm.”

“You can switch-up which arm it is, though,” Belinda said. “There's that.”

The group laughed at the flat look Jason gave her.

“We might be little more sympathetic,” Neil said, “if your powers hadn't killed a carnivorous plant the size of a small city.”

“It wasn't just me,” Jason said. “There were twenty-five other people involved in that.”

“Asano, we would have all been left sitting around with nothing to do if we didn't have you there,” Sophie said. “Stop whining.”

“I guess that's fair,” Jason conceded.

“Sophie, that new ability makes you rather like a defensive version of Jason,” Humphrey pointed out. “You don't have any explosive attack powers but now the longer a

fight goes on, the more dangerous you become. Increasing your power attribute will obviously increase your physical strength and the increase in spirit will affect the additional damage your powers add to your even your normal attacks. That will eventually add up to every one of your strikes having the kind of strength the rest of us only with a special attack. And we all know how quickly you can attack.”

“We still have one more ability to awaken,” Clive reminded them as he finished setting up for the final ritual.

“Did you hear what people were getting from Reaper stones, while you were in the market?” Jason asked.

“Clive veered off quite early to go ask around while the rest of us were selling loot,” Neil said. “Did you actually get people to tell you, Clive?”

“Kind of,” Clive said. “I found the Magic Society contingent and organised cheap awakening rituals for anyone who let us record their abilities.”

“I saw that,” Neil said. “You organised that?”

“I’m still a Magic Society official,” Clive said, “even if Lucian Lamprey did effectively strip me of all responsibility.”

“I’d like to kick that guy’s insides out once day,” Sophie said.

“Was this because of me?” Jason asked unhappily.

“He doesn’t like that I work with you,” Clive said. “It worked out, though, since It left me more free for adventuring and research. All his punishment actually did was free me from a bunch of administering duties.”

Jason frowned, knowing that it had not been the windfall Clive was making out.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I told you, it’s fine,” Clive said. “Getting back on topic, I did manage to find out about a lot of powers coming from the Reaper stones. The most common, from what I could gather, are aggressive utility powers,” Clive said as he continued to work. “There’s quite a lot of conjuration powers, mostly weapons but also stranger things, like Jason’s arm conjuration. They all seem to incorporate offensive aspects, though, like the affliction Jason’s shadow arm delivers.”

“I’d like something impactful that I can open up a fight with,” Sophie said. “Something to put the enemy onto the back foot.”

“I’m not sure that’s on the table,” Clive said. “From the people I talked to, the Reaper stones tend to give out powers more in Jason’s wheelhouse. Slow, inevitable death.”

Speculation turned to anticipation as Clive finished the ritual and carried it out.

-
- You have awakened the balance essence ability [Deny the Reaper]. You have awakened 5 of 5 balance essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all balance essence abilities. Linked attribute [Recovery] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank balance essence ability.

Ability: [Deny the Reaper] (Balance)

- Special Attack (counter-execute, healing).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Target enemy suffers a small amount of transcendent damage and you are healed for a small amount. As a counter-execute effect, the damage and healing scale exponentially with your own level of injury.

“Counter-execute?” Jason said. “That’s a new one to me.”

“You generally see it in defensive power sets,” Clive said. “They are generally more powerful than other abilities, but only if you use them when things are going badly. Usually, they have some combination of damage reduction, healing, retribution damage or health drain.”

“My immortality power is something of a false counter-execute,” Humphrey said. “It’s unlikely to scale as well Sophie’s new power but it can also scale off low stamina and mana, and will be more useful without having to be beaten down first.”

“Thought that ability scaled, like this one,” Neil said.

“Yes, but it doesn’t have to be with damage,” Humphrey said. “If I’m just low on mana, for example, it will top my mana up well without doing much for my health and stamina.”

“So it’s more versatile,” Jason said. “Stupid OP power. I bet your Mum’s happy, though.”

“Actually, she was ecstatic,” Humphrey said. “I’ve never seen her like that.”

“Of course she was,” Jason said. “A mother just found out her child was immortal.”

“I’m not actually immortal.”

“It is still a powerful survival skill,” Clive said. “This one of Sophie’s is not to be underestimated, however. The chance to bring a fight going badly back to even ground fits into the classic balance essence mode. Balance is quite popular because it has abilities like this that can pull you through rough situations.”

“I wanted an attack for a start of the fight, not the end,” Sophie said.

“Look at it this way,” Humphrey said. “Would you prefer a big, splashy entrance that may or may not do you any good, or something you can rely on when things go wrong.”

Sophie considered Humphrey’s words, nodding to herself.

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “Big attacks are kind of your area, anyway.”

“Plus, transcendent damage,” Clive said. “That’s as reliable as it gets, plus incredibly rare at iron rank. You only see it on conditional powers, like executes, or when the damage is negligible. Both of which are demonstrated by Jason’s abilities.”

“That leaves you,” Sophie said, turning to Belinda. “Ready to become an essence user.”

“Are you kidding?” Belinda asked. “I can’t wait for Jason to complain about how great my powers are.”

“What?” Jason asked.

“You can be a bit of a whiner,” Neil told him.

“I’m not a whiner,” Jason said. “I’m just open with my feelings. I’m a delicate flower.”

“The kind of flower that’s hard to eradicate, even when you try to get rid of it,” Neil said. “Is there a word for that?”

“You’re calling me a weed?” Jason asked. “That’s very rude.”

“You said I was fat!”

“You are objectively hefty for an elf.”

“I’m well built.”

“Like a fancy cake,” Jason said. “But I imagine you know all about cake, given how many you must have eaten to get like that.”

“I’m not the only elf that looks like this, you know.”

“You mean Lucian Lamprey? He’s not a great role model. Even putting aside the whole evil sleazebag thing, the guy looks like someone sucked the air out of a bag of nuts.”

As Jason and Neil continued to bicker, Clive went to work setting up Belinda’s first essence ritual. It was more elaborate and involved than a ritual of awakening, but otherwise quite similar. Soon, Belinda was standing in the middle of a magic diagram, a magic essence held nervously in her hands.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Sophie said. “You saw me go through this.”

“Trust me,” Clive said. “I’ve done this dozens of times. Probably hundreds.”

“What if I get a crap power?” Belinda asked.

“My mother says there is no such thing as a bad power,” Humphrey said. “Just a bad essence user who doesn’t know what to do with it.”

“Everyone here knows how smart and resourceful you are,” Jason told her. “If you get a basic attack ability, that's a reliable power you can count on when things are too hectic to set up a clever plan. If you get something more esoteric, you can be innovative with it and really show what you're capable of. Either way, I know you'll be able to make the most of it.”

Belinda nodded.

“Thanks,” she told them.

“If all your powers are crap, though,” Jason added casually, “we're not letting you on the team.”

He yelped as Sophie thumped him on the arm.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“What was that for?” Sophie echoed incredulously. “If I had a suppression collar I'd put it on you and throw you off the highest tower in this whole damn palace!”

“I'm kind of in the middle of something here,” Belinda interjected.

“Sorry,” Jason said.

Clive conducted the ritual, the essence in Belinda's hands dissolving into a nebula-like cloud that floated around her before drifting gently into her body.

-
- You have absorbed [Magic Essence]. You have absorbed 1 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 25% (1/4 essences).
 - [Magic Essence] has bonded to your [Spirit] attribute, changing your [Spirit] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all magic essence abilities to increase your [Spirit] attribute.
 - You have awakened the magic essence ability [Bag of Tricks]. You have awakened 1 of 5 magic essence abilities.

Ability: [Bag of Tricks] (Magic)

- Special Ability (dimension).
 - Cost: None
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): You have a personal, dimensional storage space. You may equip any item in your storage space directly onto your person or unequip anything on your person directly to your storage space.
-

“A dimensional space as your first ability,” Neil said. “Not even from some high-end stone; you got it straight from the essence. It looks like a convenient one, too. None of this conjuring up a cupboard or whatever.”

“We have a lot of storage spaces in this team,” Clive said. “We’re lucky, in that regard.”

Blue-grey light started shining from within Belinda.

“Here we go,” Clive said.

-
- Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [Adventurer’s Tools].

Ability: [Adventurer’s Tools]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
- Active ability (conjuration). Conjure basic, non-magical objects.

Sophie and Belinda had already decided just to do Belinda’s essences before taking their shopping trip to sell off their loot in a market not flooded with essences and awakening stones. They already had some stones picked out but were also waiting to see what her first powers produced. Normally, they would have only awakened around half of her powers right away, as had been the case with the rest of the team. Belinda was already behind the curve compared to the rest of the team, so they instead decided to do them all, after coming back from their shopping trip.

In the meantime, they moved on to the next essence.

-
- You have absorbed [Trap Essence]. You have absorbed 2 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 50% (2/4 essences).
 - [Trap Essence] has bonded to your [Power] attribute, changing your [Power] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all trap essence abilities to increase your [Power] attribute.
 - You have awakened the trap essence ability [Bait and Switch]. You have awakened 1 of 5 trap essence abilities.

Ability: [Bait and Switch] (Trap)

- Special Ability (dimension, illusion).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- **Effect (iron):** Teleport self or nearby ally to a nearby location. The subject is rendered invisible for a brief period, leaving behind a lifelike illusion. The illusion has no substance or aura.
-

“An escape power,” Clive said. “The mana cost and use-interval for a power like that are quite large because you can use it on other people. That’s a valuable power.”
Belinda’s next racial gift evolution soon triggered.

- **Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [The Price of Power].**

Ability: [The Price of Power]

- **Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].**
 - **Active ability (spell, curse). The subject of this ability suffers disruptive-force damage when expending mana, proportional to the amount of mana consumed.**
-

“That’s interesting,” Clive said. “Active racial gifts are rare, especially one you can use on other people.”

“How is that a trap power?” Sophie asked.

“It turns a person’s own mana into a trap,” Neil said. “It’s a nasty ability.”

“I’m glad,” Belinda said. “The first one wasn’t great. Useful, don’t get me wrong, but a bit underwhelming.”

“Underwhelming?” Jason said. “That ability to conjure tools is the most pure-blood adventuring power I’ve ever seen. I could empty half my storage space if I had that power.”

“He really could,” Humphrey said.

“A will admit, I’ve been carrying around some useful goods as well,” Clive said. “Because I had ropes with me, Neil and I have multiple growth items, now.”

“Still two essences to go,” Clive said. “I’ll set up the next ritual.”

“Actually, could we take a break?” Belinda asked. “This is kind of intense and I could use a rest.”

“Good idea,” Jason said. “We can all go up to my suite and I’ll put on some lunch.”

As everyone shuffled out of the ritual room, Clive asked Sophie and Belinda to stay behind a moment to discuss an issue with their new abilities.

“Is there a problem with our abilities?” Sophie asked after the others were gone.

“This isn’t really about your abilities,” Clive said. “This is about Jason.”

“What about him?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t like the way you were attacking him,” Clive said.

“Seriously?” Sophie asked. “It hit him ten times harder when we spar.”

“But you weren’t sparring.”

“You think he couldn’t have stopped me?”

“Jason’s judgement is compromised when it comes to you,” Clive said. “He’s wary of his power over you and the men who had power over you in the past. Because of that, he lets you get away with things he wouldn’t tolerate from anyone else. Don’t forget, he just went through something incredibly affecting.”

“He seemed normal to me,” Belinda said.

“Exactly,” Sophie agreed. “You saw him. He’s fine.”

Clive gave them a sad smile. “You never met Farrah, but when Jason and I started adventuring together, she asked me to look out for him. To make sure he actually was fine and didn’t just seem that way. He’s good at hiding when he’s overwhelmed.”

“That’s crap,” Sophie said. “He’s just one of those guys who takes it all in stride. Nothing really affects people like that.”

“People like that don’t exist,” Clive said. “Jason may not have been through all the things you have but he’s had his own challenges. He’s more vulnerable than he seems.”

Sophie scowled while Belinda looked at her, thoughtfully.

“Maybe we can tone it back a little,” she said.

“You mean I can,” Sophie said.

“Yeah, Soph,” Belinda said. “I mean you.”

They reconvened in the ritual room after lunch. Sophie was subdued, her scowl replaced with unhappy, thoughtful frowns as she shot glances in Jason’s direction. Jason moved over to Clive as he drew the circle for the next ritual.

“What did you do?” Jason asked quietly.

“I didn’t like the way she was treating you.”

“She needed that,” Jason said. “To know that she really is free and wouldn’t be pushed back down for acting against the man with the power over her.”

“You think that was a healthy expression of freedom?” Clive asked.

“Of course not,” Jason said. “But it was a start.”

“And what about what you need?” Clive asked. “You might be putting a good face on it but I know what happens to people who get that close to that many gods. I’ve read papers on it. You can’t tell me you’re fine when I know you were shaken to the very soul. Literally.”

“It’s fine,” Jason said.

“The way she was treating you isn’t fine,” Clive said. “Neil and Humphrey might think she’s crabby about some other girl but they’re teenagers and don’t know any better.”

“Wexler’s damaged,” Jason said. “We need to give her some leeway.”

“Trauma is not an excuse to hurt other people,” Clive said. “Isn’t the whole point for her to take responsibility for her own behaviour? This is not how you work through your problems.”

“You can’t fix everything at once, Clive. You take the wins you can get.”

“You aren’t a reliable judge when it comes to her,” Clive said. “You’re so scared of abusing the power in that indenture contract that you won’t act when you should,” Clive said. “But that’s alright. You have friends to help you. And so does she. Let us keep both of you walking in straight lines.”

Jason glanced over at Sophie, then nodded.

“Alright, Clive,” Jason said. “Thanks, mate.”

Chapter 181:

Blob Body

Clive performed the next essence ritual for Belinda.

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

Ability: [Blessing of Readiness] (Adept)

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

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

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

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

Ability: [Quick Learner]

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

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

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

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

“You’re an adventurer, now.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“What do I do?” Belinda asked.

“Reach out and take it,” Clive said.

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

-
- You have absorbed [Charlatan Essence]. You have absorbed 4 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 100% (4/4 essences).

 - [Charlatan Essence] has bonded to your [Recovery] attribute, changing your [Recovery] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all charlatan essence abilities to increase your [Recovery] attribute.

 - You have awakened the charlatan essence ability [Echo Spirit]. You have awakened 1 of 5 charlatan essence abilities.

Ability: [Echo Spirit] (Charlatan)

- Familiar (ritual).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Summon an [Echo Spirit] to serve as a familiar.

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

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

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

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

Ability: [Face in the Crowd]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].

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

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

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

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

Ability: [Form and Function]

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

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

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

“Not quite,” Clive said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“My body? You mean an outworlder body?”

“I do.”

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

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

“What?” Jason asked in horror.

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

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

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

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

“Habit,” Clive said.

“Habit?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

This time everyone gave Clive horrified looks.

“What?” he asked. “It’s true.”

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

“That’s broadly accurate,” Clive said.

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

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

"I suppose not," Jason said.

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

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

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

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

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

"That explains so much," Humphrey said.

"I know, right?" Jason agreed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Emir chuckled, shaking his head.

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

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

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

“Nice.”

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

Chapter 182: Particular Appetites

In the old stone fortress in Old City, now a neutral ground of criminal delights, one of Cole Silva's thugs knocked on the door of Silva's office.

"Enter," came a gruff bark from inside. The thug went in, his body screaming reluctance.

"Boss?"

"What?"

"You asked for any news about Wexler."

"And?"

"She was part of the team that brought back the thing that big-time out-of-towner was after. I don't think we'll ever have a shot at her, boss."

A short time later, two more thugs dragged the body out of the office as Silva strode back and forth, fuming.

"You want us to send someone to clean up the blood, boss?"

"No," Silva snarled, then stopped his pacing. "Find Killian Laurent and have him come see me."

Emir had not entirely thrown out the usual decorum of a high society soiree, with one of his staff announcing each of the prestigious guests as they arrived. The guests were then met by Constance, at her most proper, and Jason, considerably less so.

"It didn't occur to you to wear long pants?" Constance asked him quietly between arrivals.

"Nah," Jason said.

Zara Rimaros was the next to arrive, flanked by her two offsidiers and accompanied by an older woman. Zara's companion was another celestine with the same caramel skin set off by sapphire eyes and hair. She looked around thirty but Jason had come to recognise the agelessness of essence users, even if her politely retracted but unmistakably silver-rank aura hadn't given it away. There was something behind the eyes of high-rankers; something about the way they carried themselves. An absolute confidence that low-rankers, even amongst the nobility, were yet to develop. This woman was practically bursting with it.

"Jason," Zara greeted with a smile full of dangerous promise. "Might I introduce my aunt, Vesper Rimaros."

“A genuine pleasure,” Jason greeted, his respectful tone wholly incongruous with his short pants, floral print shirt and open-toe sandals.

“I’ve heard much about you,” Vesper greeted, apparently unfazed by Jason’s outfit.

“Oh,” Jason winced. “Don’t worry, we got all the heidels back, and most of them weren’t too traumatised. We’re completely out of fruit chutney after all that, though, so let me save you the trouble of checking the condiments table.”

“What are you talking about?” Vesper asked, whose eyebrows had slowly climbed up above her otherwise schooled expression. Jason’s expression was suddenly that of a man realising he’d said too much.

“Uh... nothing,” he said, looking about nervously. “You should say hello to Emir. He’s around here, somewhere.”

Zara, hid a giggle behind her hand, flashing her eyes at Jason.

“Emir Bahadir is currently a person of interest to our royal family over a theft that took place several years ago,” Zara told him, her words formal but her voice unable to excise the undertone of mirth.

“And he still invited you?” Jason asked. “What a magnanimous bloke.”

“You know, Jason,” Zara said. “At the risk of self-aggrandisement, I like to think that when someone meets me, I’m the most interesting person they meet that day. I’m not used to being upstaged by gods.”

“Never fear,” Jason said. “You were absolutely the most interesting person I met that day. I’m pretty sure gods are just big lumps of magic that have been around so long they gained sentience and started having funny ideas.”

“That comes dangerously close to blasphemy,” Zara’s aunt said.

“Blasphemy is kind of my thing,” Jason said.

“And yet, you were just personally and publicly praised by multiple gods,” Zara said.

“I know, right?” Jason asked. “It’s a funny old world.”

Danielle Geller came upon Rick Geller, standing alone. He was only a distant relative, to the point she wasn’t sure what their actual relation was. Some kind of much-removed nephew, from what she recalled. She had come to admire and respect the young man who had been as close to the family’s recent tragedies as anyone, losing two members of his team who were closely related. Rather than swear vengeance, he had grown into his responsibilities as a leader. Instead of dwelling on those who had fallen, he focused on protecting those that remained.

She noticed his gaze locked on something across the room. She followed it to where Jason was speaking quietly with the Rimaros princess and her royal aunt. Danielle noted the body language of the princess and the confused expression on Vesper Rimaros' face she had come to associate with people talking to Jason.

"That's the hurricane princess," Rick said.

Danielle sighed.

"I don't understand people who insist on these overblown sobriquets," Danielle said. "She's iron-rank, for goodness sake. None of you have had a chance to truly prove yourselves."

They watched Zara giggle at something Jason said, putting a hand over her mouth.

"How does he do that?" Rick asked and Danielle looked at him.

"No offence, dear boy, but a woman like that would chew you up and spit you out. I thought you were interested in one of the young ladies on your team?"

"Yes," Rick said. Normally he wouldn't admit it, but no one who had been through Geller training would consider lying to Danielle.

"I could use some of Jason's way with women," Rick said wistfully. "Really, how does he do that?"

"Did you ask him?"

"He said that what he had can't be taught."

Danielle chuckled.

"Probably true," she said. "Would you like me to tell you why?"

"Yes," Rick said enthusiastically, turning to look at Danielle.

"When it comes to princesses or other highborn women, do you know how often they meet someone who doesn't care they're a princess? Never, probably, at least in their own age group. The smarter boys learn the value of pretending they don't care, which makes the smarter young women very good at spotting it. All the more, for the social training they undergo. Then along comes Jason, who genuinely doesn't care who their family is. Add a little wit, a disregard for propriety and a penchant for the taboo and you're waving fresh meat in front of a hungry animal."

"I don't think I can be as brazen as Jason," Rick said.

"Nor should you be," Danielle said. "Jason is who he is, without apology or shame. He accepts the consequences, knowing that as many or more will hate him for it as be drawn to him. People respect authenticity, however, even when it's as unusual as Jason's. There's an integrity to it. That's what you are looking for. You don't need to be like Jason. You need to figure out who you are, Rickard. Be true to that and accept the

consequences. Then you won't have to go looking for the right people because you'll have already learned to recognise them."

"You really think it's that simple?" Rick asked.

"I do," Danielle said. "Simple, however, is not the same thing as easy."

Jason was still greeting new arrivals, the steady presence of Constance a guiding light. She would subtly indicate a guest who would not respond well to Jason's particular social graces and he affected enough civility that no one made a fuss, in spite of his, to their eyes, ludicrous appearance.

Various groups had arrived from various religious organisations, many of whom were at a loss as to how to handle Jason. One such group was from the church of knowledge.

"Gabrielle," Jason greeted. "I didn't realise you were participating in the trials."

"My lady felt that I would benefit from facing challenges where I did not have her to rely upon."

"Yeah, the Healer mentioned that the gods couldn't access astral spaces. It's always fun to hear that even gods have their limits."

Behind him, Constance pointedly cleared her throat.

"My lady has prepared another gift for you," Gabrielle said, clearly unhappy to be delivering the message. "She believes you will find it more palatable than the last. It shall be delivered on your return to Greenstone."

"I'm a little wary, after the last one," Jason said.

"She is certain that this one will be more welcome."

"I guess we'll see," Jason said.

Hester was one of Emir's most important staff members. She was in charge of logistics and coordination between all of Emir's disparate operations, for which her portal ability was a crucial tool.

Hester was from Pranay, this world's equivalent of Sri Lanka. In this world, however, it was a much larger, located further to the south and west. In a world where the Arabian Peninsula did not exist and the Mediterranean connected directly to the Indian Ocean, it's northern coast was home to several important connections for sea trade.

Hester had been born in one of those ports, the city of Jayapura. She opened a portal through which Jason and his team stepped into. They emerged from the portal with mixed reactions to the transition. Jason and Sophie, with their astral affinities were unaffected.

They immediately started taking in their surroundings, including their team members who handled the transition less well.

Humphrey had a teleport power of his own, so while not immune to the disorientation, was at least used to it. Portalling across a continent was more straining than across a room, but he took a deep breath and was fine. Clive and Neil were less experienced but it was not their first time, staggering a little before righting themselves. Belinda had the worst of it, lurching dizzily until Sophie stepped in to prevent her from falling over entirely. Stash the puppy stumbled about before toppling over and letting out an unhappy whine.

They were in a courtyard full of lush plants, in raised planters and hanging from walls. The walls, planters and even the floor were covered in mosaic tiles in bright, cool colours. The shades of blue, green and turquoise gave the courtyard an underwater feeling, the vibrant space lit up by the bright sunlight. The air was hot, like that in Greenstone but drier, without the mugginess produced from the delta. The heat was cut by a fresh breeze with a tang of the sea, blowing in through archways leading out of the courtyard.

Hester gave them a tour of what turned out to be a magnificent house on a clifftop, overlooking the ocean. Tunnels dug down into the rock, with stone stairwells leading down into a network of cave grottos. Platforms of metal and wood wound through the caves, suspended over the water below. Magic glow stones lit up the caves, both under the water and above.

“There are guest rooms down here or up above,” Hester told them. “You can choose whichever you prefer.”

“Down here,” Jason said immediately, grinning like a loon as he looked over a railing and into the water.

“If you want to swim, feel free,” Hester said, continuing to lead them through the colourfully-lit caves. “The main entertaining grotto actually has a bar you can only get to by swimming. Or flying, water-walking, teleporting. Whatever powers you might have.”

“You have a magnificent home,” Jason said as Hester led them back upstairs.

“You can travel a lot as an adventurer,” Hester told him, “especially with a power like mine. I think it’s important to have somewhere to come home to, though. And, of course, being adventurers gives us the means to have that.”

Hester introduced them to her extended family, all of whom lived in the expansive compound sprawling over the top of the cliff. Like many successful adventurers, she had provided her family with essences and monster cores to extend their longevity, even if they never fought a monster themselves. Hester’s family were extremely welcoming, especially Hester’s mother, Anise.

“She never brings home friends,” Anise was saying to Jason as they walked, joining them for the rest of the tour.

“Mother...”

“Oh, hush dear. You really must tell me what Hester has been up to, Jason. She’s always so secretive.”

“Let me think,” Jason said. “Ah, I know. A little while ago, there was a big expedition that went out from the city where we’ve been staying. It was a huge deal, and they sent along everyone who could open a portal or do a mass teleport. Of course, then they ended up in an astral space they couldn’t portal out of. Are you familiar with astral spaces, Anise?”

“Oh, yes,” Anise said. “So many rumours going around these days about them.”

“Well, it turned out that expedition was in desperate need of help, and it was Hester who made that happen. Without her, no one would have gotten there in time.”

“Why aren’t you the one to tell me about these things?” Anise asked Hester.

“I didn’t really do anything,” Hester said.

“Nonsense,” Jason said. “She’s an absolute hero. Humphrey and Neil, here, were on that expedition. They might not be here if it weren’t for your daughter.”

“He’s blowing things out of proportion,” Hester said.

They came to a pathway outside the house from which they could see the city sprawling down from the hilltop upon which the Hesters’ home was located. It was much larger than Greenstone, spreading out over the coastline, alongside the cerulean ocean sparkling in the sunlight.

“This is beautiful,” Jason said as they stopped to look out. “Thank you for sharing your home with us, Hester.”

“I’m just happy you managed to bring that scythe back,” Hester said. “Emir seems like a relaxed boss, but he wasn’t great to be around while you were in the astral space. The prospect of no one bringing it back after two years of effort? The whole staff is just about ready to kiss you. Don’t let them, though. Especially Weird Pants Keith.”

Killian Laurent was an elf who looked like the villain from a fairy story, with ugly, sunken features, emaciated limbs and sickly pallid skin. Dressed in ill-fitted black, even the way he walked had an unpleasant, obsequiousness to it. He sidled into Silva’s office, not even glancing at the blood soaking into the rug. Silva stood with his back to the door, not turning around at Killian’s entrance.

“You once made a suggestion to me,” Silva said without preamble. “I declined.”

“You did not want to take the risk of discovery,” Killian said in his raspy voice.

“Since then, I have been discretely approached,” Silva said. “Someone offered assistance that may make something like what you suggested more viable.”

“You are ready to take the girl?”

“No,” Silva said. “I was offered assistance in taking the man who took her from me. She’ll get hers when the man who holds her indenture contract is flushed out to sea in a thousand pieces. Is this something you can make happen?”

“Mr Silva, I am a man of particular appetites,” Killian said. “I moved my loyalties from your father to you, because you have my appetites met reliably and discreetly, where your father would not. People of my inclination operate in very small circles, and I am familiar with a man, a silver-rank adventurer, with predilections not unlike my own. There is no way such a man, being silver-rank, would enter your employ. But if he were offered the same arrangement I enjoy, I imagine he would be willing to undertake the occasional favour. For example, the quiet acquisition of a troublesome young adventurer.”

“How reliable is this man?”

“I can assure you, Mr Silva, that he is a man of exquisite caution.”

Silva did not respond for a long time, still staring at the wall without turning to face Killian.

“Very well,” Silva said. “Set up a meeting; I want to talk to this man. Also, find out exactly what he will want before the meeting happens.”

Chapter 183: Domineering, Territorial and Robust

For those who could afford them, personal transport in Jayapura consisted of small discs that floated in the air, underfoot, the rider directing them by shifting their weight. Hester brought a number of them out onto an open area of lawn for the visitors to get a handle on.

“Hoverboards!” Jason called out cheerfully.

“Their actually called personal float discs,” Clive corrected him.

“Hoverboards!”

“That’s not..”

“Hoverboards!” Jason asserted again. Stash turned into a bird and flew onto Jason’s head, echoing his cry.

“Hoverboards!”

“Good boy,” Jason said, giving bird Stash a biscuit.

Smaller float discs, like those Hester had brought out, were for standing on. She explained that there were larger ones, each of which had a seat on them. Use of those by anyone other than the physically infirm were looked down on, however.

Humphrey and Clive had used them before, while Sophie and Jason found their balance quickly. Neil and Belinda had more trouble, struggling to get their disc to move, only for it to shoot out from under them as it did. While they continued to practice, Jason skimmed around the edges of the yard, giggling like a madman.

“Hoverboards,” he said happily, pulling up next to Clive. “Why do we not have these in Greenstone?”

“The magical density is too low,” Clive said. “It’s why all the magical vehicles need someone like me to drive them.”

“Doesn’t that make your ability kind of useless here?” Jason asked at which Clive grinned.

“You need someone like me to drive that,” Clive said, pointing up. Jason looked into the air, where what looked like a zeppelin was floating gracefully through the sky. Instead of an inflated envelope of air, it had what looked like the frame of one, visibly glowing with magic.

“Awesome,” Jason said.

Eventually Hester judged Neil and Belinda ready for strictly supervised use of the float discs and they started down the hill and into the city, carefully for the benefit of Belinda and Neil.

“Did we have to start off downhill?” Neil asked as he nervously controlled his disc.

“Not to say I don’t agree with the sentiment,” Belinda said, likewise moving with caution. “It might be a bit much to ask Hester to move her house somewhere flatter for our benefit.”

Hester led them into the city, passing through older and older sections as they moved closer to the centre. Their destination was the Mystic Quarter, where the city’s main temples were located, along with the Magic and Adventure Society campuses.

“The Adventure Society trade hall should be the place to find most of what you’re after,” Hester told them. “You may need the Magic Society for some of the ritual components. In any case, the trade hall brokers will take all the loot you’d care to trade off your hands.”

Adventure Society campus dwarfed that of Greenstone’s, although it lacked the open simplicity. Instead, it was a warren of tight alleys and narrow streets, with building hugging together like goods bundled in a crate. It was more like a town, with the trade hall alone being the size of a village.

“You should enjoy this, Humphrey,” Jason said as they moved through the crowds of the main trade hall. “Unlike in Greenstone, there’s no one to recognise you. You can just be some guy, here.”

After visiting the brokers, they spent some time shopping around, Jason’s group chat allowing them to stay in contact when they split up. They moved through the crowded trade hall, the maelstrom of voices all around them, hawking and haggling.

“Does anyone have any crystal wash?” they heard a voice calling out. “Everywhere seems to be sold out, all of a sudden.”

The team regroup outside the trade hall to compare purchases. They had only bought a few things, their main purpose being to hand over their awakening stones and essences to the brokers for auction. There was market enough that auctions took place daily, so they would be able to collect their earnings in the morning.

“I got a line on a magical tattooist with the skills I need,” Jason said. “Someone who can apply the immortal crest.”

The immortal crest was an item Jason obtained during the trials that was unusual in nature. Using it required the services of a specialist magic craftsperson, none of whom resided in Greenstone. Humphrey had used one himself, while travelling with his mother.

Item: [Immortal Crest] (iron rank, rare)

An object that allows the soul to mark the body (consumable, tattoo).

- **Effect:** When applied by a mystical tattooist, this item will draw out a soul crest. This item can only be used on an iron rank essence user.

After acquiring the item, Jason had asked Clive about it. Clive, in turn, roped in Humphrey, who already had a soul crest. A soul crest, they explained, was a magical tattoo printed not on the body, but on the soul. That imprint would appear on the body in turn, in a form that resisted design. The form of the crest was a visible reflection of the bearer's true nature.

The value of the crest was as a form of identification. The unique imprint on the aura remained the same, even if the aura itself changed and the visible form of the crest with it. Impossible to track or falsify through even the strongest magic, so long as there was a record of the imprint, it was a guaranteed proof of identity.

Immortal crests were difficult and expensive to make, especially for an iron-rank item, but many wealthy adventurers commissioned one, nonetheless. Once the Adventure Society had a record of the imprint, it was an ironclad proof of identity that could be verified at any branch in the world.

The visible form of the crest could not be chosen, instead reflecting the soul that produced it. This had famously mixed results.

"If we're going to see a magical tattooist," Humphrey said, "then you should all get one. I already did, when I used my immortal crest."

Deciding to make that their next stop, Clive explained magical tattoos as they traversed the city on their hover-discs.

"It will only last as long as your current rank," Clive told them. "It gets purged from your body as you rank up, along with any other magical waste that doesn't hold up to your new rank. That leaves you free to get a new tattoo at your new rank."

"What do they do?" Belinda asked. "I've heard of magic tattoos, but never seen one."

"We can change that," Humphrey said. He pulled back his sleeve to show an intricate sigil on his upper arm, confident enough in his skill with the floating disc to do so without falling off. The tattoo's colour was a brilliant shade of blue that shimmered like sunlight on the ocean.

"Different tattoos do different things," Clive said. "That looks like a mana-accumulating one."

“That’s right,” Humphrey said. “It slowly accumulates mana, which I can absorb when I need it. It’s basically a mana potion that takes a few hours to refill itself.”

“The functions of iron-rank tattoos are quite basic,” Clive explained, “so most people go for some variant on health or mana recovery, be that a moderate increase to natural recovery, or an on-demand burst like Humphrey has there. There are other options, though. A short burst of damage reduction, or reducing the cooldown of an ability. Effects like that are single-use and take an amount of time to recover before being used again.”

“How many can you get?” Sophie asked.

“Just the one,” Clive said. “Usually, anyway. There are essence abilities that can increase that. My rune essence, for example, will frequently produce that type of ability. I didn’t get one of those, though.”

Following the directions Jason had obtained, Hester guided them away from the main areas of the Mystic Quarter, the streets growing narrower and the building older as they went.

“Are you sure this place we’re going is legitimate?” Neil asked Jason.

“Are you kidding?” Jason asked. “Mysterious shopkeepers in dilapidated parts of the city where most would never tread are always better.”

“According to whom?” Neil asked.

“Eighties movies.”

“Eighty what?”

“I’ll assess the place for myself,” Hester said.

They found the tattoo shop, and while the dingy exterior was not confidence-inducing, the interior was a stark contrast, with polished wood, shining tiles and glass as pristine as a cloudless winter sky. Hung on the walls were pictures of various tattoos, some artistic, others with descriptions of their effects.

“If the craftsmanship we can expect is a match for what’s on display here,” Clive said, examining the pictures, “then I don’t foresee any problems.”

“Agreed,” Hester said, likewise looking over the displays. She turned to Jason.

“Who told you about this place?” she asked.

“I was asking around at the trade hall,” Jason said. “I couldn’t much tell good advice from the bad, so I tried something else. They don’t differentiate the trade hall by rank like they do back in Greenstone; it’s all mixed together. So I started looking for places that seemed a bit less impressive than you’d expect at the trade hall. Eventually I found a place that didn’t look like much and everyone seemed to ignore, but every person I saw go in was clearly a top-flight adventurer. It was all silver and gold rankers, the kind who have

plain-looking gear that you can tell is actually the good stuff if you pay attention. So, I went in, had a little chat with the guy running it and he gave me a tip.”

“Just like that?” Sophie asked.

“Well... I did have to promise to send Neil in for a special visit.”

“What?” Neil asked.

“It’ll be fine,” Jason said. They really liked the sound of a chunky elf. We should start looking for a sailor suit soon, though, because finding one in your size might be tricky.”

“They?”

“I think he had some mates he wanted to bring along. The more, the merrier, right?”

“You know that someone is going to tie you to a boulder and drop you in the ocean one day,” Neil said.

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “It turns out that I don’t need to breathe.”

A wiry woman emerged from a back room. She looked older, but hale and weathered like a tree that survived storm after storm. Jason was unable to detect any aura from her at all.

“I was wondering who was making a commotion in my shop,” she said, looking them over. “Not a lot of boisterous youths darken my door. Accompanied by Hester Maharala, no less. The lady with the house on the hill. Are you still following that Bahadir boy around?”

“You know Emir?” Hester asked.

“Know might be a strong word,” the woman said. “We crossed paths when he was still a precocious boy. Good to hear he took up treasure hunting, because he was only a so-so adventurer. That couple he ran around with, now they knew their business. The sneaky one, too.”

“Gabriel and Arabella Remore,” Jason said. “We’ll be seeing them soon, if you’d like us to pass on a greeting.”

“Oh, they don’t want to hear from some old shopkeeper,” she said. “Who is it that sent you my way?”

“The man selling magic lamps in the trade hall,” Jason said.

“And you were the one who got it out of him?” she asked. “He probably saw you were an outworlder and got all excitable, the damn coot.”

“I’m Jason Asano. May I have your name?”

“Tilly is good enough. You didn’t come here just for tattoos, Jason Asano. You could get them plenty of places, cheaper and easier.”

Jason took out a plain metal plate and handed it over.

“Immortal crest,” Tilly said, turning it over in her hands. “Who made this?”

“Me, kind of,” Jason said. “A looting ability. Of sorts.”

“Of weird sorts, to produce something like this. Alright, I can get you sorted out. Once we’ve settled the matter of price.”

“And that is?” Jason asked

“Is the chunky elf with the sailor suit on the table?”

Jason blinked in surprise, then burst out laughing.

“Gods damn you, Asano,” Neil said.

“The price is money, of course,” Tilly said with a twinkle in her eye. “It’s a tattoo shop. It’ll be a wheelbarrow full of coins for an immortal crest and a day or two to get things ready.”

“Once today’s auctions have gone through, we’ll have wheelbarrows of cash to spare,” Jason said. “In the meantime, We’ll get some enchanted tattoos.”

Tilly took them back into a workroom with a big chair, plus needles and pots of oils, unguents and powders. Light came from the large skylight over their heads.

“You first,” Tilly said to Humphrey. “Shirt off.”

“I already have a tattoo,” Humphrey said.

“I don’t care,” she said. “I want a look at that soul crest. The price of me doing one for your friend.”

Humphrey tugged off his shirt, revealing his impressive physique.

“Damn, Humphrey,” Jason said. “I didn’t realise you waxed your chest.”

“I don’t wax my chest.”

“You do seem oddly hairless,” Belinda said. “Do you get that hair-removal cream from Jory?”

“No!”

“I think he has some kind of magic crystal he uses for shaving,” Jason said.

“Would you please stop talking about my chest hair.”

“You don’t have any chest hair,” Belinda said. “That’s kind of the whole point.”

“Stop gabbing and turn around,” Tilly told Humphrey, who was clearly relieved to do so. It revealed a startling image on Humphrey’s back; a rainbow-coloured dragon on a great, sand-coloured shield. The dragon’s scales glimmered in the light, making it seem like a living thing.”

“Whoever drew this out knew their business,” Tilly assessed. “This is the Vitesse style. Was it Klimpsen?”

“You can tell that just from looking at it?” Humphrey asked. “I though the image was determined by the soul.”

“It is,” Tilly said. “It’s shaped by the artist that drew it out of your soul, though. Klimpfen was a good choice but he doesn’t work for just anyone. You must have some good family connections.”

“His mum is kind of a big deal,” Jason said.

“Lucky for some,” Tilly said. “You next, Asano. I need to know what I’m dealing with to make the right preparations. Shirt off.”

Jason looked at Humphrey as he self-consciously removed his shirt. Jason’s body was as fit as it had ever been but looked flabby and meagre next to Humphrey.

“How is that fair,” Jason said. “You look like some famous sculpture brought to life by a witch to steal my girlfriend.”

“You don’t have a girlfriend,” Humphrey said.

“Rub it in, why don’t you.”

Tilly shoved Jason around and started prodding at his back with her wizened fingers.

“You shouldn’t get anything too embarrassing as a crest. You wouldn’t believe the number of sheltered young idiots that get an immortal crest and aren’t happy with a crest that reveals who they truly are. Which yours will too, make no mistake. If you don’t think you can handle seeing what you really are, then I’d stop here.”

“It is what it is,” Jason said. “Worst case, shirts are a thing.”

“Interesting aura,” Tilly said, continuing to ply Jason’s back. “Domineering and territorial. Robust, especially for your rank. Something else, too. Are you some kind of priest?”

The whole team laughed at that.

“He’s definitely not,” Neil said. “If anything, he’s the exact opposite.”

“It’s a little odd to find a touch of the divine on you, then.”

“I’ve been touched by gods, alright,” Jason said. “They’re quite handsy, once you get to know them.”

Chapter 184

More Shady as We Go Along

Tilly provided the group with catalogues that took the form of recording crystals, allowing them to look through projections of the available magic tattoos.

"I'm going to take the burst healing rune," Sophie said and was soon in the big chair in her undershirt as Tilly pricked needles into her arm.

"You want privacy for this?" Jason asked her.

"You've never seen a woman's shoulder before? I feel sorry for that Cassandra girl, now."

By the time the red rune Tilly drew onto Sophie's arm was complete, the others had picked out their own tattoos. Belinda chose one that would allow her to ignore the delay before she could use an ability again. This would allow her to use her cooldown reduction power twice in a row, which would, in turn, let someone else use a powerful ability three times in quick succession. That tattoo was a small one printed on the back of the neck.

Clive took the same one, while Jason took one that made his afflictions slightly harder to resist. Jason's was imprinted on his chest, right over his heart.

"You have an impressively broad repertoire," Humphrey complimented Tilly. "The place I received my tattoo had a more restrictive selection."

"Klimpsen does quality work," Tilly said, not looking up from where she was putting needles into Jason's chest. "He's not what you'd call an innovator, though. He's the guy you go to for reliability, rather than originality."

Neil was originally going to take a tattoo that gave a general increase to his mana recovery speed, but had his mind changed by Tilly. She was able to do a burst mana-recovery tattoo, essentially a free mana potion, with a recharge time affected by his mana recovery rate. Given that Sophie and Clive both enhanced team mana recovery, he would be able to use the tattoo with enviable frequency.

Like Jason, Neil's tattoo went on the chest, but when Neil took his shirt off, it got loud reactions from the team.

"Wow," Belinda said.

"Yep," Sophie agreed, both women tilting their heads as they ran their eyes over Neil's muscular body.

"What?" Neil asked.

"Uh, we all thought you were fat," Clive said.

"Wait, you really did think I was fat?"

"I didn't," Jason said, at which Neil wheeled on him.

"You're the one responsible for this and you didn't even think I was fat?"

"I'm not going to mock an actual fat guy," Jason said. "That's just punching down. Also, your tailor is the one responsible, not me."

"Your outfits really aren't flattering," Humphrey agreed. "Is there padding in them?"

"No, there isn't padding in them."

"They drape very poorly," Jason said. "You should try Gilbert's in the trade hall back in Greenstone. He sadly doesn't sell short pants or floral print, but if you want to look good, he's your guy."

"You go to Gilbert's too?" Humphrey asked Jason.

"I do," Jason said. "I think he makes you look better than me though. You've got those powerful shoulders."

Once all the tattoos were done, they made arrangements to return the day after next for Jason's crest. After all their shopping, the sky was growing dark and they returned to Hester's house.

Hester's extended family had gathered for her return, welcoming the team into their home for an evening of food and family. Jason quickly found his way to the kitchen, while everyone else gathered on an entertaining deck underground where colourful lights lit up the grotto as they watched the sun go down over the sea through a west-facing cave entrance that looked out along the coast.

Belinda retired early, in anticipation of using no less than sixteen awakening stones the next day, plus summoning at least one familiar. Late in the evening, Sophie spotted Jason in his conjured cloak, walking over the water in the grotto and out through the cave entrance. She quietly dropped over the railing, using her slow-fall power to alight on the surface of the water herself. She followed him out, where the ocean water was eerily still, the light of two moons shining down on it. The hood of Jason's cloak was pushed back of his head, tilted back and looking at the night sky.

"Clive gave you a telling off, the other day," he said, apparently sensing her in spite of her moving in silence. Her perception powers enhanced her ability to sense auras, yet she could barely sense his. Those same abilities had allowed her to sense Jason's aura control as it became increasingly precise in the time they had known one another. She knew the dead friend she had never met had taught Jason the techniques he was passing onto her, fastidious practice seemingly his way of connecting with his absent mentor.

"I probably shouldn't have hit you so much," she said.

“I understand,” Jason said, keeping his gaze on the stars. “I know you were holding back and I wasn’t hurt. You should probably be looking for healthier expressions of freedom, though.”

“Am I free?” She asked.

“If you want to leave and never come back, just talk to Hester,” Jason said. “I told you that from the start.”

“I’ve come a long way since then,” Sophie said. “You’ve put a good amount of capital into making me an adventurer, both monetary and political.”

Jason turned his gaze from the sky to her, frowning.

“I’m tired of having this conversation. I’m tired of justifying myself, as if I’m somehow not good enough to have done something just because it was right. As far as I’m concerned I don’t have an indentured servant. I have a teammate who keeps talking about leaving. If you’re going to go, do us a favour and go now, because we’ll need to find new people.”

“Belinda and I aren’t going anywhere.”

“Good,” he said testily, “because I am done talking about this.”

Jason vanished into the shadow of his cloak, which drifted emptily before disappearing as well.

Sophie stared at the spot he had been standing.

“Good job, Wexler,” she admonished herself.

In the morning the team left without the guidance of Hester, leaving her to catch up with family. They had seen enough of the city to muddle through, having already visited the Mystic Quarter in which it was located. It wasn’t hard to get directions to the Magic Society campus and Belinda and Neil’s increasing proficiency with the floating discs compensated for the time they lost through lacking of a guide.

Clive took the lead at the Magic Society, his understanding of the Society’s workings getting them prompt consideration. They decided the order of the day would be to hire a ritual room and conduct all Belinda’s remaining awakening rituals. Afterwards, they would purchase the materials Jason and Belinda would need to summon familiars. Belinda already had one such power and, with sixteen powers to be awakened, had a good chance of getting more.

“A companion specialist would be interesting,” Humphrey said. “My sister’s abilities are like that. It would make for some interesting potential, on top of the familiars and summons we already have.”

“I think a support specialist is more likely,” Clive said, “based on the power’s we’ve seen so far. Only four powers in, though, it could be anything, really.”

“Either works for me,” Belinda said. “As long as I’m not in front of someone, swinging a great big sword.”

“We have Humphrey for that,” Jason said.

As they awakened Belinda’s powers one by one, her abilities fell broadly into three categories. As expected, her trap essence produced area control powers. One was an ability Clive had from the rune essence, called rune trap. Another conjured a dimensional-space pit trap under the feet of enemies, while the final two powers used magical tethers to affect enemies in different ways.

From the magic essence she gained abilities with effects predicated on the powers of others. She had a curse that caused enemy power use to lock them out from another of their abilities. An ability called power thief was a special ranged attack that would lock out an enemy’s power, giving Belinda the power to use instead. She had a spell that let her mimic spells recently used by allies, while her final ability was another summoned familiar, called an astral lantern.

“Lantern-type familiars are quite good,” Humphrey said. “Judging by my sister’s, at least.”

“They tend to be ranged attackers,” Clive said.

The adept essence started out well, with a perception power that let her see magic, like Clive. It got better with an aura that caused allied abilities to come off cooldown faster, followed by a power, usable once per day, that reset every cooldown a person had. It was the last adept ability to awaken where things started going off the rails, at least from Belinda’s perspective.

-
- You have awakened the adept essence ability [Instant Adept]. You have awakened 5 of 5 adept essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all adept essence abilities. Linked attribute [Speed] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank adept essence ability.

Ability: [Instant Adept] (Adept)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- **Effect (iron):** Gain a significant increase to the [Speed] attribute and temporary proficiency with acrobatics, small blades and ranged weapons. Your maximum stamina increases and you gain an ongoing stamina recovery effect.
-

“What kind of ability is this?” she asked as she read the power.

“I’ve seen these before,” Clive said. “They bestow a particular set of skills, much like a skill-book, but only temporarily. It lets you fill archetypal roles, not as well as a specialist, obviously, but if that’s what you need at the time then it’s very useful.”

“It says ranged weapons,” Jason said. “It might be good. Get yourself a good magic bow, fire some arrows down range and then escape with those acrobatic skills it mentions.”

“I suppose that isn’t too bad,” Belinda said grudgingly before they moved onto the next power.

By that stage, she only had two powers from the charlatan essence left to awaken, which had already produced two unusual powers. Beside myself was a power that rendered her invisible while an illusion mimicked her nearby. Unexpected allies was a power that used illusions to make allies look like enemies, but the allies could see through it. The spell then randomly switch-teleported all the allies and enemies in the area with each other.

“It has to be better than that stupid learning archery power,” Belinda said as Clive completed the ritual.

- **You have awakened the charlatan essence ability [Counterfeit Combatant]. You have awakened 4 of 5 charlatan essence abilities.**

Ability: [Counterfeit Combatant] (Charlatan)

- **Special ability (shape-change).**
 - **Cost: Very high mana.**
 - **Cooldown: 6 hours.**

 - **Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).**

 - **Effect (iron):** Gain a significant increase to the [Power] attribute and temporary proficiency with armour and melee weaponry. Your physique enlarges, your maximum stamina increases and you gain an ongoing stamina recovery effect.
-

“Oh, gods damn it.”

“It does bring some versatility to the team,” Humphrey offered.

“I don’t want versatility! The team’s already thick with versatility! I want to stand at the back, being all clever and disruptive. What’s clever about braining some guy with a scimitar?”

“It doesn’t have to be clever,” Humphrey said. “It just has to be useful.”

“You think putting me up the front to hit people will be useful?”

“It’ll be unexpected,” Jason offered. “Who expects a small, adorable person to whack them upside the head with a big hammer?”

“I think I understand the specific dimensional space you awakened now,” Clive said. “As you’ll no doubt recall, it’s unique nuance was the ability to directly equip or unequip gear. Given your new abilities to take on specific roles, that now becomes very useful.”

“Are you telling me that my next ability might be another one of these idiotic powers to hit people with weapons, like a thug?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Clive said. “You already have powers to turn you into a fast attacker and a strong attacker.”

“Maybe you’ll be able to turn into a healer,” Neil said. “The ability to have another in a pinch would be amazing.”

“That’s true,” Belinda acknowledged, calming down. Clive conducted her final ritual of awakening.

-
- You have awakened the charlatan essence ability [Specious Sorcerer]. You have awakened 5 of 5 charlatan essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all charlatan essence abilities. Linked attribute [Recovery] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank adept essence ability.

Ability: [Specious Sorcerer] (Charlatan)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Very high mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Gain a significant increase to the [Spirit] attribute and the ability to use magical tools. Your maximum mana increases and you gain an ongoing mana recovery effect.

Belinda groaned.

“Is it just me,” she asked, “or are these ability names becoming more shady as we go along?”

“These abilities may seem underwhelming now,” Clive said, “but remember this is only the beginning. Power like these usually offer up extra powers to use while they are active. Your adept power will most likely give utility abilities, while the strength and magic based ones will probably give you special attacks and spells, respectively. You could even consider them to be a means to get more abilities than everyone else.”

“Yeah?” Belinda asked thoughtfully. “I do like the idea of having more things.”

“That’s everyone’s powers complete,” Humphrey said. “Summoning familiars aside, we’re ready to get down to the real work.”

“The real work?” Neil asked.

“Training,” Jason said, Humphrey nodding his agreement.

“Between us, we have an adventurer and a half worth of abilities to learn. The next few weeks will be strategising, testing, training and then doing it all over again. We won’t just be learning how to use our powers but how to use them as a team. It’s going to take weeks, maybe months to get where we need to be.”

“Months?” Sophie asked.

“It won’t be as tedious as he makes it sounds,” Jason said. “We should all be ready to work hard, though.”

“I had an idea to inspire us a little,” Humphrey said. “There’s a public mirage area in this city. I asked Hester to reserve us a viewing room for this evening. I think seeing what the best of a large city like this can do will show you how far we have to go. If I have anything to say about it, we’ll become better than anyone we see tonight.”

Chapter 185

Magnificent Entity

“Moment of truth,” Jason said. He had drawn out the summoning circle himself, rather than let Clive draw it out with his ritual diagram power. All the materials were laid out; spirit coins, quintessence gems and other magical objects. After sprinkling some powdered lesser magic cores to double check everything was correct, he stood up, preparing to chant the incantation.

“When Gary heard Jason would be getting new familiars,” Humphrey whispered, “he tried to bet me the incantation would be really evil.”

“You didn’t take that bet, did you?” Sophie asked him.

“Gods, no.”

“Do you mind?” Jason asked. “I’m trying to summon an awesome British shadow creature.”

“Sorry,” Humphrey said. “You go ahead.”

“Well, I’m self conscious, now,” Jason said. “You’re all going to interpret the incantation as evil, even when it’s just a normal, harmless incantation.”

“It’ll be fine,” Humphrey said. “We promise to keep an open mind.”

“I don’t,” Neil said.

“Just do it,” Sophie said. “It’s not going to seem any less evil for all the build up.”

Jason groaned, but turned back to his ritual circle and started chanting.

“I call to the realm beyond cold and darkness, where death has no meaning for life has no place. Let mine be the dark beyond darkness, falling on the final road to the end of all things. Let mine be the shadow of death.”

As Jason chanted, dark energy started boiling up to submerge the ritual circle.

“I don’t know what we were worried about,” Neil said. “That didn’t seem at all like he was calling up some all-consuming darkness and that we should kill him to keep it from entering the world.”

“I don’t know that I’d say evil,” Humphrey said with very little conviction.

“You wish you’d taken that bet then?” Sophie asked.

“No, I do not,” Humphrey said.

Jason dropped to his knees, then rolled onto his back. He took out a mana potion and chugged it to assuage the low mana headache suddenly pounding the inside of his skull.

“That was a lot easier than last time,” he said. “Summoning Colin didn’t just drain just my mana, but my health and stamina, too.”

Everyone's gaze turned to the ritual circle where darkness rose up like fire's dark twin, consuming light instead of shedding it, the room seeming to grow dim in spite of the magical glow-stones.

"That's odd," Clive said. "These stones are shielded so as to not affect the ambient magic in the room. Nothing in here should be able to affect them."

From the dark circle of black flame, a figure slowly rose. Nothing more than a silhouette, it seemed ephemeral, yet at the same time imposing. It had the rough shape of a man draped in a cloak. Jason's teammates couldn't help but think of Jason himself, as he looked with his magical cloak completely dimmed.

Suddenly the oppressive feeling drained away. The room lit back up and the black flames vanished, leaving only the figure who looked to be made from darkness itself, his edges blurry, even standing in the light.

"Hello again, Jason Asano."

"Shade," Jason said, a huge grin spreading across his face. "I was hoping it would be you."

"It has been some time since I walked the worlds," Shade said. "You seem likely to see more than most. I should warn you, that the vessels I inhabit now are far less capable than those I was bound to in the astral space."

"Vessels, plural?" Jason asked. He reached out a hand to touch Shade.

-
- Shade (shadow of the Reaper).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Incorporeal.
 - Can occupy up to three shadow bodies.
 - Highly visible in well-lit areas but can move rapidly.
 - Shadow bodies can hide within the shadows of other people. When there is not at least one shadow body attached to the summoner, the summoner has no shadow.
 - Can drain mana by touch. Drained mana can be passed onto anyone with a shadow body hidden within their shadow.
 - While at least one shadow body is hidden within the summoner's shadow, summoner can see and hear through other shadow bodies.
 - Shadow bodies hidden in the summoner's shadow can contain traces of the summoner's presence. One shadow body can eliminate either the caster's heat, scent or sound, with additional shadow bodies eliminating additional factors.

"Shade," Jason said, "I think that will do just fine. Speaking of the astral space, though, did you happen to notice anyone who stayed behind when everyone else left?"

“Yes,” Shade said. “When the trial period ended, the vessels I was inhabiting were dissolved, returning me to the astral. This was the moment the gates closed, therefore those who had not used them remain there still. I am aware of which people they are.”

“You know who stayed behind?” Jason asked. “Actual names?”

“Yes. The powers afforded me by the vessels I inhabited were powerful. All that was said, I heard.”

“That’s pretty amazing,” Jason said and turned to his team. “I’m going to hire one of the Magic Society’s water communication chambers and get that list of names back to Greenstone. In the meantime, you summon up your familiars, Belinda. I’m pretty tired, anyway, after doing mine. I can finish up when you’re done.”

Shade sidled into Jason’s shadow and Jason left without any indication of his new passenger’s presence. The rest of the group cleared away the remnants of his summoning circle and Belinda started setting up her own. Like Jason, she was drawing her own magic diagram, with advice, but not assistance, from Clive.

Belinda’s first summon had a more mystical and less sinister chant than Jason’s. Its appearance was heralded by silver-blue light that filled the room before coalescing over the ritual circle, compressing down until a silver lantern appeared around it. The lantern started floating around the room, bathing it in a cool light.

“It’s pretty,” she said. “I like this much more than some death shadow.”

“Shade was good to us in the astral space,” Sophie said. “He was presumably good to everyone, but I like him.”

Belinda was drained from the summoning, following Jason’s example and drinking a potion to relieve the mental exhaustion. Her familiar was bobbing in the air around her like a puppy seeking attention and she reached out to touch it.

-
- Unnamed (astral lantern).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Reveals nearby hidden enemies.
 - Makes ranged attacks with bolts of disruptive-force, consuming small amounts of core energy.
 - Can intercept and negate magical projectiles. Negating powerful projectiles consumes core energy.
 - Core energy naturally replenishes over time. Summoner can use mana to restore core energy.
 - Familiar can be subsumed into the caster’s eyes. When it has done so, the summoner can see hidden enemies and consume mana to make disruptive-force beam attacks from her eyes.
-

"You need a need a name, little guy," Belinda said. "Floaty? Sparkles?"

"That's terrible," Sophie said.

"You have a better idea?" Belinda asked.

Sophie thought it over as she looked at the silver lantern with the silver-blue light.

"How about Shimmer?" she said.

"I like that," Humphrey said.

"That is pretty good," Belinda said, then turned to her familiar. "What do you think? Do you like Shimmer?"

The lantern waggled side to side in the air.

"Does anyone know if that means yes?" Belinda asked.

Jason only returned once Belinda had recovered and mostly laid out her next ritual circle.

"Since it wasn't a scheduled message," Jason said, "I had to wait for them to go get someone. I wasn't just going to drop that information to anyone, so I spoke to Rufus."

"That extra time would have been expensive."

"Rufus said he'd get the Adventure Society to pony up for it."

"Pony?"

"It's like a small horse."

"Those are the one-headed heidels, right?"

"Yeah, except with silky hair instead of creepy reptile scales."

"And what does they have to with paying for things?"

"Nothing."

"Then why did you say it?"

"Because language is weird."

"You know, you could make more of an effort to be understood through your translation power."

"Your Mum understands me."

"What does that have to do with anything?" Humphrey asked.

Jason groaned.

"Sometimes trying to aggravate people in this world only aggravates me," he complained, then levelled a suspicious gaze at Humphrey. "Were you being deliberately obtuse just to get under my skin?"

A grin teased the corners of Humphrey's mouth.

"You shouldn't be talking about my mother."

"That's true," Jason said. "That is not wrath I'd be looking to suffer."

Belinda completed her ritual and summoned her other familiar. Unlike the previous two, it was not foreshadowed by phenomena, suddenly appearing out of nowhere. It was a strange, flickering entity, skipping around the room without passing through the intervening space. It's form constantly shifted, changing with each flickering teleport. It first appeared with Belinda's form, then Humphrey's, then Clive's. Then it was a strange amalgam of Sophie and Neil, but only for a moment as the changes continued. Sometimes it would replicate a member of the group, other times, melding two or more forms together in a bizarre gestalt. It never took any kind of form of its own.

It stilled slightly, holding in place as Belinda approached it but still flickering, like a television with bad reception. She reached out and touched it.

-
- Unnamed (echo spirit).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Incorporeal.
 - Can mimic the form of enemies or allies.
 - Can switch-teleport with mimicked allies.
 - Can mirror the mimicked ally's movements and attacks, but inflicts no damage or other effects.
 - When subsumed into the summoner's aura, the summoner can manipulate their own aura, projecting false traits or mimicking the aura of others.
-

"It's deception based," she said. "It works like Humphrey's new power to make an illusionary double."

"It'll be interesting to see if it doubles Humphrey's illusionary double," Jason said. "That would make him almost impossible to defend against, short of running away."

Once again Belinda needed to pick out a name. She ultimately accepted Jason's suggestion of Gemini.

"It means twins in a language from my world," he explained.

That left Jason's final familiar, which he started setting up for.

"That last incantation was pretty bad," Neil said. "This one is called an avatar of doom, though. Who's going to bet which incantation is more evil?"

"Seriously?" Jason asked, not looking up from his task.

"I'll take avatar of doom," Sophie said. "It has to be worse."

"I don't know," Belinda said. "That whole bit about the end of all things in the last one was pretty bad. I'll bet on the shadow incantation."

"Yes, I'll take the shadow familiar as well," Clive said.

"Oh, come on, Clive," Jason said. "You too?"

“What about you, Humphrey?” Belinda asked.

“No, he’s the judge,” Neil said. “He has to be objective, so I’ll round out the numbers and pick the new one as worse.”

“I should kick you all out and do this alone.”

Belinda and Sophie immediately booed him, Neil joining in as well. He turned around to glare at them as Humphrey and Clive shrugged their shoulders, helplessly. Jason shook his head and ignored them until he was done.

“We didn’t decide what we were betting for,” Belinda said.

“The losers buy everyone’s snacks at the mirage chamber tonight,” Neil said.

“That’s reasonable,” Clive said.

“Really, Clive?” Jason asked.

“You don’t get to complain,” Neil said. “Your snacks get bought for you either way.”

“My issues aren’t snack-related,” Jason said.

“Maybe just get it done and out of the way?” Humphrey suggested.

“You’re just in it because your snacks are guaranteed, too.”

Scowling, Jason turned back to his ritual circle and started chanting.

“When worlds end, you are the arbiter. When gods fall, you are the instrument. Herald of annihilation, come forth and be my harbinger. I have doom to bring.”

At first, it seemed like nothing was happening. Neil had just opened his mouth to accuse Jason of getting it wrong when the glow stones lighting the room started flickering.

“That really shouldn’t be happening,” Clive said.

The glow stones started going out, one by one, until the room was plunged into darkness. Then they all flared up at once, flooding the room with glare before they started shattering, stone fragments falling into the crystal that should have shielded them from anything in the room.

After the blinding brightness, the dark seemed especially deep. As they looked around, a speck of orange light appeared, floating over the circle. It expanded, swirling in the dark like a nebula in the void of space. The orange was joined by blue and soon they could see the expanding colours take the shape of an orange eye with a vibrant blue iris.

The darkness around the nebula eye started to coalesce, taking on physical substance the way Jason’s conjured cloak did. It even took on the form of a cloak, draping around the nebula eye, which floated where the torso would be. Two orbs manifested around the cloak, themselves smaller versions of the eye. One was blue in orange, the other, orange in blue. They drifted through the air, slowly circling the cloak like guardians.

Jason's teammates had been poised to mock the incantation but were transfixed by the beauty of the familiar. In the darkness left from the shattered glow stones, the eye nebula and the floating orbs were the only sources of light.

"Ah, crap," Jason said. "I'm going to be a chuuni forever."

"Hey, Clive," Neil said.

"Uh, yeah?" Clive said.

"I'm guessing that wasn't meant to happen either."

"No, it was not," Clive said, his normal inquisitiveness reasserting itself as he moved to stand next to Jason and look at the new familiar.

"It's curious that the familiars are both reflective of your appearance," Clive observed. "Your appearance while wearing your cloak, anyway. I did notice that Shade looks somewhat different than he did in the astral space. There, his silhouette was closer to a person's form, instead of the cloak shape he inhabits now."

"Can you speak?" Jason asked the familiar. The shadowy cowl shook its empty non-head slowly, an ominous gesture in the light coming from its own body. Its cloak shape was dominated by the eye, but the rest of the space in the cloak was slowly being occupied by what looked like a less formed nebula, with shades of red, green purple and other colours that shifted like a rainbow tide.

"You can understand me, though, that's good," Jason said. "Let's try this: Make the orb that's blue on the outside glow slightly brighter for yes and the one that's orange on the outside for no. Can you do that?"

The blue orb glowed brighter.

"Nice. This will work out just fine."

He reached out to touch the avatar, his hand getting a strange tingle as it met the light of the nebula eye.

-
- Unnamed (avatar of doom).
 - Familiar (iron rank).

 - Incorporeal.
 - Each orb can make sustained beam attacks. One orb inflicts disruptive-force damage, the other, resonating-force damage.
 - Enemies damaged by the avatar are afflicted with [Vulnerable]. Sustained beam damage will cause additional instances to be accrued.
 - The avatar's normal movement is slow but it can make rapid energy dashes, inflicting disruptive-force damage on enemies in the path of the dash. Orbs do not attack during the dash.
 - Can be subsumed into the summoner's aura, making the summoner's aura much harder to detect and read.

- [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.
-

“No name, then?”

Orange orb.

“Do you want one?”

Blue orb.

“Yeah, you should have one. I can’t be all ‘hey, Avatar of Doom, do you want a sausage?’ That would be absurd.”

“It doesn’t look like it’s big on sausages,” Belinda said.

“You have to give it a majestic name,” Neil said. “Even I’m willing to acknowledge that is a magnificent entity.”

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “I’m going to call you... Gordon.”

“What?”

“No!”

“You can’t call it that!”

“What do you say, Gordon?” Jason asked. “Want to go take a look at the mirage arena?”

Blue orb.

Chapter 186

I Try to Find the Truth, But That's Your Hiding Place

The city of Jayapura featured a vast mirage chamber complex that was larger and more sophisticated than the Geller family's private chamber. The higher magical density of Jayapura meant that more advanced magical effects could be used and supported. This included potent dimensional magic that allowed the replication of vast spaces, as well as multiple, concurrently-operating chambers in the same complex.

In addition to hiring out spaces for training, it was the premier entertainment space in the city. Essence users would pit themselves against one another or illusionary challenges, all for the entertainment of a paying audience. This produced more than enough funding for the frequent upgrades and regular maintenance required of a top-tier facility.

The organisation that owned and operated the chamber had close ties with the Magic Society, Adventure Society and local government. Important for both the amenities and the revenue it provided the city, the Mirage Chamber Association enjoyed significant power and influence within Jayapura.

Rather than a dome, the mirage chamber was a flat, circular building at the edge of the Mystic Quarter. Very large, it spilled into the adjacent theatre district, which was appropriate enough. Most people came looking for entertainment, rather than to use the facilities for themselves.

"There are whole essence user teams who never become adventurers," Hester explained as they arrived. She had met up with them after they were done at the Magic Society, leading them to the site of their evening's entertainment. They joined the crowd likewise heading in through the large public entrances.

"They make all their money here in the arena, and use monster cores to rank up."

"They can make enough money for that?" Belinda asked.

"They have competition leagues here at the arena," Hester explained. "Teams facing off against one another all year, leading up to the grand championships. There are two leagues a year, in silver, bronze and iron divisions. Obviously, silver is the big draw, with the largest following and the biggest prizes."

"No gold division?" Neil asked.

"Even with the money running through here, getting to gold rank using monster cores is a tough ask," Hester said. "They just don't have the numbers to make a gold division,

which is why the handful of professionals successful enough stop using cores before they hit gold. Being at the peak of silver keeps them at the top of their game.”

“And because they used monster cores to get there,” Jason realised, “they’re well-past their abilities advancing through regular use and training.”

“Exactly,” Hester said. “They keep going until silver-rank longevity is no longer enough, at which point they retire and make their way to gold for the extended life span. This whole place is run by former participants who are all gold rank, now.”

“Is this common practice in big cities?” Jason asked.

“It is,” Humphrey said. “I’ve travelled to a number of large cities and seen the same thing in each.”

“Is it all PvP, or do they mix it up?” Jason asked.

“PvP?” Hester asked.

“Hot adventurer-on-adventurer action,” Jason clarified.

“There are three events, but the big one is the team-against-team arena battles,” Hester said. “They’re fast and exciting, with plenty of powers flying around. There’s also monster hunts, but they aren’t as popular. That tends to bring in competitors who are also active adventurers, but people prefer to see people go up against one another. Lastly is team conflict again, but in larger, more complex environments, with roaming monsters. It’s a slower, more complicated event that doesn’t interest the public as much. It mostly gets attention from the professional adventurer crowd.”

They went inside with the crowd but instead of the large viewing rooms for the general public, a member of the area staff took them upstairs to a private viewing box. It was a large lounge, with a front wall made of dark, impenetrable glass. Luxurious chairs and couches were arrayed in front of it and several low tables were filled with food and drinks.

“Aside from the more comfortable environs,” the staff member explained, “these private rooms differ from the public areas in that you can choose what you want to be looking at any given time. Any event, any division, any match, at your leisure. The projector is controlled from the tablet on the table there, which can also be used to order any food or drink you might want from our comprehensive selection and it will be brought right up.”

“Who do we pay for the snacks?” Neil asked her.

“All costs are included with the room,” the attendant told him.

“Then how are Clive and Belinda going to pay for them?”

“Us?” Belinda asked.

“Clearly you lost the bet,” Neil said.

“No way,” Belinda argued. “‘Mine is the shadow of death’ is way worse than the other chant.”

“You’re clearly wrong. The other one talked about killing gods. Gods!”

“It didn’t mention doing it personally. Don’t forget about that ‘final road to the end of all things’ bit.”

Clive went up to reassure the attendant, who was starting to look a little nervous.

“Don’t worry,” Clive assured her. “They’re just talking about our friend’s new familiars. We’ll be fine here; you can go.”

“Honestly,” Sophie said as she left, “The blood-drinking apocalypse beast is more sinister than either of them. I bet that incantation was the worst of the lot...”

The attendant hurried out, closing the door behind her.

“Am I mistaken,” Neil said, his eyes glued to the viewing screen, “or are these people really good. As in, really, really good.”

“They’re good,” Humphrey confirmed.

They were watching one of the iron-rank monster-hunt events, where teams would take turns hunting identical monsters in identical circumstances and be judged on their performance.

“How do you think we would stack-up against teams like this?” Clive asked.

“Poorly,” Jason said. “These people are at the top of their game in a city with a lot of game to climb over to get there. They’re obviously practised and work effectively together. My guess would be that they’re all closing in on bronze rank.”

“They are,” Hester said. “These are the best Jayapura has to offer and they are, indeed, closing in on bronze rank.”

“We’ll get there,” Humphrey said. “Training and experience, that’s all it is.”

“The only people on our team operating at this level right now,” Jason said, “are Humphrey and Neil. The rest of us have our strengths, but also critical flaws. Clive has been out of the game a long time and his power set is all about judging the circumstances and picking his moments. It’s the kind of thing only experience can improve. The same goes for Belinda but even more so, given she’s been an essence user for about an hour. She isn’t even ready for the Adventure Society field test.”

“We’ll get you there, Lindy,” Sophie assured her friend.

“Yes, we will,” Jason said. “Wexler has skills to match anyone out there but has too many abilities she hasn’t had a chance to get a handle on, yet. The same is true for all of

us, to a degree. As for me, my power set doesn't give me the margin of error Humphrey's or Neil's do, with armour and self-shields. I can be dropped in one hit if I get blind-sided and I've only been in this world half a year. I still have a lot of blind spots where the rest of you would see danger coming."

"So, all those people who went into the astral space with us," Clive said. "They were all this good?"

"No," Hester said. "These people we're watching today have already fulfilled whatever potential they had. When I was selecting people for the Reaper trials, Emir had me looking at unfulfilled potential. These people here are good, but the people who went through the trials have at least the potential to be as good or better."

"And we beat them all," Sophie said with satisfaction.

"That was luck," Jason said. "Sigrid was almost as fast, and she wasn't the only one to jump through that final ring."

"You never told us what you saw, there at the end," Clive said.

"Nor should he," Hester said, her voice full of warning. "I checked-in with Emir, today, and there has been an unusual development. One of the others who reached that final stage has gone missing, along with everyone who accompanied them to Greenstone. Gone without a trace, leaving all their possessions behind."

"Some secrets are best left dead and buried," Jason said, "lest you be buried with them. I imagine that some of you will speculate as to the meaning of what happened. Keep that speculation to yourself, for all our sakes."

"That mirrors the advice Emir asked me to impart," Hester said. "I was going to wait until after we returned for the evening to tell you, but since the topic came up it seemed appropriate."

Jason was frustrated at having no one to discuss it with, if only to act as a sounding board. As the others continued to watch the viewing screen, his mind was consumed with possibilities. If the Order of the Reaper wanted to remain secret, why would they act so blatantly? Were they preparing for a grand reappearance or were they not involved at all? If Jason wanted to kill someone who had also reached that secret last stage, the Order of the Reaper would make an intimidating, if risky patsy.

He reflected again on how in this world, the answer to every question and the solution to every problem was the same: get stronger. He had been putting off his final awakening stones for the Reaper trials and while he couldn't be sure if the legendary stones he acquired were worth the delay, he suspected his new familiars were formidable.

He could feel them in his shadow and his aura, much as he could feel his first familiar inside his blood. They felt like power, waiting to be unleashed, and it was only the beginning. While Jason was still iron-rank, he still felt within the realms of a normal human, whatever Clive said about the strange inner workings of his body. Bronze-rank was the threshold beyond which the ordinary was left behind, surpassing even the most exceptional normal person.

The very concept of reaching those levels was bizarre and exciting. Stronger than an Olympic power-lifter and more agile than an Olympic gymnast at the same time. His perception was linked to his spirit attribute, which left him wondering what that would mean. Telescopic vision? Seeing the infrared spectrum, or hearing ultrasonic sounds?

In a world of monsters, magic, adventurers and cultists, it somehow was all acceptable. When considered within the context of his own world, it suddenly became impossible and absurd. Was there really a place for him there, anymore? Did he want it? Absently he took out the world-phoenix token, turning it over in his hands.

Knowledge told him it would take him home, but could he trust the words of the goddess? It looked very much like the Reaper token he had already used. Would it trigger another gift evolution? How was he meant to use it? The goddess told him that he lacked the faith in magic. Jason was no longer an atheist but that did not mean he was willing to jump into faith. He liked believing in things for good reason.

Sophie got up from her chair to grab some food and spotted Jason, uncharacteristically quiet as he looked at something in his hands. She crashed down next to him on the couch he was using.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jason said, putting the tablet away. “The future, maybe.”

The team were making their way through the streets of Jayapura, back toward Tilly’s nondescript tattoo parlour. As they floated along on their discs, the topic of discussion was postulation on the nature of Jason’s personal crest.

“I bet it’s just a picture of him with an idiotic grin and a sandwich,” Neil said.

“I think it’ll be something intimidating,” Clive said. “Look at his familiars. It’ll be all dark and spooky.”

“How is Jason in any way intimidating?” Neil asked.

“Try fighting him,” Sophie said. “I’m the only one here who’s done it for real. I had a well-executed plan, meticulous preparation and, as it turned out, a silver-ranker intervening on my behalf. Even then, it took a priest of the god of healing and an alchemist healer

working together to keep me alive and he wasn't even trying to kill me. He makes people like you think he's an idiot because otherwise, they'd run for the hills."

"She exaggerates," Jason said. "I'm with Neil. I think it's going to be sandwich-related."

"What about you, Humphrey?" Clive asked. "You've known him longer than the rest of us."

"I don't know what his crest will be," Humphrey said. "I suppose I can say what I want it to be."

The others looked over at Humphrey, their interest piqued. Neil turned his eyes back to where he was going, though, when he almost drove his disc into a wall.

"What do you mean?" Sophie asked, looking between Humphrey and Jason. Humphrey's expression was sober and thoughtful, Jason's blank and unreadable. He had mostly stayed quiet during their guessing game.

"Jason is good at putting on masks to get what he wants," Humphrey said. "He becomes what he needs to be to provoke the response he's looking for, whether it's absurd buffoon, or callous killer. I've seen him be friendly and approachable with ordinary people, sharp and provoking toward aristocrats. He'll stare down silver-rankers and capitulate to his landlady. I'd like to see who he is under all that. Which parts of what he shows us is really who he is."

The others all looked at Jason, who remained impassively silent.

"Damn," Neil said. "That got heavy fast."

The rest of the trip took place in awkward silence. When they reached the tattoo shop, Tilly took in the strange air over them and nodded toward the back room without saying anything.

Jason stripped off his shirt as Tilly adjusted the chair so she could work on his back. She took out a series of pots, some of which were faintly glowing, and set them out on a table, along with a set of brushes.

"You have the crest?"

Jason took the immortal crest out from his inventory. Tilly took a stick of chalk from her pocket, scrawling some symbols on it as Jason held it in place. Then she ushered him onto the chair, telling him to hold it to his chest. He did so, placing it over the sigil of his magic tattoo.

Tilly began drawing an intricate magical diagram on Jason's back, using the brushes and paint she had set out. She would stop frequently, her face caught up in thought as if pondering what to do next. Sometimes she would make slow progress, a minute or more

passing between strokes of the brush. Other times would be a fury of activity as she wildly applied whole sections, her seeming haste having no ill-effect on her precision.

Her brushes dipped into one pot after another as every part of Jason's back was filled with tiny, precise lines and sigils. The diagram was drawn out in ordinary black, vibrant blue, shimmering silver and bright gold. Finally, she put down her brush and wheeled the table away, pulling up another one. She took out a rolled-up cloth and unfurled it on the table, revealing a dazzling array of needles. Some were silver, others, black, green, red and gold. She started pulling them out and poking them into Jason's back, one after another. By the time she was done, Jason's back was a forest of metal, the elaborate diagram completely obscured.

She moved away from the chair, taking out a tarp and setting it on the workshop floor.

"Get up and go stand on that," she instructed and Jason did so.

"Now we wait," she said.

They all stood in silence, Jason's eyes glued to the floor. Sophie and Humphrey had their gazes locked on Jason while the others shared awkward glances. Just as the silence grew so heavy it felt like someone had to say something, there was a dull sound as a needle fell from Jason's back and onto the tarp. It was followed by a second, third, rapidly increasing until they started cascading from his back to form a pile around his feet.

No one said anything for a moment.

"Well?" Neil asked, breaking the silence. "Turn around and let us see."

"He sees first," Tilly said, her tone brooking no dissent. She took a sheet of dark glass the size of a large book, holding it behind Jason's back for a moment, then passing to Jason to look at. He held the glass in his hands, staring for a long time at the image it had recorded from his back. Finally he nodded, handing the glass back to Tilly.

"It's a good one," she said, "but you don't have to show them. You don't have to show anyone, if you don't want."

"It's fine," Jason said, stepping carefully out of the needles at his feet. Then he turned around, allowing the others to see.

On his back was the image of a dark, empty cloak, not unlike his new familiar, Gordon. Around the cloak was a dark sky full of silver stars. Inside the cloak was an open blue sky, with a golden sun right where Gordon's nebula eye was located, right in the middle of the chest.

"Is it shining?" Clive asked, squinting his eyes. Tilly walked over to the wall, tapping a crystal. Shutters came down over the windows and the glow-stones in the workshop dimmed to nothing. In the darkness, the only light was the faint glow of the sun and stars

on Jason's back. They softly illuminated his new crest, the silver stars highlighting the dark sky and the gold light of the sun lighting up the bright portion in the middle.

"It looks like the day, hidden in the night," Humphrey said.

"Yep," Sophie said. "That's going to get you laid, alright."

Chapter 187

The Last Reward

In the early morning, Jason stood at the edge of a platform in the underground grotto, looking out to the cave entrance and the ocean beyond. Daylight was yet to penetrate the west-facing cave and the illumination was still provided by the colourful glow-stones shining from beneath the water.

“It’s only been a couple of days, but I’m going to miss this,” Jason said.

“It definitely beats hiding out in the back of a disused boat warehouse,” Sophie said, emerging from her own room to join him in leaning on the rail.

“Still,” Jason said, pushing himself off the railing. “There’s a world of wonders waiting out there for us. Shall we go see if we can find it?”

“Sure,” Sophie said, giving him a smile.

As they made their way up the spiral staircase, Jason happily reflected on Sophie finally not viewing any approach as some kind of attack. Reaching the top, an open terrace looking out over the cliff face to the ocean, Humphrey and Clive were already waiting for them.

“Ever since we haven’t been actively hunted,” Sophie said, “Lindy has taken to sleeping in.”

“Very sensible,” Neil said, emerging from the main house. “I know Humphrey has been planning dawn to dusk training for when we get back, so this might be our last lazy morning for a while.”

“Night training as well,” Humphrey said, not denying it. “We can’t be ready for every circumstance, but we can try.”

Belinda and Hester appeared together.

“Thank you for the generous hospitality,” Jason said. “Especially for those of us who haven’t left Greenstone before, this was a great experience.”

The time they had spent awakening abilities, summoning familiars and getting tattoos had only been a portion of their several days in Jayapura. They had also taken in the city, visiting markets and the city’s various places of interest. New customs, new food. New sights and sounds, tastes and smells.

Jason had always wanted to travel, until circumstances derailed his life plans. Instead of finishing university he had taken a job in retail and barely travelled beyond a few city blocks. More and more, his new life had him reflecting on his old one.

Hester opened up a portal and they stepped through, arriving at the district of the Island called Marina North. Jason knew it quite well, having travelled through it frequently. It contained the bridge he most often used to cross between Old City and the Island, and was the place he first met – and was kicked in the face by – Sophie.

They were at one of the marinas for which the district was named. The entire east side of the island was lined with marinas, holding the private watercraft of the city's elite. Trade shipping was restricted to the sprawling port on the Old City side, with the Island serving as a vast breakwater.

Emir was waiting for them, along with Constance. They were in an open area beside the main marina building, the area pleasantly laid out with subdued green and yellow pavers.

"Excellent," he greeted as they arrived. "I hope you had a nice trip home, Hester. I need to put my logistics coordinator to work."

"Of course," Hester said amenably.

"Constance has the details," Emir said. "She can fill you in while I attend to Jason. Are you ready for your cloud...well, not palace, yet."

"I definitely am," Jason said.

"My cloud palace is still at the lake, since my people are now largely concerned with studying the underwater complex. I've taken the liberty of renting marina space for you to use, by which I mean I had Constance do it. She has all the paperwork, so see her about all that after. It's nothing you can't afford."

Emir reached into his jacket and pulled a large flask from the dimensional space within. It was round, with a cylindrical neck, identical to the one that Emir used for his own cloud palace. Through the glass they could see energy swirling inside, a vortex of blue and white. He handed the bottle to Jason, who immediately dropped what turned out to be the profoundly heavy object.

"Oh, right," Emir said. "I forgot how weak iron-rankers are."

"Did I break it?" Jason asked in horror, looking down at the bottle laying on the stone pavers.

"Don't worry about that," Emir said, gesturing to the stone, three storey building beside them. "You could drop this building on that bottle and it wouldn't get so much as a scratch."

He took out a notebook, thumbing through pages until he found what he was after and passed it over to Clive.

“Can you knock that one out for me?” Emir asked. “It might be a little tricky.” Clive only spent a moment glancing over notes before he started drawing out a ritual circle using his power. Passers-by looked over in curiosity as golden light traced out a magic diagram. When he was done, Emir picked up the bottle and carried it into the middle of the circle, directing Jason to join him.

“You won’t need to enact the ritual, Clive,” Emir said. “Jason just needs to drop a little blood into the bottle. Just a few drops will do it.”

Emir took the glass stopper out of the bottle and Jason nicked a finger with the blade under his wristband. He kept it there even when not wearing his combat gear in case he needed to call out Colin in a pinch.

The droplets of blood fell into the bottle and Emir stoppered it again as the contents swirled about wildly. Despite only losing a few drops of blood, Jason felt suddenly drained. The mana and stamina bars at the periphery of his vision emptied and he staggered before righting himself.

-
- You have bound [Cloud Flask] to you.
 - [Cloud Flask] is currently iron rank.
 - You can summon, dismiss and alter the iron-rank options of your [Cloud Flask].
-

After Jason tipped mana and stamina potions down his throat, Emir held out the flask for Jason to take.

“That didn’t go so well last time,” Jason said, but took the proffered bottle, nonetheless. To his surprise, the bottle now was so light as to be almost weightless. He could feel a connection to the energy inside it, not dissimilar to the sense of his familiars he had while they were subsumed within his body.

Item: [Cloud Flask] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- This item is bound to you and cannot be used by anyone else.
 - Use the energies within the cloud flask to create buildings and vehicles made of clouds. Available forms are restricted by rank.
 - Items contained within the cloud construct when it is returned to the flask are stored in a dimensional space and cannot be recovered until another cloud construct is formed.
 - Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).
-

“Soul-bound items are rare, even compared to other growth items,” Clive said. “Ten years in the Magic Society and this is only the third one I’ve seen. The advancement requirements are usually quite prohibitive.”

Jason looked over the growth requirements.

-
- 1000 [Air Quintessence (bronze)].
 - 1000 [Water Quintessence (bronze)].
 - 200 [Dimension Quintessence (bronze)].
 - 10,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins]
-

“Oh, that’s a lot,” Jason said. “Really, a lot.”

“Not to worry,” Emir said. “I have everything you need to upgrade it to bronze. You can grab it all next time you’re in the cloud palace. After that, you’re in charge of your own supplies, though.”

“Thank you,” Jason said gratefully. “That’s very generous.”

“I think it’s time to try it out,” Emir said. He led the group to find the right pier, where he had leased three adjacent berths to make sure Jason had the room he needed.

“So, how does it work?” Jason asked. “Do I just open the bottle?”

“That’s the first step,” Emir said. “Do that now.”

Jason opened the bottle and mist flowed out, shifting in colour as it formed a small image of a house in the air. It looked like a small manor, in the sunset colours they all recognised from the cloud palace.

“Here you can choose which configuration of house you want to use,” Emir told him. “What you’re looking at now is the grand form. Put your hand into the image and turn it.”

Jason did as instructed and the image changed, from a manor to a large house boat.

“That’s the adaptive form,” Emir explained. “It won’t be as large as the grand form but it will fit into its surroundings much better, even camouflaging itself. Good for unusual environments or when you don’t want to make a spectacle. Once I used the adaptive form of the palace in a forest and got a series of tree-houses connected by swinging bridges. It was amazing.”

“How do I set it off?” Jason asked.

“Once you’ve picked your form,” Emir said, “concentrate on where you want it to go and just give it a push.”

Jason left the small image in the form of a houseboat and shoved it with his hand. The image broke apart as fog started pouring out of the bottle and into the empty space along the marina dock. They watched as the fog slowly took the form of a large houseboat,

with three imposing storeys and clearly too ponderous to move. It took some ten minutes to achieve its final shape, after which the cloud-stuff from which it was constructed started taking on the look of painted wood until it was indistinguishable from an actual wooden houseboat.

“I would have picked you for going with the grand version,” Emir said. “What’s the point of having a cloud palace if no one knows about it?”

“Enjoying it for yourself,” Jason said. “I’m not gold rank, Emir. I have to be judicious about how and when I make a spectacle of myself.”

“You do?” Clive asked.

“It seems more like you’re making it up as you go along,” Neil said.

“Of course I am,” Jason said. “But when it works out, you have to tell everyone that you planned it all along.”

Emir burst out laughing. “Exactly right.”

They went aboard, discovering that the houseboat’s facade was just that, with the interior being constructed from the familiar cloud-stuff. They toured around, discovering several bedrooms, two entertaining decks and a formidable kitchen.

“Every cloud building has certain similarities,” Emir explained as they explored. “They all have their own nuances, however, reflective of their owners. My houses, for example, never have kitchens in them.”

“That’s actually common with soul-bound items,” Clive said. “No magic item can match the potential contained within a soul, so items connected to one tend to take on it’s properties. This becomes more pronounced with growth items as they advance in rank.”

“So, you could use a person’s soul-bound items to judge their true nature,” Humphrey said.

“Oh, yes,” Clive said. “If you meet someone who seems like a good person but has a hideous and twisted soul-bound item, stay clear. Compare that to Emir’s cloud palace, which is so obviously a reflection of him. Outrageously grandiose, yet welcoming and beautiful.”

“Clive,” Emir said warmly. “That may be the nicest thing anyone has ever said about me. Speaking of revealing the true nature, though, Hester said you were getting a personal crest, Jason. I have to admit to being curious.”

“It’s just me eating a sandwich with a big stupid grin,” Jason said. “It’s kind of embarrassing, to be honest.”

Emir gave Jason a sceptical look but didn’t challenge his assertion.

“You should be careful not to rely on the security of this cloud house,” Emir warned, turning the subject back to Jason’s new abode. “Yours is only iron rank, so a bronze-ranker could force their way in given enough time. With the right skill set, someone could even sneak their way inside. I imagine that even Clive and Belinda could do just that, if they put their heads together. As it ranks up you’ll find it becomes increasingly more resistant to all forms of trespass.

Jason discovered, as they roamed around, that he was quickly gaining a sense for the houseboat, even able to sense the people inside. Emir walked Jason through the various functions, such as taking aura imprints to allow others to have various permissions.

“There are some other things that I’ve figured out from using my own cloud flask,” Emir said, giving Jason the notebook he had handed to Clive, earlier. “Everything I’ve learned is collected here. I direct your attention especially to the section on plants, which is the product of many years of trial and error.”

“Thank you, Emir,” Jason said, taking the notebook.

“I’m glad it was you,” Emir said, “although, I will admit to being a little surprised. You had some impressive competition, which you apparently made friends with. The boats have left already, but several notable groups stayed behind and will have to make their own arrangements. They’ve been waiting for you to get back.”

“It sounds like a housewarming party is in order,” Jason said. ‘I’ll have to get some supplies.”

“Nothing too raucous,” Humphrey said. “Tomorrow, we start training in earnest.”

“We also have to sort out living arrangements,” Jason said. “With the cloud palace off at Sky Scar Lake, you and Lindy, Wexler, should probably shack up here. Unless you want to make your own arrangements.”

“And give up cloud beds?” Belinda said. “No chance.”

“There’s about eight bedrooms in here,” Jason said. “Any of the rest of you are welcome to join them. It could be good for team building.”

“I’ll take you up on that,” Clive said. “I’ve been living in the Magic Society dorm for years.”

“That’s a great idea,” Humphrey said. “We can regulate our training so much better if we’re all together.”

Neil groaned. “You’re really going to let Humphrey push us through training every waking minute?”

“You say that,” Jason said, “but you train as hard as anyone. You can act as disaffected all you like, but we all know how driven you are.”

“And what happens when Humphrey starts planning the meals for maximum effectiveness?” Neil asked.

Jason’s eye’s went wide.

“Now that I think about it,” he said, “maintaining a respectful separation may be what’s best for the team.”

Chapter 188

Impossible Wasn't Enough

In a training hall within the Adventure Society campus, Prince Valdis was squaring off against Rufus. Both held training swords that would leave a painful sting but not inflict any permanent damage.

Valdis moved swiftly, rushing around Rufus while delivering a flurry of rapid but precise strikes. Rufus was more languid, moving with slow, consistent steps as he deflected every attack with almost dismissive ease. He remained on the defensive yet never seemed pressured, casually throwing out the occasional attack to disrupt Valdis' rhythm.

By the time their practice session was done, Valdis was laying in a sweating heap as Rufus wiped down the swords and returned them to the rack on the wall.

"You're not too bad," Rufus said. "Once you stop trying to be my grandfather and start fighting your own way, you might actually become good."

"Thank you for doing this," Valdis said, pushing himself to his feet.

"Of course," Rufus said. "I spoke to my grandfather the other day through a water speaking chamber and he expressed his respect for your father. Have you seen the speaking chambers they have here?"

"Yes, I used one to tell my mother that my team would be staying in Greenstone for a while. They have impressive chambers here for such an out of the way city."

"I've found this city to be full of surprises," Rufus said.

"I should have suspected as much from the place that produced the Geller family," Valdis said. "Is it true your academy is establishing an annex here?"

"It is," Rufus said. "It's my personal project, but my attention has been drawn away by other matters."

"This business with the astral spaces is certainly concerning," Valdis said. "Do you think this cult used the Reaper trials to place people inside the astral space?"

"Almost certainly," Rufus said. "Emir's people are seeing if getting inside is any more feasible now the trials are completed."

Valdis walked over to the side of the room, taking a stamina potion from his dimensional bag and drinking it.

"Jason Asano is a friend of yours, right?" Valdis asked. "Did you imagine he would be the one who succeeded in the trials?"

"Yes," Rufus said.

“Really? I never saw him in action during the trials but I’ve seen some recordings since. He’s coming along with his skills and mastering his power set, but there were dozens of people participating with better training, superior skills and greater mastery of their abilities.”

Rufus chuckled.

“The day I met Jason I learned that something being impossible wasn’t enough to stop him. My grandfather has a lot of sayings about adventurers and I find Jason tends to remind me of them. I’m guessing your father has a few sayings of his own.”

Valdis laughed.

“More than a few.”

“Well,” Rufus said, “you wondered how someone with less skill and less training could beat out all these people like you. What would your father say?”

Valdis thought Rufus question over for a moment.

“One of my father’s sayings,” he said, finally, “is that mastering your powers can make you good adventurer, but only a good one. To be a great adventurer, you have to master destiny.”

“That’s a little overdramatic, but a good enough point,” Rufus said. “Around half a year ago, I was in as bad a situation as I’ve ever been in. I thought of this place as an isolated backwater and underestimated the dangers. I let my team get ambushed and we were caged up with suppression collars, waiting to be killed. I was certain we were going to die.”

“Obviously that didn’t happen,” Valdis said.

“No,” Rufus said. “That was when I met Jason. He was in a worse situation than we were. He had only been in our world a matter of hours and had no idea of what was going on. He came from a world with no magic, no monsters, no essences. I had to tell him what a spirit coin was. He was caged up with us, no suppression collar but his only essence abilities were falling slowly and seeing in the dark.”

“He helped you escape?”

“Helped? He broke out and released us, only for us to confront the bronze-rankers who caught us and get punished because we still had the suppression collars. So Jason stepped in. Two essence abilities against two bronze-rankers, but they’re dead and we’re here.”

“How?”

“Exactly how you’d expect: by talking a lot of nonsense. Great adventurers are the ones who find their skills and powers aren’t enough and they win anyway. That’s why I wasn’t surprised when Jason was the one who grabbed the scythe.”

“You know, someone from my team almost beat him to it.”

“Then make sure they stay on your team.”

Valdis thanked Rufus again and went for the shower room, while Rufus left. On his way out of the building, a voice came from a shadow.

“A word, please, Mr Remore.”

Rufus moved closer.

“Mr Dorgan,” Rufus said. “I was beginning to wonder if I would hear from you again.”

“I think we both know the kind of risks involved in what you’ve asked of me,” Dorgan said. “I don’t even trust messengers with this information.”

Rufus’ gaze grew sharp. “You have something?”

“Yes.”

“Should we be talking here?” Rufus asked.

“Don’t forget who my daughter is,” Dorgan said. “This seems like a casual conversation, but no small effort has been made to keep it and my presence here private. The closest set of ears is your young prince friend, who is being watched.”

“What do you have?” Rufus asked.

“I told you last time we met that someone was covering up every trace. You told me who, which gave me something to work with, but looking into a church’s activities is delicate business. Normally bribes and blackmail are reliable tools, but people get real committed when religion gets involved. You never know when zeal is going to throw good sense out the window, especially with the church of Purity.”

“I understand.”

“Once the Mercer’s went crazy and started rooting everything out, everything changed. These cultist pricks started pulling everything out of the city and mistakes were made. Making the most of other’s mistakes is what I do best. I managed to track some supplies that were taken out of the city in a rush, without the usual careful cut-outs.”

“And?”

“There’s an island,” Dorgan said. “All those materials you had me tracking that passed through the city before mysteriously vanishing? That’s where they’ve been going.”

“You have a location?”

Dorgan handed Rufus an envelope.

“Everything I have is in there.”

“Who knows about this?”

“I’ve been keeping the people I’m using apart from one another,” Dorgan said. “None of them know enough to put anything together and all of them know enough not to try and find out more. All they know is that I’ve been running this thing personally, which I never do. Even my daughter doesn’t know any more than I’m doing something for you.”

“What about the people keeping this meeting private?” Rufus asked.

“She made sure they can’t listen in, and they’re all people she brought into the Adventure Society herself. They’re loyal.”

Rufus looked at the envelope in his hands, nodding gravely.

“Thank you, Dorgan.”

“You aren’t the only one concerned about these people, you know,” Dorgan said. “You might look down on me but I’m part of this community. The people of Old City are my people.”

Rufus nodded, offering his hand for Dorgan to shake.

“I’ll remember that,” Rufus said. “Your daughter will have my support in her position, for what it’s worth.”

Dorgan accepted Rufus’ handshake.

“I thought you might hold a grudge,” Dorgan said. “I know you lost a friend on that expedition.”

“There’s plenty of blame to go around,” Rufus said. “I know who the enemy is.”

“Rufus isn’t here?” Valdis asked. “I was training with him just this morning.”

Jason was having a small gathering on his cloud houseboat, largely of adventurers who had been through the Reaper trials. A number of teams had stayed behind, deciding to use Greenstone’s lower-ranked monsters for some experience operating independently. This included Valdis’ team and Padma’s, both of whom were present at Jason’s party.

“Probably best not to talk about that,” Humphrey said quietly. “He took off out of the city with my parents and some other silver rankers late this morning.”

Rick Geller and his team were also present. Rick and his sister Phoebe had both reached bronze rank during the trials and would soon be returning to their home city. Going with them would be Dustin, Neil’s friend who had once suffered with him as Thadwick’s lackey.

Humphrey’s sister, Henrietta, was also in attendance. She had been bronze-rank for almost two years, now returned to Greenstone with their father in readiness for the

monster surge. They originally hadn't intended to, but with the increasing delay, they took the chance to visit home.

"Henri has agreed to help us train," Humphrey enthusiastically explained to his teammates. "She has the full set of familiars and summons, which is an area we really need to work on. We've really been underutilising the ones we have and now we have even more."

Jason looked at Henrietta, looking them over in turn. She was statuesque, like her brother, with strong, handsome features and hair cropped practical and short. Jason had now met Humphrey's father, seeing that the siblings both favoured the burly man in physique, compared to their slender mother.

Jason smiled to himself. It was plain that Henrietta was less interested in helping them train than in making sure the ragtag group Humphrey had assembled was good enough for her little brother.

"You find something funny?" she asked Jason.

"Invariably," Jason said with a laugh.

With so many new abilities, Jason and his team had immense amounts of work to do. Humphrey was as good as his promise at driving the team's training, from the basics on up. Physical training, movement training and meditation took up the mornings, then more individualised work to master their abilities in the afternoons.

Jason's training fell into two areas. Along with his new familiars, he started incorporating his new shadow arm power into his combat style. What at first seemed like a simple addition to his repertoire turned out to be a highly flexible power, both literally and figuratively. More than just being a much-welcomed source of necrotic afflictions, it offered incredible utility when incorporated into his parkour and martial arts.

It was while learning to use the shadow arm that he began to understand just how comprehensive the Way of the Reaper fighting style truly was. It had technique for incorporating various powers into movement and even martial technique. This included reach and teleport powers, such as Jason's, as well movement powers.

Sophie was undergoing a similar revelation, even more so with her larger number of new powers. They practiced the same style but her techniques didn't come from a skill book. This gave her a stronger foundation than Jason but meant she didn't already have the techniques she required and had to turn to the books they brought back from the Reaper trials to advance her knowledge.

Humphrey had gifted her his set of the Way of the Reaper books as he had his own fighting style and no intention to switch. Shade had once demonstrated the ability of the books to create a projection that offered guidance on the content of the books. Shade himself, however, was a far superior guide. Once the familiar to one of the old Order of the Reaper's leaders, Shade was well versed in their techniques. His active assistance was better than anything to be found in a book, even a skill book.

Each of Jason's three familiars brought something different to the table. Colin had proven his value time and again as an affliction bulk-delivery system that was incredibly hard to dislodge because of his swarm nature. The remaining two familiars, despite both being intangible cloak-shaped entities, were very different.

Shade offered little in the way of direct combat impact, only able to drain mana. His function was primarily one of utility. In addition to being an effective spy, Jason could teleport in and out of his shadowy figure. Placed judiciously around a battlefield, he made Jason all the more mobile. He could also be deposited in the shadow of enemies, almost impossible to detect, turning them into beacons from which Jason could discreetly spy while remaining hidden.

Gordon, by contrast, was the most directly combative aspect of Jason's arsenal, including Jason himself. The twin orbs floating around Gordon each blasted out sustained, destructive beams. One beam was orange, inflicting resonating-force that penetrated armour. The other was blue, delivering disruptive-force that was effective against magical protection and incorporeal enemies. The beams weren't wildly powerful, but they were too strong to ignore, tracked their targets and never relented.

Gordon was an incorporeal entity himself, barely affected by most forms of attack. Magic had a limited effect, but only disruptive-force attacks posed him a real threat. Part of the team's versatile nature was that many of them had such attacks, from Sophie's unarmed strikes to Clive's legendary weapons and Humphrey's new special attack, spirit reaper. During mock battles in the Geller mirage chamber, they would frequently go after Gordon to put a stop to his unrelenting attacks. He had the power to rapidly evade, however, transforming into a blue-orange cloud that could dash across the battlefield before he reformed to resume his attacks. The best deterrent turned out to be Belinda's lantern familiar, which had disruptive-force attacks of its own.

On top of their damage, Gordon's beam attacks doled out a stacking affliction that made enemies more susceptible to further afflictions by diminishing their resistances. It quickly became evident that the affliction or even the damage was not what made Gordon such an effective tool for Jason. It was the fact that Gordon's attacks, while not

overwhelming, were both powerful enough to require a response and completely unrelenting.

To a mindless monster, Gordon's continual attacks would be a constant source of threat, at least one of the beams effective against almost any kind of defence. To a more intelligent enemy they would recognise the threat Gordon would pose if left unchecked. Many healers and ranged magic users, like Clive and Neil, possessed magical shields that would protect them long enough for a guardian to intervene. A constant barrage of disruptive force would quickly penetrate that barrier and no team of essence users was stupid enough to leave the healer exposed.

Gordon's presence on the battlefield was not overpowering but it did require an answer, forcing the enemy out of their own pace and right into Jason's. A distracted enemy, reacting instead of acting was exactly the scenario in which his hit-and-run style thrived, the fires of chaos fed as he appeared and disappeared, loading up the enemy with afflictions.

Jason thought back to his fight against Rick's team. He no longer had the need to resort to extravagant theatrics to keep enemies off balance. With Gordon to force an enemy's hand and Shade for stealth and mobility, Jason wouldn't have to work so hard to crack a team's formation. Even in an open environment he could jump from one of Shade's duplicates to another, swift and elusive as the enemy still had Gordon to deal with. While his opponents scrambled to pin him down, he would be baiting them into the perfect place to unleash Colin, showering them in apocalypse beast.

All of that was when he was operating alone. Working with the team, there were several strategies open to him. For extremely tough opponents he would be the main damage dealer. He could be to his team what Gordon was to him; a distraction the enemy couldn't ignore lest it ruin them all. They could also flip that role, with the team engaging the enemy as Jason went around afflicting them all.

They devised a wide array of strategies for all manner of situations, varied enough to apply broadly and flexible enough to adapt to specifics. As they developed and refined their strategies, it became evident that rather than any individual strength, the team's greatest asset was flexibility. The versatility of their potential strategies made their defining trait the power to dictate the pacing of a battle.

Their efforts were excessive for fighting iron-rank monsters but they had their sights set higher. Monsters would become more intelligent at higher ranks, their powers more exotic. In the short term, there was no telling when they might find themselves in battle

with Builder cultists. They worked up specific strategies for what they knew about the cult and their tactics, Jason focusing on the controllers as the team contained the constructs.

Each evening, the team would wind-down after their training on the deck of the houseboat, frequently joined by another team. Some, like Beth's team, were mirroring Jason's in pouring themselves into training. Foreign teams like Valdis' and Padma's were enjoying the freedom of undertaking contracts without supervision. Padma's team mostly stayed around for Rufus who, along with Gary, had claimed the two empty bedrooms on the houseboat while the cloud palace was still off at the lake.

Beth put the idea of some more contests in the mirage arena to Humphrey. Humphrey begged off each time, seeing only how far the team had to go. Finally, Jason weighed in on the other side.

"It's time we had some pressure on us," Jason told him. "We have to put the team in the fire to see if we cook."

Chapter 189

Eclipse

The strike force had been small, to restrict information. Three gold-rankers, six silver-rankers and a dozen bronze-rankers. Rufus' parents, Gabriel and Arabelle, along with their teammate, Callum, were the golds. The silvers were Danielle Geller, Thalia Mercer, Elspeth Arella, Emir's chief of staff, Constance, and two more silver-rankers under Emir's employ. The bronze were Rufus, Gary and ten more of Emir's people, under Constance's command.

They arrived on the island in the dead of night. To avoid sharp senses they used no abilities, magical items or even magically-propelled vessels, instead sailing on ordinary ships and rowing ashore in dinghies. Only once they had eyes on the island's inhabitants were they sure that the enemy had not been forewarned. As expected, the cultists outnumbered them, even discounting the small army of construct creatures standing idle in rows.

To their good fortune, the island the cultists were occupying was not inhabited for a reason. The terrain was harsh, with the few flat, usable areas isolated from one another by ridges and gorges. There was very little plant life, mostly barren rocks, but the wild landscape of cliffs and rises gave them plenty of places to hide away.

The harsh topography forced the cultists to segment themselves into a series of camps and outposts, scattered around the island. Some were clearly well-established, with buildings of hewn brick or stone warped through essence abilities. For most, however, they were stuck with tents pitched onto rock or, for the lucky ones, hard-packed earth.

The best scout they had was Callum, the gold-ranked assassination specialist. He set out to reconnoitre while the others waited, quiet and hidden, for his return.

Gabriel looked at his son, whose schooled expression couldn't quite hide the rage behind his eyes. Rufus' mind seared with the memory of Farrah's death. With the panicked, unexpected battle and every mistake he made along the way. If he'd fought the way he should, the way he'd been taught, then maybe he could have bought those fleeting few seconds he hadn't known he needed before Danielle's intervention.

He reflected again on his lack of experience. His whole life he had been told of the amazing adventurer he was going to be, all the while shielding him from ever truly being responsible for himself. He had become sloppy and complacent, which quickly became evident once he arrived in Greenstone and fell into the hands of the blood cultists.

It became clear to him that for all his superbly trained, bronze-ranked might, the reality was that he was wildly inexperienced. The value of the Geller family's approach of raising their members with the most potential in a place where they could be responsible for themselves proved more and more true. He didn't realise just how great a deficit he faced until he was standing over Farrah's fallen body.

Since Farrah's death, Rufus' mind had been consumed with the next fight. He put aside luxuries and rest, spending every moment he could spare preparing for the next time he would face the cultists. If his father didn't have time to train with him then Emir, his mother, Danielle, or anyone stronger than him would do. If he couldn't find someone stronger then he trained others. Growing up in an academy he knew that teaching others could be a learning experience for yourself. Only when his parents, Gary or Jason forced him to take a break would he stop to rest or engage in some social activity. Even then, the fight to come was a fire in his mind.

Rufus had always been hailed as a prodigy, even amongst his family who trained the best adventurers in the world. Since coming to Greenstone he had failed to live up to that, time and again. No more. He was going to bring every bit of training, every bit of experience to the fight. They would suffer for every lesson he had learned, from every mistake he had made.

"Son," Gabriel said.

"I know," Rufus said. "Put the rage in a box and only take it out when I need it."

"Easier said than done," his mother, Arabelle, told him.

"The anger doesn't help me," Rufus said, his voice cold. "Last time I didn't fight the way I know I can. I was on the back foot, letting myself be caught up instead of making the battle my own. My eyes are clear."

Gabriel and Arabelle shared a look but didn't say any more. Shortly after, Callum returned.

"We have confirmation," he told them. "Priests of Purity are here. In full colours, no less. They're clearly confident we don't know about this place."

"Did you get a recording for proof?" Arella asked.

Callum shook his head. "There's a gold-rank priest down there. Too much chance he would have sensed it."

"We'll use recording crystals when we attack," Danielle said. "Just the one gold ranker?"

Callum nodded.

"What kind of numbers are we looking at, Cal?" Gabriel asked.

Callum started taking them through the numbers and dispositions of the priests and cultists on the island. There were more than a dozen different camps. They strategised a plan of attack, the low numbers that had given them this chance now their biggest weakness.

“We aren’t going to get them all, whichever way we go,” Callum said. “The portal devices set up at various points around the camp will probably serve as escape points once they realise things are going wrong. They may even run straight for them. Destroy them if you can but don’t take any undue risks. We have trouble enough with the numbers.”

“If they have as many portal devices as you described,” Danielle said, “then they really do have better astral magic than we do.”

“How do you get that from just a lot of portals?” Gary asked.

“The cost,” Danielle said. “If they had the resources it would take to make that many portal devices with our knowledge, they could have mounted a very different operation.”

Ultimately, they decided to break into task-focused teams, trying to sweep through the camps as quickly as possible. The key reason they could take on such a larger force was that the disparity in rank made up for the disparity in numbers. Three gold-rankers to one was more than enough to even the odds, so long as they could bring that power to bear effectively. They hadn’t been expecting even one gold-ranker, so they had to put him down fast.

That was the task of team one. Their objective was to eliminate the leadership, the gold-rank priest, his silver-rank followers and the silver-rankers from the cult. Team one was the smallest but most powerful, consisting of all the gold-rankers and most of the silver. The goal was to finish their task quickly and move to support the others. The enemy only had one gold-ranker to their three, and their three were all top-tier by any measure.

Elsbeth Arella would lead a second team to engage the construct monsters, wiping them out before they could be brought to bear elsewhere. The largest contingent of constructs were gathered in the largest camp, which was where they would strike first.

The third team, led by Constance, would seek to sweep the bulk of the cultist forces of bronze-rank and below. The leadership were gathered together in the least awful of the island’s outposts, while the remainder of their forces were scattered around the various camps.

The bulk of their own bronze-rankers would be split between teams two and three. They would both face superior numbers, but again, they were relying on quality over quantity.

“We don’t have a way of taking cultists prisoner without them killing themselves, so don’t even try,” Gabriel said as they prepared to move. “We’re outnumbered, so remember that you might be stronger than any of your enemies, but you aren’t stronger than all of them. Reserve your strength as best you can. Staying alive until team one comes in to mop up is your top priority. The entire point of splitting up is so that they can’t consolidate. Hitting multiple points will hopefully get them thinking our numbers are greater than they seem until our gold-rankers are brought fully to bear and it’s too late.”

“What about the priests?” Gary asked. “Do we take them prisoner?”

“We don’t have the numbers,” Gabriel said. “If they aren’t one of us, put them down. Any that live to be taken as prisoners at the end is a bonus.”

“Assuming we win,” Arabelle added. “You all know your withdrawal points; a fighting retreat early is better than a rout later. The withdrawal points are defensive enough to hold until we come for you.”

The three teams struck under cover of darkness. Team one came down like the hammer of god, three gold-rankers erupting like an explosion. Gabriel blasted out waves of fire and wind with sweeps of his sword, turning everything they passed through to tumbling cinders. He moved swiftly, every move devastating as he crashed through the battlefield like the embodiment of wrath, delivering annihilation left and right as he bore down on the gold-rank priest.

Arabelle moved through like a breeze, the enemies she touched with her hand collapsing to withered husks. With each one, an urn, glowing red with life force appeared around her, ready to fuel her other powers. As the priests and cultists started fighting back, she used that life force to fuel potent healing magic and devastating attacks. Trailing behind her husband, however, she went unnoticed by few beyond her victims.

Gabriele, Arabelle and Callum had been companions for decades, falling into one another’s rhythms like dancers. Gabriel enacted his attention grabbing onslaught with Arabelle to cover his flanks and heal his injuries. Callum used that opportunity to hone in on the true objective. As the gold-rank priest prepared for the oncoming threat of Gabriel, Callum appeared behind him to strike.

Callum was an expert assassin and his abilities landed strong and true on the priest, to devastating effect. No gold-ranker would die easily, however, and even Callum’s prowess was not enough to secure the kill immediately. The priest was already healing as he responded to Callum’s assault, even as Gabriel and Arabelle moved closer.

The Silver-rankers were not as overwhelming as they clashed with their cultist counterparts and the rapidly-awakening construct monsters. Nonetheless, they were still

more than holding their own. Every member of the small force they had brought along was a powerhouse for their rank.

Team two struck the largest collection of constructs first, rows on rows of them arrayed like soldiers on parade. Elspeth Arella had not been chosen to lead it at random, the reasons for which were obvious as she immediately made devastating headway. Her telekinetic powers were constrained against people, requiring that she first penetrate their auras. Since the constructs had little more aura than an inert rock, she could wield her powers against them to full and spectacular effect.

She raised her arms out in front of her and entire clusters of the constructs floated up into the air. Waving her arms like a conductor, she had them smash into each other again and again until all that remained was a floating cloud of debris. She then flung her arms back down, sending the debris cloud clashing into the panicking cultists trying to send more of the constructs to their defence.

As Arella started the whole process over, the rest of team two surged forward with Gary at the lead. In his hand was a hammer he had forged himself, specifically to fight such enemies. The heavy head came down on the first construct he could reach, shattering it like glass. The others surged around him, having been picked out as most effective against their artificial enemies.

Team three has the largest number of actual cultists to deal with and Constance didn't have the kind of powers Arella did to make such a potent opening salvo. Worse was an unpleasant surprise, hidden amongst the cultists: three silver rankers to their one. Callum had scouted out all the silver-rankers but apparently they had moved camps while the team was plotting their attack.

The initial assault went well, with most of the cultists asleep in their tents. The attackers still didn't know of the silver rank surprise waiting in store, the first signs being a defence that was organised much more quickly than anticipated. The cultists were forming squads and awakening constructs in a swift and organised manner under the tyrannical control of the silver-rankers.

The element of surprise was soon overwhelmed by the numerical superiority as the cultists organised a counter-attack. Constance moved to try and curb the troubling response, which was when the silver-rankers revealed themselves. All three launched themselves at Constance, although her habitual caution prevented her from suffering as she responded with a careful and defensive drawing back. The moment she sensed three silver-rank auras, she loudly called for all her people to retreat.

The call almost came too late, with team three scattered by the cultist counteroffensive. It was a near thing but the team was saved by a swift and destructive force passing through the enemy, leaving death in its wake. Golden light of the sun and silver light of the moon alternated bright flashes as Rufus moved through the cultist ranks, untouchable and unstoppable.

His movements were swift and smooth, except when he flickered with a flash of sun or moonlight, vanishing from one spot to appear in another, one of his two swords securing a kill. In one hand he held a searing, golden sword. It passed through cultist and construct alike, as if his enemies were a soft cheese platter. In his other hand was a silver sword, almost impossible to see in motion. Unable to read its trajectory, it found a critical joint or soft throat before the enemy realised they were dead.

Those few who managed to survive the kiss of Rufus' blades were left with malign reminders. Those injured by the golden sword had a small orb of fire, a miniature golden sun, float around them, scorching them with the heat it put out. Those touched by the silver sword had a tiny moon instead. It soaking up heat instead of delivering it, chilling to the bone and sapping strength.

Rufus' path of death was marked by beautiful light. The tiny suns and moons shone brightly in the night. His power to speed up so quickly the world seemed to freeze left a trail of light where he moved. Cut-apart constructs and severed chunks of armour glowed red-hot from where his golden sword passed through.

With Constance fending off the silver-rankers, it was Rufus and his whirlwind efforts that extracted the bulk of team three, reducing their losses from near-total to only a few. A trail of death was left in his wake. Frustration squirmed through his mind as what was meant to be a vindicating attack became another fighting retreat, just like the last time.

His people were getting away and it was time to withdraw but anger blazed through him as this battle and the last merged together in his mind. He saw Constance fighting back against the silver-rankers the way he, Gary and Farrah had fought back the cultists and their creations.

Looking at Constance's battle in glances as he continued to massacre his way through the lower-ranked enemy, he first thought his mind was projecting. Then he looked again and saw he was right. One of the trio Constance was barely holding off was the man who killed Farrah. The same macabre mixture of flesh and steel.

Their people were on the retreat and he had to leave, he knew that. The last time he had faced the monstrosity it had bested him in moments, he knew that. It was time for him to go back. He knew that.

He went forward.

In the midst of the chaos, the cultist, Timos, was hurrying in the direction of the closest portal device. There was yelling and screaming, constructs lumbering into motion and cultists running back and forth. He had no idea how anyone had found them; they had been so careful. He realised, logically, that the flaw in their veil of secrecy most likely came from their church of Purity allies. His instincts, however, wanted to blame the man at his side.

“What are we going to do?” Thadwick asked in a panicked half-squeal.

“Shut up,” Timos snarled.

Against Timos’ emphatic recommendation, his superiors had not only decided to keep Thadwick alive in case there was some use for him, but made Timos’ responsible for the idiot. While others around him were running, wild with panic, he made purposeful strides for the portal as his mind silently piled a litany of hatred on Thadwick.

Everything had started to go wrong the moment Thadwick joined them, like a curse somehow sent from their enemies. Timos knew Thadwick wasn’t truly the engineer of their troubles, yet couldn’t dislodge the idea from his mind.

He saw the portal flare to life up ahead, shining silver-blue in the darkness. He considered leaving Thadwick behind and claiming he was lost in the chaos. The consequences of disobedience if the lie was discovered, however, still outweighed his hatred for Thadwick. He grabbed the fool by the front of his shirt and yanked him in the direction of the portal.

There was a trap in Rufus’ powers that he had been warned time and again not to fall into. It was a trap that many essences users had. Synergistic powers were potent, but one could easily spend so much time setting up the perfect moment that they died for missing the good one.

Now, Rufus was diving into the trap he had been drilled for years to avoid. Willing Constance to hold out, he didn’t make directly for the place the silver-rankers were fighting. Instead, he continued moving through the crowd of enemies, disappearing from one spot and appearing in another, accompanied by flashes of light.

Unlike Jason, Rufus didn’t have a teleport power he could use over and over again. Instead, he had a slew of powers that blended movement, teleportation, illusionary after-images and attacks. It took skill and practice to chain them all together in a dynamic environment, which is exactly what Rufus did with absolute confidence. By the time he

worked though his powers they became available all over again as he became an unstoppable dervish of light.

Now, Rufus was no longer going for the kill. With grazing wounds and minor cuts, his twin blades left a swarm of tiny suns and miniature moons behind as his swords flashed with absolute precision. He kept moving, kept slicing, cutting and moving forward, desperately urging Constance to hold out. Every time he caught a glimpse of the silver-rank battle she was being pressed harder and harder.

Gradually, a sea of tiny suns and tiny moons orbited amongst the crowd of enemies, construct and cultist alike. The enemy milled, their earlier coordination turning to confusion. Their leadership was caught up battling Constance, too busy to give the earlier direction. The enemy had retreated, leaving only Constance and the elusive dervish of light moving through them like a poltergeist.

Constance's voice cried out in a scream as a powerful attack penetrated the magical bubble shielding her. It had been key to withstanding the barrage of attacks she was subjected to but it was close to collapsing entirely. Rufus knew the time had come to act, and in any case, he had pushed himself to near collapse. His body and mind ached with the depletion of his stamina and mana. Turning finally toward the silver-rank battle, he tossed away his conjured swords and threw back the strongest recovery potion he had. He felt the fresh infusion of mana and stamina flush through his body like dipping into cool water. He activated his speed ability one more time.

Time seemed to freeze around him. Ahead, the three silver-rank abominations and Constance motionless before him like the painting of a battle. He did not use his fleeting moment of acceleration to attack, needing it to stop and chant a spell without suffering an attack from the enemies surrounding him.

“Darkness and light, sun and moon; be mine to awaken and move at my command. Mine is the realm and mine is the power; bring forth the kingdom of eclipse.”

Rufus' speed power came to an end just as he completed his chant and darkness, like some great explosion, swept over the battlefield. The stars in the sky were gone, as were the twin moons that had lit up the battle. Every glow-stone embedded in a construct or floating around a cultist went dim, leaving only the tiny suns and moon to cast light. The crowd of cultists cried out in shock and even the silver-rankers were startled into giving pause. The halt in their attacks gave Constance a much-needed reprieve.

The suns and moons floated up, into the air. The people they left behind were suddenly drained of colour, leaving only dark silhouettes. Flames of silver and gold lit up, limning the dark silhouettes as they began to scream.

Above them, the suns and the moons started merging together, growing and melding as they formed an enormous orb of darkness, shrouded in light to form an eclipse, floating over their heads. It loomed over the battlefield, potent and domineering in the magical darkness that filled the air. The shrieking cries of those burning in fire of silver and gold below made a horrifying accompaniment to the ominous eclipse.

The silver rankers had strong magical senses and felt the connection between the darkness that had enveloped them, the orb floating above them and the person who had called it into being. They turned as one, their gazes falling on Rufus. He was finally standing still but the cultists around him were either burning with fire or wild with panic, too busy to recognise the enemy in their midst. A construct lunged at him but he raised a hand without even looking at it, a stream of sun fire launching out and melting the steel monstrosity on the spot.

One of the three silver-rankers sneered with recognition as he locked eyes with Rufus. Rufus' face was impassive as he rose an arm to point at him, the cultist who had taken Farrah's life. From the orb above, a terrifying beam blasted down at the abomination, a bright beam with a dark core, pouring transcendent damage into the cultist.

Rufus has never come anywhere close to building up so much power with which to use this attack before. Against anything short of silver rank would have been instantly annihilated and even most silver-rankers would have died in moments. The cultist upon whom Rufus poured all his rage and all his power was no ordinary silver-ranker, however. Standing at the peak of his rank, on the cusp of obtaining gold, and with the fullness of power bestowed by its otherworldly master, the cultist was still standing when the beam was spent, the power gathered in the eclipse exhausted. It vanished, the oppressive field of darkness vanishing with it.

Across the battlefield, dozens of cultists and constructs were dead, the fires having taken their toll. The enemy that had taken the brunt of that power still stood, although anyone looking at his state might assume he wished he hadn't. The cultist had conjured one steel wall after another to try and endure the transcendent blast but it stormed through them, one after another. The cultist suffered much the same treatment, the flesh and steel of his body fused together like a candle melted by sunlight through a window.

There was an odd stillness throughout the battlefield, all eyes on the ruined cultist. He moved, just a little, then a little more. He flexing his warped limbs and melted muscles roaring in wordless pain and rage.

Rufus was as spent as his power, everything he had and more burned through to set up and deliver one grand attack. The last thing he saw before passing out, surrounded by

enemies, was the hideously injured cultist, more an abomination than ever, moving in his direction.

Chapter 190

A Question You Don't Yet Know to Ask

Jason and Humphrey were the first to rise each morning, Jason making the team breakfast while Humphrey plotted out the day's training. One of the things Emir had warned Jason about was that the houseboat would require additional materials to perform various functions, be they universal or more specific to Jason individual needs.

Jason had been finding the cloud grill a delightful new culinary tool, for which the houseboat required the addition of fire quintessence gems. Fortunately they were only iron rank, and were relatively inexpensive to source in a desert region.

Jason and Humphrey were out on the deck, Jason working hot cakes on the grill as Humphrey sat at a table, looking over the meticulous notes he was taking on the teams training. Winter was pleasant in Greenstone, with mild temperatures and less of the mugginess pressing in from the delta. The sky was a gorgeous, cloudless blue, with a crystal clarity to the air even the brightest summer day couldn't match.

"I think we'll have a nice one, today," Jason said.

"You're right," Humphrey said. "How about we do some outside training? Maybe focus on mobility training."

"Works for me," Jason said. "Did you schedule that match-up with Beth's team?"

"It won't be for a few days," Humphrey said. "We aren't the only ones in a training frenzy after the Reaper trials and the mirage chamber is heavily booked."

Like everyone who safely returned from the Reaper trials, the various Geller family teams had brought back a treasure-trove of awakening stones to complete their power sets. Danielle Geller had received the same forewarning as Jason about the chance for unusual awakening stones, thus most now had a Reaper ability in their repertoire. Many had started actively dodging Clive and his enthusiastic questions about their new powers. He had also urged Belinda to shape-shift into Jason, in an attempt to replicate his interface power, but she always ended up with his astral affinity and map powers.

"The map is a great power," Jason had insisted as Clive complained.

"Not for administrative purposes," Clive had bemoaned.

"I think you and I look at the potential of magic powers in very different ways," Jason told him.

As Humphrey and Jason chatted while going about their morning tasks, Jason spotted a familiar, but unexpected figure walking along the marina pier.

"Humphrey," Jason said. "Your ex is coming by."

“My ex?” Humphrey asked, looking up and spotting Gabrielle as she approached the houseboat.

Jason and Gabrielle had soured on one another, not the first person whose strong religious views had placed them antagonistic to Jason. His only regret, though, was the part that played in ending Humphrey’s relationship. He respected Humphrey for having the strength to end things with someone who stood out even in a world full of people made beautiful by magic. Jason doubted he could have made as mature a choice at seventeen.

Jason invited Gabrielle aboard. The open deck areas of the houseboat didn’t require the boat to take an aura imprint before granting access.

“Gabrielle,” Humphrey greeted, a complicated expression on his face.

“Hello Humphrey,” she said. Dressed in a plain version of the robes of her church, she was clearly trying to be impassive but emotion clouded her face. Steeling herself, she turned to Jason.

“The goddess has a new gift for you,” she said. “I’m here to deliver it.”

“Is it strippers?” Jason asked. “Not you; you’re too young. Other strippers, but roughly the same level of hotness.”

Humphrey and Gabrielle both gave him horrified looks.

“What?” he asked innocently.

“Ignore him,” Humphrey said.

“My lady wants me to tell you that objectification jokes are beneath you,” Gabrielle said to Jason.

“Yeah,” Jason said with a chuckle, “but you shouldn’t trust someone who doesn’t spend at least a little time in the gutter.”

“I very much disagree,” Gabrielle said.

“Colour me surprised. So what does your boss have for me? I’ll admit I’m a little trepidatious, after the last time.”

“She recognised your concerns and has prepared a new gift you should find more palatable,” Gabrielle said, clearly unhappy. “You should know that this gift edges against the boundaries of her own rules. Consideration that you clearly don’t deserve.”

“What do you mean?”

Gabrielle open the dimensional satchel and started pulling out books, one after another, piling them on the table

Next to Humphrey’s notes.

“This knowledge is the answer to a question you don’t yet know to ask,” Gabrielle said as she continued taking out books. “This pushes the limits of what she is willing to do.

Further, this knowledge is not of this world. She was reticent to give it to anyone, but you are not of this world either.”

“Not of this world?” Humphrey asked.

“The builder cultists have been bestowed knowledge from beyond this world,” Gabrielle said.

“Ah,” Jason said. “I know she likes this world to develop knowledge for itself, which is why she offered to bribe me in the first place. The Builder cult doesn’t care about that, though, and now the genie’s out of the bottle.”

“What would a genie be doing in a bottle?” Humphrey asked.

“Wait, genies are a thing?” Jason asked. “Do they grant wishes?”

“No, that would be outrageous. Do they grant wishes where you come from?”

“Just in stories,” Jason said, then turned back to Gabrielle. “So this knowledge is something that comes from the Builder?”

“Yes. Once the knowledge was known by someone in this world, it became part of the goddess. She personally transcribed these tomes for delivery to you.”

Humphrey’s eyes went wide.

“The goddess made these personally?”

“Yes,” Gabrielle confirmed as she took out a small wooden case. She opened it to reveal neat rows of recording crystals. “She also created these and the information contained within. She would have produced all these as skill books that you could absorb more quickly but knew you would reject them.”

“I would,” Jason said. “I won’t imprinting things directly into my mind that came from sources I don’t entirely trust. So, what is all this knowledge?”

“The goddess recommends you turn to your friend Clive for assistance. She anticipates he will be quite enthusiastic.”

Jason picked up a random book and opened it up. It looked to be some kind of magical theory, at a level well above what he could parse at a glance. He closed the book and sat it back down.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m not really sure of the ramifications of this gift, but given the source, I expect it to be quite specifically useful.”

Gabrielle shook her head. “I am constantly at a loss as to why the goddess feels you warrant such consideration.”

“You and me both, sister. You want to stick around for pancakes?”

Gabrielle gave Humphrey an uncertain glance, then shook her head.

“I have further duties to attend to. I shall take my leave here.”

Rufus was stirred back to consciousness under the effect of his mother's potent healing magic. He was laying on the sandy shore of the island.

"We won, then?" he groaned.

"We were already on the way when we saw your field of darkness go up, and then that huge beam," his father said. "We finished off that silver-ranker but he was close to done when we found him."

Gabriel gave him a proud smile, placing a warm hand on Rufus' shoulder. "Fantastic job, son."

"What your father means," Arabelle said with a pointed look at Gabriel, "is that you should never have confronted an enemy like that."

"Exactly," Gabriel said. "Terrible job, son. Don't do it again."

Arabelle shook her head at her menfolk. "I think its time for another child," she said. "A daughter, this time."

"I'd love a little girl," Gabriel said. "What essence should we give her? How about a whip essence? I saw a student at the academy doing some very interesting things with one just recently."

"I think you're skipping a little far ahead, dear."

"What about the cultists?" Rufus asked.

"A lot of them made it through the portals," Callum said. Rufus hadn't even realised he was there, which was normal for Callum.

"We got most of the leadership," Callum continued. "The count came up with one silver-ranker less than my initial count, so they likely escaped."

"Prisoners?" Rufus asked.

"None," Gabriel said. "The cultists did the usual self-detonating crystal star thing. Before they did that, though, they killed off the priests amongst them."

"Killing their own allies," Arabelle said, shaking her head. "I hate fighting zealots."

"We have plenty of recordings of Purity's clergy consorting with the cultists, though," Callum said. "More than enough for the other churches to form an ecumenical council and forcibly investigate."

Rufus pushed himself to his feet.

"So, what now?" he asked.

"Now we bring in everyone else. We need to identify the dead, see if it leads us to more cultists. Give the Magic Society a chance to figure out where these portals go. As for us, we can head back to the city."

For Jason and his team, days of unrelenting training turned into weeks as potential slowly transmuted into capability. This included regular practise against other teams in the mirage chamber. Beth's team was likewise improving rapidly, beating them less than half the time but with only five members to the six on Jason's team. Padma's team was made up of Rufus' juniors from the Remore Academy and interested in testing themselves against the person Rufus had trained personally. At first, their conflicts were one sided but Jason's team advanced in leaps and bounds until they started winning as much as they lost.

Padma's team was standoffish at first, all the more when they rolled over Jason's team in their early encounters. They opened up as Jason and his team solidly proved their worth, although their draconian member remained stolid in his disdain for Humphrey and his dragon essence. Their shapeshifter, Natalie, struck up a friendship with Belinda. She was a valuable voice of experience in the specialised area of changing forms.

Padma's team leader, in the mean time, built up a rivalry with Valdis. Both were sword specialists with almost identical essence combinations, but were very different swordsmen. Valdis had the classic combination of sword, swift and adept, which produced the master confluence. Each essence was common, but with legends like Rufus' grandfather, no one would look down on it. Valdis was very much a swordsman of that tradition, with an array of special attacks that, at a glance seemed very similar. Every aspect of his combat built from and led to his mastery of the sword.

Lance, Padma's team leader, was an elf. As such, his aptitude was on spells, rather than the special attacks of a human. His essences, sword, myriad and adept, also produced the master confluence, yet produced a wholly different combat style. He could not match Valdis toe-to-toe, but he had no need to. He was far from weak in hand-to-hand but his powers gave him the freedom to fight at any range. Mixing spells into his swordsmanship, he could duplicate himself and conjure dancing blades to fight for him, firing waves of razor sharp force from a distance.

Of the two swordsmen, the more experienced Valdis edged out his opponent more often than not, although Lance would score his own points as well.

Valdis and his team maintained a perfect record against Jason's in the mirage arena, although what began as a series of thrashings slowly became actual battles. To hear Valdis talk, however, enjoying post-fight drinks on the houseboat, anyone would think he was the one losing.

“Your team is terrible to fight against,” he said to Jason. “You’re running around like an invisible, teleporting plague while your familiar is trying to burn down our healer. Normally my job is to put down problems like that, but that damn woman is made of the wind. How does an immovable object move that quickly? That’s not how immovable objects work.”

“You do realise you won, right?” Jason asked him.

“She head-butted my sword! That shouldn’t work. And what’s with that woman who’s everything? She had a wand in one hand and a shield in the other, which doesn’t seem like something people should be allowed to do.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s not a rule.”

“Once she hit me with my own power. My own power! Being able to take on different roles is one thing, but none of those roles should be me!”

“Calm down,” Sigrid told him. “You’re spilling your drink.”

In the wake of reaper trials, the city had a relative flood of essences and awakening stones. The foreign adventurers largely took their gains and left but many locals had also participated. Most had never intended to vie for the ultimate prize, instead plundering the astral space for as much treasure as they could carry away and survive. As a result, the market price of essences and stones reached an all-time low.

With so many essences and awakening stones entering the market, Greenstone’s adventurer population was undergoing a surge. It made for a strong first step in replenishing the numbers diminished by the losses of the disastrous expedition.

The ramifications of the expedition were also still being felt in the ongoing presence of the Adventure Society inquiry. After beginning with sweeping demotions, they had put the branch records through a sieve in the time so many adventurers were away at the Reaper trials. Once they returned, the inquiry commenced interviews, sometime with individuals, other time with groups. Gossip buzzed as the interviews went on, discussing the questions being asked. They ranged from the individual and specific to broad ideas about the adventuring culture of the city.

Finally they had started going through reassessments, assessing which adventurers deserved rank reinstatement one by one. This brought with it a sense of hopefulness, but for most their demotions were confirmed. Those who had their membership revoked entirely did not have those decisions revisited. The lobbying to do so from certain sectors was swiftly and emphatically refused.

Other concerns were of an import that iron-rankers like Jason and his team were uninvolved, although connections kept them abreast of goings on. The Builder cult was on the back foot, at least locally. The cult had been purged from the city and, after several costly ambushes, halted their supply raids in the delta. The escapees from the island raid were still at large, however, and as stories rolled in of the cult's activities around the world, tension built as the city awaited the revelation of their next plot.

The church of Purity was under more scrutiny than any church would ordinarily have to tolerate as an ecumenical council of the other churches sanctioned them, launching a sweeping inquiry. Their temple was searched and all manner of materials seized. The church officially maintained that their members present at the island raid were a schism faction denounced by their god. Claims of a few isolated, bad apples rang hollow, however, as similar revelations were made about the church of Purity around the world.

Certain individuals stood out, either by their absence or the issues in which current events embroiled them. A number of key members of the church of Purity seemed to have vanished on 'previously-scheduled sabbaticals,' No one knew where they had gone on their 'spiritual wanderings of the soul.' This included the church of Purity's Archbishop, Nicolas Hedron, Anisa Lasalle and almost the entire Lasalle family, long deeply involved in affairs of the church. Those that remained claimed no knowledge of where their spiritual journeys had taken them.

Jason was especially delighted to hear about Lucian Lamprey scrambling to absolve himself. Lamprey's personal intervention in handing the star seed over to the church of Purity was suddenly the object of significant scrutiny.

The time-displaced priests Jason had released from the astral space were an unusual new presence in the city. Most were absorbed into their various churches, but the former members of the church of Purity were another matter. As Jason predicted, the Adventure Society had taken their disposition in hand. Given the troubles being faced by their former church, they were a rather awkward presence within the city.

While their essences were taken from them, the damage was limited while they were still iron-rank. They could never reclaim the confluence essence they gave up in favour of a divine essence, but the absence could be replaced, either by another divine essence or a regular one.

One group of the former purists dedicated themselves to regaining entry to the church of Purity. They were undaunted by the new revelations about their church, but their dedication was flatly rebuffed. A small number even turned to suicide in their despair.

Others sought positions in other churches, many finding success. The rest came to accept the need to start over and accepted new ordinary essences. With the market at record lows, the Adventure Society provided them as an act of mercy.

Whatever their situation, every member of the various faiths now escaped from the astral space had to decide on their future. They were all born before Greenstone was founded, knowing that aside from any who managed to reach gold rank, everyone they knew and loved was long gone. Many found passage to their homelands regardless, knowing that there was likely no one waiting for them or even anything they even recognised.

For those whose gods had welcomed them back, at least they had a path. Their churches situated them locally or sent them off in the direction of distant branches of their faith. Others, mostly former purists who came to accept their abandonment, decided to start over in Greenstone. They took the essences they were offered, even if they were cheap and less than ideal. For many, purist and otherwise, they rejected their former faith with ferocity. Filled with resentment at the gods who had sent them into that place, costing them everything and everyone they had known, they had a new attitude towards the gods that made Jason seem pious by comparison.

All the recovered clergy, excommunicated or not, had a variety of attitudes toward Jason. As the agent of their liberation they were largely grateful, although to wildly varying degrees. Some felt that he only released them as an afterthought or even resented him for their current situation. Many of the former purists fell into that camp. Most were more gracious, however, often appearing to thank him in person as he wandered about the Adventure Society campus.

There was even a small contingent who viewed him as their saviour, especially in the wake of the gods appearing to thank him in person. They went so far as to offer themselves into his service, which he repeatedly refused.

One day, Jason and his team returned from their training to Rufus drinking out on the deck of the houseboat with Vincent, the Adventure Society official with the outrageous moustache. The pair had previously maintained a casual relationship, although not since Farrah's death. Vincent's busy schedule and Rufus' driving obsession had left them seeing little of one another. After confronting Farrah's killer and being largely responsible for his death, Rufus was finally starting to move forward.

They were not alone, being joined by Gary and his friend Russel, an artificer from the Magic Society.

“Jason,” Vincent greeted. “Your reassessment interview with the Adventure Society has been scheduled. I thought I’d come and tell you in person.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Any idea if I’ll be getting my old rank back?”

“The issue is that you’re very... loud for an iron-ranker,” Vincent said. “They’re going to want a display of humility.”

“No worries,” Jason. “No one’s as good at being humble as me.”

Chapter 191

Looking Forward

In the waiting room of Jory's clinic, Jason chatted with Jory's assistant, Janice, until Jory emerged from the treatment rooms in the back with a patient.

"Jason," Jory cheerfully greeted, after sending the patient on her way. "It's good to see you in person instead of just hearing you through your voice chat power. You know that weird message popping up to say you want to contact me can be disturbing, right?"

"Disturbing?"

"Remember the other day, you tried to contact me and I refused?"

"I figured you were busy with a patient."

"I was in the bath! It felt like you were watching me. It was creepy."

"Sometimes I just don't have time for a personal visit. The team's been busy with training."

"That much I know. I've barely seen Belinda, lately."

"Can you spare me a few minutes now?" Jason asked.

Jory glanced around the waiting room, which was around half full, then gave Janice a questioning glance.

"A few minutes shouldn't throw things too badly off," she said. "A *few* minutes."

"Come on," Jory said. "I'll make us some tea. Would you like one, Janice?"

"That would be lovely," she said with a sweet smile.

Jory led Jason back into the room he and whatever healer priest was on duty used to relax if things got too tense. It had a large cooler box and cupboards full of snacks and beverages. A large window looked out onto the courtyard where Jason, Rufus, Gary and Farrah used to train. Far from the dirt yard it was back then, it was nicely tiled, with standing and wall planters adding pleasant greenery.

"We've come a long way," Jory said, following Jason's gaze. "It was only in the summer that you were hopelessly lost, madly training in a dirty back lot. Now this place is a thriving medical centre and you're a big-time adventurer."

"This is only the beginning," Jason said. "Now I'm looking toward bronze rank. I think I can get there before I've been here a year. For sure, if the monster surge comes. All those monsters in that astral space sent my abilities shooting up. Same for everyone who doesn't use monster cores."

“I know,” Jory said. His voice was a complaint to Jason’s enthusiasm, despite talking about the same thing. “Mine did the same. I’ve never had the money to go spending on monster cores and I’m definitely not interested in hunting for them.”

“You’ve got the skills,” Jason said, “but I think you’re in the right place. There’s plenty of us out there killing monsters. We need more people helping those who need it the most. I really admire you for that.”

“Thank you, Jason. That means a lot.”

“Also, I need forty gallons of crystal wash.”

“Wait, what? Forty gallons?”

“If I could get in it a barrel that would be good. Maybe one of those big kegs that Norwich uses, with the little tap. That would be convenient.”

“What? Are you insane? Are you trying to soak your whole houseboat in the stuff?”

“Actually, kind of yes,” Jason said. “Emir warned me that it would require certain additional materials, especially early on, to fuel the various amenities. The cloud-stuff automatically cleans itself and anything in it. Have you ever noticed how you get out of the cloud bed feeling like you’ve just had a refreshing shower?”

“You know I’ve been...”

“Jory, we all know about you and Belinda.”

“You do?”

“Jory, I’m connected to the houseboat. I know anyone who comes aboard and where they are at all times. Even if I didn’t, Humphrey and I have been watching you sneak off in a dishevelled state every morning. I don’t even know why you’re hiding it. There’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I wouldn’t want to impinge on her reputation.”

“Jory, she’s a convicted criminal.”

“I was raised a certain way,” Jory said defensively. “I was taught that there’s a proper process to courting a lady.”

“Why didn’t you do that, then?”

“I was working up to it. Then she kind of grabbed me and dragged me off to her room.”

“At least she’s sensible,” Jason said. “Anyway, the cloud beds. Like everything else on the houseboat, the cloud-stuff cleans whatever’s in it. Unfortunately, the houseboat has used up whatever resources it started with for cleaning. Emir warned me that a lot of resources would need topping off early and now I need a bunch of pure quintessence and a full barrel of crystal wash. Luckily, most the Purity temple’s assets were seized and Clive

reckons he can get his hands on the quintessence I need. That just leaves the crystal wash.”

“Jason, that amount is crazy. A whole barrel?”

“Now, come on, Jory. I know for a fact that you massively increased the production with all those fancy foreign nobles in town. I’m willing to bet you have a decent amount stockpiled away.”

“I sold most of it,” Jory said. “The visiting adventurers are all gone now. Except Prince Valdis, who buys almost as much of the stuff as you.”

Jory looked down, scratching the back of his head absently as he let out a sigh.

“I can probably make that work,” he conceded. “I’m going to use that production space currently on crystal wash for the lesser miracle potion, but I’m still sourcing the materials I need. “That will be the engine to fund the clinic going forward. I suppose I could keep production up until then. I could have that much crystal wash by the end of the month.”

“Thanks,” Jason said gratefully. “I’ll pay full price, instead of the usual mate’s rates. I’ll be taking up a good chunk of your production, after all.”

“That’s appreciated,” Jory said. “Getting the church of the Healer’s assistance has been great but we still run some tight margins. That miracle potion money will be coming in eventually, but I used the last of the leftover money from the renovations on importing the materials.”

“Seems like the more money we make, the more we need, right?”

“No kidding,” Jory said. “Where are your costs coming in?”

“Preparing for bronze rank,” Jason said. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to get back to a big city, so I picked up the materials to resummon my familiars at bronze. I thought I’d be flush with coin after auctioning off those essences but I’ve pretty much got it all earmarked for preparing new equipment, materials for the house boat, summoning rituals, it just goes on and on.”

Jason let out a weary sigh. “I should let you get back to it then,” Jason said. “I need to go spend some more money.”

“You aren’t training today?” Jory asked.

“Humphrey and I are both having our rank reassessments at the Adventure Society this afternoon,” Jason said. “We decided to give the others a rest day. You should knock off early, go see Belinda. In fact, the symphony is playing tonight. Take her and use my private viewing booth.”

“You have a private booth?”

“I go whenever I get the chance,” Jason said. “That hasn’t been as much as I’d like, lately. I’ll swing by and make sure they know to let you use it. You have a good suit, right Jory?”

“Uh...”

“Oh, dear,” Jason said, shaking his head. He took a carousel of recording crystals from his inventory, looking through them until he picked one out and told Jory to stand still.

“What are you doing?” Jory asked as Jason moved slowly around him, waving the crystal up and down his body.

“This is a specialised recording crystal to take clothing measurements,” Jason told him. “I know a guy who’ll do a rush job for me without compromising quality. You’re lucky he’s actually my next stop.”

“You carry around a crystal specifically for clothing measurements?”

“A good adventurer is always prepared.”

“Mr Asano,” Gilbert greeted as Jason entered Gilbert’s Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman. “Excellent timing. I was just having Emil take everything to the fitting room.”

“You’ve reached iron rank,” Jason said, shaking Gilbert’s hand. “Finally picked up that last essence.”

“Yes, I finally went and did it,” Gilbert said. “All my cloth essence abilities hit bronze years ago but I was resistant to more essences for a long time. Never seemed quite right to take essences that others could make use of to help people. Age and health are humbling, however. With the market the way it is, right now, I was running out of reasons not to get the others. I’ve been absorbing monster cores but I’m still a long way from bronze and the extra years it will buy me.”

Gilbert led Jason into the generous fitting room just as his assistant appeared, pushing a long rack of clothes from the back room on a wheeled trolley. As Emil departed to fetch the next one, Gilbert started showing Jason the outfits.

“Your winter wardrobe,” Gilbert declared. “As requested, this is largely in the Vitesse style, with the flourishes we discussed previously.”

Jason had long admired Emir’s dress sense, which he discovered was largely down to Constance. She had been kind enough to consult when Jason decided to buy his clothes for the cooler months. Between her advice and Gilbert’s expertise, Jason’s winter wardrobe was sleek, fitted and sharp. The colours were more earthy and sober than local Greenstone fashion, which favoured explosions of bright hues.

“It was engaging to work with something different to the local palate,” Gilbert said. “I am quite satisfied with the result.”

“So you should be,” Jason said with admiration. “You’ve outdone yourself, Bert.”

“Thank you, sir. With the mild winters, here, mid-weight fabrics are perfect. Included, of course, are some subtle enchantments to maintain the comfort level whether to day trends hot or cool. Off course, there is a selection of outfits that trend one way or the other. I have included an array of winter colours in the Vitesse fashion; dark greens and burgundies, the expected blacks, greys and blues. Some very nice browns; dark and rich as well as a deep caramel Miss Constance referred to as brandy. I’ve also included some lighter selections, of course, and the expected formal wear for various occasions.

Jason started putting the clothes away, opening the outfits tab of his inventory and placing each ensemble into its own set.

“Is there anything else I can do for you today?” Gilbert asked as Jason stowed one outfit after another.

“Actually yes,” Jason said. “A couple of things. One is rush job, just some basic formal wear for a friend that you can put on my tab.”

“You have his measurements?” Gilbert asked.

“Of course,” Jason said. “I picked up the crystal you suggested.”

“Very good.”

“The other job is non-urgent,” Jason said. “It’s time I started looking ahead and thinking about bronze rank. My combat robe is fantastic but I will need to upgrade.”

“Well-made adventuring garb is about matching material and craftsmanship to purpose,” Gilbert said. “You are wise to start thinking about it now, so we can put together exactly what you need.”

“Actually, there’s something I’ve been keeping up my sleeve for a long time on that front,” Jason said. He continued taking outfits off the racks and putting them away in his inventory as Emil hauled out more trolleys. Three were hanging racks while a fourth was a box trolley packed with underclothes and other sundry items.

“You got the love hearts on the boxer shorts just right,” Jason said as he rubbed the material between his fingers. “This texture is incredible. You were spot on to suggest the mist valley silk.”

“I import a large supply each year,” Gilbert said. “I’ve found it to be an exceptional choice for underclothes with our particular winter climate.”

Jason started looping ties around his neck, tying them before adding them to his outfits. He matched the knot to the outfit, whether a simple four in hand knot, a nice, clean

Pratt knot or a bold full Windsor. He even added a flamboyant trinity knot to a couple of the most outgoing outfits.

“I must confess, Mr Asano, I was uncertain about the noose but it does have a way of bringing an outfit together.”

“How many times, Bert? It’s a tie, not a noose.”

“I was concerned that your opponents might not see it that way should you find yourself in an unexpected engagement, Mr Asano. This shop provides *resilient* attire for the discerning gentleman, after all. I had an enchantment placed on the ties to prevent them from being used to choke you.”

“Very considerate, Bert.”

“Consideration is my watchword.”

“As it turns out, though, I don’t actually need to breathe.”

“Do you need to chant spells?” Gilbert asked.

“That’s a fair point,” Jason acknowledged.

He used the room’s full length mirror to adjust before putting everything away. Then dark smoke manifested around him briefly, before vanishing to reveal Jason in one of his new outfits. He adjusted his tie slightly now it was incorporated into the ensemble.

“Well?” he asked.

“I may not be an impartial judge, Mr Asano, but I would say you look very dapper.”

To Jason’s eye it had more of a gothic flair, compared a suit from his old world. The patterned embroidery of the vest and the flourishes on the long jacket that swept in at the waist before reaching down to mid-thigh. He gave a little shuffle, finding his movement utterly unimpeded. The shoes looked stylish but felt like athletic footwear.

“Superlative, Bert. You’re a credit to your profession.”

“Thank you, Mr Asano.”

“I have meeting with the Adventure Society, so I think I’ll wear it out.”

“Of course. Before you go, Mr Asano, you mentioned having something up your sleeve?”

“Right, yes.” Jason said. He wandered over to a table at the side of the room and retrieved a large bolt of dark material from his inventory. “I’ve been holding onto this for a while. What do you make of it, Bert?”

Bert moved up next to Jason and ran his finger lightly over the material. It was dark, matte and cool to the touch.

“Snakeskin,” he said. “Umbral snake, probably the mountain variety. Strong affinities for darkness and poison. Bronze rank, and it’s infused with some kind of odd magic. It almost feels intrinsic, rather than externally imposed, but…”

Gilbert frowned. “Was this a familiar?”

“It was,” Jason said. “Is that a problem?”

“In terms of the value of the material, just the opposite,” Gilbert said. “My concerns are ethical. You don’t get familiars without essence users.”

“You’re aware of the people running around causing trouble in the astral spaces.”

“Cultists or something,” Gilbert’s assistant said from off to the side. “It’s almost all anyone wants to talk about, these days.”

“Yes,” Gilbert said, giving his assistant a nod. “The competition held by the gold-ranker distracted people for a while – congratulations again, by the way – but they’re back to all this unnerving talk. Strange forces from beyond reality and the madmen that worship them. It’s as unpleasantly disconcerting as it is monotonous. Fear isn’t a look that matches any outfit to be found in this store.”

“Fear is to be expected,” Jason said. “The threat is real and it falls to more powerful people than us to stop it. About half a year ago, however, I ran across one of those cultists and he tried to kill me. After he died, his familiar tried to kill me too.”

He patted the material.

“This is its skin.”

“Good riddance, then,” Gilbert said. “We should see if we can’t make something of it to help you deal with more of them.”

“If the familiar was bronze-rank,” Emil said, “then the cultist must have been, as well, right.”

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“You’re only iron-rank, though,” Emil said.

“Back then, I wasn’t even that. Didn’t even have my first essence.”

“Then how did you beat them?” Emil asked.

“I got lucky,” Jason said. “Things that attack me have this way of ending up dead.”

“Do go on, Emil,” Gilbert said, dismissing his assistant.

“Yes, boss. Uh, can I ask you something before I go, Mr Asano.”

“Emil,” Gilbert admonished.

“It’s fine,” Jason said. “Go ahead, Emil.”

“Did all those gods really appear to thank you in person?”

“Gods turning up is hardly a big deal,” Jason said. “Spend some time at the Divine Square; they pop up with fair regularity. And I’d hardly call it ‘all those gods’ when it was barely a half-dozen.”

“Out with you,” Gilbert said, shooing his assistant out of the fitting room.

“He’ll be telling that story all over, Mr Asano. You’ve built up quite the reputation with recent events. A local boy, beating out all those fancy foreign adventurers? Princes and princesses, no less.”

“I’m not exactly local,” Jason said. “In fact, I’m about as far from local as it comes.”

“You’re a local now,” Gilbert said with a laugh. “You’ve been co-opted. Nothing earns good will like success.”

“So, this material is something you can work with?”

“I certainly can. If you’re willing to leave it with me I can investigate the best options.”

“Good, because it was a pretty big snake,” Jason said, taking out a second bolt of the material.

“Oh, my,” Gilbert said. “There’s certainly enough for two sets of armour here, probably three. Possibly even four, depending on how we use it. Were you looking at spares, or do you want something for your agile lady friend as well? This material should be useful for something that would suit her.”

Sophie, like Jason, used highly flexible armour made from trap weaver leather. Gilbert only catered to the discerning gentleman, but had a lady friend of his own. On Gilbert’s recommendation they had taken the trap weaver leather to Brenda’s Massacre Emporium, elsewhere in the trade hall.

“Sophie might want something that better combines flexibility and defence,” Jason said. “Stealth and poison doesn’t fit her power set.”

“Then would you like me to take the liberty of keeping an eye out for appropriate materials? I can have Brenda do the same.”

“That would be great,” Jason said. “For the whole team, in fact. How about I have them come in for a chat so you know what to look for.”

“A prescient idea, Mr Asano.”

Chapter 192

Adventurers Are People Too

Jason rode the elevating platform up through the Adventure Society administration building, arriving on the fifth floor. There was a new reception desk, installed as part of the changed being implemented by the inquiry team. Behind the desk was a familiar face.

“Bert,” Jason greeted him. “They’ve moved you upstairs. Is it the new essences?”

“It is,” Albert said. “Getting the full set is the way off the bottom rung in the Adventure Society. Or anywhere else, for that matter. Seems the higher-ups liked that I didn’t let them take Miss Sophie away when she was locked up in the prison tower.”

“Miss Sophie and myself both appreciate it as well,” Jason said. “It’s nice to see integrity being rewarded.”

“Is that one of the suits Gilbert was making for you?” Albert asked.

“It certainly is,” Jason said.

“Well, if you don’t mind me saying, Mr Asano, you’re looking quite sharp.”

“Thank you,” Jason said. “We have a saying where I come from: the suit makes the man. In a characteristic display of Bertinelli family excellence, your brother has made quite the man of me.”

“Thank you for saying, Mr Asano. You can go ahead and wait in the conference room.”

“I know the way. Thanks Bert.”

Jason went through to the conference room and sat down to wait. In the meantime, he pulled out a hefty tome of magical theory, opening to where he had marked his place with a ribbon and started reading. It wasn’t one of the new books Gabrielle had handed over, as they were too advanced, but a more foundational text he inherited from Farrah.

The books Knowledge had delivered to him fell directly into Clive’s field of astral magic, all focused on one specific aspect: dimensional transgression. Portals, teleportation and even the basic theories of passing between worlds. Clive had almost exploded with surprise when he first perused the books to glean their purpose.

“I don’t know if this is enough to get you to your world or back,” Clive had excitedly told Jason, “but it gets us orders of magnitude closer.”

Clive had been spending every moment not spent training buried in the books. They turned out to build on work he found amongst Landemere Vane’s notes, seized back from the church of Purity.

Jason closed the book and put it away as the door opened to admit Elspeth Arella and Tabitha Gert, the stern-faced leader of the inquiry team. He stood up to greet them, Arella shaking her head seeing that Jason had been sitting at the head of the table.

“Arella,” he said with a nod. “Interim Director.”

“Actually,” Gert said, “Director Arella has resumed her full duties as the inquiry comes toward a close. You may address me by my regular rank of Inspector.”

“Very well, Inspector,” Jason said.

Jason took in Gert at a glance, from the tightly bound hair and prim, plain clothes to the way her cold eyes surveyed her surroundings and seemed to find them wanting. Her resting expression exuded disapproval, as if she had a general expectation that the world at large would fail to live up to her standards.

Given his style of interpersonal relations, Jason had learned to swiftly assess how certain people would respond to his particular brand of provocational insouciance. He recognised immediately that the inspector was the kind of person with zero tolerance for the informal affability that was his strong suit. With people like that he would either crank it right up or dial it right back. It was a matter of what he needed from the interaction and how much he felt they deserved a prod. From everything he had heard, Tabitha Gert was a rigid, but even-handed woman, carrying out her job with stark professionalism. As he felt that integrity was deserving of respect, he kept his normal inclinations subdued.

Gert waved Jason to one side of the table as she and Arella sat opposite.

“Mr Asano,” Gert began. “In the course of our inquiry in to the general culture of this Adventure Society branch, your name has been appearing significantly more often than is appropriate for an iron-ranker. Which is to say, at all. Garnering the attention of the influential and powerful too early in your career is an excellent way for that career to reach an early and ignominious end.”

“I agree,” Jason said. “All I can say in my defence is that I made what I felt to be the right choice at each stage. I recognise, of course, that such a course often leads to places I never intended or wanted to go. I’m told that is a common situation for outworlders to find themselves in.”

Gert nodded, although even that affirming action somehow came across as disapproving.

“Your rank was reduced as part of the initial sweep of demotions,” Gert said. “From our brief initial assessments, your promotions had a smell of politics to them. That they were part of some kind of game Arella was playing.”

Arella remained silent and impassive, not reacting to the mention of her name or the postulation on her motives.

“I have no doubt that was a factor,” Jason said. “I like to think that my capabilities made it an easy pill to swallow, but naturally that is not an impartial opinion.”

“Do you think you deserve three stars, Mr Asano?” Gert asked.

“From what I’ve seen of the demands on adventurers, yes. At least at iron rank.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Gert said, surprising Jason. She seemed built for delivering news you didn’t want to hear.

“I read your report of the contract surrounding the land in the forestry district. It was thorough and well-recorded. I look very favourably on thorough reports. Delivering that report directly to the upper levels of the administration was also well-considered. Your handling of a politically delicate situation demonstrated sound judgement. You also took being excluded from a prestigious expedition with equanimity, putting your energy into completing contracts. At the iron-rank level, this is more than sufficient to warrant a three star promotion.”

“I don’t imagine things are quite that simple, though,” Jason said.

“Indeed. Frankly, you have demonstrated a capability above your rank. The problem is that in doing so, you’ve demonstrated that you consider your rank to be below you. I am aware that you surround yourself with bronze, silver and even gold rankers, but you are not one of them. I have no doubt that you will climb higher, but before restoring your promotion, I would like to see a demonstration that you understand that you are, for the moment, an iron-ranker.”

Jason nodded.

“I surmised that something like this would come up during the reassessment,” Jason said, “and I have given it some consideration. I think I have a proposal that will work for everyone involved.”

“And what is this proposal, Mr Asano?”

“A road contract,” he said.

“A punishment detail,” Gert mused. “Interesting.”

“My reputation is riding high, right now,” Jason said. “Ostensibly, I should be swimming in accolades. But if you assign me a punishment detail and I eat it without complaint, then it will be a public demonstration of my respect for the Adventure Society’s authority.”

“What’s in it for you?” Arella asked, speaking for the first time.

“My team has been undergoing an intensive training period. Going out and facing some real-world challenges is exactly what we need right now. In my world they call it a shakedown cruise. It will allow me to show some humility and help some people along the way, which is a win all around, by my count.”

“A well-considered idea,” Gert said. “I approve.”

“I’ll be choosing your scheduled route,” Arella said. “You can expect a lot more trudging through the desert than nice delta towns.”

“That’s fine. I would appreciate if it included North East Quarry Village Four, if that’s possible. I made some friends there a while ago and it would be nice to check in.”

Arella looked slightly peeved at Jason welcoming her condition.

“Are you sure you can get your team to eat being placed on punishment detail with you?” she asked.

“We’re already making plans,” Jason said. “If you don’t give us one, we’ll probably roam around clearing off adventure board notices anyway.”

“Very well,” Gert said. “You will be assigned a road contract. Contingent on it being carried out satisfactorily, your promotion will be reinstated on its completion.”

“Thank you, Inspector.”

“Thank me by doing your job and doing it well, Mr Asano. We are done, here.”

She stood up and departed without a further word. Arella followed, giving Jason a complicated and assessing look.

“I’ll have the details sent to you before the road contracts go out at the start of the month,” she told him and likewise left the room.

Jason made his own way out, returning to the reception desk.

“How did you find the head of the inquiry team?” Albert asked as he paused for a chat.

“Disconcertingly agreeable,” Jason said.

Albert raised an eyebrow.

“That’s the first time I’ve heard someone call her agreeable,” he said. “The Duke hates her more than he hates Arella.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. She’s completely rigid when it comes to Adventure Society rules and authority but has a complete disregard for anything else. Locals laws and authorities mean nothing to her. I’ve seen the Duke march in here more than once, only to leave more angry than he arrived every time.”

“Something worth knowing. Good looking out, Bert.”

Valdis informed Jason and his team that they would soon be returning to the Mirror Kingdom and they arranged one final match in the Geller family mirage chamber. Jason and Humphrey gathered the team on the houseboat to discuss strategy.

“I really want to win, just once,” Neil said. “Sending him off knowing that we can stand along side the best.”

“That’s easier to plan than execute,” Humphrey said. “They’re all close to bronze-rank, more experienced and have been working as a team for much longer. They’ve been able to take apart every strategy we’ve attempted by staying calm and responding with tactics that make efficient use of their superior power and practised teamwork.”

“Then we disturb their calm,” Neil said. “Hamper their efficiency, disrupt their team work. Surely you have something, Jason? Disturbing people’s calm is your life’s work.”

“Well, I was thinking about something,” Jason said.

“Oh?” Humphrey prompted.

“We’ve been thinking about Valdis’ team the wrong way,” Jason said. “We’ve been strategising as if they were collections of power and skill sets.”

“You don’t think we should strategise around their powers?”

“Of course, but we also need to look at them as people. Think about Valdis. We’ve been looking at him as a high-speed, high-impact melee attacker and using Sophie to contain him. Trying to take him out doesn’t make strategic sense because the effort to put him down would cost more than having him put down is worth, compared to Sophie bundling him up.”

“You think that’s wrong,” Sophie said.

“I do,” Jason said. “We haven’t been thinking about them as people. Valdis isn’t just a power set. He’s a prince of the Mirror Kingdom. The rest of his team were hand picked to stand alongside him.”

“Oh,” Humphrey said, eyes wide as revelation dawned. “I get it. Disturb their calm.”

“Would you mind filling in the rest of us?” Neil asked.

“Strategically,” Humphrey explained, “their team is built around their healer, Sigrid. She facilitates and directs strategy. We’ve tried pouring into her multiple times but they have tried and tested strategies to defend against exactly that.”

“This isn’t new information,” Belinda said.

“The strategic core of the team is Sigrid,” Jason said, picking his explanation back up. “The political core, however, is Valdis. Prince of the Mirror Kingdom. He’s the reason their team exists and I promise you that in their heads, the central figure of the team isn’t Sigrid,

but him. This is our last shot at beating them until we go to the Mirror Kingdom and kick the snot out of them on their home turf. I'm willing to bet it all on the bottom line of Valdis' team being that he has to survive, whatever the cost."

"But this is a mirage chamber fight," Clive said. "He will survive."

"Yes," Humphrey said, "but those instincts have been ingrained for years. I can tell you right now, they were being prepared for Valdis' team before they ever received an essence."

"Exactly," Jason said. "That disparity between the actual core of their team, Sigrid, and the core that's been drilled into them, Valdis, is the gap in their armour. If we go all-in on Valdis, right out of the gate, I bet they'll do the one thing we haven't been able to force out of them. They'll make a tactical mistake. Even if it's just a fleeting moment before their discipline kicks back in, it gives us a small but critical window."

"So we feint on Valdis but actually move on Sigrid," Sophie said.

"Exactly," Jason said.

"We're going to have to really sell the feint," Humphrey said.

"We can do that," Jason said. "The advantage we have on them is versatility. We can change things up faster than they can react. So long as we can get them to make that mistake, we can capitalise before they can cover for it."

"You think we'll win like this?" Sophie asked.

"From just this, no," Jason said. "There's a good chance they'll regroup and retake their formation, even in the face of everything we throw at them."

"Then we need to figure out how to stop that," Neil said.

"No," Jason said. "We try and stop them, because it would be suspicious if we didn't. We fight hard to keep them scattered, which will make them clump together all the more. If they're going to put so much effort into gathering up, it would be a waste not to use that against them. The advantage of never having our strategies work against them is that they haven't seen them through to completion. It's time we showed Valdis and his team some things they've never seen before."

Chapter 193

Valkyrie

Valdis wildly fended off Humphrey's attacks as behind him, Sigrid desperately healed their team members. Even using his smaller sword Humphrey couldn't match Valdis' speed but his strength was overwhelming. Valdis was more highly-mobile striker than defender and could not meet the barrage of special attacks leaving him to a slow retreat as Sigrid fell back behind him.

In their previous encounters, Valdis had always ended up fighting Sophie while Humphrey used his heavy sword style to pressure the heavy defender from Valdis' team. He had dismissed Humphrey's swordsmanship as all power, no finesse.

Now Humphrey used his smaller sword, stylised as an angelic wing. Despite the embellishments it was still a practical, single-edged sabre, flashing out with much more rapid attacks than Valdis had seen from Humphrey in the past. When he first moved to protect Sigrid, Valdis assumed his superior skills would compensate for being forced into holding his ground. Only now did he remember that Humphrey's mother was a famous swordswoman. Humphrey's swordsmanship was every bit as rigorously trained as his own.

If it were simply a duel, Valdis' mobility and experience at duels and lighter blades would have given him the edge. Forced to keep himself between Humphrey and Sigrid, the advantage fell to Humphrey, whose style was more suited to a standing clash. He pushed Valdis back step by step, with solid, unrelenting attacks.

While Valdis had the unquestionably stronger team, the one advantage Jason and his allies had was versatility. They had seen almost every trick Valdis and his highly efficient cohort had to offer, while they had more up their own sleeves. Their ability to surprise was what had forced Valdis into the position he was now in.

As the fight began, Sophie, who normally went after Valdis, had instead bolted away while the rest of her team had converged on him to sell the feint. Clive switch-teleporting her with the heavy defender guarding Sigrid was the signal to give up the feint and move on her instead.

The defender had not been worried. Displacing the defenders was a standard strategy he had faced before and his abilities included a rapid-movement power that allowed him to reposition as circumstances required. When he went to use it, however, he was yanked back like a chained-up dog trying to sprint and getting pulled up by the neck.

He turned to look at what had jerked him back. There was a crystal rod sticking out of the ground, with a force tether connecting it to him. He launched into a charging special attack, which bounced off a force field around the rod, although he felt the impact weaken the field. At first he failed to notice the sense that another of his abilities suddenly became unavailable, as if he had used it as well.

He was human and had no shortage of special attacks, so when he started unleashing them, the force field quickly starting to buckle. Only as the field neared collapse did he realise that for every power he used, another became unavailable. When the field finally gave out, the crystal rod exploded, blasting him backwards. He was far too tough for that much to stop him, although he certainly felt it. It was not his first experience with the armour-penetrating feel of resonating force damage.

He pushed himself swiftly to his feet, only then realising that for every attack he had used, another power had been expended, including his critical movement powers. He recalled it was the effect of a curse levied by the strange role-shifting woman on the enemy team. With a grimace, he started running back in the direction of the main battle, encumbered by his heavy armour.

Sigrid had suffered a near-fatal damage when Jason and his team had sprung their trap out of the feint against Valdis. As Jason predicted, her team had suffered a brief but critical moment of panic, leaving the most slender of windows in which Sigrid was exposed to attack. Their enemies were poised for that moment, Jason's team poised to switch gears while Valdis' team moved to protect him.

Sigrid had barely kept herself alive through the use of a potent self-heal that would not be available again for hours. Even then, she was left badly hurt and even suffering some afflictions. Humphrey's spirit reaper attack had pounded down her personal shield, giving Jason the chance to throw some quick spells her way before the shield snapped back up.

Both teams had six members although their make ups were very different. Compared to Jason's eclectic and versatile team, Valdis had a traditional healer and heavy defender. The rest of his team were mobile and attack-focused and they focused on swift blitz tactics. Along with Valdis himself was a spearwoman who specialised in potent, charging strikes. Their ranged attackers were an archer using a mid-range skirmish style and a spell caster with the wind and needle essences.

Those three attackers found themselves in a fast-moving dance with Jason and Sophie, startled to find the pair more than holding their own against superior odds. Sophie was even faster than they were and apparently impervious to harm. She deflected

projectiles with her bare hands, physical and magical alike. When they tried to catch her in area attacks, they hit empty air she had already vacated.

Like Valdis, the trio were startled by the skill of their enemy. While they were frustrated at the inability to inflict any real damage, they were relieved by her lack of powerful attacks. They turned their attention to Jason but found him just as much trouble. Their own shadows had come to life, draining their mana as Jason moved in and out of them at will. At any moment he could appear or disappear right next to them, slashing out with his black and red dagger or quickly chanting a spell on the move.

Although the reach of his dagger was short, Jason's deceptive style proved a tricky opponent. His cloak floated around him, shrouding his movements as a dark arm reached out, carrying his dagger past the reach of even the spearwoman's lengthy weapon, while being far more flexible. He wasn't landing critical hits but he didn't need to.

The fight drew out as Jason's powers filled his enemies with a growing sense of dread. His afflictions carried their horrifying work on their flesh, only Sigrid's stream of healing holding it back. Their own shadows seemed to have turned against them, an intimate and unnerving form of attack.

Between rapid-fire shadow jumps and raw speed, Jason and Sophie flickered around the trio of enemies like mating hummingbirds. Jason was more aggressive than his normal in and out style, his quick attacks left only superficial wounds but each one was a clock of doom counting down on his enemies. He even cast the odd spell in the direction of Valdis and the defender madly sprinting back toward the fight. It was only the efficient healing of Sigrid being spread around the battlefield that kept things under control, although she didn't have time to spare to cleanse the afflictions.

Jason's more aggressive approach left him more exposed but he trusted Sophie to cover him. Every time their enemies thought they pinned him down, suddenly Sophie was there. Most teams preferred a traditional, heavy defender but Sophie was demonstrating the true value of the mobile guardian archetype.

When all three of their enemies came too close together, Jason unleashed one of his trump cards in the form of leeches spraying from a cut he sliced on his hand. That could well have spelled the end of the fight if not for Sigrid. Using another of her long cooldown powers, every member of her team other than the distant defender gained a short-lived shield that exploded out from inside them, blasting away the leeches covering their bodies.

Many of the leeches were destroyed on the spot, others being scattered across the battlefield. Even the brief exposure left more afflictions behind but Jason was taken aback.

Once he actually caught enemies out, the deployment of Team Colin was normally the finisher. Never before had his familiar been so thoroughly and immediately countered.

With all their members caught up in fights, Valdis' team faced one more threat from where Clive, Belinda and Neil were gathered behind a protective wall of summons and familiars. The bunker strategy was one of many the team had developed, a place for Belinda and Clive to launch control and attack powers from safety. It also freed Neil up to throw out shields and healing without the pressure Sigrid was being subjected to.

Neil had frequently sought out Sigrid over the past weeks. Their ability sets were similar and her experience was far more extensive than his. He had confidence in her abilities, but could not help but admire the equanimity with which she directed her team, even as Humphrey pressed in on her.

Even as Sigrid's team was thrown into chaos, caught up and scattered, they were slowly moving to regroup. Their discipline and experience showed as they slowly returned to formation, even caught up in their individual fights. If not for the dangerous spells pouring out of Clive, they might have turned the fight already. The need to shield her team was a key reason Sigrid was too busy to cleanse Jason's afflictions.

The minion wall made going after Clive, Belinda and Neil an infeasible option for Valdis' team until they had regained a semblance of order. The only attackers they could spare were their own familiars and summons, which could do no more than initiate a distracting monster brawl.

On Jason's side was the ominous figure of Gordon, whose blue and orange beams poured relentlessly onto the enemy minions. Belinda, Clive and Humphrey's familiars were likewise present, along with Neil's summoned chrysalis golem and Humphrey's summoned dragon-tooth warriors.

The golem looked like an ogre carved out of diamond. With every attack against it, a rune appeared on one of its many facets. Clive's familiar, Onslow, fired off elemental attacks from the runes on his shell as Clive periodically recharged them with his own mana. Onslow was back next to Clive, as was Belinda's lantern familiar that fires bolts of force at the enemy. Her other familiar, the illusory echo spirit, was dancing around the enemy familiars, distracting and baiting them.

Humphrey's dragon-tooth warriors were normally humanoid figures with bodies of ivory, decked out in conjured equipment provided by his personal space power, magic armoury. In this case, however, the summons were affected by the summoning die Jason had gifted to Humphrey that randomly affected the form of summoned creatures. What

were normally three ivory soldiers were instead a trio of hulking bone gorillas, covered in heavy conjured armour. They even wielded hefty, iron-shod clubs.

The final members of the wall of minions was Stash. Like Gordon, Stash was smarter than the summoned creatures, with the added value of being versatile, like the team to which he belonged. He moved wildly through the brawling familiars and summons, his form rapidly shifting from one shape to another. One moment he was a resilient bark lurker, soaking up an attack aimed at the gorillas. The next he was a darting bird, quickly repositioning.

The summons and familiars on the other side were, like their owners, fast and attack-oriented. A were wolf-like creature fought alongside a sleek metal humanoid figure, covered in sharp edges. There was a ball of needles with chitinous spider legs and a scorpion that fires spines from its stinger. Floating amongst them was a small lantern, projecting shields to protect them. They were outnumbered by the familiars and summons of Jason's team, making little headway beyond forcing Clive, Belinda and Neil to keep an eye on them.

Behind the minion melee was the key reason Valdis' team had not yet managed to regroup. Clive's offensive potential was primarily contained within in a single, potent spell, wrath of the magister. He could charge it up and unleash powerful attacks, on a one minute cooldown. With Belinda's ability to reduce an ability's cooldown by that same amount, both with an ability and her tattoo, Clive unleashed a mana-hungry but incredibly potent series of attacks. As his mana pool was greater than any two of his teammates, however, he had the freedom to do so.

More than anything else of the battlefield, Sigrid was poised to respond to Clive's spell, throwing out her strongest shields to intercept. Even then, the spell burned through protections, forcing Sigrid to follow up with her strongest heals. As with Jason unleashing Colin, it was only the consummate skill and power of Sigrid's healing and shielding that prevented the fight from already being over.

For a while, at least, Belinda's ability to loop Clive's potent spell was a defining force on the battlefield. She even copied the spell and cast it herself when he was done. It was another strategy they hadn't used against Valdis before and his team couldn't be certain how long Clive and Belinda could maintain the barrage. They were too busy to do any more, however, and were forced to endure.

The failure of Jason's team to finish off Sigrid with their ambush was the defining point of the fight, as there was no question she was the most impactful person on the field. Standing bloodied and unbroken with her Valkyrie blond hair, her piercing blue eyes took

in every part of the fight. She was the glue that held her team together in the wake of the enemy's divide and conquer strategy; the critical factor in every part of the battlefield. Through the chaos, she fought desperately to bring her team back into order, barking out directions between spell chants. Their practised teamwork and extensive experience allowed them to make subtle moves to coordinate, even caught up with more immediate concerns.

Jason's team had defined the pace of the fight, but the arrival of Valdis' defender turned the enemy's six on five advantage into an even fight. The defender's cooldowns were finally back up and he erupted into the battlefield at Sigrid's direction. Jason and Sophie were pushed back, Jason not daring to dive into the formation Valdis and his team were falling into. He recalled Shade's bodies to himself as Valdis started attacking them with disruptive-force special attacks.

The reformation of Valdis' team came as they realised that the spell barrage from Clive and Belinda was finally over. They knew they had to seize the moment and turn the tide as Jason had placed them on a clock. Jason's afflictions were past the point that Sigrid could eliminate them while still healing the team. They took one of their sweeping attack formations and started moving on Clive, Belinda and Neil. If they could take out the healer along with Clive before his cooldowns ended, the fight would be over.

Valdis launched forward at the head of his team, flashing a triumphant grin at the chance to finally fight on his own terms. Then he saw an uncharacteristically hungry smile of Humphrey's face and concern flashed through his mind. Sigrid had also intuited that something was wrong but he warning to scatter came too late.

A crystal rod rose up from the ground in the space between the two teams. The air shimmered as tethers of force yanked Valdis' team toward Jason's. Then Jason's team vanished. Cold, dark energy flooded the area, the merest touch opening terrible wounds as their flesh rotted away like it was recoiling.

Belinda's tether had brought the teams close enough for Neil to catch both teams in the six hour cooldown power he obtained from his reaper awakening stone. Reaper's redoubt placed his team safely in a dimensional space and flooded the area with death energy. Given Valdis' team were all afflicted with Jason's necrosis-enhancing curse, it was a finishing move that closed out the fight. In the strange, dark dimensional space of Neil's power, the team started receiving messages.

-
- You defeated [Valdis Volaire].
 - You defeated [Sigrid Freyn].
-

As the most capable members of the team, Valdis and Sigrid had put themselves on the line to cover the others, making them the first to fall. The others soon followed and moments later, awoke in the mirage chamber control room.

Valdis sat up on his platform, glancing between Sigrid and the still bodies of the enemy team still inside. He let out a relaxed laugh.

“That was unexpected,” Sigrid said.

“And just think, Sig,” Valdis told her. “You didn’t want to make friends.”

Chapter 194

Departures

Danielle Geller played the recording of the mirage chamber fight for her important visitor.

“They used my son’s status against him,” the Mirror King said. “It seems your son has picked up your knack for spotting people’s leverage points.”

“No he hasn’t,” Danielle said. “My Humphrey’s a good boy.”

“I see,” the Mirror King said. “You teamed him up with someone who thinks more like you.”

“The man is good at making friends,” Danielle said. “Just ask your son.”

Valdis was deeply regretting his insistence on joining Jason in drinking bronze-rank liquors. It was the farewell party for his team on Jason’s houseboat and when he saw Jason drinking the higher-ranked stuff he had joined in over Jason’s warnings. He didn’t remember anything between that and waking up with a pounding headache and his father at the end of his bed. Now his team were making final farewells on the deck of the houseboat, although he wasn’t saying or listening to anything as he struggled with a throbbing head and unruly stomach.

Valdis and his team were packed and ready to leave via portal, having spent the night in the houseboat after the raucous party. They had only travelled to Greenstone via boat originally because of the arrangements made by Emir. He liked big entrances, as evidenced by the grandiose arrival of his cloud ship days after Hester had quietly portalled him to the city.

There was also the problem of actually opening a portal to Greenstone. Whatever other nuances a dimensional transport power might have, the requirement to have visited the destination was universal. Most of the teams had been portalled as close to Greenstone as their people could reach that was in the path of Emir’s transport ships.

“It’s for the best,” Sigrid told Jason, nodding a head at Valdis. “If he was in a better state then he’d be making a last-minute attempt to poach your team members.”

Valdis looked like he was going to say something, then looked like he was going to throw up, giving up on the former to avoid the latter.

“You’re not going to make a recruiting pitch on his behalf?” Jason asked.

“My job, first and foremost,” she said, “is to keep Valdis out of trouble. You are definitely trouble.”

Jason laughed. "Next time we see you, we'll all be bronze rank. We might come visit that kingdom of yours and give you a chance for revenge in your local mirage chamber."

"You do remember that we repeatedly beat you, right?" Sigrid asked.

"You're only as good as your last fight," Jason said. "That makes us the winners, leaving you to return home in disgrace."

She shook her head. "I still can't fully parse you, Jason Asano. Are you a fool, a genius or a monster?"

"Yes," he said with an impish grin.

Suddenly every member of Valdis' team dropped to one knee, except for Valdis himself. Jason's own team followed a beat later. Jason turned around to find a man standing on the deck that he hadn't sensed, even through his connection to the boat. The man was dressed well but not extravagantly, looking to be somewhere in his late thirties with a neatly-trimmed blond beard.

The man's appearance was unremarkable, but his aura was something else entirely. It was not overwhelming, in fact, just the opposite. Jason could hardly tell where the man's aura stopped and the rest of the world began, as if the very world around him was simply an extension of his power.

Another man walked across the cloud-stuff gangplank and onto the deck from the marina. His positioning and posture marked him as subordinate to the first man, despite his own powerful, gold-rank aura. He was glaring unhappily at Jason.

"You should kneel," he told Jason.

"Why?" Jason asked.

"To show your respect. You stand before the king."

"I've always felt that if someone wants you to kneel, it isn't respect they're after, whatever they might tell you. Also, *the* king? I mean, he's *a* king, I'll grant you. Certainly not my king, though."

"Do you even have monarchs where you come from?" the Mirror King asked. His voice was deep, rich and tinged with amusement.

"Kind of," Jason said. "We sort out our own business, but old folk like to have a royal or two floating about, so we borrow someone else's queen from time to time."

"You borrow a queen?"

"Yep," Jason said. "We pop her over, wheel her down the street so people can have a wave and then send her back. It works out for everyone."

"That's madness," the Mirror King's offsider said. "He's telling strange outworlder stories to disrespect you."

The Mirror King laughed. “What he’s doing is poking the nest to see how aggressive the wasps are. You remind me of Danielle Geller when she was young and precocious.”

“Thank you,” Jason said.

“You’ll have to forgive my friend Hastor,” the Mirror King said. “Among his varied and valuable roles is protocol officer, at which he very much excels.”

“Thank you, your majesty.”

“Sadly,” the Mirror King continued, “the traits that makes him an excellent protocol officer serve him less well in more informal settings. If there isn’t a chart so seat everyone in the room by relative rank, he starts getting snippy.”

“Your majesty!” Hastor protested.

At that moment, Valdis, who had been lurking behind Jason, lost his battle with his stomach. Lurching to the side of the deck, he vomited loudly over the side.

“Good thing I ranked up by poison resist power,” Jason confided in the Mirror King. “It soaked up just the right amount of alcohol. Also, I apparently don’t have a stomach. I was going to ask my mate Clive about it – that’s Clive kneeling there – but I figured the answer would be pretty gross. Which may sound odd, coming from the guy with the flesh-rotting powers, but there you go.”

“It seems my son has learned a lesson about limitations,” the mirror King said with a chuckle. “Those can be hard to find for princes.”

Valdis staggered forward to stand next to Jason.

“Dad,” Valdis croaked in greeting. The Mirror King gave his son a wry smile.

“Having fun?”

Valdis let out a wordless groan and the Mirror King chuckled again.

“Thank you for putting up with my son, Mr Asano. I think it’s time to go.”

“No worries, your kingness. And you can call me Jason.”

The Mirror King grinned and threw an arm around his son’s shoulders, who groaned.

“Come along, boy; you can explain the state you’re into your mother. If you would, Hastor?”

Hastor called up a portal that looked like a sheet of glass and the Mirror King marched his son through. Just before he passed through, Valdis shared a put-upon look with a grinning Jason, departing with a wave. Once the king was gone, Jason and Valdis’ teams stood up, Sigrid politely moving to greet Hastor. The disgruntled look on Hastor’s softened with their brief and formal, yet somehow still warm interaction.

“It’s good to see you, father,” Sigrid said after her formal greeting.

“Wait, this guy’s your Dad?”

“He is my father,” Sigrid confirmed.

“And he doesn’t get a hug? That’s cold.”

Sigrid giggled, shaking her head.

“Thank you for the hospitality,” she said to Jason’s team. “I look forward to the next time we meet.”

She led the rest of her team through the portal, leaving only Hastor with Jason and his team.

“Thank you,” Hastor said, to Jason’s surprise. “While I cannot agree with your gross deficit in etiquette, the young Prince doesn’t have a lot of friends who will stand beside him instead of kneel.”

Hastor didn’t wait for a response, stepping through his portal, which vanished.

“That was unexpected,” Jason said. “So, Emir’s portal lady is Hester, and that guy’s portal guy was Hastor,” he mused. “Are portal powers a name thing?”

“Of course not,” Clive said. “You need to watch your decorum around royalty.”

“Do I?” Jason asked. “I was more thinking that I need to get powerful enough that they have to watch their decorum around me.”

The keg of crystal wash was much larger than the cloud flask, yet Jason emptied it into the flask without any sign of the flask being full. He had returned the houseboat to the flask in preparation for their departure, which left Rufus and Gary once again stripped of accommodation for the duration of the road contract. With the conflict with the Builder cult at an uneasy pause, Gary and Rufus turned to other endeavours. Gary would be rejoining Emir at Sky Scar Lake, while Rufus would lodge at the Geller estate as he refocused his attention on the training annex project.

The fight against the Builder cult was at a lull after the raid on their island outpost and the Purity church was in something of a limbo while everyone waited for word from on high, be that the main branches of the churches or the gods themselves. In the meantime, the church of Purity’s people were comfortably but thoroughly detained under the authority of the ecumenical council.

Once he had drained the cask of crystal wash, restoring the cleaning functions of his magical abode, it was time to head out. It was a short walk from the marina to the loop line station for Jason and his team, which carried them to the Adventure Society campus. Waiting for them outside the jobs hall was Humphrey’s sister, Henrietta.

Henrietta was a statuesque and handsome woman whose short-cropped hair swept back dramatically. In practical leathers and with a dimensional bag slung over her shoulder

she had the confident ease of an experienced adventurer. Her eyes were a bright shade of purple, a sure sign of a summoned familiar inhabiting them. Belinda's lantern familiar, Shimmer was likewise subsumed into her eyes, turning them silver instead of purple.

Henrietta was a minion specialist and Jason knew that she would have her three summoned familiars inside her body. Her fourth familiar was bonded to her like Stash was to Humphrey. It was a phoenix, the classic variety native to the desert. Rare and elusive, people lived whole lives and died out in the desert without ever seeing one. It was a gorgeous creature with feathers like living fire, which stood out even when familiars were a common sight. As the phoenix could not disguise itself the way Stash could, she largely left the mystical bird to its own devices, since she was always able to sense and communicate with it.

Summoned familiars had a number of practical advantages over bonded types, but the bond was not without its perks. A bonded familiar could be sensed at all times in a way summoned familiars only could be while subsumed within the summoner, which was not a practical advantage. The closest Jason had to this was Shade and his three bodies. While Shade's other bodies were out and about, Jason could sense them so long as at least one copy of Shade took the place of his own shadow. It also helped make Shade a useful spy.

"I've already picked up the contract," Henrietta said. "Let's head out."

Every road contract consisted of a group of iron-rankers, usually a team, with a supervising bronze ranker. In the current, uncertain times, Henrietta had appointed herself to look after her brother and his team. Danielle had also made sure Henrietta had certain expensive magical consumables to use in a pinch.

The team turned around and headed back for the loop line. After leaving the station, they prepared to head out for the desert. Clive had arranged for a heavy duty skimmer that could handle rocky terrain to be waiting for them at the edge of the delta. Skimmers specialised to sand were relatively cheap, but the magic that kept them aloft became less effective over less smooth, sweeping area. Knowing they would be ranging far and wide, Clive had requisitioned a more robust model designed for all kinds of terrain.

To get to the Magic Society outpost at the edge of the delta, the team started deploying their various means of transport. After returning from the trip to Jayapura, the team had new means of transportation available to them.

Humphrey already had Stash, who would happily transform into a heidel. Stash didn't like the colour of regular heidels though, leaving Humphrey riding a bright pink animal. Jason's familiar mount was Shade, who could transform each of his three bodies into horses due to Jason's dark rider power.

The hair of each horse was black, with white, glowing hooves, eyes and mane. White mist, shining against the black coat of the horses rose up from the hooves. Jason would have been satisfied so long as Shade didn't turn into a heidel, but what delighted with the glorious form he took.

"Looking sexy, Shade."

"I believe," Shade said, "that comment is inappropriate on numerous levels."

Clive had purchased a floating disc during their trip away. It was much the same as the ones they had used in Jayapura, but could function in low-magic areas like Greenstone. As with most such cases, it required someone with a special power to use magical tools to function.

Neil has no such power and no shape-changing familiar. He ended up in a floating trolley, towed behind Clive by a magical tether.

"This doesn't feel dignified," Neil said as Clive towed him along like a child. He looked over at Henrietta, riding a heidel-like construct creature, strangely crafted from what looked like folded paper. It would not hold up to the rigours of combat but could fold itself down small enough to carry in a pocket, like a two-headed origami horse.

"I should have bought one of those," he lamented. He had seen them for sale in the Mystic Quarter in Jayapura but had balked at the price. Given the money he still had from the essence auctions, he was now regretting his own prudence.

"I watched the recording of your fight with that Prince and his team," Henrietta said as they rode through the city streets.

"What did you think?" Neil asked. "Beating that team is impressive, right?"

"Impressive?" Henrietta asked dismissively. "It was a travesty. You lined your familiars and summons out like they were bricks in a wall. Do you have any idea how much potential you squandered?"

Henrietta had already spent some time with the team, training them in the use of their familiars and summons. She was, it turned out, unhappy with the results.

"During this trip I'm going to drill you all until you stop wasting your familiars. Jason is the only one of you even starting to use his familiars properly and he still has a long way to go."

"Thank you," Jason said.

"I wouldn't get too happy," Henrietta said. "Your performance was only decent compared to the rest of this lot. You left one of your familiars standing around with the others, too. You'll be drilling as hard as anyone."

"I don't mind a bit of hard work," Jason said.

Henrietta grinned at him.

“You will when I’m done with you.”

They were making their way down Broadstreet Boulevard, one of the main artery roads between the Island and Old City’s north east gate when they all felt a surging aura. Looking in that direction, they could see rainbow light shining over the rooftops from several streets away.

“A manifestation,” Henrietta said darkly. “Right in the middle of the city.”

“Maybe it’ll just be an awakening stone,” Neil said.

“Not with light display of that size,” Clive said. “That’s a monster. Probably silver rank.”

“Silver rank?” Neil said. “Do we go?”

“Of course we go,” Jason said. “We’re adventurers.”

“I’m not,” Belinda said. “I haven’t had my assessment, yet. Does that mean I get to not go?”

Jason flashed her a grin. “No.”

He urged his shadow horse to a gallop, roaring ahead of the group. Trailing behind him was the sound of hooves on the packed earth of the street, mixed with the sound of Shade’s voice.

“I would like to remind you that I can talk. You could just ask me to go faster instead of digging in with your heels.”

Chapter 195

No Pot of Gold

The people of Old City were reacting in one of two ways to the rainbow light shining in the air. Many were fleeing as fast as they could, rushing past Jason and his team as they rode toward the source of the commotion. Other members of the populace were trying to find a spot to watch from a safe distance. At worst, they would get to see some adventurers in action. Even better would be if it turned out to be an essence. Maybe they would even have a chance at grabbing it for themselves.

Jason and his team were not the only adventurers in the area to come running. There was another team of iron-rankers in full gear, plus a handful of people with iron and bronze-rank auras that, from their casual clothes, were just in the area on civilian business. Jason and his team dismounted their various means of transport.

“Once the monster manifests,” Henrietta said, “everyone follow my direction. If there are lower-rank secondary monsters I’ll have at least some of you on them. Otherwise I’ll put you on crowd-wrangling. The onlookers won’t be willing to go until things get dangerous, so we’ll need to keep them from panicking and trampling one another.”

The rainbow light turned out to be emerging from the ground. Chunks of street had broken apart and were floating in the air like dandelions on a breeze as the light rose up from the holes left behind. The assembled adventurers moved up to peer into the holes, seeing through the light that there was a good-sized space below.

“Some kind of hub for the water utility tunnels,” Clive said, taking a stone tablet out of his personal storage space. The magical map etched into it shifted as he pushed his fingers across the surface of the tablet.

“That’s troubling,” Clive said after finding what he was looking for. “There’s a wastewater treatment hub right underneath here. It’s probably been damaged by a manifestation his strong.”

“You think that’s troubling?” Jason asked. “I think you’re missing the main point.”

“What do you mean?” Clive asked.

“Monsters take forms according to their environment, right?”

“Oh,” Clive said, realisation dawning.

“What is it?” Henrietta asked.

“There’s no pot of gold at the end of this rainbow,” Jason said, “I think we’re about to fight a poo monster.”

Even as he said it, filthy water started geysering up from the holes in the ground. The gathered crowd started recoiling loudly as gobbets of viscous water rained from the sky,

bringing with it a terrible stench. Jason quickly pulled out his magic umbrella and the wastewater rain avoided the bubble that formed around him. Belinda and Sophie immediately ducked into the bubble with him as the others looked on in envy as they were rapidly drenched in filth.

“I think we might need another keg of crystal wash,” Jason said.

The splashing water did not lay inert after landing. Like a living creature it crawled over the ground, buildings and even people it landed on, seeking to congeal into pools.

“The rain is the monster,” Henrietta called out. “Some kind of elemental.”

As the rain congealed into pools, the pools started radiating auras. The biggest pool was condensing a silver-rank aura, the smaller ones either bronze or iron.

“Start attacking if you have anything that will be effective,” Henrietta called out, not just for Jason’s team but all the assembled adventurers. “Anything explosive or any resonating-force powers will be most effective against a water-type elemental. Avoid ice or anything else water-based it can absorb unless you can freeze and shatter all at once.”

Elementals were forming anywhere that the water was pooling, from the middle of the street to the flat rooftops and even on shopfront awnings. Globulous masses of thick, rancid liquid congealed into gelatinous chunks, until an accumulated pile started undulating in the direction the closest living thing. They oozed across the ground, spilled over walls and tipped out of whatever the wastewater had been accumulating in, splattering to the ground. Jason spotted one elemental secrete its way out of a fruit cart, flowing between the fruit like some unholy juice.

“Like a less-awful kale smoothie,” he muttered to himself.

Gordon, who inhabited Jason’s aura, was much easier to draw out than Colin, who lived his bloodstream. All Jason had to do was project his aura the right way for Gordon to appear at his side and soon blue and orange beams of force were gouging their way through elementals.

Jason’s afflictions would be worthless against the elementals own powers so he drew his sword, although he knew he would be more use directed elsewhere.

“I’ll be better off on crowd control,” he told Henrietta. “This is a bad match-up for me.” Henrietta nodded.

“You know your team better than me,” she told him. “Set the roles.”

Jason had Sophie join him on crowd wrangling as her speed was more useful than her fists against the ambulatory sewerage monsters. The others he assigned to a elemental hunting. Humphrey’s powerful attacks could smash an elemental apart, rendering the magically-infused water inert once more. Clive had his legendary staff tucked under one arm and his legendary wand in the other hand, blasting out force energy

from both. Neil kept an eye on the whole field, shielding and healing anyone who needed it, from their own team to other adventurers and civilians. Belinda chained her force tether to collect elementals together where all the adventurers could lay on area attacks.

The other adventurers had also leapt into action as elementals emerged across the sprawling area of streets, alleys and rooftops where the wastewater rain had fallen. That included Henrietta, who called her familiars into play. She let out a breath that became a dervish of ash and cinders that charged into the liquid elementals, evaporating them into clouds of foul, choking steam.

Purple light poured out of Henrietta's eyes, from which manifested a huge, bizarre floating eye, held aloft by leathery wings on each side of the orb. It flew around projecting a beam of purple energy that blasted apart the elementals. The last familiar was a lantern emitting soft green light that healed any living thing it encountered. She sent it floating off in search of civilians caught up and isolated by elementals.

Even Henrietta's previously absent phoenix appeared, diving out of the sky like a burning spear. In a series of swooping strikes it punched through elementals, their watery bodies exploding with sprays of filth and steam.

Having put her familiars to work, Henrietta employed a power not unlike Clive's ability to draw ritual circles. Hers, however was specifically for summoning creatures. Where most people would have to lay out a circle of salt or other appropriate substance, she drew a simple magic circle in the air with her finger, which was traced out in silver-blue light. She was done in moments and the circle transmuted into a shimmering portal, through which came one summon after another.

The first was a crow made of golden fire, superficially similar to the phoenix but formed entirely from golden flames with burning red eyes. It soared out of the portal and joined the phoenix in its swooping strikes. Next through the portal was a winged centaur, clad in armour and carrying a shield and lance. It galloped into the fray, smashing apart elementals with sweeping shield bashed and crashing blows from its own wings, used as bludgeons.

The third entity to come out looked like a strange, dark angel. It had no arms but four wings, two black and two white. Around it floated four disembodied hands. It flew into the air, looming over the chaos and started sending out the floating hands. Where they touched an ally, the ally was healed. Where they touched an elemental, the elemental was desiccated. The hand would push into the elemental as it reduced down to a dry, hard nugget of waste before floating off again.

The final one was a golem made of crude iron, glowing with internal heat. Similar to the forge golem Jason had seen Gary summon in the past, this furnace golem had flames behind the metal grill in its torso, rather than molten metal.

There was no shortage of elementals to go after as more and more kept forming. The geysering wastewater continued unabated and the filth rain kept coming down. As some focused on eliminating the elementals as quickly as possible, Jason, Sophie and some of the other adventurers spread out to help people. The rain had come down further afield than anyone had anticipated, seeping under doors and into the buildings around them.

After designating roles, Jason couldn't spare any more attention to what the rest of the team was doing. He used the voice chat to keep in touch, but mostly it was left clear for Humphrey, Clive, Belinda and Neil to coordinate.

It was his evolved map ability that he relied on the most, which now had the ability to pick out friends, enemies and neutrals. Jason ran around, Gordon trailing behind. Jason kept one of Shade's bodies with him to communicate with the two he sent scouting. The mana draining power of Shade's even turned out to be effective against the elementals, which were basically magically-infused physical matter. Draining the magic out of them had a strongly deleterious impact on their integrity.

He fought elementals as he had to, with his sword and proving sufficiently effective. It was sufficient to at least extricate people from where they had been boxed up so he could find them a path out of the rain. He relied mostly on his familiars to begin with as he accumulated power on his sword until it was slicing through elementals at a blow.

People were scattered, panicking and making all the wrong decisions. Elementals were coming into their homes and businesses, they were running exactly the wrong way and it was generally like herding cats in a thunderstorm.

With the spread of people and the rain coming down a whole range of streets, alleys and buildings, he didn't always reach people in time. Some he found dead, drowned in viscous filth. He didn't have time to reflect on how inured he had become to death, already looking for the next person he could save.

It seemed like the geysering wastewater would never come to an end. More and more of the foul fluid poured into the sky, raining down to form yet-more elementals. The smaller, iron-rank ones coalesced first, followed by the larger bronze-rank ones. The adventurers had mostly cleared out the panicking innocents by the time the largest pool congealed into a towering silver-rank elemental. At the height of a two-storey building, it loomed over the adventurers battling its lesser kin. Fortunately its formation finally saw the geyser of filth peter out.

More adventurers had arrived as the battle continued. Henrietta and the other bronze-rankers were gearing up to confront the giant elemental when the first silver-ranker arrived. With dark, waving hair, broad shoulders and huge hammer, he leapt from the roof of a nearby building. He had arrived after the filth rain stopped but was quickly coated in muck as great chunks exploded off the elemental with each swing of his giant hammer. It was a huge lump of metal, even the handle, but he waved it about as if it weighed no more than a stick.

The arrival of the silver ranker and the end of the rain forming new elementals signalled the turning point of the fight. Each rank of adventurer turned to the matching rank of elementals, which were cleaned up in short order. In the wake of the battle, the adventurers gathered up, mostly covered in filth. A few had shielding abilities that protected them, while others were already using crystal wash or similar items to clean themselves. Jason tossed a bottle of crystal wash to the silver ranker who was now covered in muck.

“Thanks,” the adventurer said as he tipped the bottle over his head, which restored his square-jawed handsomeness and lustrous, wavy hair. “From that cloak you’re wearing, I’m guessing you’re the Jason Asano people have been talking about.”

“That’s me,” Jason said as the adventurer looked over the team forming around Jason. His eyes fell on Sophie and Belinda.

“That would make one of you two Sophie Wexler?”

“Why would you have heard of me?” Sophie asked as she took one of the crystal wash bottles Jason was handing out.

“The Adventure Society director had a friend of mine following you around in secret for months. He was the one quietly intervening to help you avoid being caught. He wasn’t allowed to talk about it at the time, of course. A bit ethically shaky, but there you go.”

“I met him briefly,” Jason said.

“Oh, I know,” the adventurer said with a laugh. “You got him told off, so he hates you.”

Henrietta approached the group, nodding to the silver-rank adventurer.

“That was good timing, Bert.”

“Henry, It’s been a while,” the adventurer greeted back.

“Wait,” Jason said. “You’re Bertrand Bertinelli?”

“You can call me Bert,” Bertrand said.

“Wow,” Jason said. “You really are the handsome one.”

Chapter 196

The Glory of Success or the Price of Failure

Bertrand was the ranking adventurer, which made reporting the elemental manifestation to the Adventure Society his responsibility. As he was a latecomer to the incident, Henrietta diligently filled in the blanks in his knowledge. The team was happy to leave sorting out the mess of the filth-coated streets to him. Civilian casualties need to be tallied and reported and repairs and cleanup organised. Through some meteorological quirk of magic, it never rained in Greenstone. All the waste would need to be cleaned off before it dried into the walls. If nothing else, the untreated wastewater would pose a health risk if not dealt with.

Bertrand was commandeering the services of some of the other adventurers present as they left. Their travel contract fortuitously exempted them, as they had a schedule to keep. They left the city and made their way along the coast road towards the northern edge of the delta.

"I'm told that given the events of recent months," Henrietta told them, "some of the more remote areas haven't been getting the attention they should. Not all of the villages were covered in the last two months by adventurers, which has apparently led to casualties from iron-rank monsters that have reached the berserk stage. Bronze-rank monsters that spawned in that period won't have reached that stage yet, so we can anticipate a higher than normal number of them on noticeboards."

"We're going to fight bronze-rank monsters?" Belinda asked. As the newest and only non-adventurer on their team, her face reflected an understandable uncertainty.

"My role is primarily a supervisory one," Henrietta said. "While with a less capable group the bronze ranker might engage in more active leadership, this is a chance for you to show not just ability but also judgement."

"Meaning we choose whether to face off against a bronze-rank monster ourselves or turn to you," Neil said.

"Precisely," Henrietta said. "My role is to step in when I determine your ability or judgement has failed and the danger has become unacceptable."

"If these remote areas we'll be visiting have been this neglected," Jason said, "then I imagine there have been messengers sent to lodge complaints."

"There have," Henrietta said.

"I'm willing to bet Arella picked out a route where we'll be cleaning up messes for her, leaving us to face up to some unhappy townsfolk."

“Assuming that’s all she does,” Neil said. “Her father’s a crime boss and she hates you, Asano. I’m more concerned she’ll try and have you bumped off out here, catching the rest of us in the middle.”

“Arella has a vested interest in keeping me alive, at this point,” Jason said. “She barely held onto her position and the support of the Remore family was a large part of that. Not to mention that Humphrey and Henrietta are with us. Their mother has not been happy with Arella since the expedition, and if Danielle suspected her of endangering her children, Arella might just vanished and never be heard from again. That said, I’ve assumed Arella would make the smart choice before and paid the price for that assumption. It might not hurt to keep an extra eye out.”

“She won’t do anything,” Henrietta said. “My mother bullied her way into supervising the development of our schedule. She also provided Humphrey and myself with certain resources to rely on in critical moments.”

“Assuming no one else got the schedule and decided to bury Asano out in the desert,” Neil said. “Not everyone appreciates his cavalier disregard for rank and social standing. Even if he hadn’t ticked-off certain crime lords, which he has, Lucian Lamprey has well-known criminal connections. I also know for a fact that certain elders in the Mercer family really hate him.”

“What for?” Jason asked. “Are they still annoyed that I had the temerity to have a relationship with Cassandra?”

“It was never about you, Asano. It’s internal family politics. The Mercer family elders are used to being in charge and they weren’t happy when Lady Thalia came back to Greenstone from adventuring. She carved off a chunk of their influence just from turning up. They knew Thalia approved of you and Cassandra as a match, so they pushed the family to force you apart as a show of strength. They made a big deal of you not being good enough and Thalia not thinking of the family.”

“I see it,” Jason said. “They shoo me away from their precious scion because I’m some nobody, then suddenly I’m swanning about with visiting royalty, gold-rankers and even gods. Thalia looks prescient for championing me when I was a nobody and they look like fools for pushing away someone whose star is on the rise.”

“That’s basically it,” Neil said. “You don’t actually matter to them, but they resent you anyway.”

“Hold on, Asano,” Henrietta said. “You and Cassandra Mercer?”

“Jason and her were together for while,” Humphrey said. “Until her family pushed her to end it.”

“Wow, Cassandra Mercer,” Henrietta said. “I’m envious.”

“Henry!” Humphrey said.

“What?” Henrietta asked. “Have you not seen Cassandra Mercer? She’s smart and fun. She was also ridiculously gorgeous, even before she had essences.”

“You know her?” Jason asked.

“I did, before we both went off adventuring. Our mothers are friends and we’re the same age, so we drifted around the periphery of the same social events.”

Despite being the senior figure, Henrietta wasn’t amongst the older members of the group. She was twenty one compared to Clive, who was at almost thirty, Jason at twenty-four, plus Sophie and Belinda, both about a year younger than Jason.

“How is any of that Mercer family business Asano’s fault?” Sophie asked. “They just tried to use and dismiss him and now they’re annoyed he’s successful?”

“This is one of the problems with aristocracy,” Jason said. “If you teach someone that everyone else only exists for their benefit, you can’t be surprised when they start using people as if they don’t matter.”

“As an aristocrat,” Humphrey said, “I think the issue is more nuanced than that.”

“Humphrey,” Sophie said. “Every problem Lindy and I ever had was something you never had to deal with, because you were born in a big estate. When Asano came along and gave me enough essences that I can be here today, that was something I never imagined having. Something incredible and life-changing. But for you, there was never any doubt that not only would you get essences, but you would have your pick.”

“Jason, have you been poisoning Sophie with your politics?” Humphrey asked.

“Humphrey, were you not listening?” Jason asked. “We know you’re one of the good ones. We’ve all seen how hard you work to deserve the things you have, but if you slacked off and did nothing, you’d still have them. The problem of aristocracy is that deserve’s got nothing to do with it.”

“Things aren’t as simple as you make out,” Humphrey said.

“They never are,” Jason said. “That doesn’t obviate the fundamentals problems.”

“You seem to know a lot about Mercer family politics,” Henrietta said to Neil, sharply heading off the political discussion with a forceful change of topic.

“While we were doing all that training,” Neil said, following Henrietta’s lead, “I was finding the time where I could to take tea with Thadwick’s family. I think they like having someone who knows him to talk to. There aren’t a lot of those who don’t completely hate him.”

“I think more will hate him, by the time this all plays out,” Clive said.

“What do you mean?” Neil asked.

“I’m the closest thing we have to a star seed expert in Greenstone,” Clive said. “I was consulted as to Thadwick being seeded again when the Builder cult demonstrated so much insider knowledge of Mercer family operations during their supply raids. The thing is, the timeline from when Thadwick was retaken to when the raids began is too short. The seed would have needed longer to supplant his original personality to the point he gave up such important family secrets.”

“You’re suggesting Thadwick gave up the information voluntarily,” Jason said.

“That would make sense,” Neil said. “Thadwick’s family got awkward a couple of times when we were talking and I didn’t realise why at the time. If they already knew what you just told us, that explains a lot.”

“Of course I told them,” Clive said. “They deserved to know more than anyone.”

“You think he threw in with the cultists?” Belinda asked.

“Not even Thadwick would fall that low,” Jason said. “They already captured and implanted one of those things in him once. Even he wouldn’t be stupid enough to volunteer for another go around.”

“You think they just tortured the information out of him?” Henrietta said.

“It would make sense,” Humphrey said. “I don’t like to speak ill of a man probably in terrible circumstances, right now, but he seems like someone who would give up under interrogation rather quickly.”

“And so he should,” Jason said. “Everyone’s going to break eventually, so you might as well save yourself the torture. I would.”

“You’d give up information under torture?” Humphrey asked.

“Why wait?” Jason. “I’d give up under the threat of torture. I don’t want to get tortured. I’d crack like an egg.”

They made their way along the coast road, afternoon closing in on evening as they got closer to the dividing line where the delta met the desert. The Magic Society maintained outposts at the edge of the delta where spirit coin shipments were inspected before being handed over from adventurer escorts the Duke of Greenstone’s people for transport into the city. The plan was to stay one of the outposts overnight before heading into the desert in the morning.

They knew they were getting closer as the delta showed signs of drying out. Conversation turned to the silver-rank elemental that appeared in the city and whether it was a sign of the monster surge finally beginning.

“There are certainly signs,” Clive said. “A monster surge is kind of like water building up behind a dam, except with magic. If too much builds up before being sluiced out – in the form of a monster surge – you end up with some flooding when it finally does. The fact that so many subordinate monsters appeared alongside the silver-ranked one indicates that there’s a significant build up. Being an elemental is another indicator. Elementals are basically just ordinary materials infused with magic, which is why so much material was left behind, even after all the elementals were looted and went up in rainbow smoke. That kind of monster manifestation is more common as magic builds up before a surge.”

With Both Neil and Jason on hand, plenty of looting went on in the wake of the elemental fight. Mostly it turned out water and corrupt quintessence, but also a corrupt essence from the largest elemental. That loot was Bertand’s, given he killed it, and he was going to hand it over to the Adventure Society as it was on the restricted essence list.

“Does that mean there can be a dam break situation?” Jason asked. “I kind of assumed that was what the monster surges were.”

“That sounds bad,” Neil said.

“The monster surges are part of our world’s natural magical cycles,” Clive said. “That’s why I compared them to a sluice being opened, because they are part of the normal functioning. A dam break would be such a mass of magic building up without release that, like a dam break, it would fundamentally damage the structure of the world. The dam, in this case, is the membrane between our physical reality and the astral. Permanent damage to that membrane would be very, very bad, yes.”

“What would that look like?” Henrietta asked.

“I can’t be sure,” Clive said. “It would open our world up to astral forces from which it’s normally protected, but the results of that are pure conjecture. The idea has been thrown around, but not in any serious capacity because it just shouldn’t happen. The natural venting process of the monster surge would kick-in well before reaching that point. It would only be possible with some kind of outside intervention, but we’re talking about a world-altering power scale. People have bandied around ideas about how that might work because surges have been taking longer to arrive but that is conspiratorial rubbish. We don’t even have the beginnings of the kind of astral magic that would take.”

“Don’t we?” Jason asked. “How’s that extra reading I gave you going?”

“Jason, it’s a big jump between some new revelations in astral magic and altering the magic of a whole world. It just isn’t possible.”

“Clive,” Jason said. “A year ago I didn’t know magic was real. The moment that I accepted that it was – really accepted that it was – I realised that there is no such thing as impossible.”

Humphrey gave Jason an assessing look.

“I think I just came a little closer to figuring out how you think,” he told Jason.

“I wouldn’t try that, if I were you,” Neil said. “Getting inside that mind is like putting your hand in the fire.”

“Or a trap,” Sophie added.

“You don’t know that,” Jason said. “Come, Neil, and bathe in the comforting warmth of my thoughts.”

“I’d rather bathe in that turd elemental,” Neil said, the group laughing at Jason’s mock-hurt expression.

“You never answered the original question, Clive” Sophie said. “Do you think this is the start of a monster surge?”

“Maybe,” Clive said. “Roaming around during a monster surge is like travelling in the astral space city where the Reaper trials were conducted. You won’t go much more than an hour or two without some monster jumping you and we’ve been riding all afternoon without incident. This might be some kind of flare-up as a precursor to the surge, but those can happen weeks, even months ahead.”

“So, it’s just another monster manifestation?” Sophie asked.

“I know it feels like it means something because the monster appeared in the city, but that is just us ascribing meaning that isn’t there. To a monster manifestation, the city means nothing. It’s no more or no less likely to appear in a city as anywhere else, but when it appears in the city instead of the wilderness, it feels different to us. That’s why the inclination is to see it as somehow different, when it isn’t. Being a silver-rank manifestation just adds to that, but they do happen here, albeit rarely.”

“How long can it take between surges?” Belinda asked. “What’s the record?”

“Just under fourteen years,” Clive said. “That was a famously bad one. It’s over twelve and counting, this time.”

“Maybe I’m just overthinking it,” Humphrey said. “With everything that’s happening with the Builder cult and the church of Purity, I can’t help but feel all this is building up to something. Something bigger than what we’ve seen.”

“Let’s hope not,” Henrietta said. “You know that not everywhere has managed to stop the cult of the Builder. Most of the big places found and shut them down, but there have been towns and rural areas wiped out when the local astral spaces were ripped off the

side of our world. My team scouted one out before we split up to go protect our home towns. The outskirts were devastated, like a hurricane had passed through. The actual area itself was worse. There was nothing left. No plants, no building, no life. Just a huge, gaping hole in the landscape.”

“How big an area?” Neil asked.

“The size of a lake,” Henrietta said. “A big one. You’ve all heard of the legend of Sky Scar Lake? That a god made it to punish some sinners that were living there? That’s what it was like, as if some god came down and scooped the land out.”

“That’s horrifying,” Belinda said.

“Mostly it’s been small places,” Henrietta said. “Rural areas or even wilderness where there aren’t enough, if any, adventurers to find and stop them. Word came in just yesterday of a city of twelve thousand people being lost. It’s the biggest so far, and no one thinks the cultists are done.”

“I didn’t realise things were so bad,” Neil said.

“You have to realise that Greenstone isn’t a priority compared to the rest of the world,” Henrietta said. “You’re only seeing the periphery of a larger conflict. The cult has been largely blunted here and there’s only so much more damage they can do.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Clive said. “We know from Jason’s familiar that some people stayed behind when the astral space was resealed,” Clive said. “Emir and his people have been looking for a way back inside.”

Jason stayed quiet. He had put the issue of getting back inside the astral space to Shade, who had said it was a possibility, but not yet. The astral space had originally been stabilised by Shade’s former summoner, who used his own essence abilities as a foundation for much of the infrastructure. That meant installing his own familiar as an administrator and building the archway portals based on his teleportation ability, path of shadows.

Shade had postulated that once Jason’s own path of shadows power reached bronze rank and could open portals, then between it, Shade’s own knowledge of the infrastructure and a sufficiently skilled astral magic specialist, it might be possible to send people back into the astral space. Jason had, thus far, not shared this with anyone, as there were no guarantees. Opening his mouth now would just put a target on his back as the cult tried to kill him off before he ranked his power up.

“Coming back here is a risk,” Timos said.

“Our situation is desperate,” Zato said.

Zato was the last silver-ranker left in the Builder cult's local forces. Tasked with leading the evacuation when their island stronghold was invaded, he was able to escape with a good number of their people. None of his fellow silver-rankers made it through, however, leaving him in the position of leadership. Along with the church of Purity members working directly with them, they had decamped to the former Vane Estate.

"They know we've used this place in the past," Timos said.

"Our people still embedded in Greenstone, what few we have, confirmed that they already checked this place and believe we abandoned it," Zato said.

"And if they decided to check again, having smoked us from our last hiding hole?"

"Then the consequences will still be less severe than continued failure. The astral space Bahadir's people opened up is our last chance to prove ourselves to the leadership. Have you seen what they do to those who prove themselves more liability than asset?"

"Recycling," Timos said with a shudder. "I haven't seen it myself, but I've heard stories."

"We both have star seeds within us," Zato said. "There's no running or hiding. Only the glory of success or the price of failure. We need the infrastructure we left hidden here if we're going to claim that astral space."

They had arrived in what was once the underground ritual room of Landemere Vane and were working to create the portal that they needed. All the former contents had been stripped out, even the plaster on the walls and the wood on the floor, revealing hewn stone. Moulded into the stone of the floor was a breathtakingly intricate magical circle made of brass. They had created it by carving channels into the stone floor and pouring in molten metal. At the centre of the circle was a crude archway made of piled bricks, each of which had glyphs carved into every visible side.

"Our people inside the astral space have successfully planted the beacon," Zato said. "As soon as we detected it we were able to target it and start establishing the astral bridge. Once it's complete and the portal opens, everyone goes through."

"Everyone?" Timos asked.

"When the Builder claims the disconnected astral space, we shall be there, triumphantly arriving with the latest addition to his world. In any case, you do not want to be left here. Did you see the final estimations of how destructive claiming that astral space would be?"

"Not the final ones," Timos said. "I knew its unusual nature made it different. Last I heard was that it would devastate Greenstone."

“The knowledge used to secure that astral space to this world was obtained by the Reaper from the Builder himself,” Zato said. “Breaking those bonds will have a terrifying backlash. We need to take all our people, if only because Greenstone and everything else within a hundred kilometres of Sky Scar Lake will cease to exist.”

Timos’ past was littered with the dead he left behind him, yet that level of destruction gave even him pause.

“How many people will that kill?” he asked.

“Does it matter?” Zato asked.

“I suppose not,” Timos said. His flash of compassion was a flickering candle flame, quickly snuffed out. “Can we leave Thadwick behind?”

Chapter 197

Adequate

Jason took one look at the spartan dormitory of the Magic Society outpost and pulled out his cloud flask. The low, blocky building of desert stone contained little more than hard cots.

He chose the adaptive version of the cloud house and mist started spilling out of the flask. It formed into five small buildings in a ring, similar on the outside to the dormitories and connected by covered walkways. Inside was a very different story, with the soft, luxurious cloud-stuff interiors to which they had all become accustomed.

“This is very indulgent,” Henrietta said after her first night in the cloud house. Three of the five buildings were bedrooms, while the last two had a kitchen and dining room in one and a lounge with bar in the other.

“You’re free to pitch a tent outside, if you think it’ll make you soft,” Jason told her.

“It’s my responsibility to remain with the team,” she said hastily.

“We can expect to have a lot of work,” Henrietta said after they set off the next morning. Their planned route was to move north, checking in on the villages along the coast before turning deep inland and working their way back south before taking the river back to the city.

“The further we go, the more we should find overloaded adventure board notices,” Henrietta warned. “In some instances I’ll be splitting the team into two groups to cover more than one notice at a time, but no more than two. We want to keep at least some safety in numbers.”

“There’s a village on our list today,” Jason said. “Last time I saw it, it was a complete ruin. It’ll be good to see it rebuilt.”

“What happened to it?” Belinda asked. “Storm, or monster attack?”

“A tidal troll,” Jason said, “although it looked like a hurricane had passed through. This was just after Clive and I caught you and Sophie. Humphrey and Neil were off on the expedition and I took the contract alone. It was my first solo bronze-rank monster, and the first one I fought on purpose.”

“You took down a tidal troll alone?” Henrietta asked. “They’re tough and strong, even for bronze rank monsters. Humphrey and his might essence will be close to silver rank before he can match it.”

“They’re slow, though,” Jason said. “Big, slow and no weird powers. That made it the perfect enemy for me. Lots of surface area for Colin to latch onto.”

“I can see that,” Henrietta said. “If you were going slow and steady with the afflictions, though, it must have been hard to keep it out of the water.”

“It wasn’t what you’d call a fast mover,” Jason said. “By the time it ran for the ocean it was too late. I used my execute to close it out before the troll crossed the beach.”

“You’re the first focused affliction specialist I’ve met,” Henrietta said. “All the others were wide-area types. Very good at weeding out the weaklings and softening up the main opposition. They’re very popular on teams, which they have to be. They’re great openers, but not great closers, better against large numbers of weaker enemies.”

“That’s the opposite of you,” Humphrey said to Jason.

“I can see the appeal.” Jason said. “Just blanketing an area in afflictions would be nice. I was really envious when Beth Cavendish showed off powers like that and I was hoping to pick some up myself. I have to work to get people afflicted, and a lot of the time its better just to stab them in the neck and move on.”

“You need to get out of that habit,” Henrietta said. “The higher rank you get to, the less stabbing someone with a weapon becomes viable. A silver-ranker will pull your knife out of her throat and stab you right back with it. If you don’t have strength like Humphrey or passively add damage to your attacks like Sophie, ordinary attacks will be worthless. People get far too tough at higher rank and monsters are even worse. If you stab someone and want it to accomplish anything, there has to be a special attack to go with it.”

“Loading enemies up with afflictions at this rank feels pointless a lot of the time,” Jason said. “It doesn’t seem worth the effort when one good knife strike will get the job done.”

“That’s the wrong attitude,” Humphrey said. “The habits we ingrain now are the habits that define us in the future. You need to fight now the way you will then.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “I need to use those abilities to rank them up anyway.”

“Maybe ranking your affliction powers will give you some area effects,” Humphrey said to Jason.

“Not that I could find, when Clive and I looked through the Magic Society records,” Jason said. “It turns out my shadow teleport opens up portals, starting at bronze-rank, though. My range will be much shorter than Hester’s, and it won’t be able to transport people higher than bronze rank, but it’s still awesome.”

“My teleport will be long-range and let me take people with me at bronze,” Humphrey said.

“My personal space power, rune gate, also creates a portal at bronze,” Clive added.

“Hold on,” Henrietta said. “I knew about Humphrey’s power, but your team will have three portal users?”

“Mine’s technically not a portal,” Humphrey said.

“That doesn’t matter,” Henrietta said. “I thought it was bad enough when four of you had personal storage powers, but three portals? And you, Clive, getting both in the same power? Most teams would kill to get a portal user on their team.”

“Don’t tell Emir,” Jason said. “He’s already trying to poach Clive as it is.”

“You’re in demand,” Belinda said to Clive. “You should negotiate for a bigger cut of the loot.”

“The question,” Clive said, “was whether Jason’s powers would gain some wide-area effects. There are a lot of gaps in the Society’s knowledge regarding Jason’s abilities. His familiars are unusual, of course, but that’s true of many adventurers. He’s not the only adventurer to have an apocalypse beast familiar.”

“He’s not?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Clive said. “There’s an active adventurer with another swarm-type apocalypse beast. Desolation locusts, they’re called. It’s not Jason’s familiar powers I’m thinking about, though. Many focused affliction specialists find their abilities adding wide-area aspects somewhere around the silver-gold level. Out of Jason’s sin and doom essence powers, the Society only has records of what one of them does beyond bronze rank. I’m looking forward to filling those gaps as he ranks up.”

“The sin essence is extremely rare,” Jason said, “and apparently not popular, for a legendary essence.”

“It does take a particular kind of arrogance to absorb the essence of defying the gods into your soul,” Neil said.

“I don’t see it that way,” Jason said. “The sin essence isn’t about defying gods.”

“Then what is it about?” Neil asked. “Because it really seems like it is.”

“It’s about the nature of sin,” Jason said. “A sin is a transgression against a set of rules.”

“Exactly,” Neil said. “Rules set down by the gods.”

“But those rules are arbitrary,” Jason said. “Each god had their own set of sins. For Knowledge, lying is a sin, but for Deception, or even the Merchant, lying is a part of their core practices. Each god has their own set of rules.”

“So?” Neil asked.

“So, I don’t think the sin essence is about violating rules of the gods. Not for me, at least. Maybe it works that way for some others.”

“It definitely does,” Clive said. “I’ve seen some of the combinations in the Magic Society records.”

“Anyway,” Jason said, “it doesn’t work like that for me. My sin essence, I’m pretty sure, is about having my own rules that others transgress.”

“Oh, so you’re not violating the rules of the gods,” Neil said. “You’re positioning yourself alongside them. Let me retract what I said about your breathtaking arrogance.”

The trickiest part of the adventure board notices in coastal villages was the preponderance of ocean monsters. Clive’s air bubble ritual was fine for slow underwater travel, but wouldn’t hold up to combat. Knowing their route through the coastal villages would cause this issue, they had picked up a supply of water-breathing potions from Jory before they left.

They were saving the potions for when they needed the whole team. They resolved most of the notices by relying on Jason’s magic umbrella, while his necklace of the deep was handed over to Humphrey.

Item: [Necklace of the Deep] (iron rank, uncommon)

A necklace containing the power of the deep ocean giants (jewellery, necklace).

- Effect: Ignore the effects of high pressure and pressure variance.
- Effect: Breathe water.
- Effect: Your weight is increased. You cannot use iron-rank weight reduction abilities or items.

Jason’s bubble, and the magic umbrella that created it, were quite stable and handled underwater contact with no issues. As the umbrella floated over his head by itself, it left both of his hands free, while the bubble of air meant his movements weren’t slowed down by water resistance. The biggest impediment to his combat power was the inability to pull out Colin, who couldn’t handle the salty water. The intangible Shade and Gordon handled it just fine, however.

The necklace didn’t have the same effect of freeing up movement, but it offered the secure footing of extra weight and Humphrey’s superhuman strength did the rest.

The pair emerged from the ocean after taking out a crab monster that was impacting the village’s seabed trawling operations. The water quintessence that formed along the coast north and south of the delta was the bulk of a village’s earnings. Their teammates were waiting for him on the shore.

“You should try going without your umbrella,” Clive suggested. “Getting past the drowning reflex is a good way to break the breathing habit.”

“He’s only iron rank,” Henrietta said. “He’ll drown.”

“He’s an outworlder,” Clive said. “His body got a head start on the magic transition.”

“I take it you’ve all had the talk, then,” Henrietta said.

“The talk?” Jason asked.

“The ‘we’re all turning into wet, magic flesh sacks,’ talk.”

“Yeah, we had that one,” Jason said. “Next we’re going to tell Neil where babies come from.”

The biggest time sink during their journey was not going to be travel, with the heavy skimmer Clive secured careening them over the desert in speed and relative comfort. It was the time it took to hunt down the monsters on the adventure board notices that soaked up their time. If the monsters had been closer and more of a threat to the village then they would have sent for immediate adventurer response.

The first village was the one closest to the city and in least need of extra attention. It was the remote villages out in the desert where they anticipated the notices to be stacked up. The second of three villages they planned to visit that day was the one where Jason had fought the tidal ogre.

Having been completely rebuilt, he didn’t recognise it as they arrived to the warm welcome of the villagers. After they had been forced to escape their ravaged homes, the Adventure Society had avenged their fallen, reclaimed their village and even helped fund reconstruction. They insisted on showing their gratitude with a small luncheon feast before the adventurers even had a chance to look at the adventure notice board.

They finally turned to the task that brought them to the village. It was a bronze-rank monster, but not an aggressive one. After the tidal troll, simply avoiding the territory the beast had claimed was an easy task for the villagers. This was especially true since it’s territory was a desolate stretch of desert with little value to anyone. They had simply posted warnings on the coastal road warning traders to detour around, a common enough thing in a world where monsters were a fact of life.

“This will be the first bronze-rank monster that many of you have faced,” Henrietta told the team. “The villagers have identified it as a stone lurker, which is a common monster in this area, so it should be reliable. It’s tough, strong and camouflages itself well in rocky desert areas. If you catch it in the sand it will be easy to spot, but keep a sharp eye out if you start seeing rocks. It’s very good at hiding it’s aura.”

“Also, don’t assume there is only one,” Humphrey added. “Jason, you’ll be the primary damage dealer.”

“You should be wary, Jason,” Clive said. “A stone lurker isn’t as strong as a tidal troll but it isn’t as slow, either. It can also make charging dashes, which it will in an ambush.”

There turned out to be two of the stone lurkers but the fight went well as they could have hoped. Sophie, with her enhanced aura senses, detected them right before they attacked. She and Humphrey intercepted them, her holding off one as Jason went to work on it. They already had Humphrey and Neil’s summons out, which they directed to support Humphrey.

The stone lurkers were large, bipedal lizards that hammered out with huge, knuckled fists. Their strength was enough that meeting them fist to fist rattled Sophie’s arm in spite of her attack-negating power, but she mostly dodged the attacks, frustrating the giant lizard. It was surprisingly fast for it’s size, but that was nothing to Sophie.

Humphrey didn’t have Sophie’s defensive strength so the rest of the team supported him. Clive and Belinda opened up, chaining Clive’s powerful attack spell. Humphrey held the line as Neil’s shields protected him, one after another, then let the summons take the brunt until Neil’s abilities became available again.

Jason used the reach of his shadow arm to get his attacks in from safety. Many of his afflictions were resisted at first, although his resistance-diminishing aura was stronger than in the past and almost half of them got through. Gordon’s unrelenting beam and Jason’s conjured dagger both inflicted the vulnerable condition, lowering the lizard’s resistances for each instance that took hold, so it was not long before Jason had his full suite of afflictions on the lizard. He could have unleashed Colin, but kept the leeches in reserve, in case there was a third monster, waiting to pounce.

Once his afflictions were locked in, Jason used his punishment spell. It inflicted damage for each affliction of certain types on the target, which were rapidly stacking up, but the bronze-rank monster was able to sustain that much from Jason’s iron-rank spell. He couldn’t use it again for half a minute, so he moved on to the second monster while Sophie continued to keep the first one busy.

Jason added his efforts to the others. His afflictions were soon locked in and the fight became a matter of time. He used his punishment spell every time it became available, causing more and more of the monster’s flesh to die as the afflictions mounted. In the end, he finished the monsters, one after the other, with his transcendent damage execute power.

The team were tired, stamina exhausted and mana spent. Against bronze-rank monsters, even when the fight went their way at every stage, the battle was a slog. Clive and Belinda had learned that endurance was the key when their combined efforts, while hurting the monster, weren't enough to take it down before they were reduced to ineffectually firing wands from the back.

"You did adequately," Henrietta told them in the aftermath. "Don't think things will always go that well, though. There will be hard fights ahead and you will be challenged. When I step in to save you, chances are you will have been hurt already. Badly hurt. You all need to be ready for that."

The team returned to the village to notify them they could remove the detour signs from the coast road. The team then moved on quickly as the graciousness of the villagers was appreciated, but also time-consuming.

Riding away, Sophie looked back at the village, then locked a thoughtful gaze on Asano's back.

"What is it?" Belinda asked quietly.

"He didn't tell them," Sophie said.

"Didn't tell who what?"

"Asano," Sophie said. "They don't know he's the one who killed the monster that destroyed their village, and he didn't tell them."

Chapter 198

Trash Bonanza

Jason set up the cloud house after they cleared out the adventure notices of the third village of the day. Henrietta gathered the team together to talk about their performance in the day's combat.

"Obviously, most of those notices weren't any kind of a challenge," she said. "As a team, and even alone for most of you, very few iron-rank enemies will pose any kind of threat. That's acceptable for now, but a full team of capable iron-rankers should comfortably handle not just most iron-rank monsters but bronze-rank monsters as well. One to one, any adventurer should be worth more than any monster of their own rank. That is not to say you all need to be able to handle monsters alone. Neil and Clive, your powers are obvious suited to a group environment. You need to make sure that your value to the team is greater than any monster to their pack."

Neil threw a wary glance in Jason's direction.

"What?" Jason asked.

"Nothing smarmy to say about my value to the team?"

"Are you kidding?" Jason asked. "You're awesome. If the team gets stuck in a situation where you or me has to be kicked off the bus, it's not going to be you."

"Jason is right," Henrietta said. "Neil, you are the most indispensable member of the team. That does not mean you don't have improvements to make, which goes for all of you. You beat the bronze-rank monsters today, but if you're still performing at that level by the time we get to back to Greenstone, then I will personally see to it you disband. I will not have my brother in a stagnant team, because right now you're all potential and no payoff."

She panned her gaze over the group.

"You have clearly been strategising around versatility," she went on, "which is a good fit for your team makeup and power sets. Now I've seen you in action against a live enemy who poses an actual challenge, I could easily recognise the factor holding you back. That factor is a lack of dynamism."

"We're using a variety of strategies," Humphrey said, "and we're constantly devising more."

"And that is a good foundation," Henrietta said. "You're combining your abilities well enough, but only when you fall into those devised strategies. When pushed out of them, you fall back to individual efforts. You need to internalise those strategies to the point that you can improvise on the move and adapt to the different configurations required in the

moment. The key is that when you adapt, you have to include your team members instead of falling back on what you know works just for you.”

“Trust,” Jason said.

“Precisely,” Henrietta said. “To make the most of your versatility, Improvisation will be critical. You have to know what your team is capable of and trust them to do it. You have to learn to read each other. No discussion, no hesitation. Assess, adapt, act.”

“Surely that’s a matter of experience,” Neil said.

“It’s exactly a matter of experience,” Henrietta said. “Not just any experience, though. You have to know everything your team is capable of and you won’t figure that out if you keep falling into the same, easy patterns. From now onward, I will be picking you out for notices in different groupings. When you’ve been doing this yourselves, you’ve been going for the obvious, complimentary groupings. Jason and Sophie, Clive and Belinda, Humphrey and Neil. You’re going to find these new groups I put you in awkward, perhaps even dangerous. Your job will be to tease out everything your team mates are capable of. To find the synergies you never saw and exercise the abilities that have gone neglected. If nothing else, it will help you rank up all your powers on the way to bronze.”

Henrietta put her designs into action with the next village they came to. First up was the pairing of Jason and Belinda. Belinda had fallen into a pattern of resetting and duplicating Clive’s infrequent, high-impact powers, a tactic worthless with Jason’s rapid, low-impact abilities. They ended up with Belinda serving as a makeshift guardian, drawing enemy attention while Jason went to work.

“Pathetic,” was Henrietta’s assessment. “Jason, you’re squandering Belinda’s powers and trying to do it all yourself. Expect to be placed in this pairing again and again until you find the synergies that make you fight like a team instead of like nervous adolescents, fumbling around one another.”

“I think that means you, Humphrey,” Jason said.

“Is there something in my tone that suggests inviting light-hearted whimsy?” Henrietta snapped. “If you have time to levy your wit against my brother, Mr Asano, I suggest you leverage it in the development of your combat skills, rather than your socials ones.”

Humphrey received a similar dressing down after being paired with Clive, Henrietta berating them for working as a pair of disconnected individuals.

“It’s not enough to be a distraction for your damage dealer,” Henrietta told her brother. “You’re trying to set up Clive to use his attack spell, as if he didn’t have nineteen other essence abilities. I want to see you luring people into his trap spell. Baiting the

enemy into making big attacks where his retribution damage powers will have the greatest effect. And you, Clive need to stop waiting for everyone else to give you your chances. You have to make them yourself.”

As they went from village to village, fight to fight, the team was placed in a variety of configurations. Neil was grouped with Jason, whose usual stealth tactics would leave the healer alone and exposed. Then he was paired with Sophie against a high-defence monster. Neil and Sophie made for a combination even harder to harm than the monster itself, but they lacked the offensive power to hurt it in turn, turning the fight into a battle of attrition.

Belinda saw the most action of anyone in the team, combined with everyone else in different configurations of two or three. Not only were her powers the most varied and untested, she was also the one most in need of experience.

The next bronze-rank monster encounter came at the final coastal village before their route would take them inland. Henrietta’s intention had been to let them face bronze-rank monsters in smaller groups, but this one was an aquatic monster. Not only was she allowing the full group to act together but also participating herself.

The monster wasn’t notoriously strong, but it was aquatic and had the environmental advantage. They used water breathing potions, Jason finally taking Clive’s advice and getting Humphrey to hold his head under water until he gasped out and broke the reflex to breathe. It took multiple attempts before Jason could actively stop breathing without his instincts freaking out and starting him up again. Only after finally overcoming the drowning reflex did he manage it.

“This feels very weird,” he croaked in a gasping voice. “I have to get used to talking when I’m not breathing.”

“No rush,” Neil said.

“It’s kind of unnerving,” Jason continued. “It’s like my body senses something is wrong. It definitely doesn’t want me wasting breath I don’t have on talking.”

“Trust your instincts,” Neil said.

“That’s not helping,” Henrietta said to Neil.

“It’s helping me,” Neil said.

“It will take time before your body adapts,” Clive said. “It’s actually an unusual and fascinating process. Your body, as it stops doing things the way a mortal body does, will start find new ways. Your voice, for example, won’t come from breathing through your throat but by using vibrations to generate sound. It’ll take a while before you sound like

your old self, but along the way you'll find yourself picking up interesting tricks. Throwing your voice or projecting it to fill up a room. Or just blasting louder than you ever could with something as maudlin as lungs."

"Don't try and rely on not breathing in combat, yet," Henrietta told Jason. "You've been breathing your whole life and you don't just kick the habit that easily. You can do it fine, standing around, nice and safe. You go underwater and get caught up in a fight and you'll find that drowning reflex coming right back."

The fight against the aquatic monster was a mess. While breathing water, spells could still be cast but it had to be done with careful enunciation of the incantations, slowing the process down. The leverage required to swing weapons underwater was impossible to achieve without an item like the necklace of the deep that Humphrey was wearing, and even then it took all his strength to swing his sword through the water to even minimal effect. Mobility was obviously impacted underwater and team coordination fell apart, even using Jason's voice chat for silent, telepathic speech.

"That was an absolute shambles," Henrietta told them as they dragged themselves out of the surf after eking out a victory. She had done much of the work, using a spell that allowed her familiars to act freely under the water.

"Neil, you were the solitary stand-out," she continued. "The way you covered the team and their many, many mistakes was a credit to you. Well done. How much mana do you have left?"

"I'm drained," he said, collapsing onto his back on the sandy beach.

"And that's how close you were to failure," Henrietta told the others. "If the fight had gone on any longer, there was a danger of some of you suffering real damage when Neil's mana ran out."

"The fight was in an extreme environment against a bronze-rank monster," Humphrey said in defence of the team. "If you expected us to do well, you wouldn't have participated yourself."

"And if I wasn't here to participate?" Henrietta challenged her brother. "What would you have done?"

"Sent for someone else," Humphrey said. "If it was aggressive enough to leave the water to attack, we could have fought it on land. If not, we'd have had the time to send for an adventurer better suited to fighting it."

Henrietta grinned, surprising the team.

“Good answer,” she said. “Recognising when not to fight is also a strength worth cultivating. If the top reason adventurers die is bad information, the second is lacking the courage to admit they aren’t a match for the fight in front of them.”

“Not to dismiss the fact that I was the best,” Neil said from where he was sprawled in the sand, “but how useful is learning to fight underwater anyway?”

“We won’t always get to pick our fights, or the chance to walk away,” Jason said. “We have to be ready for the fights we don’t want. That fight showed us the strength of having the right items to compensate for environmental challenges. If we pick some more up and keep them in storage, then with some more experience we should at least be able to hold our own.”

“Asano is right,” Henrietta said. “Always be as ready as you can. We’re done with these coastal villages, but once you’re back in Greenstone, pick up some items and practise more underwater combat in the mirage chamber.”

As the team turned their path inland, they started crossing the empty desert sands. The heavy skimmer allowed them to travel in relative comfort, sitting under an awning as the seemingly endless desert passed by. The air was hot, rushing over their faces with the speed of the skimmer, but not oppressively so with milder winter temperatures.

Jason and Clive both had oasis bracelets that shielded them from the heat, as did Belinda. Jory had gifted it to her in preparation for her first real adventuring expedition. For the rest of the team he had provided less-valuable, but still welcome heat protection for a nominal fee. Sophie, Neil and Humphrey all wore head-cloths that were alchemically treated to remain wet and cool. Henrietta had a fire essence and could eat worse heat than the desert could throw at her.

They made their way through remote villages that were torn between gratitude for their arrival and frustration it had taken so long. The villages were all located on oases sourced from apertures to the rainforest astral space. One village had even experienced attacks by Builder cultists who had fled through the local aperture, following the battle with the expedition in the astral space.

The villages in the sandy regions of the desert were largely there to serve the more remote spirit coin farms. With many magical practises prohibited in the area of the sensitive coin farms, the people staffed there turned to nearby villages.

Moving deeper in, the sand turned to rocky wastes. Most of the villagers they encountered quarried the stone for which Greenstone was named, while others were mining towns. Most of those towns were built around dig sites for a magical ore that

appeared in the desert, and while investigating to serve his own curiosity, Jason made an interesting discovery.

The magical mineral sun gold could be found in iron and bronze-rank veins and mostly appeared in arid lands that saw clear skies all year round. For that reason, most sun gold mines were located in deserts. Sun gold was always found with large quantities of what they called trash gold, which was normal rank and had no magical properties. It simply formed in large quantities around sun gold veins and had to be carefully separated from the valuable stuff in the smelting process.

Jason picked some of the discarded metal.

Item: [Gold Nugget] (normal rank, common)

A lump of non magical gold. Has little value in worlds with magical equivalents (crafting material, metal).

➤ Effect: Non-magical crafting material.

The sun gold was refined by a local whose iron and transmutation essences turned him into a human smelting machine. Trash gold was a cheap cosmetic material considered too heavy to be worth shipping off and was largely discarded. Jason paid the smelter to go through the slag piles, helping him experiment with what sizes he could fit into his inventory. It turned out he could stack twenty ten-kilogram bars of purified trash gold into a single slot, as the restrictions were more size than weight-based. Jason left the village with two slots filled with heavy gold bars.

“What do you want all that trash gold for?”

“Someday I’m going to go home,” Jason said. “Where I come from, there’s no such thing as magic gold. In my world, trash gold is just gold.”

Chapter 199

Strangeness

As they went from town to town, clearing off huge stacks of adventure notices, not everything went as planned. Henrietta continued breaking the team into inefficient combinations, which was only the start of things going wrong.

Humphrey had been regularly summoning his dragon tooth warriors, both to practise working with them and level the power. Each time he did, he used the summoner's die to alter their form. The die had proven an effective boost, turning his warriors into hulking gorillas, swift hunting cats or even giant, blood-draining spiders.

The way the die worked was to roll it in the summoning circle, which for Humphrey was a simple circle of powdered chalk. This served to activate the power, calling out the summons in their altered form. Three giant fish made of ivory appeared on the ground, wrapped in chain mail and flopping around like fish on a dock.

"What is this?" Humphrey asked.

"Looks like one of the sides on that die is fish," Jason said, giving Humphrey a consoling pat on the back.

"I can't resummon them for six hours."

"Tough luck buddy," Jason said. "I guess you're fighting this monster without them, unless you can find a lake real quick."

Amongst the iron-rank monsters they were clearing out like they were magical exterminators, they came across the occasional additional notice for a bronze-rank monster. This was where the team faced challenges that truly tested their abilities.

Henrietta assigned Neil, Clive and Belinda to hunt down a monster called a sand hulk, a lesser giant that was common in desert areas. Without Sophie, Humphrey or even Jason to obstruct or distract, the team had little in the way of front-line options against the slow but powerful monster.

Belinda's counterfeit combatant power was at the bottom of iron rank, nowhere close to the point that they would risk her attempting to hold it off. That left Neil's summon, the chrysalis golem, which only took one punch each from the monster's huge fists before retreating into its harmless chrysalis state. It could no longer fight in that state, but not even the giant, twice as tall as person was able to damage it. The giant wasted precious moments that the team used to retreat as it pummelled ineffectually at the crystal cocoon.

The team fought a stalling retreat, blasting away at the monster with wands and spells. Clive's familiar, Onslow, proved a relatively effective source of attacks. Any time Clive wasn't casting his own spells, he was continually recharging the tortoise's elemental powers. The only issue was the tortoise was even slower than the giant, so Clive had to periodically return Onslow to the rune in his skin, then move back before pulling the familiar out again.

Belinda's lantern familiar also sent bolts of force in the sand hulk but was much less effective. The disruptive-force attacks were better against magic in incorporeal entities, rather than a solid, physical monster.

They threw power after power at the sand hulk, which largely shrugged it off. It walked right over Clive and Belinda's rune traps. Belinda's lightning tether dealt damage the further the target moved from it, but even at maximum ranged its damage was superficial. Clive's big attack spell, looped and copied by Belinda, was the only thing that inflicted any real damage.

Belinda glanced at Clive, who nodded and she used her pit of the reaper ability. It opened up a dimensional pit, not an actual hole in the ground but an extra-dimensional one that didn't occupy space and was open to normal space at the top. The walls were frictionless and anything inside would suffer ongoing necrotic damage.

The team's concern was that they had looked up the sand hulk and knew it could transform into a cloud of sand. There was little information about the sand cloud form and Clive was wary of it. They didn't know if it could fly or use some kind of scouring sandstorm attack they couldn't defend against. They had held off using the pit as they were concerned about it triggering the power but they needed all the time they could get to burn the monster down. If it couldn't escape the hole and they could shoot down at it like fish in a barrel, then all the better.

The sluggish monster was not hard to drop into the pit, but their first concern was proven valid as it flew right back out in the form of a sand dervish. It moved no faster than the monster's previous pace, however, and retook the form of a giant.

In the time the pit had delayed it, Neil's golem had the chance to catch up. It had hatched from its cocoon some time ago, but was not much faster than the giant. The golem's new form was something between crystalline and gelatinous. It wrapped a pair of long, rubbery appendages around the monster, which immediately began to retaliate.

The monster ripped off the gooey appendages but the golem simply grew more from its fluid body mass. The monster pounded on the golem's body, which rippled like a jellied dessert as it absorbed the impact. The monster tried transforming into sand to escape the

grip, only to find that as its body started changing into sand, that sand became stuck to the golem. The monster halted the transformation and went back to trying to free itself through main force.

With the giant at a standstill, the team intensified their attacks, throwing everything they had at it. Neil's summon had performed its function of adapting to the needs of the fight admirably, but it was ultimately an iron-rank monster fighting a bronze-rank one. It couldn't harm the sand hulk, merely tie it up for a brief but valuable few moments. Eventually the sand hulk tore its way free by ripping the golem into globulous chunks and tossing them aside. Once the golem fell inert, the giant turned back to the team.

Despite its incredible resilience, the monster was in a bad state, by this point. The sheer accumulation of damage had left it pitted and burned, spilling out sand like it was blood. Neil and Clive had both taken the chance to use powerful retribution effects on the golem, which had turned the damage from the sand hulk's own powerful blows back on itself. Clive's spell had continued to have a large impact and the simple accumulation of damage from rune traps, wands, Onslow's elemental attacks and other abilities had simply piled up.

When it was clear the monster would break free of the golem, Belinda and Clive had set up a whole line of rune traps and the monster waded over them, one after another. This was enough to finally make the sand hulk decide to flee, which it tried to do in the form of a slow-moving sand cloud. Clive used his big attack spell, wrath of the magister, one more time. He used the most powerful version, a prismatic beam launching into the cloud. The colours dimmed, one by one, until the beam was black and a void sphere appeared in the middle of the cloud. The sand was sucked through as if the void sphere was a hole in the universe, the once seemingly indestructible monster annihilated into nothingness.

The weary group trudged back to the rest of the team. They looked to Henrietta for her assessment, although it was Jason who spoke first.

"I don't think there's anything to loot," he said. "Neil?"

"I was too far away," Neil said. "It wasn't in range of my aura."

"Maybe there are some scraps left behind from where they attacked it along the way," Jason suggested.

"Loot can wait," Henrietta said and gave the tired combatants an assessing look. "I took away the toughest and most mobile members of your team and you still got the job done. This was an acceptable performance. If we get another sand hulk it's yours to fight, Asano."

“Won’t that be an easy one for me?” Jason asked. “A big, slow monster like that?”

“The Magic Society entry doesn’t say if that cloud form clears off afflictions,” Henrietta said. “I’m willing to bet it does. I’m curious as to what you’ll do about that.”

Late in the evening, Jason stepped outside the cloud house. They were out in the desert, in between villages, and it had once again taken the form of a set of flat stone buildings.

Jason concentrated and stairs appeared on the side of one of the buildings. It might look and feel like stone, but still moulded itself as the cloud-stuff it truly was. Jason was becoming more and more adept at controlling it. He walked up the stairs to the roof where, to his surprise, he found Clive’s familiar, Onslow, standing in the middle of the roof.

“How did you get up here?”

Onslow responded only with a slow yawn.

“Keep it casual, don’t reveal all your cards,” Jason said. “I can respect that. Mind if I join you?”

The closest Onslow came to a response was an impassive blink.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

A patch of roof rose up to form a chair of clouds and Jason sat down. He concentrated on bringing his breathing to a halt. Henrietta had been on the mark about needing time to adjust to not breathing and he had been practising of a night, wearing his warmest clothes in the chilly desert night.

Neither moon was in the sky but he had no trouble seeing out over the barren landscape. His midnight eyes power was edging achingly close to becoming his first bronze-rank ability and his vision in the dark was near absolute. Originally, the power had let him see with washed-out colour. Now he could see as clear as day, yet he could also see the darkness almost like a physical substance, oddly transposed over his vision. It should have clashed, yet seemed to him part of a natural whole, even though the result looked something like an alien landscape. It was nothing that his old human eyes could ever perceive.

Midnight eyes had been his very first essence ability. Compared to the other things he could do it was positively mundane, yet it was also the most emblematic of everything he had been through. Because of that power, the way he looked at the world had literally changed. It was the still moments, alone in the dark, when Jason most felt the strangeness of his new world. More than that, the strangeness of what he had become living in it.

He practised speaking without breathing, using exercises Henrietta had taught him. Onslow was watching him and Jason retrieved Colin, who piled up in front of the tortoise. Onslow tilted his head to look at the pile as Team Colin undulated excitedly in front of it.

Eventually Jason tired of practise and decided to get some rest, collecting Colin and making his way back down the stairs. There, he had an odd encounter as two people emerged at the same time from different buildings. They were both also Jason.

The three Jason's looked at each other. One had an embarrassed look on his face, the other, a bushy moustache.

"I take it Clive is still trying to have you replicate my interface ability?"

"Yeah," Belinda/Jason said with an apologetic smile.

"Biscuits!"

Jason tousled Stash/Jason's hair. "What did Humphrey say about sweet things before bed?"

"Warm milk?" Stash/Jason ventured.

"That, I think we can manage," Jason said.

"Yay!" Stash/Jason cheered. "Why is everyone better looking than me?"

"That's enough out of you, dragon."

Chapter 200

Full Circle

The six-legged lizards were not especially dangerous individually. They were no bigger than medium-sized dogs and posed little threat. What made them troublesome was that they were extraordinary in both their hardiness and their number. A group of lizards was normally called a lounge, but the mass of creatures the team was viewing from a distance would be better described as a swarm or even a carpet.

“Desert horde lizards,” Henrietta said. “They’re not a real danger to an adventurer, but they’re a lot harder to kill than they look. Most of the time they’ll just lay about in the desert sun, not bothering anyone. If they’re on the move, though, they’re looking to feast. They can come down on a town like a swarm of giant locusts. Regular people have no chance of putting them down.”

She turned to the team, looking down at the monsters from a high ridge. “Any volunteers?”

“Let Belinda and I go,” Jason said.

Henrietta raised her eyebrows. She had paired Jason and Belinda together the most because the combination had shown the least results. While their effectiveness had improved, that improvement had come from combining individual effort instead of operating as a unit.

“You have something to show me?” Henrietta asked.

“We’ve been working on some things,” Belinda said. “This should be a good enemy to show off the results.”

Henrietta acceded and Jason and Belinda made their way down the sharp ridge. The lizards were following the base of the ridge around, so by going down one side, they had time to make preparations before the lizards arrived. They called out their familiars, except for Colin, and Jason pulled out a large flat board, setting it on the ground. Belinda took out a stick of chalk and started drawing out a ritual circle.

Clive was the team's master of ritual magic, with a breadth of knowledge that regularly staggered Jason, who was learning from Clive. Belinda was likewise learning from Clive, but for her, it was more like filling in gaps. When it came to a certain branch of magic, the deception and intrusion branch, even Clive had something to learn from her. The circle she was drawing out wouldn't visibly disguise them, but it would contain any aura they inadvertently revealed while using essence abilities.

Desert horde lizards were short-sighted, relying more on aura senses than normal sensation to sense prey or other predators. So long as the lizards had something else to hold their attention, Jason and Belinda should be able to cast spells from a distance without being detected.

They sent their familiars forward to meet the monsters as they came around the ridge. Remaining behind were Colin, still in Jason's blood, and one of Shade's three bodies, currently serving as Jason's shadow.

The lizards became a boiling cauldron of chaos as they surged on the familiars, the aggressive monsters piling over each other to reach them. Their savage bites had little effect, with Gordon, Shade and Belinda's living illusion all being incorporeal. Belinda's flying lantern floated out of reach, blasting down bolts of force. The inherent magic in the monsters allowed them to minimally affect the familiars, but not to the point they posed a genuine threat, even in massive numbers.

The familiars, in turn, didn't make much of a dent on the lizards. Only Gordon, with his resonating-force beam, inflicted any effective damage. The goal was not to inflict damage, however, but to hold the attention of the monsters. Only once Jason and Belinda were certain the lizards were focused entirely on the familiars did they start casting spells. Jason started, chanting a spell that, from the victim's perspective, gave no indication of where the caster was. At the distance they were at, there was no chance of the lizards hearing his quiet recitation.

"Carry the mark of your transgressions."

Ability: [Castigate] (Sin)

- Spell (curse, holy).
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 8 (19%).

 - Effect (iron): Burns a painful brand into the target, inflicting slight transcendent damage and the [Sin] and [Mark of Sin] conditions. The brand cannot be healed so long as the target retains any instances of [Sin].

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

 - [Mark of Sin] (affliction, holy): Prevents aura retraction. Cannot be cleansed while target retains any instances of [Sin] or [Legacy of Sin].
-

A small amount of transcendent damage burned a brand into one of the lizards and it gained two afflictions. The important one was sin, which increased any necrotic damage. There was no indication as the source of the spell and Jason's rigid aura control kept it from leaking as he used the ability. Even if it had, Belinda's ritual circle would have contained it. The unintelligent lizard became frenzied as it renewed its attention on the obvious enemies, the familiars.

Right after Jason used his spell, Belinda used the same incantation and cast the same spell on a second lizard. Her aura control wasn't as practised as Jason's, which was why the ritual was primarily for her.

Ability: [Mirror Magic] (Magic)

- Special Ability.
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: Varies.

- Current rank: Iron 2 (91%).

- Effect (iron): For a short time after a nearby ally uses a spell, you may use the same spell one time. The strength of the spell you cast is based on your attributes and the rank of this ability and your attributes, not those of the original caster. This may make your version of the spell higher or lower rank than the original, including losing or gaining additional effects from higher ranks. This ability has the same cost and cooldown as the original spell.

In the past, Belinda had mostly used the ability to copy Clive's potent attack spell. As she and Jason had spent evenings looking for more ways to synergise their powers, they had a revelation. Jason's abilities might be less impactful, but they also had no cooldown. In circumstances where he needed to use them over and over, Belinda could double the rate of application.

Jason followed up his castigate spell with inexorable doom, to get the sin affliction multiplying. Like his first spell, it gave no indication of its source, manifesting directly on the target. This was rare in abilities with more immediate effects and most often found in single-target afflictions powers. Such abilities could ignore many physical obstructions, so long as the target was visible. It took magical protection, such as the common mana shield ability, to prevent the easy use of such a power.

Jason's familiars were his key tools in dealing with that particular problem. Colin could slither right through the shield, which didn't register movement as an attack unless it was much faster than Colin could manage. Only if spraying out of Jason would it count, so Jason would usually have to bait such enemy into Colin's range.

Shade couldn't usually get through such powers, with magic shields blocking even movement from incorporeal creatures. With the mana shield ability specifically, though, which directly manifested mana as a shield, he could drain mana directly from it. Mana shield was an extremely common power, available through many essences. Clive and Neil both possessed it as did Sigrid and Claire, the healer from Rick Geller's team. It made Shade very useful for breaking through that specific power.

For Gordon, breaking magic shields was a much more straightforward problem. His disruptive-force beam wasn't wildly powerful, but its sustained effect would break down magical shields very quickly. However the shield went down, it would give Jason a chance to get a spell in before the shield snapped back into place.

None of that was necessary against the lizards, however. Jason would cast his castigate on one lizard and follow up with inexorable doom, Belinda following up on a second. He used castigate, she used castigate. He used inexorable doom, she did the same. She could only duplicate a spell once for each time it was cast by the original user. The cost and duration of the ability were equal to the cost of the copied power.

Neither of Jason's spells had a cooldown, so they were able to paint the lizards with brands and afflictions. Both spells had a moderate mana cost, so it wasn't until they were done that their mana pools started to get low. Jason's wasn't as bad as Belinda; his recovery attribute was more than half a rank higher hers and his mana had been naturally replenishing faster. She drank a mana potion to compensate.

"Is that all of them?" Belinda asked.

"It should be most of them at least," Jason said. "You put on the big show and I'll mop up after. Call them back, Shade."

Jason's shadow was one of Shade's three bodies, while the others were helping hold the lizard's attention. One of the tricks Belinda and Jason had developed was to use Shade to direct their familiars allowing them to work at a distance effectively. Belinda's familiars didn't hesitate to come back, then when Shade relayed the call to return.

Most of the lizards had suffered brands put in place with unstoppable transcendent damage, far from crippling but painful. It had sent them into a frenzy in their pursuit of the familiars, which they immediately chased as the familiars started to fall back toward Belinda and Jason.

The lizards were collected nicely in their pursuit, so when a crystal rod appeared in their midst, they were all within range of its effect.

Ability: [Force Tether] (Trap)

- Conjunction.
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 1 (34%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a crystal rod, from which a tether of shimmering force connects to all nearby enemies within a moderate range. Tethered enemies are dragged toward the rod, which is protected by a force field that inflicts moderate resonating force-damage to anyone in contact with it. If the force-field is ruptured, it explodes in a wave of resonating-force damage. If the rod is destroyed or removed from its location then it explodes in a wave of disruptive-force damage. Dimensional displacement, such as teleportation, severs the tether. Untethered enemies who enter within range of the rod become tethered. Only one rod may exist at a time.

The force tether was a powerful control effect against groups of weaker enemies. Stronger enemies, or someone like Humphrey, could resist the pull of the rod with physical might. The lizards, however, were nowhere near as strong as they were tough. The tether quickly dragged them into a pile, burying the rod and its small force field underneath them. Belinda then used another conjunction power.

Ability: [Pit of the Reaper] (Trap)

- Conjunction (dimension).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 2 minutes.

- Current rank: Iron 1 (14%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a dimensional space pit on any horizontal surface. The surface does not need to be solid or supportive. Anyone inside the pit suffers ongoing necrotic damage. If this spell is cast again while a pit already exists, the existing pit vanishes, depositing anyone inside upon the surface on which the pit was conjured.

A hole in the ground appeared under the pile of lizards and they fell in. A few lizards around the periphery remained outside of the pit from the sheer size of the monster pile managed to scramble out of the pit's area in time, but the crystal rod that was the source of the force tether in the air also fell down, dragging them over the edge and into the pit with the others. Being moved from its original location triggered the rod and its force field to explode, the twin waves of force smashing lizards into the frictionless walls of the pit.

Soon, the shrieking cries of the lizards came rising up from the pit. The pit's necrotic damage was not a large amount but most of the lizards were stacked high with the sin affliction that multiplied it. The screams started to diminish as the lizards died, until the duration of the pit ended after just over a minute.

The only lizards that survived were the ones who hadn't been branded because Jason and Belinda missed them in the original sprawling group. Those surviving lizards started moving in the direction of Belinda, Jason and the returned familiars.

"Gordon, intercept any that move on Belinda. Shade, one on me, one on Lindy and one with Gordon."

Jason broke into a sprint in the direction of the lizards. The familiars were quickly following. Jason leapt into the air, combining the power of his cloak and his magical boots to go sailing over the monsters.

Item: [Sand-Cutter Boots] (iron rank, rare)

Boots incorporating the chitin of a sand-cutter, inheriting some of its power (apparel, boots).

- Effect: Improved ability to walk on sand.
- Effect: Increased jump height and distance.
- Effect: Enhanced kick attack. Highly effective against enemies with strong earth affinity.

He cut his hand as he passed over, raining Colin down over the monsters before he landed lightly on the other side. The now frenetic lizards wheeled around to go after him, even as Team Colin dug into them. Jason didn't bother trying to finish them himself, instead dancing around, playing distraction the way the familiars had before. Gordon and Belinda's lantern from the other side started beaming them, splitting their attention.

Any time a lizard got too close, Jason swung a kick in front of it. A chain-whip of razor shards came out his boot with every kick, causing the lizards to flinch at the surprisingly deep lacerations it gouged out of them. Like many desert monsters, they had a strong earth affinity, making them vulnerable to the attacks of Jason's boots.

Lack of intelligence was the biggest weakness that low-rank monsters possessed, Jason and his familiars playing them back and forth as Colin did his work. Jason could easily teleport between Shades, one remaining on the far side of the monsters, one with Belinda and one in between, with Gordon. Soon enough, the surviving stragglers were finished, Jason using his execute on some of them to help level the power.

After the fight was done, the pair made their way back up the ridge. Belinda was exhausted, dripping with sweat despite the refreshing power of her magical bracelet. Jason had replenished himself on the bodies of the fallen monsters with his blood harvest spell, so was back to full strength.

“That was excellent,” Henrietta told them. “Belinda, you're only just beginning to realise the potential in your powers. You'll be able to handle monsters of your own rank well enough, but once you have full command of your abilities, working alone would be an egregious waste. You need to be the mortar in a brick wall. You can make an adequate wall with just bricks, but the mortar makes it so much better than it ever could be without it.”

She turned to Jason.

“You are something on an opposite,” she told him. “You're strong on your own and you're harder to mesh with others without taking away some of your greatest strengths. Because of that, you need to develop different skill sets for when you're operating in a team to working alone. To truly be part of the team you have to use them as more than just a distraction while you have your own fight. I have no doubt you could have conducted some version of what you did here by yourself, but by integrating your abilities you developed a reliable, effective and efficient strategy.”

“Thanks,” Jason said. “I was kind of waiting for the turn-around there where you start telling me what I did wrong.”

“You weren't perfect, by any means,” Henrietta said, “but you're coming along. Your rapid improvement tells me that Humphrey knew what he was doing when he put this team together. There's a lot of potential here.”

The team's route had taken them north from Greenstone, up the coast, inland over the sands of what Jason knew as the Nambi desert and into the Kalahari. There was more plant life, patchy and dry though it was, with mountains dotting the horizon. Jason had been looking to his map as they travelled, which unveiled space as he passed through it. He had been watching as their path formed a loop of revealed space, his eyes always turning back to the point the loop would close.

Because of his map ability, Jason had been playing team navigator. One of the map's functions, he discovered, was to mark waypoints, even to areas that were still veiled. He could use the waypoint to mark out a route and use the mini-map feature the map gained when it evolved to keep them on track. As navigator, Jason occupied the other front seat of the skimmer, next to Clive who was driving. When the loop had almost closed entirely,

he leaned over at Clive and talked over the sound of air rushing through the magic ring at the back of the skimmer.

“Can we take a little detour?” Jason asked. “Should only be about an hour out of our way for the skimmer.”

“What is it you want to see?” Henrietta asked from behind him.

“Some blood cultists tried to sacrifice me and my friends in this big ritual chamber, inside a mountain. I wouldn't mind taking another look, now that I'm not terrified out of my wits and I've spent more than a few hours in this world.”

“I definitely want to see that,” Humphrey said. “I've heard the story and I'd love to see where it happened.”

Henrietta looked at the others and got a general consensus of nods.

“Alright, then,” she said. “Let's go take a look.”

The entrance to a cave was easy to miss from any kind of distance, but they spotted the remnants of a magic Society expedition. Trash, debris and a couple of abandoned tents that seemed to have suffered a monster attack made for an obvious marker.

“That's the problem with these expeditions in the desert,” Clive said, examining the tents after the skimmer pulled up. “There's not a lot out here, so they tend to attract monsters.”

“When did the Magic Society come here?” Jason asked.

“Right after Rufus gave his report to the Adventure Society,” Clive said. “After hearing what happened, the Adventure Society referred it to us so we could assess the site for potential future threats.”

“Did you find any?” Neil asked. “Might be worth knowing before we go in there.”

“No,” Clive said. “Ultimately, it was just an ordinary, if impressive ritual room. If anything, the main value is historical. Like the Sky River Aqueduct or the Order of the Reaper complex we found under the swamp, the ritual room here predates the settlement of Greenstone. It seems like the Vane family simply found it and made use of it.”

They went in through the cave, down the long tunnel into the mountain. Glow stones were pulled out to light the way.

“The cult had these strange red lanterns that washed everything the colour of blood,” Jason said. “I don't know if they had some kind of purpose, or were just aesthetic.”

They emerged into the main chamber. The stairs, like carved pegs jutting out of the wall, wound their way up and around the cylindrical chamber. There were larger platforms

at cardinal points as the stairway went up. On the floor level, what used to be the pool of blood-like liquid still occupied most of the space. It was now drained, reminding Jason of an empty swimming pool in some abandoned house.

“The pit was full of this nasty liquid,” Jason told the others walking over to look inside. It was about as deep as Jason was tall, a featureless pit of dark stone. “There was a light shining out of it that washed everything red, like those lanterns I mentioned.”

“It smells like blood in here,” Sophie said.

“Not like it used to,” Jason said. “The air was thick and heavy with it, then. I was pretty woozy because I'd already been knocked out a few times that day.”

“The Magic Society team examined and disposed of the liquid,” Clive said. “It turned out to be mostly water, mixed with various alchemical materials. There was also a lot of blood in it. The team estimated at least a dozen people died to produce it. The report described the substance as reminiscent of blood that refused to dry or clot and was extremely unnerving, even with the magic within it gone dormant.”

“The Adventure Society made their own investigation,” Jason said. “I was qualified to look at the report after I reached three stars. It turns out that the Vane family had been preying on the towns in the region for years and passing it off as monster attacks.”

“I can't believe they were really eating people,” Neil said. “I knew Landemere Vane. Not well, but I saw him at social events.”

“I knew him as well,” Clive said. “We shared the same magical specialty. I thought he was a genius, seeming to pluck these incredible innovations out of the air. Now we know he was getting them from the Builder cult all along.”

Jason walked them through the events of that day, as best as he remembered them.

“This was the platform where they left me. They dropped Gary first because he was the heavy one. If you look over the edge you'll see the doorway on the other side of the room. I jumped off the edge of the platform and used my cloak to float down. All I had was that and my dark vision power. My intention had been to run like hell, and I almost did.”

“But you came back,” Humphrey said.

“To hear Gary tell it,” Jason said, “it was some brilliant scheme to lure off some of the cultists. The truth is, I really was running. But I was unconscious when I arrived and had no idea what was at the end of that tunnel. I knew I would need help if I didn't want to be recaptured ten minutes later. Also, I'd been whacked around the brain too many times. My judgement was compromised.”

They continued up the stairs.

“This is where Rufus had a sword fight, except his sword was this evil magic gardening trowel that I found at the Vane Estate. I wish I had a recording crystal of that. It was incredible.”

They went all the way to the top, the platform once holding the altar now empty. He walked up to the edge, looking down with a sigh.

“The first time I ever deliberately killed a person was in this room. Landemere Vane was the first, back at the estate, but that just kind of happened when we were struggling over a knife.”

“These people would have killed you, too,” Humphrey said. “That’s the whole reason they brought you here.”

“I know,” Jason said. “I don’t regret the way it turned out. But this is the first place I ever decided to kill a person and then did it.”

He turned back and gave Sophie a sad smile.

“You probably think I’m a spoiled fool,” he said to her. “The life you’ve had, and here I am complaining about the things you probably did far younger.”

“You’re definitely a fool,” Sophie said, giving him a wry smile. “And yes, I had to make that decision younger than you. That doesn’t make it easy, though, whenever it happens.”

“It was bandits, for me,” Humphrey said. “I’d only just gotten my essences and was still training. I was out with my cousin, Ernest, who was looking through monster notices for something I could handle. We were on a hunt and came across this trade caravan fleeing from bandits. Their leader was bronze-rank, so Ernest was tied up fighting him while I took the others. I knew my special attacks were powerful, and I’d seen what they could do in the mirage chamber, but it was different in real life. I mean, it wasn’t, but it was. It’s terrifying how easily people can die. That first bandit, when I hit her... it was like the top half of her just exploded, raining down into the mud in unrecognisable chunks. It didn’t even land on me; the power blasted it all away. I remember thinking it was odd that I stayed clean.”

“It was bandits for me too,” Clive said. “They raid the remote farms and ranches in the delta, sometimes. They didn’t know my family had an adventurer son, or that he was visiting.”

Clive’s face twisted into an uncharacteristic rage.

“They found out,” he said quietly.

They made their way back down to the bottom of the chamber and Jason pointed out scorch marks, hard to spot against the dark stone.

“This is where we fought the sanguine horror,” Jason said. “Farrah got her suppression collar off and blasted it to ash.”

“Quite a way to begin your journey as an adventurer,” Henrietta said.

“You know, I’m not sure I even knew what an adventurer was, the last time I was here,” Jason said. “Rufus, Farrah and Gary only had a chance to start answering my many, many questions on the way back to the Vane Estate. It’ll be interesting to see that place again.”

Chapter 201

Regretting it Later

Jason looked around the skimmer as it sailed smoothly over the rocky ground. It was an unremarkable patch of desert, but the walk between the mountain and its hidden sacrifice chamber and the Vane Estate had been an important time for Jason. It was his first chance to slow down and get some answers from someone who didn't want to eat him or throw him in an evil blood pit.

That was when he really met Rufus, with his solid dependability and Gary with his boisterous enthusiasm. Then there was Farrah. She was the one who made the team work, bringing Gary into line when it was time for business and loosening Rufus up when he was causing unnecessary tension. Smarter than either, she could have easily led a team of her own. She was wise enough to recognise that she didn't want to, leaving that to Rufus while she engaged in her own pursuits.

Jason hadn't realised that, at the time. He was still agape at the terrifying volcano powers she had used to annihilate the sanguine horror. He was only just getting to know the people who would be his first friends and mentors in his new world.

Returning to the place it had all started, the path he had taken weighed heavily on his mind. It was a path of violence from the very beginning, so different from the safe, prosperous life he had known. That first night he had spoken to Rufus of his fears, of what a life of violence could turn him into. Rufus had not given him the reassurance he sought.

Instead, Rufus told Jason that he would have to choose between holding onto his innocence or seizing his own destiny. He promised that a life of adventure would give Jason the world, but it would come at a price. That price was safety and the inescapable stain of bloody hands. Looking back, Rufus' promise had been kept. Jason had money, power, influence. Precious friends and boon companions. But he had also faced danger, and been the danger faced by others. It could be considered a naïveté, but he wondered if violence and killing had become too easy.

The need for violence and the moral action was a harder thing to balance than he ever thought. He was proud of his growing capability, and largely of what he had done with it. But that pride also brought danger and regret. He'd gone along with everyone else to fight the Ustei tribe on their sand barge, and while they had certainly needed to be stopped, no more than a token effort had been put towards conciliation. That he didn't know how many people he killed that day was bad enough. That it had been for someone else's reasons made it all the worse.

He thought about the men he killed in the shopping arcade. For all that he told himself it was justified, he could have easily escaped without hurting anyone. In his most honest moments, he knew he didn't kill them in self-defence or through some need to send a message. Not any message worth sending, anyway. It had been pride. They had the temerity to challenge him and he had wanted – needed – to let everyone know that to come for him was to pay the price in blood.

Thadwick Mercer was, at the core, a creature of pride. It was what made him so easy to wound and drove every mistake he made. In the Reaper trials, Jason had come face to face with his own dark future, with the place that pride would take him, if he was not mindful of it.

That he had been more successful than Thadwick made people more accepting of his pride, but that was a trap. Something that made his pride more insidious, more dangerous. He had dismissed the Adventure Society's need for him to make a humble gesture, thinking himself clever for turning it to his own purpose. He was coming to realise that he had a greater need to find some humility than he thought.

"Is that it?" Clive asked, next to him, as they crossed a rocky rise.

When Jason had first spotted the Vane Estate those months ago, it had been an incongruous stretch of green. Rufus had remarked on what a waste of resources it was to maintain a temperate springtime in the middle of the desert. From the yellows and browns that had replaced the green, that price was apparently no longer being paid.

"That's it," Jason said, double-checking his map. "It looks a bit worse for wear than the last time I was there."

"Stop the skimmer on the outside," Henrietta said, leaning forward to speak to Clive. "We don't think there'll be anyone in residence, but the Adventure Society wants us checking for a reason. Best not announce ourselves too loudly."

As they approached, they found wilting plants, withered bushes and half-barren trees, their remaining leaves the brown, red and yellow of deep autumn. The Vane Estate had been an English country garden, held in a perpetual spring. As the energy maintaining the artificial climate depleted, that spring was passing through a deep autumn on the way to a sun-scorched, desert winter.

The pillars placed along the outside edge of the estate grounds still marked the border between the desert and the estate. Clive drew the skimmer up next to one and the team disembarked and stepped across the boundary. The air inside was still cooler than the desert, but hotter than what Jason remembered. Guided by Jason's map, they set off across the yellowing grass for the inner reaches of the sprawling estate.

“That’s the hedge maze,” Jason pointed out. The towering hedge walls looked thinner than he remembered, the pale green hedges a pale reflection of its previous, lush glory. “I came into this world somewhere in the middle of that.”

“Is that what made that big hole?” Sophie asked, pointing. There was a ragged arch in the hedges, mirrored in the hedges they could see through it.

“No, that was Gary,” Jason said. “He and Farrah sent their summons right through the middle of it. He said it was to sweep out any cultists, but I think it was mostly to annoy Anisa.”

“Anisa?” Henrietta asked.

“Priestess of Purity. She was temporarily attached to Rufus’ team. The church were the ones that sent them out here, which we think was all part of their game-playing. I have to imagine an alliance between them and the Builder cult is an uneasy one.”

“It seems dangerous for the cult to involve outsiders, like that,” Belinda said. “Too much chance of exposure. Getting too impressed with the cleverness of your own plans is a sure way to mess them up.”

“The Builder cult apparently had their hearts set on this place,” Jason said. “I can see how the combination of isolation, space and comfort would appeal. The matriarch of the house didn’t like the Builders, though. Didn’t approve of her son being part of the wrong cult.”

“You seem to run into a lot of cultists,” Humphrey said.

“Oh, that’s nothing,” Jason said. “Back in my world they come to your door with pamphlets.”

He turned his gaze back to the hedge maze.

“I couldn’t tell you exactly where I appeared in there. My arrival didn’t seem to do any damage, and every place looks like every other in a maze. Which is the whole point, I guess.”

As they progressed through the estate, they saw more and more damage beyond that caused by the desert reclaiming the land. Someone had taken axe and flame to the place, breaking down outbuildings and torching gardens. When they reached the manor, it had clearly taken the brunt of whatever ire had driven the vandals. Only sections of burned and collapsed building still stood at the original height. Every section of wall intact enough to fit it had been painted with bright red graffiti, denouncing the inhabitants as blood drinkers and murderers.

“It seems word got out about the blood cult preying on the nearby towns and villages,” Humphrey said. “There isn’t much of a manor left to check out.”

“There were some fairly extensive cellars,” Jason said. “They may be intact.”

The team made their way into the gutted ruin of the manor house.

“Careful of the parts that haven’t collapsed yet,” Henrietta warned.

They quickly discovered that the floors had been burned through, dumping the charred remains of the house above into blackened piles in the expansive cellar space. Jason managed to find the entrance to the underground ritual room, but the tunnel was packed tight with debris.

“Should we dig it out?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Henrietta said. “If we did it fast, what’s left of the house would collapse on us. If we went carefully, it would take too long and might collapse anyway.”

“There’s another entrance,” Jason said. “It’s bit of a crawl through a tight, wet tunnel. Which is at the bottom of a well. After that, though, it’s just a subterranean cave with a walkway and you’re there.”

“I don’t think we need to go that far,” Henrietta said.

“Perhaps we should be thorough,” Humphrey said.

“Agreed,” Jason said.

“Alright, we’ll compromise,” Henrietta said. “I’ll sweep my aura senses from above through that cave system. It should be between here and the centre of the maze, right?”

“I can put us right over it, using my map,” Jason said. “Maybe we should actually go down and take a look, though.”

“By crawling through a wet tunnel at the bottom of a well?” Neil said. “If there were still cultists here, then they would have killed the people who came to burn this place down. Or left, if it happened before they came back.”

“It does seem worthless as a place to hole up,” Clive said. “Without the manor, it’s just a place they’ve been known to use in the past. That makes it all threat and no value. Even if they came here, they would have moved on.”

“That does make sense,” Humphrey acknowledged.

“Still, I’ll do the aura sweep, just to be thorough,” Henrietta said. “We don’t want to go regretting it later.”

From within the edge of the estate grounds, Timos and Zato watched the skimmer disappear into the distance.

“Consider this a formal apology,” Zato said. “I thought your ideas were overwrought. Burning down the manor and moving everyone into the cave. Using so many of our

resources setting up the aura suppression. You protected our final chance. Even if we killed them, more would come looking.”

“Our work here will take months,” Timos said. “I knew someone would come, eventually. I remained hidden in Greenstone for so long because I was more careful and more thorough than anyone believed I had reason to be. If the leadership hadn’t felt Thadwick was worth risking exposure, I’d be hidden there still.”

“You’ve made a believer out of me,” Zato said. “You’re in charge of keeping us secure. Whatever measures you think necessary, take them. So long as it doesn’t compromise the work.”

The team moved south from the Vane Estate, following the direction, but not the path Jason had once taken to the Mistrun River. The direct route they had taken at that time had required most of a week on foot. The team anticipated taking about the same amount of time because of their zig-zag route that would visit all the local towns and villages, with all the time it would take to clear off their adventure boards.

The skimmer garnered attention as it arrived in the North-East Quarry Village Number Four. Such a magical conveyance was only ever used by adventurers or big shots coming to check out the quarry operations, so the villagers immediately knew that important visitors had come.

The village was situated in a ring around a lake fed by a channel leading from the nearby mountain that was the site of the quarries. A waterfall sprayed out of a hole in the mountainside, feeding the channel.

“I was sprayed out of the mountain by that waterfall,” Jason said, pointing it out.

“Why would you jump into that spray?” Sophie asked.

“I was up there taking a look when it turned off,” Jason said. “Me and another bloke were taking a look when it turned back on.

“It’s fed by an aperture, right?” Henrietta asked.

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“There were a number of instances of the aperture’s being interrupted,” Clive said. “It was the whole reason the expedition was formed in the first place. That must have been one of the earliest incidents. What happened, exactly?”

“I was standing right next to the stream when it stopped. The caretaker and I went for a closer look and a shab came through. It was my first iron-rank monster. We killed it, and then the water turned back on. It threw me, the other guy and a bunch of extra shabs right off the side of the mountain. It was kind of awesome, actually. Most of the shabs died

when they hit the ground, but a few survived by landing in the water, although they still took a good hit from that height. Rufus, Gary and Farrah were off chasing the guy that set them up for the blood cult, so me, the other guy and Colin finished the shabs off.”

Their arrival having been noticed, the mayor was soon hurrying out to greet them.

“Jason? Jason Asano?”

“G’day, Greg,” Jason said, shaking the mayor’s hand. He looked Jason up and down, taking in the dark combat robes, a sword on one hip and a dagger on the other, his bandolier full of throwing darts.

“Look at you, all intimidating,” Greg said. “Every inch the successful adventurer.”

“I wouldn’t rush to conclusions,” Jason said. “I’m the reason my team got stuck with punishment detail.”

“Yes, I do recall your friend mentioning you would be by soon enough. Are they doing well?”

Jason forced himself to keep the easy smile on his face as he recalled Farrah’s flippant remark.

“Let me introduce you to some new friends,” he said, giving Greg all their names.

“Geller?” Greg asked. “As in…”

“No, not those Gellers,” Jason said. “These two are from the other Geller family. Very big in the peat trade. As the saying goes, if you want to find a Geller, look in that disgusting peat bog. These are some of the first to go into adventuring. Not the actual first, though. It was a shame about the others. Such an undignified way to die.”

Henrietta watched Jason from under raised eyebrows as Neil shook his head. Humphrey took it in stride, also shaking the mayor’s hand. Greg led them into the village, along the ring road that circled the lake. They drew a lot of attention, some people coming up and greeting Jason by name.

“My daughter still has that spirit coin you gave her when you had her run from the monsters. She keeps it in a box like a treasure.”

Jason would share a few words before they let let the intimidating cluster of adventurers move on.

“Dan,” Jason greeted one man. “We’ll have to get some of that grilled giant worm.”

“Not this time of year,” Dan said as he shook Jason’s hand. “We don’t take them during their breeding season. I can do you a steamed pockmark lizard, if you like.”

“Sounds terrible,” Jason said. “I’m in.”

“I don’t get it,” Neil said as they made their way to the adventure notice board. “You were here for what? A couple of days, half a year ago?”

“It was three, I think,” Jason said.

“How do you know all these people?”

“You aristocrats are all about dignity and status,” Clive said. “We regular folk appreciate someone who doesn’t climb up on their high horse. And say what you will about Jason, it’s clear that if he was ever on a high horse, he fell off.”

The team found the adventure board notices and Henrietta looked them over.

“There’s nothing impressive here,” she said. “If you like, Asano, you can stay here while the rest of us handle these and pick you up after. You seem to have some catching up to do.”

“That would be nice,” Jason said. “I can call in on an old friend.”

“Three days, six months ago,” Neil said again. “How do you have old friends?”

“The Magic Society have actually been looking into it,” Jason said. “It turns out that once you cross a certain charisma threshold, it starts warping reality around you.”

“Just to be clear,” Clive said, “The Magic Society has not been doing that.”

Jason was sitting in the yard of Hiram, the caretaker of the local astral space aperture. They had been thrown off the mountain and fought the monsters that emerged from it together. His home faced onto the lake, where his granddaughter splashed about with some of the neighbours’ children.

“Things here have been just fine,” Hiram said. “I want to hear all about your exciting adventures.”

“I might have had a close call or two,” Jason said. “There was actually something of a contest for adventurers that...”

Jason trailed off as rainbow light started shining from the middle of the lake. He leapt out of the lounge, stern gaze locked onto that light. It was growing rapidly, to a size indicating a bronze, or possibly even silver manifestation.

“What is it with this village? Hiram, you need to evacuate. Everyone, the whole village. If you have some kind of shelter, put them in it. Otherwise, just get everyone as far away as you can.”

“How long before it finishes manifesting?” Hiram asked.

“If it’s bronze-rank,” Jason said, “maybe quarter of an hour. I can probably handle that, though. If it’s silver you have twice as long, but there won’t be anything I can do.”

Hiram nodded and headed for the children who had stopped playing and were looking at the beautiful rainbow vortex.

Chapter 202

Swat

Jason extended his shadow arm to the roof of Hiram's house as his shadow cloak appeared around him. He reduced his weight and retracted the arm, pulling himself lightly onto the roof. He looked around the village and saw people scrambling to get their families and go. They knew what a monster manifestation meant and none of them had seen anything as large as the rainbow vortex now shining over the surface of the lake.

The rest of his team was out of voice communication range. They would be back some time in the next few hours, depending on how long it took them to chase down the monsters they were hunting.

Jason turned his grim gaze back to the vortex. It was definitely going to be silver rank, which gave the villagers more time, but it wouldn't be enough. There was no way to evacuate the whole village in half an hour, not with children and the elderly. Someone was going to have to buy them time and the only person on hand was him.

He had no illusions of defeating a silver-rank monster. He was confident against a bronze-ranked one, even a bronze-rank essence user, if they were of the mediocre variety that inhabited Greenstone's lower rungs. A silver-ranked monster, though, was not something he could beat. Even with his powers to reduce the resistances of an enemy, his afflictions would spatter off anything silver-rank like rain off an umbrella.

Essence users advanced in a well-rounded manner, with all their attributes going up with rank. Even if they had no powers to boost them, every essence user would be faster and stronger than they were at the rank before. Monsters did not conform to that balance. Some were fast, some were strong; others were physically weak yet possessed potent magical powers. Jason needed the silver rank monster to be big and slow, just as he normally preferred.

If it was big and slow, there was a good chance he could kite the monster away from the villagers. If it was fast, or had some strange powers, it might well kill Jason in moments before rampaging through the fleeing villagers. Jason watched and waited, knowing that life or death for himself and hundreds of others was just a matter of fortune.

This was the third magic manifestation Jason had witnessed, after the awakening stone and the other silver rank monster. Silver-rank monsters were rare in the low magic region, yet he had been close to two of them manifesting in a month. It was possible the monster surge was imminent after all.

He had been told that no two manifestations happened exactly the same way, although he was having trouble getting excited for it, with his mind dwelling on his likely imminent death. Eventually, the rainbow vortex started to shrink, coalescing into a sphere that grew brighter and brighter, until Jason had to shield his eyes against it. He could see the village washed in blue light, as if a cerulean sun had appeared over the lake. Then the light dimmed and he was able to look again. He watched the sphere of blue light drop into the water and vanish.

There was an odd stillness from Jason's perspective, although in the distance he could still see villagers scrambling to flee. The light show had done nothing to allay their fears. Around Jason, though, all was quiet.

The moment passed as a humungous plume of water erupted from the lake, geysering into the air like a bomb went off in the depths. Waves rippled outward, rocking the boats tied up at jetties along the shore. Lake water fell like rain and Jason feared a repeat of what happened in the city with the small army of elementals.

Jason strained his aura senses at every pool and puddle that was forming, looking for manifesting elementals. He found the water seemed blessedly inert, aside from the single silver-rank aura bulging out from the centre of the lake. His eyes tracked to the very centre of the lake, where not all the water had fallen back down. Some had taken the form of an elemental, standing on the surface of the lake.

The elemental was unlike the formless blobs he had seen in the past. It resembled a statue, carved from water and filled with chunks of rock floating through its liquid body. It looked like a person, an armoured woman with greaves, breastplate and helmet, even a shield in one hand. In the other was a long whip, trailing from her grip down to the lake. The whip was filled with what looked like razor sharp stones along its length.

Quest: [Evacuation]

The villagers of North east Quarry Village Number Four need time to get their people away from the monster that appeared in their midst. You are all that stands between them and a quick death.

- Objective: Delay [Oasis Tyrant] until the villagers escape or help arrives.
 - Reward: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian].
-

Jason let out a breath, realising that all the news was good. Normally an elemental was a bad matchup for him, but anything at silver-rank was as immune to his afflictions as

an elemental anyway. Elementals of the water and earth variety were not known for speed, which was the province of wind and fire types. Most importantly, it was alone. It would be powerful, but all he had to do was distract the one monster for as long as the villagers took to get away.

If he could keep it from going after the villagers until they were gone, then that would be a win. If he could do it long enough for the others to get back, it would be a triumph. Henrietta was the only one who would have the power to fight the monster and even that would be no easy fight.

Jason called out Shade and Gordon. Colin would be most useful remaining in his bloodstream, healing the injuries Jason would inevitably be taking.

“Shade, I’ll be relying on you for movement. One of you stays with me, keep your other bodies where I can jump to them at need. The villagers are escaping to the north, so we’ll start by heading south. We’ll use the building ringing the lake for cover and slowly work our way around. By the time we reach where the villagers are now, they should be gone. Gordon, stick with me. When I shadow jump, catch up as quick as you can.”

Jason drew his sword and looked at the elemental. Despite not having eyes, it was turning its head as if panning its gaze around the village.

“Gordon, grab its attention.”

Twin beams blasting out from the eyes orbiting the avatar of doom signalled the beginning of the fight. The elemental, standing on the surface of the lake, turned its gaze from the village to hone in on Gordon.

The elemental was a towering figure, three times the height of the house Jason was standing on. Just as he had hoped, it’s steps were slow and ponderous, even though it walked over the surface of the water as if it weighed nothing. Once it drew closer, however, Jason discovered he hadn’t gotten off as lightly as he believed. The elemental flicked its tree trunk-thick whip of water and razor rocks in Jason’s direction.

The elemental might have been slow but the whip was not. Jason barely had time to leap off the roof before the whip smashed through the front wall of Hiram’s house. As it yanked the whip back again, the roof was torn in half, what was left collapsing into the interior.

Gordon had followed Jason from Hiram’s rooftop to that of the next cottage by turning into a nebula cloud of blue and orange energy. In could form he made a rapid dash through the air before returning to his normal state. Jason was able to make such a huge leap to the next rooftop because of the jumping magic on his boots. At that moment, he

was sending a silent blessing in the direction of the Bert brothers, Gilbert and Filbert, who had found them for him.

The fight between Jason and the elemental was not a fight at all. It was a cat and mouse game, a housekeeper swatting at a skittering bug. Gordon would emerge from between a pair of buildings and fire beams at the elemental. Jason would use that distraction to extend his shadow arm and land a blow with his sword, striking at the whip.

While the elemental used it as if it were a separate weapon, it was part of the elemental itself. It didn't really matter, since the sword was all but harmless. The goal was to hold the elemental's attention. After attacking, Jason would vanish into Shade before Shade himself flickered away like the shadow of a cloud.

The game was not an easy one. Because the whip was an animate part of the elemental, it was not bound by the motion of an actual whip. It lashed and flailed, snaked and sought in pursuit of its elusive prey. As Jason and Gordon hid amongst the trees and garden, homes and shops, the passage of the whip devastated them all. Cottages were smashed to rubble, trees slapped right out of the ground in the attempt to swat down Jason and his familiars.

Jason ducked amongst the trees and buildings, sprinting, leaping, teleporting. It was close call after close call as the whip snaked around or smashed right through the obstructions he was using as cover. He was continually forced to find new ground to hide in as the monster smashed its way around the village in a circle. He realised that he was burning through village faster than the villagers could evacuate it. The contest was not just whether Jason could survive, but whether the villagers could evacuate while there was village to evacuate from.

From his first day of training, Gary had been hammering movement skills into Jason, and Sophie had taught him even more. She seemed to have a preternatural sense for motion, helping him incorporate each new power in efficient, innovative ways. All that training and practise was showing its value as he was pushed to the limit of his abilities and beyond.

In the crucible of action he was pulling off wild stunts he had barely learned for the simple reason that he had to. He wasn't even sure he had adrenaline anymore, but it felt his whole body was flush with it. He would leapt up high, floating with his cloak as he tugged himself through the air by gripping a tree or building with his shadow arm. It allowed him to air dodge the crashing whip as it tried to slap him into the ground.

He dashed wildly through the increasingly ruined village, retaliating only enough to make sure the elemental kept coming after him. The pinpricks of his sword weren't truly hurting it but seemed to annoy and frustrate as it became more wild in thrashing the whip.

Gordon was a loyal companion, following Jason's wild rush through the ruins of the once-beautiful village. Gordon's normal form was not swift, so he spent more time in his rapid, nebulous cloud form than not. Meanwhile, Shade was constantly repositioning his bodies to give Jason places to teleport to.

One of Shade's bodies was the first casualty, left behind as Jason barely teleported through it in time. The whip did not have any inherent power to affect incorporeal objects, but the silver-rank monster was so infused with magic that it ripped apart the iron-rank familiar.

Gordon was the second casualty. His cloud dash was fast but his reflexes were otherwise sluggish. He took one glancing hit, then a second, before a square blow slapped him into nothingness, his vessel dissipating entirely.

Jason was increasingly feeling the pressure. Losing one of the Shades hampered his mobility and he no longer had Gordon as a secondary distraction. When he had the chance he glanced to the evacuating villagers, confirming his fears that he wasn't buying enough time. The village was being wrecked faster than they could vacate it, the destruction moving closer and closer to their evacuation point. Just as despair began to well up, he received blessed relief.

-
- Contact [Clive Standish] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Henrietta Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Sophie Wexler] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Belinda Callahan] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Neil Davone] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Humphrey Geller] has entered communication range.
-

"HELP!" he screamed through the voice chat. "SILVER-RANK MONSTER!"

Henrietta's voice came back through the voice chat in a stream of expletives.

"She means we're on our way," Humphrey said. "How long do you think you can hold out?"

"Frankly, I'm surprised I lasted this..." Jason said before cutting himself off to duck under a sweeping whip strike that shattered the wall behind him and showered him in debris.

"If you could hear extraneous sounds," Jason said as he sprinted off, "you would have just heard a house collapse. Can't really talk."

“Stay sharp and stay alive, Asano,” Henrietta said. “We’re on our way.”

Renewed hope filled Jason with fresh determination. The villagers needed him to keep the monster away from them and he was running out of village, so he was forced to stay longer in the already-wrecked sections where the cover wasn’t as plentiful and the elemental could more easily track his movements. He took greater risks and more desperate chances. Finally, one of the increasingly close calls was too close and the whip found its mark.

It was little more than a glancing blow but Jason felt like he’d been hit by a truck, his body skipping like a stone across the ground before crashing into a wall. Barely able to move, he reached down and took a vial from his potion belt. The enchantment on the belt protecting them from incidental damage was one of his oldest items and he silently thanked Gary for insisting he buy it. Thumbing the stopper from the vial, he tipped it down his throat.

Item: [Lesser Miracle Potion] (iron rank, legendary)

Salvation in a bottle (consumable, potion).

- **Effect:** Fully restore health, mana and stamina. This potion is only effective on normal and iron-rank individuals. The magic of this potion lingers in the body longer than normal potions, preventing additional healing and recovery items from being effective for a longer period.

Jason experienced a sensation unlike anything he had ever felt. Power, strength and vitality were a raging river, crashing through his body. It was performing at a packed-out arena; winning a grand final. It was being born while having an orgasm. He vaulted to his feet, ignoring the rents in his combat robes. The whip was coming in to finish the job, but he suddenly felt like he could beat the elemental single-handed.

Fortunately, that delusion passed quickly and he got out of the way. His shadow hand snaked out, much like the whip that was chasing him, to snatch up his dropped sword and continue the fight.

Over the course of the chase, Jason had landed many hits with his sword and built up considerable charges of extra force damage. He estimated it was more than any previous encounter, yet the iron-rank weapon took no more than thumbnail-sized divots out of the silver-rank elemental.

Jason continued his mad dash, buying as much time as he could as his situation deteriorated. Shade’s second body was destroyed, then his third. In Shade’s absence he was conjuring and re-conjuring his cloak as he teleported through it to any shadow he

could see. The reinvigorating effect of the potion was spent as he burned through stamina and mana both, riding more and more on the edge. Hiding had become a constant state of evasion, his body riddled with cuts from debris smashed into flying shards. He no longer had time to check on the villagers, or try and slow down the destruction of their village.

The end came when he sensed a bundle of new auras approaching. He recognised his team and let out a weary laugh. That moment's distraction proved costly as the whip slammed into him. A stone shard within the whip tore across his torso as it sent him careening through the air. He was already unconscious when he hit a wall like a bug on a windshield.

Chapter 203

The Purpose of the Adventure Society

Jason returned to consciousness to find a small face looking down at him.

“GRANDPA!” she yelled at a brain-rattling volume. “He’s awake!”

“He’s also a little delicate,” Jason croaked as Hiram’s granddaughter skipped off to find her grandfather.

He brushed aside the system messages for the moment to push himself into a sitting position and look around. He was in one of the cottages in the village from the looks of it, but not Hiram’s. That had been the first one destroyed under the whip that swept through the village like a wrecking ball. The bed he was laying on was in a small bedroom, with a large open window letting in pleasant fresh air.

As he was glancing around, Hiram made his way into the room, along with Humphrey and Neil. Neil pushed his way to the front and started examining Jason by pulling a crystal from his dimensional satchel and waving it over Jason.

Jason looked down as he did, spotting a scar running from his right hip to the middle of his torso on the other side. Neil spotted his gaze.

“Nothing I can do about that,” Neil said. “Soul scar. Physically, you’re fine, just very depleted. Don’t go trying to rush your recovery with stamina and mana potions, though. You’ve been asleep for four days, so take it slow.”

“Four days?”

“I’m not sure you realise how close to death you came,” Neil said. “We almost fed you a lesser miracle potion before I checked for potion toxicity and realised you were still getting over one. The state you were in, another one would have finished you off. If it weren’t for your outworlder body and that familiar inside you, I doubt you’d have lived long enough for my healing to take effect.”

“Thanks, Neil,” Jason said. “And thanks to you too, Colin. What about the monster?”

“Henrietta took care of it,” Humphrey said. “It wasn’t easy, though. She lost a couple of her familiars and had to resummon them after.”

“I did too,” Jason said. “I’ll need to get the materials, though. I only have the bronze-rank equivalent I bought for when I rank up.”

He swung his feet off the bed and held out a hand. Humphrey took it and helped him to his feet, supporting him when he staggered.

“Take it easy,” Neil said. “You’re still recovering from all that healing. We’re not going anywhere for at least another day while you recover. I’m guessing you’re hungry?”

“Yeah, now you say it.”

“Spirit coins, one every hour or so to replenish your reserves. No food for at least a day.”

“How flexible is the no food thing.”

“Not flexible at all,” Neil said. “Normally I’d tell you that if you want to mess up your recovery, that’s your business, but you’re part of this team. We have to rely on you, so get it right.”

Jason gave Neil a grateful smile.

“Alright, mate. The food stays stashed in my storage space for now.”

“You don’t have to go that far,” Neil said. “The rest of us can eat food while you watch and suck on a spirit coin.”

“Oh, that’s cold.”

“How are you feeling?” Neil asked.

“Tingly. Weak.”

Jason looked himself up and down. He was wearing only the silk boxer shorts he’d had on when he was knocked unconscious. The combat robes and underclothes were gone, as was the blood and sweat he was certain had stained them during the fight. Someone had clearly stripped him down and tipped some crystal wash over him.

“That’s normal,” Neil said. “As long as you keep eating spirit coins and focus on rest, you’ll be back to full strength in a day or two. I’d recommend using the time to meditate.”

Jason spotted his combat robe on a wall hanger, dangling from a peg. Like him, four days had been enough for it to recover as the self-repair magic restored it to pristine condition. Also like him, it had been cleaned.

“Thank you for what you did,” Hiram said as Jason took the robe and placed it into his inventory.

“Was it enough?” Jason asked as dark mist appeared around his body, obscuring him for a moment before disappearing, revealing Jason changed into casual clothes. “Did everyone get away?”

“There was a lot of debris flying around, even at a distance,” Hiram said. “There were a lot of cuts and scrapes, but your team’s healer saw to everyone after he had you settled. Hard worker, that one. We did lose a pair of elderly people. Their family were out of the village and with everyone in a mad panic, no one checked on them.”

Jason hung his head. “I’m sorry, Hiram.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Hiram admonished. “Nothing at all. Do not even try and apologise after fighting a monster like that.”

"I wouldn't call it a fight," Jason said. "More like a mad scramble to not die."

"You did better than anyone had any right to expect," Humphrey said. "Not many iron-rankers would have even tried what you did."

"You would have done it," Jason said.

"I wouldn't," Neil volunteered. "I'd have run as fast as I could while complaining I didn't have powers to run faster."

"I get that," Jason said with a chuckle. "That's pretty much what I did."

Jason took out an iron spirit coin and slipped it into his mouth. He grimaced at the ozone taste.

"Good boy," Neil said and Jason groaned in complaint.

"Feel ready to go out?" Hiram asked. "There's a lot of people waiting to thank you."

"No thanks," Jason said. "Let Belinda turn into me and they can thank her."

"If you're going to run around playing hero," Neil said, "you'll have to accept people treating you like one."

"What Neil means is that the people here want to show you their gratitude," Henrietta said, walking into the room. "Part of the job is to let them. They need to know that the Adventure Society will be there when they need it most. The purpose of the Adventure Society, after all, is to let people live, without living in fear."

She glanced at her brother, then turned back to Jason.

"Our family has certain views on what makes a real adventurer", she said. "A lot of adventurers get caught up in the money and power of what we do and put aside the responsibility. You're a real adventurer, Asano, and let no one tell you differently. How are you, by the way."

"He's as well as can be expected," Neil said. "He's still a day or two from getting back on the road, though."

"Can't he rest sitting in the skimmer?" Henrietta asked.

"It would be better if he has the freedom to walk about a bit and the peace to meditate without the skimmer's air intake roaring behind him."

"Alright," Henrietta said. "Are you ready to go out and meet with people, Asano? You might as well get it over with."

"No, I'd like a little time to gather myself. I'll be out in a minute."

The others shuffled out of the small room and Jason sat back on the bed, turning his attention to the system messages he had banished to the periphery of his vision.

Quest: [Evacuation]

- Objective complete: Delay [Oasis Tyrant] until the villagers escape or help arrives.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 1,000 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 10,000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has been added to your inventory.

Jason took the item reward from his inventory. It hung on a chain made of intricate links of carved obsidian. The amulet itself depicted a replica of Jason's personal crest, a cloak filled with daylight sky, surrounded by the night.

Item: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] (growth, iron rank, legendary)

A protective amulet with the power of a shadowy guardian (jewellery, necklace).

- This item is bound to you and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Effect: For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Guardian's Blessing]. You may bestow all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] upon another person by touch.
- [Guardian's Blessing] (boon, holy): Instances are consumed to absorb damage from any source. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. For each instance consumed, gain an instance of [Blessing's Bounty].
- [Blessing's Bounty] (heal-over-time, holy, stacking): Heal over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Growth Conditions (bronze):

- Bound user must be at least bronze rank.
- 100 bronze-rank barrier quintessence gems.
- 100 bronze-rank renewal quintessence gems.
- 100 bronze-rank balance quintessence gems.
- 100 bronze-rank malign quintessence gems.
- 1000 bronze rank spirit coins.
- Ritual of bronze ascension.

Jason clasped the chain behind his neck, slipping the amulet under his clothes.

"I think you and I are going to get along just fine."

It did mean more materials he had to buy, however. He had blown most of his money on getting materials ready for bronze rank, plus the resources he had been literally pouring into the cloud flask. He had brought two sets of bronze-rank summoning materials for each

of his familiars, in case their vessels were destroyed, but he hadn't expected it to happen while he was still iron rank. Replacing the materials to resummon Shade would be bearable, but even the iron rank materials for Gordon were onerous.

Fortunately, the quest had given him a monetary haul, which should put a dent in his costs. He also had the loot from the elemental. Neil had used his own looting power on it after Henrietta defeated it. The team decided that Jason and Henrietta should split the loot, as both had expensive summoning rituals to perform as a direct result. Along with the spirit coins, Henrietta had laid claim to a magical bronze-rank whip made of water filled with razor-sharp stones. Jason received an epic-rarity discord essence.

He turned to the other system message.

New Title: [Resolute]

- The damage you suffered in your stand against a much more powerful enemy has marked your soul. Your resistance to the suppressive force of higher-ranked auras is increased.
- Your aura signature has changed. Your unflinching resolve can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura.

Jason unbuttoned his shirt and traced his fingers along the scar, from his right hip, across his abdomen and curving a little way around the left side of his torso. It was strange to see a scar that looked healed, yet he had only found there minutes before.

Once again, he had edged right up to death. The more his powers grew, the greater the dangers he faced. This time has been a greater escalation than he had been looking for, though. He thought back to those moments when he was waiting for the monster to manifest, unsure if he would live or die.

In the end, he was lucky with the monster that appeared. Too many times it had been luck that kept him alive. From the beginning, he had become an adventure to seize control of his own fate. He had to get stronger, strong enough to face any challenge. He stood up, his face full of steely resolve. Then he got dizzy and sat down again, before getting up more slowly.

The waterfall sprayed out of the mountain, falling into the pool at the base, flowing into the channel that fed the lake around which the village was built. The force of the water sent it tumbling through the air instead of washing down the cliff face, leaving a space under waterfall at the base of the cliff. It was a favourite play area of the village children,

jumping from the rocks into the pool. They were all strong swimmers, which was an oddity for children of the desert.

None of the children were present, most of the families having already left the village. Those still present weren't letting their children out of their sight. With only a handful of homes left, most of the villagers had already headed for the fortified town where the regional villages waited out monster surges. Jason had visited that town himself, once, where Rufus had introduced him to the adventuring boards.

The remaining villagers occupied the small cluster of intact buildings. Leaving a small bedroom to Jason alone was a grand accommodation, in the circumstances. They had never intended to stay the night, so Jason had not set up his cloud house before the fight.

Quarry operations would not be resuming until the village was once again in a state to support them. Those that stayed behind were the mayor, the quarry operations manager and the other town leaders who were planning out the reconstruction of the village. Their plans were very up in the air, however, with the uncertainty surrounding the overdue monster surge.

Jason's experiences made him more comfortable with people being annoyed, confused or both than with sincere displays of gratitude. He did a lot of smiling and handshaking, while in his head he was waiting for a shoe that never dropped. Eventually Henrietta rescued him, telling the people that he needed more rest. Hiram quietly suggested the spot by the mountain, knowing Jason was going to go off and meditate.

He sat alone on a wet rock, meditating as errant waterfall spray splashed him with pleasant coolness. He let his mind drift and the weariness of his body fade away. Periodically he would emerge from a trance state, slip a spirit coin into his mouth and then resume meditation.

System messages appeared periodically, which he ignored until he felt a wellspring of power building up, filling his chest with an uncomfortable pressure. He coughed up phlegm speckled with blood, which splashed into the water. Blue grey light started to shine from within his body.

-
- Ability [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Iron 2 (100%).
 - Ability [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark) has reached Iron 3 (00%).

 - All [Dark Essence] abilities have reached [Iron 3].
 - Linked attribute [Speed] has increased from [Iron 0] to [Iron 3].

 - Progress to bronze rank: 50% (4/4 essences complete).
-

Many of Jason's most advanced abilities had finally seen real movement in the wake of the fight, including the Midnight Eyes power which, in spite of barely being used, was within grasping distance of becoming Jason's first bronze rank power.

The sun was going down and it was time to return to the village where he had set up the cloud house. Before he left, though, he opened up his character sheet to look at his progress.

Jason Asano

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Iron 7].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Iron 3].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Iron 3].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Iron 7].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (5/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 9] 99%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 9] 12%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 8] 41%.
- [Hand of the Reaper] (special ability): [Iron 3] 00%.
- [Shadow of the Reaper] (familiar): [Iron 3] 09%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 7] 41%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 8] 14%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 7] 02%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 8] 89%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Iron 8] 92%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron 8] 45%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 7] 63%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 7] 69%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Iron 9] 18%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Iron 7] 88%.

Doom [Spirit] (5/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 8] 97%.
 - [Punition] (spell): [Iron 8] 24%.
 - [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Iron 8] 26%.
 - [Verdict] (spell): [Iron 6] 94%.
 - [Avatar of Doom] (familiar): [Iron 3] 12%.
-

He was now well and truly on the path to bronze. His newest powers hadn't been increasing much during training but the regular hunts as they travelled around, clearing adventure notices had seen a surge. By the time they reached the heights of his older powers, it would probably take bronze-rank monsters to really push him over the line in anything like timely fashion.

He got up and meandered back into the village, walking barefoot across the lush grass that grew alongside the channel, in defiance of the desert surrounds. He was struck again by the destruction visited upon the village. If the sudden preponderance of silver-rank monsters was any indication, he would have all the monsters he needed to rank up in the very near future.

Chapter 204

Elven Storage Solutions

The cloud house had taken the form of a large two-storey building of desert stone. Jason found Clive and Belinda out front, working on the scattered collection of parts that used to be the skimmer. After getting Jason's cry for help over voice chat, Clive had used a quick and dirty ritual to overcharge the skimmer. It had brought them to village in the nick of time, but also taken a toll on the vehicle. While Jason recovered, he and Belinda had been trying to repair it using the random collection of materials he happened to have in his storage space.

"How's it going?" Jason asked.

"We've figured out something that should last us the rest of the trip," Clive said. "It'll put all the burden on the parts that are still good, though."

"Which means the skimmer will be well and truly done by the time we get to the river," Belinda added. "It might not even make it, depending on how much chasing around after monster notices we do."

"We'll have it ready to go in the morning," Clive said.

"Jason, have you seen Sophie, yet?" Belinda asked.

"Not since I woke up," Jason said. "Was she looking for me for something?"

"No," Belinda said. "Just do me a favour and don't be too... you when you see her."

"Too me?"

"Yes," Belinda said. "You know what I'm talking about."

"I don't think he can help it," Clive said.

"Don't believe it," Belinda said. "He might seem all over the place, but it's a lot more deliberate than you think. I know a flim-flam man when I see one."

Jason flashed her a grin and went inside the house.

The team looked at the dark hole leading into the earthen bank. It was hard to think of it as a burrow when they could have driven the skimmer into it with room to spare.

Henrietta frowned at the dark opening, one of many they had spotted nearby.

"This one is dangerous," she said. "Dark hunters. Bronze rank, they appear in large numbers and like to dig themselves a warren of dark tunnels."

"I'll go," Jason said.

"I don't think going in there alone is a good idea," Henrietta said.

“Going with someone else would be more dangerous,” Jason said. “This is my kind of fight.”

A fight in the dark against powerful monsters was exactly what he needed to push his perception power over the edge. Humphrey and Clive, with their human advantage, had already reached bronze rank with their perception powers, gaining enhanced aura senses. Neil, who had been an essence user longer than Jason, had likewise reached bronze with his perception power. It gave him the ability to sense vulnerabilities in magical defences and detect injuries, both in allies and enemies.

“I’m not sure going into the dark all alone is a good strategy.”

“Going alone into the dark is my best strategy,” Jason said. “I’ve been practising fighting in various ways, this trip. Now it’s time to fight my way.”

Henrietta looked at Jason, seeing the usual whimsy absent from his expression. All that was there was confidence and determination.

“Very well,” she conceded. “I don’t want you to hesitate to call on us if it goes wrong, though. We’ve come close enough to losing you already.”

Jason walked forward, his cloak manifesting around him. As he went into the tunnels, stars on his cloak started floating into the air, turning pure darkness into dancing shadows. The rest of the team waited, with no indications of anything coming from the cave.

“Asano, are you alright?” Henrietta asked after a while.

“Yes,” Jason’s voice came back. “It’s about to begin.”

She concentrated on the hole in front of her, extending her aura senses.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked, seeing her focused gaze.

“Your aura senses are stronger now,” Henrietta told him. “Push them forward, into the caves.”

“You said dark hunters were good at concealing their auras,” Humphrey said.

“They are,” Henrietta said.

Humphrey did as he was told, concentrating his senses of the burrow entrance in front. Sophie and Clive did the same, using their own enhanced aura senses. It was hard to sense anything from within the warren, but they picked out an aura radiating fear and panic. It was coming closer, toward the burrow entrance directly in front of them.

A creature came stumbling out of the hole. It looked like a preying mantis the size of a Saint Bernard but with the stinger-tail and hard black exterior of a scorpion. It had lost a leg somewhere and was leaking dark fluids from beneath chitinous plates. From the darkness behind it came a cold voice.

“Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death.”

Light shone down on the monster from nowhere, a glorious mix of silver, blue and gold. The beauty of it was belied by the effects of the transcendent energy that rapidly evaporated the monster into rainbow smoke. Jason didn't emerge from the hole, only the team members with bronze-rank aura senses catching a glimpse of his aura in the moment the spell was cast.

They spotted more monsters emerging from the other holes around them, evacuating their underground warren. The creatures ignored the adventurers as they skittered away as fast as their legs would carry them. Each was radiating an aura steeped in the same fear and panic as the first.

"That's odd," Henrietta said, frowning at the fleeing monsters.

"What is?" Humphrey asked.

"They're called dark hunters for a reason," Henrietta said. "I've never heard of them escaping into sunlight before."

Some of the monsters were faster than others, who were clearly impaired. The most damaged started dropping dead shortly after making the surface, while the others grew more and more sluggish over time until they too collapsed to the ground. Jason's exit from the warren was presaged by floating lights that returned to their place on his cloak as he emerged into the light.

He started making his way around the dead monsters, using his blood harvest power on all the bodies before looting them. He didn't need to refresh his mana any more after the first couple of monsters, but kept doing it to level his ability. Finally completing his rounds, he returned to the group as if he'd been out for a stroll, nodding at the skimmer.

"Shall we?"

It finally happened as Jason meditated on the roof of the cloud house. It began with a burning sensation behind the eyes, which became a sharp, twisting pain until it suddenly stopped.

-
- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Midnight Eyes] (Dark)

- Special ability (perception).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): See through darkness.
 - Effect (bronze): Sense magic.
-
- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached bronze rank.
-

Jason's vision swam and he was struck with potent vertigo. He rolled forward from his meditative pose, onto to all fours for stability as the world felt like it was tipping and turning around him.

Jason senses were filled with strange new stimuli. He could smell something strange on the air, carrying a faint ozone tang like the aftertaste of a spirit coin. He could feel his necklace and amulet, like electricity against his skin but not at all painful. He took it out of his shirt and it visibly shimmered with power. The much weaker magic woven into his everyday clothes was much milder, but still visible.

He pushed himself back into a sitting position as the dizziness became manageable. Around him, even the ambient magic in their air had become perceptible. It wasn't just his sight, either. He could feel it like a breeze on his skin, smell and taste it in the air. Actual magic objects like his amulet and boots had what looked like a shimmering heat mirage on them. He conjured his cloak and dagger and was able to see the mana emerge from his body like a blue mist before coalescing into the conjured objects. They were similar to his magical items under his new senses but still noticeably different.

The cloud house underneath him was a vast well of magic, although his perception couldn't penetrate beyond the exterior. He carefully pushed himself up on his feet, still a little unsteady. His vision was swimming, like he was looking at the world through a fish bowl. He stood in place and focused on regaining his equilibrium.

Eventually his sense of balance settled. His eyesight got under control and he took stock of just how differently he was perceiving the world. He could sense subtle shifts in the ambient magic around him but it was all too new to make any sense out of it. He would need time to become acclimatised to all the new sensory input.

Once he was sure of his balance, he made his way to the edge of the roof. The cloud house was once again in the form of a two storey building of desert stone, the rooftop giving him a broad view of the desert vista. He dropped lightly off the side, his cloak allowing him to drift gently down.

He could feel the conjured object like it was part of him as he fed it the extra mana to reduce his weight. His new senses, however, suggested it was not his weight that was being changed as he sensed it affect not him, but a field around him. It explained how he was able to share the cloak's power with others and he wondered if the actual functionality was to somehow affect gravity.

He alighted on the ground next to Sophie, who was just coming out of the building.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "I could sense your aura up on the roof and it was all over the place. You aren't normally that sloppy."

"I finally had that bronze breakthrough," he said. "Probably not a big deal for the person who got their first power to bronze years ago. So, are you talking to me again now? Counting the time I was unconscious, this is the first thing you've said to me in a week."

She shifted her gaze, not meeting his eyes. It was a stark contrast from her normal mode of glaring at the world like it owed her money.

"It's kind of obvious that you're giving someone the silent treatment when you're riding around the desert together in a half broken-down skimmer," he said.

"I'm not avoiding you," she denied.

"That might have sounded more plausible if you weren't avoiding eye contact right in front of me when you said it."

She lifted her head to stare defiantly at him but he spotted the vulnerability behind her eyes. He gave her his best reassuring smile.

"How about you tell me what the issue is and we'll see what we can do."

She frowned hesitantly and he watched her body language draw back.

"They told you that you were almost fed a potion that would have killed you, right?" she asked, voice muted and reluctant.

"It rings a bell," Jason said. "I'd just came out of a four day healing coma, so my retention rate wasn't ideal."

"They didn't tell you it was me, though, did they?" she asked. "I was the one who rushed ahead. If your voice chat wasn't still up, if Neil hadn't realised what I was doing and called out for me to stop..."

Jason blinked a couple of times, then let out a chuckle.

"I almost killed you and you think it's funny?"

"It is now," Jason said. "If you'd actually killed me I imagine I'd view it differently. You rushed to my side, you say?"

"Rushed might be a strong word," she back-pedalled. "I suppose you could call it a brisk pace."

He grinned and laughed again.

“I think some humanity is started to show under that stony façade, Wexler. Celestinity? Is that a word? Look, I’ll take a reckless desire to help over cold indifference any day. Well, not any day. I can think of some scenarios where... it doesn’t matter. The point is, I’m glad you rushed to save me. Yes, it didn’t go as planned, but you learned for next time. Instead of taking a potion, pick up Neil and carry him.”

“What was that?” Neil’s voice came from inside. He wandered out of the building to join the pair.

“Nothing Neil,” Jason called back. “We’re just discussing strategies to render healing assistance when someone has already taken a potion.”

“Oh, alright,” Neil said, then clearly realised what must have prompted the situation as an awkward expression crossed his face. “Uh...”

“You can go, Neil,” Jason said.

“Thank you,” Neil said quickly and ducked back inside.

“Oh, Neil,” Jason called after him.

“Yeah?” Neil’s voice drifted back out.

“Is there any chance you could stitch handles into your clothes?”

“Handles?”

Sophie stifled a snort of laughter.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “One somewhere on the upper torso, maybe under one arm, and the other on the thigh. That should be a good balance.”

“Asano,” Neil said, “I have no idea what you’re up to, but the answer is no.”

“Probably for the best,” Jason confided quietly in Sophie. “I think some kind of ruck-sack situation would be better. You’ll be able to run faster with him slung over your back. One of those child-carrier backpacks, but sized for a super-ripped elf. No, you don’t want to carry that lot around. Do you have occy straps here? Never mind, Belinda can probably knock some out with that power she has for creating regular items. Do you know where she is?”

“Alright, seriously,” Neil said, coming back outside. “What are you two talking about?”

“We’re trying to find Belinda,” Jason said innocently. “You haven’t seen her, have you?”

Chapter 205

Disbanded

The criminal culture in Greenstone was in a state of extreme flux. The Builder cult purge had turned over every rock in Old City, exposing many criminal enterprises. That the cult had attached themselves to many such clandestine operations only made things worse. Old City's criminal leadership thrived on being ignored by the Island, but now the powerful Island factions had placed their attention aggressively on Old City.

For the crime lords known as the big three, the purge had brought about very different results. Adris Dorgan was on the rise in the wake of his daughter being revealed as Director of the Adventure Society. When she came through the subsequent inquiry still holding her position, Dorgan's place in the city hierarchy was solidified.

He gained a powerful shield against pressure from the ruling elite. There were also rumours that he was heavily involved in the more secretive elements of investigating the Builder cult's activities, obtaining powerful concessions for his trouble. Whatever the truth, his operations had somehow come out of the purge stronger than before.

Clarissa Ventress had been extremely quiet, even before the purge. In the summer she had been pushing into Cole Silva's territory, trying to seize as much territory as she could. The goal had been to capitalise on the chaos following the old patriarch's death but Ventress had suddenly halted all such efforts overnight.

Rumours abounded as to the reason, but Ventress and her organisation quietly managed their existing affairs until just over a week ago, when word spread that Ventress was dead. The circumstances of her demise were being closely contained by her people, with her former bodyguard, the leonid Darnell, stepping into her position.

The change in leadership seemed to have been completed without too much contention but the air of uncertainty remained, becoming a pall dangling over their operations. Despite the relatively smooth transition, Darnell's power was extremely unstable, especially coming in the wake of the purge. The unease spread through his territory and his people, making them vulnerable to outside forces. Oddly, Adris Dorgan had made no move to exploit this weakness and expand, despite his own solid position. Instead, it was Cole Silva who seized the opportunity.

Silva had experienced similar problems after seizing the reins his father had left behind and was still in the process of consolidating power. Many in his own organisation were unhappy with the changes he was making to how they operated and much of the old leadership were in the extended process of being pushed out.

The purge had hit Silva's operations hard. Cole had finally brought things under control by making sweeping changes. The old guard were excised and new avenues of operation were established. Unlike his father, Cole had pursued his ambitions with no concern for whom he worked with or what they worked on.

Interests his father had always avoided were suddenly on the table, brining in new sources of revenue and control. The lucrative nature of the new operations was the factor that allowed him to finally unite the organisation fully behind him.

Silva's lax approach to choosing partners to operate with allowed a number of Builder cult operations to embed themselves within his organisation. As a result, many of his rackets had been scoured by forces of the Duke, the Adventure Society and even a coalition of noble families, spearheaded by the Mercers.

Despite this, Silva was taking the chance to grab as much of the territory Clarissa Ventress once controlled as he could. It left him juggling a lot of balls at once and a personal project had been put aside. He had been willing to let one of those projects hibernate as the object of his attentions had left the city for an extended period. Now Silva had information that Asano was due to return, and he was taking time from his territorial ambitions to set new events into motion.

Silva left his office in the Fortress, gesturing at his bronze-ranker bodyguard to follow. Silva himself was a bronze-ranker but he had nothing in the way of combat skills. His taste in violence was to enact it upon those too powerless to fight back it and had raised his rank purely through the consumption of monster cores. His bodyguard was one of five other bronze-rankers currently in his employ, the most powerful and valuable members of his organisation.

The Fortress was neutral ground for the Big Three, each controlling their own sections. Silva made his way to an elevating platform which only he and his most trusted men could access. They descended into the bowels of the building, deep into the underground vaults built centuries ago to shield the citizens at the time from monsters.

Killian Laurent was waiting for him in a luxurious subterranean lounge Silva used for his most clandestine meetings. His father had the room set out in subdued décor, but Silva had redecorated, marking the organisation's most private sanctum as his own. On the walls, wood panelling had been painted black while the thick new carpet was a brazen red. The simple and elegant furniture his father had favoured was replaced with plush satin chairs and loungers. The simple recessed glow stone in the ceiling had been replaced with a resplendent chandelier. In place of the restrained, old art works that had adorned walls were bold images of sex, violence and power.

“Mr Silva,” Laurent greeted. The pallid elf got up from where he had been perched on the edge of a chair, waiting. “If you are ready, I will bring our first guest.”

“Why wasn’t he already waiting here?” Silva asked.

“With respect, Mr Silva, this is a man you wait on, not a man who waits on you.”

Silva’s face grimaced with anger but he gave a curt nod and Killian departed through another door from the one Silva had used. Silva had become increasingly intolerant of anyone who challenged his power as he scraped his father’s old guard from the top of the organisation. Silver-rankers were not to be trifled with, however. There were rumours that one of his guests had been dealing with Clarissa Ventress and had ultimately been the object of her demise.

Silva crashed into one of the soft armchairs, gesturing for his bodyguard to fix him a drink. The drinks cabinet was one of the few things in the room that remained from his father’s tenure.

“Bring the bottle, then wait outside.”

By the time Killian returned he was three drinks in, the spirits fuelling the perpetually burning furnace of rage and resentment inside him. The man Killian returned with was fully obscured under a robe. Silva’s aura senses stopped dead when they met it suggesting silver-rank concealment magic.

“I usually like to know who I’m dealing with,” Silva said.

“Our guest is a man who greatly values his anonymity,” Killian said.

“You may call me Mr Sparrow,” the hooded figure said. There was a slight reverb to his voice, indicating voice disguising magic. “You have my thanks for the accommodations you have made. The arrangements have been very satisfactory.”

“Please, sit,” Killian said, although he remained standing as Silva and Mr Sparrow sat down.

“I understand you are looking to have someone taken quickly and quietly,” Mr Sparrow said.

“That’s right,” Silva said. “I want him placed in my possession, but it must be done in utmost secrecy. He’s known to be slippery, resourceful and elusive, so I need someone who can strike quickly and definitively. I am told this is an area of specialty for you.”

“It is,” Sparrow said. “Utmost secrecy is my preferred method of conducting my affairs, so I believe we should be able to reach a mutually satisfactory arrangement. Who is the person you want taken?”

“An iron rank adventurer,” Silva said. “Jason Asano.”

Sparrow sat up straight in his chair.

“I’ve heard of this Asano; you make a difficult request. He has powerful friends that will come looking for him.”

“They won’t find him,” Killian said with confidence. “We have established a secure and isolated location and Asano himself has an ability that prevents him from being tracked. So long as he is taken cleanly, then he cannot be traced using his Adventure Society badge.”

“That’s an easy claim to make,” Sparrow said, “but harder to verify. I have no interest in being hunted down by gold-rankers because your information was bad.”

Killian looked to Silva, who nodded.

“We have another guest who can allay your suspicions,” Killian said. “I shall go bring him in.”

“I’m not accustomed to waiting on others,” Sparrow said, a twang of annoyance getting through the voice masking magic.

“My apologies, sir,” Killian said, “but for this man, you do.”

Silva smirked at Sparrow being told the same thing he had been earlier. Killian left the room and Silva poured himself another drink, not bothering to offer one to Sparrow. The pair sat in silence, Sparrow seemingly impassive under the dark hood as Silva stewed in the feeling of not being the most powerful man in the room.

That feeling reminded Silva unpleasantly of the time before his father died. His father’s chief people would look at him with disrespect, spreading rumours that the old man would not pass the mantle to his son. Sophie Wexler was meant to have been the symbol of him seizing power; the woman his father had always shielded from him, finally in his grasp. Instead, she had become a symbol of his impotence, flaunting herself in front of her new high society friends.

Her Adventure Society membership had placed her truly out of his reach. If an adventurer went looking for trouble in the criminal underworld and found a knife in his gut, the Adventure Society would pass it off as self-inflicted damage. If the criminal underworld went looking for adventurers, though, the Adventure Society would crash down on them like a tsunami. It meant that even if they used, killed and dumped Wexler’s body quickly enough, there would be too many threads leading back to him.

Instead he would have to make do with Asano, the man who had intervened to deny her to anyone. The inability to track Asano gave them an opportunity that they would not have with other adventurers. It was still dangerous, which is why he had been hesitant when his second guest had suggested it. That guest was being led into the room by an obsequious Killian, Silva and Sparrow both rising from their seats at the new arrival.

“Lucian Lamprey,” Sparrow said, his modulator failing to hide the surprise in his voice. Lamprey looked at the hooded figure and a smirk crossed his face.

“Hello, Lawrence,” Lamprey said. “Do say hello to your sister for me.”

Sparrow flinched but didn’t respond to Lamprey’s jibe.

“What’s your interest in this?” Sparrow asked instead.

“The boy has aggravated me,” Lamprey said. “Anyone with eyes can see that he’s the kind of vermin you need to squash before it grows to large to deal with.”

Sparrow turned to Silva.

“What do you need me for, if you already have a silver-ranker?” Sparrow asked.

“Because when Asano vanishes and is never seen again, it won’t be too long before someone asks me where I was at the time. I’m going to make sure I’m visible enough that I can round up people like cattle to give me an alibi. Also, he has some kind of communication power. I can take him down, but not before he gets word out. We need someone who can take him down clean before he knows what hit him. That’s your specialty.”

“You’re certain he can’t be traced?”

“Completely,” Lamprey said. “The problem with these low-rankers with the power to avoid tracking is that any kind magic strong enough to punch through it burns out the aura imprint it’s trying to track. By the time they get strong enough for the powers to work, the little pricks are strong enough that then their power shields them from it. The Magic Society has been trying to solve the problem for years so they can track Adventure Society badges better. That same annoyance, though, gives us an opportunity to take Asano that we wouldn’t have with another adventurer. Otherwise, we’d take the girl.”

“You seem confident,” Sparrow said.

“Yes,” Lamprey said. “You don’t have to worry about anyone finding anything at the scene. Even if you’re sloppy enough that people find out where you took him from, the Magic Society won’t find anything useful, I’ll see to that.”

Sparrow started pacing back and forth.

“If I’m going to do this,” he said, “Asano can never see the light of day again. He has to be dead and buried.”

“Forget buried,” Silva said gleefully. “He’s going to be dead and scattered across the delta in tiny pieces for wildlife to eat. Eventually, anyway. Once there isn’t enough flesh left on him to feel pain.”

“You are going to do this,” Lamprey told Sparrow. “You knew that from the moment you saw me walk through the door, Lawrence. All that’s left is to haggle the price.”

“The price has been paid to my satisfaction,” Sparrow said.

“And what is Silva paying you?” Lamprey asked. “Actually, don’t tell me. Your predilections are appalling even to me, and that’s saying something.”

“Asano is already overdue to return to the city,” Killian said. “He could be back at any time now.”

“He was caught up in a silver-rank manifestation,” Lamprey said.

“Another one?” Killian said, frowning. “If the monster surge is starting, that will complicate the site we’ve set up to hold Asano in.”

“It isn’t the monster surge,” Lamprey said. “These manifestations are just precursor signs. It could be months before the surge hits in full force.”

“Then we act?” Silva asked.

“Yes,” Lamprey said.

“Then I will need details,” Sparrow said. “Everything you have on Asano, and where you want me to bring him.”

Killian gave an unctuous smile.

“I have everything you need.”

Pantero’s Bakery in the Cavendish district of Old City was always busy. For Jason, however, both a regular customer and a young adventurer on the rise, service always came quick.

“You brought a lot today, Mr Asano.”

“My team just got back into town, Mrs Pantero. We’re having bit of a celebration.”

“How long does it take to visit a bakery?” Sophie complained, then shook her head. “Look who I’m talking about. I once saw him go through half a cart of apples looking for the perfect ones for a pie. They’re pie apples. They don’t have to be that good.”

The team were lounging on the deck of the cloud houseboat, returned to its spot at the marina. Jory had joined them, having spotted them passing the clinic just as he was closing up for the day. He was now nestled next to Belinda, the pair sharing a large cloud chair.

“He is taking a while,” Henrietta agreed.

“I bet he spotted some new food in the window of a shop,” Jory said. “I’ve learned better than to walk down certain streets with him. If he sees something new to eat, you’re lucky if he just buys it instead of finding his way to the kitchen.”

“Oh, gods, yes,” Clive said with a laugh. “I was showed him this dumpling soup place once – you know the one, Humphrey - and Jason got a job there for about a week. Jory, you’re lucky he hasn’t suborned your alchemy lab for some grand cooking experiment.”

“Has the alchemy association been hounding you about the miracle potion recipe?” Neil asked him.

Jory had gifted the team on their return with the first batch of lesser miracle potions his alchemy facility produced. It was a thank you for Jason giving him the funding to build the facility in the first place.

“They’ve been restricting themselves to fairly blatant hints that they’d like the formula,” Jory said. “Now that I have the church of the Healer backing me, they aren’t pushing. I suspect if the Healer hadn’t made the clinic sanctified ground, they would have broken in to steal it by now.”

Suddenly the whole team went deathly still.

“What is it?” Jory asked.

-
- Party leader [Jason Asano] has had his magical abilities suppressed.
 - Ability [Party Interface] has been negated.
 - Your party has been disbanded.
-

Chapter 206

The Man Behind the Mouth

The room was almost entirely bare of features, a dark stone box with no windows. There was a heavy steel door, a recessed glow stone in the ceiling and a metal chain staked into the hard floor. The other end of the chain was affixed to a power suppression collar around the neck of a naked body. Jason was unconscious, laying on the hard stone.

On the other side of the door were Killian Laurent and the cloaked figure of Mr Sparrow. They were standing in another stone room, although this one was largely stacked with crates.

“You are confident you got away clean?” Killian asked.

“Short of a gold-ranker specialised in stealth and tracking having followed, then yes.”

“You have our gratitude, Mr Sparrow,” Killian said. “You will find your usual arrangements waiting at the usual place, but I have also arranged a little bonus I am confident you will find tantalising.”

“Then my part in this is done and I wash my hands of it,” Sparrow said. “You would be well-advised to not bring this matter up again, Laurent. You would be even better advised to make sure no one else brings up my participation in it.”

“I shall keep your advice in mind,” Killian said. “I believe you know that my discretion can be relied upon, Mr Sparrow.”

Sparrow’s hooded head nodded, then he stepped into a shadow and disappeared. With Sparrow gone, Laurent left the room. The building was nothing more than those two rooms, located right where the delta met the desert.

It had once been one of the way stations the Magic Society used to transfer spirit coin shipments from the farms. Disused for a number of years, the small outpost was both secure and isolated. It had been abandoned decades ago as more coin farms went into operation, changing the transport routes and requiring larger facilities. It had a paved area where shipments were transferred, the once level pavers now shifted and uneven.

There was a second, smaller building that had been the security station, with large, reflective windows. The alchemically treated glass both helped keep the interior cool and prevented those outside from seeing in.

Inside the security building were three people, including another of the precious few bronze-rankers in Silva’s organisation. Silva was intent on keeping the location secure and had hand-picked the three to manage the site. The bronze-ranker came out to meet Killian.

“Mr Laurent,” the man said respectfully. Of the bronze rankers under Silva, Killian was the unquestionable leader. “Thank you for refreshing the cooling magic on the security building.”

“Of course, Remi,” Killian said. “Mr Silva puts a great deal of value and trust in you. How are your people?”

“Coburn is solid. Not what you’d call a deep thinker, but he knows when to keep his ears open and mouth shut. The other one, Jerrick, has some real potential; I’ve worked with him before. I was surprised to see him selected for this, though. He’s only been in the organisation a few months.”

“Mr Silva prefers the newer people he recruited himself after clearing out his father’s old mainstays,” Killian said. “Those who have taken pains to demonstrate their loyalty are his most valued people. Otherwise, he prefers the people he has recruited and cultivated himself. It avoids any issues with nostalgic loyalties.”

Remi nodded. “The old man had too many scruples, leaving money on the table all over. Mr Silva isn’t caught up in old ways of thinking.”

“Just so,” Killian said. “Jerrick has a history with our guest. Asano is responsible for his being struck off the Adventure Society rolls, as well as ruining the man’s relationship with the nobleman he was working for.”

Remi frowned. “I don’t like personal connections,” he said. “It stops people from doing their job properly.”

“I am not unsympathetic, Remi, but Mr Silva felt that Jerrick would share his passion for seeing that Asano gets what is coming to him.”

“He’s the boss,” Remi said. “If he wants it, he gets it.”

Killian smiled with his thin, pale lips.

“That’s an attitude that will take you far, Remi. I am leaving, now, to bring Mr Silva. Remember that we want to maintain the illusion of this location’s abandonment.”

“We’ll stay in the building and out of sight,” Remi said.

“Check on our guest every hour,” Killian said. “Once he’s awake, give him a spirit coin to eat. Mr Silva wants him strong and healthy enough to survive what we have planned.”

The ache in Jason’s body as he regained consciousness paled in comparison to the pain digging into his brain like a railroad spike. It was an unpleasantly nostalgic feeling, taking him back to his first hours in this world when he had been knocked out multiple times in quick succession, only a few potions and a dose of healing magic staving off a lethal brain haemorrhage.

His first thought was to open his inventory and grab a potion, but his inventory window appeared in a haze of static before blinking out again. He tried to bring up other interface windows, receiving the same result. Muscles protesting, he pushed himself to a sitting position and fumbled at his neck, finding a thick iron choker. He had never worn a suppression collar but had used them on others. It was obvious that this was the source of his power problem.

He could still feel Colin inside his blood, but the connection to him that Jason normally experienced seemed strangely obstructed. He could tell that trying to bring out his familiar wouldn't work and even the attempt might have a painful backlash. On the bright side, Colin's power to heal him was still in effect. He could already feel the aches in his body clearing up and the fuzziness in his head fading away.

Jason took stock of his situation. His clothes were gone, although most of his adventuring gear was safely stashed in his inventory. The only important item missing was his new amulet. He sat cross-legged as he looked around.

He was in a room of desert stone. It was warm rather than cold, not too unpleasant to sit on. The sun-warmed brick meant that he probably wasn't underground, despite the lack of windows.

The chain linking him to the floor wasn't long enough for him to stand, only sit or kneel. Even leaning too far forward caused it to tug at his neck in a choking grip. The rest of the room had little to offer, just a heavy metal door and a glow stone in the ceiling.

He had no idea who had come after him, remembering nothing but a dark shape erupting out of an alley. It may have been a bronze-ranker, although a silver was more likely. He had a high-enough evaluation of his own powers to think that even a bronze-ranker would have trouble so thoroughly blindsiding him with darkness and stealth.

His circumstances weren't great, but not completely hopeless, either. If whoever had taken him wanted him dead, then he already would be. He didn't expect his near future to be pleasant, however. He suspected Colin's healing power would be very useful.

If you can hear me in there, Colin, stop the healing until I say so. If they don't know you can still help me, you can be my secret weapon for what comes next.

Although the connection was dimmed, Jason got a sense of assent from his familiar.

With no other options, Jason sat and meditated. A while later, Jason sensed the approach of a bronze-rank aura, meaning at least his aura senses remained intact. The person came into the room and Jason opened his eyes.

“You’ve got a henchman look about you,” Jason said. “I don’t suppose I could seduce you and secretly pocket the keys to this collar? Well, I say pocket.”

He indicated his naked body.

“It’s a figure of speech, obviously.”

The stony-faced man tossed a spirit coin at Jason, who caught it out of the air. “Eat. The boss wants you healthy for what he’s got planned.”

“I’m guessing it’s not a charity fun run. So, who’s the boss? If Tony Danza walks in here, I’m going to lose it.”

The man gave a confused frown and left without answering. Jason wondered how long he would be able to keep up the banter before whatever was coming took its toll. He examined the coin, but his interface again gave a fuzz of static and vanished without giving him any information. It seemed like an ordinary spirit coin, the crystalline object a dull iron colour.

He considered it unlikely to be some kind of trap. In his current situation they didn’t need subterfuge to make him ingest poison or some tainted object. Keeping his strength up was an obviously good idea, but he ultimately tossed it into the corner. In his studies of magic he knew there were certain kinds of magic, usually involving the soul, that required willing participation. Without it, the soul was largely inviolable, even to the most potent magical forces. He wasn’t willing to take the chance that eating the coin was the acceptance of some magical end user licence agreement

It was some time before the door opened again to admit two people. One was dressed in the kind of expensive style that made sure everyone knew how much their clothes cost. The cut seemed familiar and Jason suspected the man used the same tailor as Thadwick Mercer.

The man in the fancy clothes looked young. That was hardly an achievement, given the bronze-rank aura, but there was also an immaturity to his snide expression. Jason had known enough high-rankers to recognise a level of easy confidence and equanimity in those whose youth belied their age. This man had the look of a boy.

In addition to his looks, the boy-man’s aura marked him as mediocre. Jason’s perception power wouldn’t enhance his aura senses until it ranked up a second time, but he could almost smell the monster cores the man had used, as if he’d drenched himself in some nasty cologne. Jason doubted the man had ever faced a monster in the wild.

Next to the human was a startlingly creepy elf, whose dark clothes made the sickly, pallid skin stand out all the more. Jason suspected the man to have been altered by his essence powers. The kinds of powers that fundamentally changed a person were the kind

that usually landed the essences that produced them on the restricted list. Jason would not have been at all surprised to find the death essence in the man's repertoire.

"So," the boy-man said. "You're the Jason Asano that's been causing such a ruckus."

"If I said you had the wrong guy, I don't suppose you'd let me go?"

Jason was still sitting, cross-legged on the floor. The chain would not allow him to take his feet and face his captors.

"You have no idea how bad the rest of your short life is going to be," the boy-man said. "Do you even know who I am?"

"You're definitely not Tony Danza," Jason said. "If you're Judith Light, life has taken you down some very odd roads."

"What are you babbling about?" the boy-man asked.

"He's spouting nonsense to put you off," the elf said in a voice as creepy as the rest of him. "Don't let him distract you."

"So, you're the Palpatine to his Vader," Jason said to the elf. "I know the routine. Just to save you some time, giving in to my hatred will be an easy sell, under the circumstances."

"Shut up!" the boy-man yelled. "My name is Cole Silva."

"You're Cole Silva?" Jason asked.

"That's right," Silva said, gloatingly. "Now you understand what kind of trouble you're in."

"The name doesn't ring a bell," Jason said, brow creasing as he strained to recall. "Wait, did you sell me that dodgy magic food processor? The pulse setting on that thing was rubbish. Is this revenge for complaining to the Artifice Association about your shoddy standards? I think we both know that's really on you."

"I'm one of the Big Three!" Silva yelled. Jason suppressed a grin at seeing the elf clearly wanting to interject but unwilling to risk the younger man's temper.

"Oh, the crime lords," Jason said, realisation dawning in his voice. "I've met Adris Dorgan; very cool guy. He has that combination of class and masculinity that lets him really carry off that dapper look. Then there's Clarissa Ventress and that other one. I forget the name because everyone just calls him the stupid one. I have to say, Clarissa, you don't look anything like how you were described."

Silva lunged at Jason only for bones spears to erupt from the hard brick floor like a wall to block him off. Silva turned his furious glare on the elf.

"Mr Silva," the elf said. "Don't let him goad you into giving him a quick death. Nothing you can do will be worse than what we already have in store for him."

Silva fumed but enough of the rage drained away that he got himself back under control. Silva angrily tugged his clothes back into place as the bone spears disappeared, leaving holes in the stone floor. and then turned a malevolent grin on Jason.

“We’ll see if you’re still so clever once the pain begins,” Silva told Jason.

“I will be,” Jason said. “It just won’t show because of the screaming and begging. I’m pretty sure there’ll be begging. I don’t know what you want from me, exactly, but I hope it’s not dignity. You took my pants, though, so I’m guessing that’s not an issue.”

“All I want is for you to pay for the things you’ve taken from me,” Silva said.

“Which didn’t include fashion advice, thankfully,” Jason said. “You need to tone it down, which is really saying something with the way people dress in Greenstone.”

“I will be interested to see how long your courage holds,” the elf said.

“Oh, that’s long gone,” Jason said. “This is pretty much terrified babble I’m trying to pass off as bravado. The inability to wet myself is only thing selling it, at this point.”

The elf gave Jason a hungry smile.

Silva snorted derision. “You willing admit to fear?”

“I’m chained up, naked, in a room with the winner of a most obvious sex-predator contest and the guy who got disqualified for being too creepy. Not being scared is admitting to being an idiot.”

“Mr Silva, I think it’s time to show him.”

“Will he even know what it is?” Silva asked.

“I didn’t tell you?” the elf said. “Our friend here is the one who procured it in the first place.”

“Really?” Silva said with a sinister chuckle. “That’s almost poetry.”

A bone cabinet rose up out of the floor, reminding Jason of the stone chest storage space that Farrah had. This also proved to be a storage space as the elf took out an object Jason recognised. It was held in a cubic metal frame, a sphere made up entirely of tiny little bricks the colour of grey stone.

“Star seed,” Jason said, his face turning pale. “You’re with the Builder cult?”

“Not at all,” the elf said. “This is the very same star seed that you acquired and was taken by the church of Purity. When the temple’s assets were being seized, we managed to snag this little treasure. And now we are going to return it to you.”

Jason said nothing, fierce eyes locked on the elf.

“There he is,” the elf said with delight. “The man behind the mouth.”

“You’d best be very careful about what happens next,” Jason said, “or you might come to regret having met him.”

Chapter 207

Search

Killian began the elaborate preparations to use the star seed. He started by conjuring up skeletal arms that he used to hammer a spike into the ceiling, which he then hung a pair of manacles from. He unlatched the chain from Jason's suppression collar and then used the skeleton arms to force Jason's wrists into the manacles. Jason didn't bother to struggle, saving his strength.

Once Jason was hanging uncomfortably from the ceiling, Killian took a series of pouches from his bone storage cabinet, pouring powder from them to make a complex ritual circle under Jason's feet. When that was done he started placing objects into the circle. Some were simple bricks of precious materials, others were tools made from exotic metals.

"How exactly do you know how to do all this?" Jason asked.

"That's actually a good question," Silva said, watching from the side. "How did you learn a Builder cult ritual?"

"From a Builder cultist, obviously," Killian said. "You opened your operations to people your father would never deal with and the Builder cult seized the opportunity. When Thalia Mercer started kicking down doors, why did you think so many of them were yours?"

"You facilitated this?" Silva asked.

"Your exact words were 'more money, less questions,'" Killian said.

"He's put you in bed with the enemy of the whole world," Jason said. "Do you even know what the Builder cult is doing? They're plundering whole chunks of this world like dimensional pirates and they don't care who or what is destroyed in the process. That's not an association you can run far enough to escape, Silva."

"Shut up," Silva snarled.

"What's done is done," Killian said calmly. "The only way forward is forward."

Killian placed the final object, the star seed, directly underneath Jason.

"And now we begin," he said.

Thalia met Clive and Neil in one of the Mercer family receiving parlours.

"Neil," Thalia Mercer greeted. "Always a pleasure. And Mr Standish, hello again. You'll have to accept my apology but I can only spare a little time. The Builder cult has gone underground, which has made rooting them out all the more work."

"Then we'll go directly to the point," Neil said. "Jason Asano has gone missing."

Thalia frowned.

"You're sure it's foul play? I recall he went off without telling anyone once before, during the time he was seeing Cassandra."

"We're sure," Neil said.

"I'm not sure exactly how I can help," Thalia said.

"We're looking into anyone with the motivation to do something to Jason," Clive said. "You're the spearhead of the Builder cult investigation, now."

"You think the Builder cult might be behind it?" Thalia asked. "Revenge for taking a star seed from them? It seems like they would have larger concerns."

Clive and Neil both took on awkward expressions.

"That's true, Lady Mercer," Clive said. "We were thinking of another potential scenario. To be blunt, we're talking about Thadwick."

Thalia's expression went dark. "Thadwick is a prisoner. A victim."

"Most likely, yes," Neil said. "We're simply exploring every possibility, however remote."

"We don't understand how much of the original personality survives once a start seed takes over," Clive said. "It may well be that Thadwick's own personality is suppressed but the thing that's taken him over inherited his hatred of Jason and is acting on it."

"We both know that Thadwick had become fixated on Jason," Neil said to Thalia. "Jason had become the symbol of his recent setbacks."

"Even if what you're saying were true," Thalia said, "what could I do that I haven't already done? You think I haven't been trying to get my son back? He's been gone for months, now. For all we know, he was in the pile of bodies that Remore and his parents left on that island. They're still sorting through the bodies, trying to identify them all."

"The thing is," Neil said, "we've all been operating under the assumption that Thadwick has been wholly supplanted by the star seed."

"If he is more of a gestalt entity," Clive picked up, "then that may open avenues of investigation that you otherwise may have overlooked. Places that Thadwick would think to go."

"I may be emotionally invested in my son's return," Thalia said, "but I am not blinded by emotion. From the point we realised the cult was acting on Thadwick's knowledge we immediately tried every avenue we could think of that might be driven by his thinking, instead of the cult."

She got to her feet.

“That is all the time I have to spare,” she said, her voice cold and dismissive. “You know the way out, Neil.”

“Mr Remore,” Dorgan greeted. “Of course you are welcome in my home, but I didn’t realise we were meeting this openly.”

“Do you know why I’m here?” Rufus asked.

“The absentee Mr Asano, I can only assume,” Dorgan said. “My understanding is that he’s been known to go off without notice before.”

“This isn’t that,” Rufus said.

“Well, let me begin by asserting that I am neither responsible nor complicit.”

“Do you know who is?”

“I only met Mr Asano the one time,” Dorgan said. “He struck me as someone who likes to play games above his rank with a rather insufferable smugness. Frankly, I’m surprised it took this long for him to mysteriously disappear.”

“I need answers, not more questions.”

“Well, while there are any number of candidates, there are not so many stupid enough to risk the wrath of you and your friends. Or your parents. Good gods, no sane person would cross a pair of gold rankers.”

“Who would?”

“Cole Silva, probably. Poor judgement, fierce temper. I’ve known him since he was a boy. The girl too; she may be the only thing he was ever truly denied. I think you’ve deeply underestimated just how angry Cole is over being frustrated in the moment he thought he finally had her. Ventress understood the depths of that feeling and used it as a weapon.”

“You think Silva is responsible?”

“All I have for you is conjecture, based on my understanding of Cole. He’s arrogant enough but I’m not sure he would make the attempt without prompting. Even if he’s responsible, you may want to look elsewhere for the origin of the scheme.”

“Whoever came up with the idea is secondary,” Rufus said. “Finding Asano is the priority.”

“Well, I don’t have him, or know who does. All I can offer is some advice. If you look into Silva, don’t look to Silva himself. Look for what he’s been doing. Even he isn’t fool enough to take your friend without precautions. Find those precautions and you find your friend. Presuming Silva is the one that took him.”

Danielle and Humphrey Geller had come upon Lucian Lamprey as he was reading in the Magic Society library. He was in an open area full of comfortable reading chairs and didn't bother to get up from the one he was occupying. He put his book down on a side table and convivially waved at them to join him.

"You were very easy to find, Mr Lamprey" Danielle said, sitting down. Humphrey remained standing, next to her chair. "To the point of conspicuousness, in fact. One might almost think you were being fastidious about establishing an alibi."

"And exactly what dark deeds would I need an alibi, Lady Geller?"

"Jason Asano has gone missing."

"Oh? I suppose I can see why you would look at me, but I have to imagine I am but a single name on a very long list. He might have made allies out of powerful people like yourself, but he's annoyed even more. Taking opportunities that rightly belonged to Greenstone's nobility. A complete disregard for propriety, decorum and the inherent superiority of the aristocratic class. He's made enemies he's never even met."

"But you're the one who threatened him in public," Danielle said.

"That was just talk. I'd just lost out in court, and you can't deny he has both the ability and intent to get under people's skin. If I genuinely intended to have someone disposed of, then I would make it a point to be friendly, rather than threaten them. Even putting aside the warning, it helps avoid conversations like this one."

Danielle gave him a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

"I assume we can count on the full support of the Magic Society in finding him?"

"Naturally," Lamprey said. "I'll hand pick anyone involved in trying to find him and supervise everything personally. Of course, he does have that little issue with tracking, doesn't he? Such a shame."

Danielle stood back up.

"Mr Lamprey, if you did happen across someone involved in this situation – through sheer happenstance, for example – then you would be well served by convincing them to reconsider the whole enterprise."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more," Lamprey said. "With Bahadir and the Remores, it means dealing with gold rankers. That's something only someone as foolish as Asano would do."

Danielle levied a penetrating gaze on Lamprey, then turned to leave, Humphrey following after. Lamprey called out after them and they turned around.

"Do let me know if a body turns up. It will reopen legal proceedings regarding a young lady in dire need of some... strict guidance."

“The Adventure Society won’t let you touch her,” Humphrey said, face creased with anger. “And even if they did, I wouldn’t.”

“The yapping of a dog, hiding under its owner’s skirts,” Lamprey said dismissively. “Have you taken a liking to my thief, little doggy?”

“I’d never let you take her as an indentured servant,” Humphrey said. “I wouldn’t let you take anyone.”

“No?” Lamprey asked. “I didn’t see you in court last year when I claimed my previous one.”

He shook his head sadly.

“Poor girl. So pretty, but she went mysteriously missing, too. Of course, she didn’t have the heroic Geller clan rushing to her rescue. Do you only help poor people when Asano tells you to? I do hope he’s alright or you’ll have to go back to protecting heiresses.”

Danielle placed a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder, silencing the reply he was about to spit out.

“You should be careful, Lamprey,” she said. “Mysterious disappearances seem to be going around.”

“Are you threatening me, Lady Geller?”

Danielle strode back across the room, Lamprey standing up to meet her. The tall, muscular elf towered over the small woman but she radiated threat like a sword. The clash of their auras drew looks from the few library patrons not already surreptitiously watching the confrontation between the Director of the Magic Society and the City’s most famous adventurer. Their auras pushed against one another, Lamprey’s yielding under the flawless, unflinching power and control of Danielle’s.

“Lamprey, if Asano is dead and I find out you’re involved, I’m going to carve you up for chum on the steps of the Adventure Society, for everyone to see, and then use you to go shark fishing. That was me threatening you.”

Belinda made her way down an alley in Old City, stopping in front of an unmarked door and knocking twice. A panel on the door slid across, revealing a pair of eyes that went wide on recognising Belinda.

“Is she in?” Belinda asked.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the woman behind the door said. “There’s all kinds of stories going around about you and Wexler.”

“The reality is crazier than the stories, I promise.”

“Just go, Belinda.”

Belinda projected her aura through the door, suppressing that of the woman behind it.

"I'm going through that door," Belinda said. "It'll go better for both of us if you open it first."

"Let her in," came another voice from inside. It was the rich, deep voice of an older woman. The door opened, the woman behind it watching Belinda warily as she went past. The older woman had a broad, mannish body and curly hair down to her shoulders. She was in her early fifties, but fit and strong.

"Hello, Marg," Belinda greeted.

"Lindy," Marg said warmly. "Please, come up."

She led Belinda up some stairs and onto the flat roof, where picnic furniture had been set up on a rug. Marg waved Belinda to a chair, taking another for herself.

"You know, Lindy, we really have been hearing some strange stories. I even heard you were an adventurer, now."

"Not yet," Belinda said. "Sophie is. I have the essences but put off the field assessment while we went on a monster safari."

"You have essences?"

Belinda shape shifted, becoming a duplicate of Marg.

"Now that's something we could get some use out of," Marg said. "I don't suppose I can talk you into taking a job?"

"Sorry, Marg. It's the straight and narrow for me."

"That's a shame. What brings you here, then?"

"A man has gone missing. Sophie and I are looking into whether one of the Big Three are behind it."

"You think they are?"

"It's possible. He's annoyed them all in one way or another, largely in the process of helping me and Sophie. So, we owe him."

"Jason Asano," Marg said.

"You've heard of him?"

"His name started floating around when he was working at the Broadstreet Clinic. I hear you've been spending some time there yourself."

Belinda blushed.

"Can you find out about Asano for me?" she asked.

"I can ask around," Marg said. "How urgent is this?"

"I really would have gone through your door."

"That door is stronger than it looks."

"I know," Belinda said. "I put it there, remember."

"So you did. Any place I should start?"

"Adris Dorgan is too smart and has too much to lose, so it's unlikely to be him.

Ventress has the least reason to be annoyed at him, almost certainly not enough for this."

"Ventress is dead," Marg said.

"Dead?"

"No one knows how long, but word got out around a week ago. That bodyguard of hers, Darnell stepped in."

"That won't last," Belinda said. "He's not a flexible thinker."

"Focus on Silva, then?" Marg asked.

"If it's one of them, it's almost certainly him," Belinda said. "With Jason's friends, Cole is the only one stupid enough to try something."

"What is Wexler doing, if you're here?"

"We already figured that if it was any of the Big Three, it was Cole," Belinda said.

"Sophie is taking a more direct approach."

Sophie stepped over broken glass and unconscious bodies, looking for someone cognisant enough to interrogate. She followed the closest groan of pain, finding a hefty man slumped behind the bar with a broken bottle sticking out of his side. She easily hoisted him up on top the bar, causing him to yell out as the bottle shifted.

"As I was saying," Sophie said casually, "I want to know what Silva is up to at the moment."

"I haven't even met him," the man groaned. "I answer to a guy who answers to a guy who answers to a guy. No one tells me anything."

"Who does get told?"

"You know what Silva will do to you?"

Sophie gripped the bottle and twisted, eliciting a scream.

"The docklands!" he yelled. "There's a tavern in the docklands called Sailor's Rest."

"I know it," Wexler said. "There's a mist den operating out of the back."

"Silva has been expanding the mist trade in a big way since you got out," the man said. "The guy who runs it is the area boss for all the mist dens on that side of the city, now."

Crystal mist was a drug made from recording crystals, imbuing the contents into a powder that was dissolved into water, vaporised and inhaled. It would create a world inside the mind, based on the recordings.

Crystal mist was illegal, due to its deleterious affect on the brain. Over time, it caused a residue to build up that slowly but inexorably inflicted permanent damage. Even with magic, the damage couldn't be healed until the residue was purged. Since the residue was resistant to most forms of cleansing, that was an expensive, but not impossible prospect.

Cole Silva's father had maintained a small operation, catering to members of the nobility with low tastes. They had the money and connections to discreetly arrange the expensive cleansing required. Cole had massively expanded the operations, knowing there was never a shortage of disenfranchised people looking for an escape.

There was a pile of people in front of the door, so Sophie left by hopping lightly through the window and dropping down a storey to the ground. By the time the third person had gone through it, very little of the glass was left and she landed lightly amongst the shattered remnants of the window. The men she sent through it had staggered off already. She could see one of them helping the other down the street with an injured leg. She turned in the other direction, toward the docklands, and started running.

The ritual chant was long, sounding more like a sermon glorifying the Builder than the incantation for a ritual. As Killian continued, an aura started emitting from the star seed. It was faint but held an echo of vast power, like the light of a star. The metal frame fell away from the sphere as it rose into the air, its aura washing over Jason. His own aura was already suppressed entirely by the collar around his neck.

The tiny fragments that made up the sphere began separating, drifting up to slowly float through the air around Jason. They rose off the sphere like smoke from a fire until the seed was fully disassembled and the fragments floated around him like a cloud. Suddenly their movement stopped, as if they were frozen in time. The star seed's aura surged abruptly and the fragment darted in, burying themselves in Jason's flesh.

Chapter 208

Defiance

The pain of the tiny objects digging into his flesh was something Jason could endure well enough. In the last six months he had endured enough suffering, mental and physical that he could take the peppering of wounds in stride, even as he dangled, helpless, from the ceiling. Below him, the magic circle shone with a silver light.

“The star seed implantation process is not a swift one,” Killian said. “First, the seed will carve itself throughout your body, suborning your flesh in preparation for claiming your body as its own. The pain you are feeling now is simply a slow, easy start. It will grow over time, escalating until your mind can no longer endure it and breaks. But that will still only be the beginning. You will be broken again and again until there is nothing left of you and only the will of the Builder remains. The star seed is a door that will allow him to reach through and claim your soul.”

“And I’ll be here to watch,” Silva said gleefully. “You know the best part, though, Asano? Let me tell you the part that convinced me that this was the way to punish you.”

“The chance for monologuing?” Jason guessed, his voice only slightly strained. “You don’t need a star seed for that. You could have just explained your evil plot and then left, assuming everything would go as planned. That’s how they do it where I come from.”

“Go ahead and blabber, Asano.”

“Okay. You should seriously re-evaluate the ergonomics in here because I don’t think this is good for my shoulders.”

“Shut up!”

“Make up your mind, guy. You really need to...”

Jason was cut off by a stab of pain.

“Sorry, what was that, Asano?” Silva asked with a malevolent chuckle. “This is going to be very, very hard for you.”

Jason let out a pain-tinged chuckle of his own.

“That’s funny,” he groaned.

“What is?”

“I said the exact same thing to your mother last night.”

“Really, Asano? The pain must be getting to you if cheap jokes about my mother are the best you can manage. My mother died a dozen years ago; her ashes are interred in the family mausoleum.”

“That did take most of the fun out of it,” Jason admitted. “All I could really do was take the lid off the urn and waggle my thing in there.”

Silva’s face turned fury red and he moved to attack Jason, but stopped himself at the edge of the magic diagram.

“Please restrain yourself, Mr Silva,” Killian said. “Trust that the process will slowly bring him a level of suffering that no amount of bravado can endure.”

Silva relaxed and the evil grin returned to his face.

“You’re right, Killian,” he said. “You interrupted me, Asano, when I was about to explain the best part of this whole thing. You see, it turns out that a star seed can’t take you over. Not unless you let it.”

“The inviolable soul,” Killian said. “One of the most fundamental rules of magic.”

“So what the star seed does,” Silva continued, relishing every word, “is just keep ramping up the pain, until your mind can’t take it. Don’t think you will find relief in dark insensibility, though. After your body, it will come for your soul. There’s no hiding from that. It may not have a way to invade your soul, Asano, but it can hurt it. You’re going to suffer in ways you cannot imagine, but you won’t have to, because you’ll feel it. You can’t prevent it, avoid it or escape it. You will suffer and suffer until you can’t take any more and you give the Builder what he wants. You will open the door and let him in, allowing his will supplant yours, just so the pain will stop. You be nothing more than a vessel, a puppet. An empty husk, dancing on a string.”

Silva stepped up close to Jason, carefully stepping over the lines of the magic circle without disturbing them. He gripped Jason by the hair and spoke softly into his ear.

“I’m going to watch it all,” Silva whispered. “I’m going to taste your pain, revel in your suffering. The last thing you see, in the final moment before your soul is snuffed out, will be my face. The last thought you have will be the realisation that you have been completely, utterly and irrevocably broken, and that it happened because you took something that was mine.”

Jason didn’t respond, gritting his teeth against the pain, like icy-cold worms burrowing through his body. Silva ran his hand down the side of Jason’s face.

“And when we’re done, we’ll let you go,” he said. “Of course, it won’t really be you. I wonder what the Builder will have you do. Run off to the cultists? Perhaps you’ll go back to your friends and see how much damage you can do before they catch on that you aren’t home anymore. I would really like to hear that you killed Sophie. Would you do that for me? Make it ugly, too. Make her ugly. Let everyone know that what’s mine is mine, and no one else’s.”

“I don’t know if anyone’s told you this,” Jason forced out through gritted teeth, “but you’re kind of a prick.”

Jason felt the progress of the star seed as it invaded his body in the form of biting cold, like his veins were turning to ice. As the cold burrowed its way through his body, however, the trails it left behind started to warm again. Jason could feel Colin’s presence, working to reclaim his body from the star seed. As the star seed took hold over his body he realised that it felt very much like Colin’s dark mirror; cold and dead instead of warm and filled with vibrant life.

Colin’s attempts to reclaim Jason’s body didn’t help with the pain. Just the opposite, in fact, as the star seed and the familiar fought a war inside his body. Colin was not truly in Jason’s blood, however, but instead as a spirit form within Jason’s soul, anchored to the physical world through the blood. In most cases, the death of a summoner would cause the familiar spirit to return to the astral as it’s anchor was severed. If Jason’s soul was violated, however, Colin’s spirit would be made vulnerable. Jason didn’t know what that would mean for his familiar but he was confident that it was nothing good.

Jason knew Colin’s efforts were inevitably doomed as the star seed altered his flesh faster than Colin could restore it. In that moment, however, he felt an incredible warmth for the life-devouring apocalypse beast working so hard to help him. He was filled with fresh determination to fight on, to protect his familiar the way his familiar was protecting him.

Silva never seemed to tire of taunting Jason, but as the pain escalated, Jason was no longer hearing the words. All that he had was the pain, a world of white noise with no sense of place or time. When the pain abruptly receded and his senses started to return, he had no idea how long it had been.

“What happened?” Silva asked. Jason had visibly relaxed and the silver glow of the magic circle had significantly dimmed.

Killian frowned.

“The star seed is a magically hungry object,” Killian said. “It is a channel to the will of the Builder, an entity so powerful that if he were to directly come into contact with this world he would annihilate it. The purpose of the magic circle is to gather and concentrate the ambient magic to create a reservoir of power. When the seed becomes dormant, it’s replenishing itself by drawing on that reserve. That way, in spite of it’s heavy magical consumption, it can outlast anyone it is implanted in, no matter how great their endurance.”

“You’re only telling me about this now?”

“It shouldn’t have happened this quickly,” Killian said.

“Did you mess up the ritual?”

“If I failed to use the ritual correctly, the seed would not have become active in the first place.”

Killian turned a curious gaze on Jason.

“Something about Asano is hindering the seed’s work on his body, forcing it to work harder, consume its stores of power more quickly.”

Jason let out a pained laugh that turned into a choking cough, but he grinned madly at his captors, eyes still alive.

“Keep smiling,” Silva told him. “If you didn’t have spirit, what would the fun be in breaking it?”

The first reprieve lasted only a few minutes before the magic circle grew brighter and the pain resumed. Colin had used that time to try and reclaim territory but it wasn’t enough and Jason was only vaguely aware that the screams he heard were his own before returning to that white space of pain.

There were other brief spells of reprieve as the star seed exhausted itself against Jason and when dormant to replenish its power. To Jason, it felt like each break was shorter than the last. In truth, they were growing longer, but his increasing diminished capacities were no longer able to gauge it. Colin’s efforts were likewise becoming less effective; as Jason weakened, so did he.

“It’s taking longer and longer,” Silva complained. “The last time it was stopped for hours. How long will this one be?”

“Probably most of the night,” Killian said. “The magical density in this region is too low for the circle to collect magic efficiently. I suggest we take this time to rest. I had Remi set up some beds in the next room. We’ll know to come back when the screaming resumes.”

“I don’t want to miss him breaking,” Silva said.

“You won’t,” Killian said. “He is proving much more resistant than I anticipated. You’ll have all the time you need to enjoy his suffering.”

“I want to watch him break.”

“You will, Mr Silva. After the body comes the mind, and then the soul. What is the will of one man against a being greater than our entire world?”

“He’s just hanging there,” Silva said with disgust. “No screams, no writhing. He’s practically relaxed.”

“The star seed had claimed his body now,” Killian said. “We are approaching the end. Even his brain is no longer his own. Whatever remains of his consciousness will have taken final refuge in the bastion of his soul. Soon, he will yield and you shall see him break, just as you wished.”

The pain was gone, but Jason’s senses did not return. There was no sight, no sound, no touch. He was in a place of pure will, the border between his soul and the entity that sought to claim it. He felt adrift at sea, not one of water but of an immense will. A will too large for Jason to even conceive it’s totality. Greater than the sky, more vast than the sun. Older than the stars and more unfathomable than the deepest voids of space.

Before that will, Jason was naked and exposed. It was more than being weak and vulnerable. In the face of that unconscionable power, not only was it beyond what he was, but beyond anything he ever could be. Anything he could even conceive of. He was the smallest speck of creation in front of a force that transcended creation.

Oddly, it was not a wholly unfamiliar sensation. From the moment he had been cast adrift in a strange world full of power and danger, he had been surrounded by forces larger than himself. Time and again he had been brought to the brink, constantly under pressure. He had fought off death and stood defiant in the face of gods. Life in his new world was a fire, burning away everything he had believed himself to be and refining him down to what he truly was.

He could feel the desire for capitulation radiating from that the vast will. The pressure it exerted, pushing in on his soul. But he knew that pressure. He had endured it from the very start, as if every thing he encountered in this world was preparing him for this moment. Next to the alien mind of the Builder and its towering will, Jason was nothing. But he realised that even the transcendent being with all its power could not open the doors to his soul. So long as he had the will to defy it, the Builder could not claim him. He gathered his own will and threw it into the Builder’s own, a grain of sand in a hurricane.

“Is he... grinning?” Silva asked. “He’s grinning! How is... what... Killian! What is happening?”

“I have no idea,” Killian said. If Jason’s ears still belonged to him he would have recognised the same delighted tone Clive would get on encountering something completely unexpected.

The two men were startled when Jason spoke.

“Is that all you’ve got, mate? You’ll have to do better than that, you interdimensional asshole.”

Killian started laughing madly.

“You think this is funny?” Silva asked him.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Killian said, awestruck. “That really, really shouldn’t be possible.”

In the wake of Jason’s outburst, the pressure of that vast will suddenly vanished. Like a becalmed sea, the absolute stillness carried an ominous sense of danger, isolation and helplessness. Most of all, it carried a silent threat; an anticipation of what would come when the weather inevitably turned.

Killian and Silva looked on as Jason once more hung limp and unmoving. Silva was increasingly agitated while Killian had gone from curious observation to avid fascination.

“We should kill him now,” Silva said. “I’ll do it.”

“You would be well advised not to take back what you have offered to the Builder,” Killian said. “We started this and have to see it through to the end or pay the price.”

“What kind of price?”

“The worst kind,” Killian said. “The price you don’t know until you pay it. But you don’t have to worry; a man cannot defy the will of a transcendent being.”

“And if you’re wrong?”

“Then that is the point we kill him, and make sure it’s done right,” Killian said. “A man who can defy that kind of power can do anything. That’s not a man you leave alive, not after what we’ve done him. But as I said, that simply isn’t possible.”

Silva opened his mouth to respond but stopped, both men turning to face the door. They both sensed the agitated aura of the guard, Remi, rapidly approach. His arrival was marked with a hammering knock.

“Mr Silva, Mr Laurent,” Remi’s voice came through. Remi, was in charge of watching over the site while Silva and Killian dealt with Jason, and he should not have left the security room unless something went wrong.

Silva and Killian went to the outer room and Killian opened the exterior door.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“We’ve been sleeping in shifts, in the security room,” Remi said. “I just woke up to find Coburn dead and Jerrick gone. I didn’t feel any aura surge from powers being used,

so he must have killed Coburn without using them. There was a stab wound in the back of Coburn's neck."

"How long ago?" Killian asked.

"I can't be sure," Remi said. "Hours, I don't know how many."

"It makes no sense," Silva said. "Why would he do that?"

"I don't know," Remi said. "I can only assume it is something to do with Jerrick's connection to Asano."

"Why?" Silva asked again. "If anything, he should want to get his own kicks in. Why kill Coburn and leave?"

"To give himself time to reach the city," Killian said, then sighed. "It's over."

"You don't know that," Silva said. "Why would Jerrick help Asano? It makes no sense."

Caught up in his own thoughts, still voicing questions out loud, Siva didn't notice the sudden change in Killian, although Remi did. Killian's normal, obsequious posture straightened, his creepy, pandering half-smile vanishing. Killian stood tall, pale face blank and expressionless, his eyes hard. Even his aura changed, becoming steely hard.

"Just because you lack the imagination doesn't mean there isn't a reason," Killian said to Silva. "He may be trying to regain admittance to the Adventure Society by helping the man who got him kicked out. He might have realised that we were using the Builder cult's star seed and balked. In the end, the reasons don't matter, only the result."

"Wait, what was that about the Builder cult?" Remi asked.

Killian glanced at Remi and a bone spike shot out of the ground, impaling the henchman. The power difference between a skilled and powerful bronze-ranker closing in on silver and a failed adventurer like Remi was made blindingly obvious as the henchman's corpse slid limply down the spike. Silva looked on in shock, realising that Killian was far stronger than he had ever let on.

"We are done," Killian said. "We're done here, we're done in Greenstone and we are done as a collaboration."

"What are you talking about?" Silva asked.

"Do you still not understand that this undertaking wasn't even risk?" Killian asked. "It was always going to go wrong. Your position in Greenstone is untenable, now. Asano's allies are too powerful, and I promise they are coming for you, even as we speak. It was always going to come to this."

"Then why did you go along with it?" Silva asked. "You arranged most of this."

“Because I have diverted enough resources from your operations over the past year to meet my needs going forward,” Killian said. “When Lamprey brought this idea to you it presented the perfect distraction to extricate myself from you and this city. While everyone is chasing after you for killing Asano, I can conclude my affairs and depart in peace. This is where we part ways, Mr Silva.”

Silva reeled at the betrayal of his most trusted follower.

“You’re turning against me?”

“Of course,” Killian said. “If anything, I’m amazed anyone is loyal to you at all. You’re completely oblivious to how much effort I had to expend on holding your organisation together, in spite of your best efforts.”

Silva lunged at Killian, only for more bones to erupt from the ground, spearing into Silva’s flesh and holding him in place. Silva grabbed two of the bones and started flexing them outwards, but while the bones gave a little, they held. Silva’s strength-enhancing power was in the early stages of bronze, no match for Killian’s conjuration power that had already reached silver.

“So pathetic,” Killian said. “You could put up more of a fight, if you knew how, but you don’t even understand your own powers. All those monster cores. Helpless victims instead of even the pretence of actual combat. You truly are a wretched thing, but I won’t kill you, Mr Silva. When you wake up, I suggest you don’t spare Asano the same mercy. If the Builder doesn’t have him by then, kill him and run. With Asano’s friends after you, you’ll be lucky to live long enough to pay the price of denying the Builder.”

Silva glared at Killian with frenzied eyes.

“And if they catch me and I set them on you?”

“Mr Silva, you don’t know a single thing about me. You don’t know who works for me, or what my holdings are. If you did, you’d wonder why so many of them had gone missing from your own months ago.”

“I’m going to kill you,” Silva snarled.

“Unlikely, but good luck,” Killian said. A skeletal arm burst through the pavers and started choking Silva. Silva tried to spit out more words but they came out as a choked-off gurgle. He tried to use his active powers but the bone cage had a suppression effect that prevented them from activating. His last thought before passing out was fury at a world that kept denying him the things that were his by right.

All that was left of Jason’s true self was hidden away in the fortress of his soul. His body stolen, he had no brain to drive his thoughts and was quickly reduced to little more

than that a last scrap of will, the innermost core of his being. Beyond the impregnable walls of his soul, the power of the Builder had undergone a change. If it could not cow Jason into capitulation, it would go back to inflicting pain until he yielded.

The Builder's will became a hurricane of knives, scoring marks across Jason's soul. It was a pain unlike anything the body could suffer, cutting not at flesh but at the very essence of his being. Jason endured, the warm presence of his familiar beside him. In his unthinking state he had a vague sense of things that were missing. He no longer remembered the familiars he had yet to resummon, yet he felt their absence.

It became worse, knives becoming drills trying to bore their way into his soul. Yet still, they failed. So long as Jason had the will to resist, they could not breach his soul. All they could do was bring pain that carried with it a promise. It could all stop, and all he had to do was give in.

The pain scoured away the echoes that were the remnants of what Jason had been when his body and mind were his own. All that remained was a meagre scrap of self, ragged and torn, yet still unyielding.

The days of torment since the star seed was implanted were a microcosm of every threat he had faced since arriving in his new world. Those memories were now gone but their effects were still felt. Those events had made him anew, reforging the very core of his being into something that would never stop struggling. Even against the indomitable will of an alien mind, with power beyond imagining. Even when there was nothing left of him but the will to struggle.

The Builder's will was unrelenting, sending pain into the reaches of Jason's soul it could otherwise not reach. into the fortress of Jason's soul. All that remained was a flickering ember, the last scrap of his true self. The alien mind strove to extinguish that final spark but it refused to die out.

After stripping everything else away, only one part of Jason remained. The one thing that had kept him going, every time he walked the line between life and death. That pushed him on in the face of monsters, cultists, cannibals and gods. The memories of those experiences were lost but the will they had formed was the one thing he had left. The unwillingness to bend, to conform, to capitulate. All that remained of Jason was pure, unadulterated defiance.

Jason could not out-endure the Builder, any more than a dandelion could withstand a tornado. But while the great astral being had no limits, the star seed connecting it to Jason did. The harder the Builder pushed Jason, the faster its power was consumed. Finally, the Builder's will faded as the seed went dormant, forced to stop and replenish itself.

In the aftermath of the storm, Jason's soul pulsed and throbbed, rattled by the forces that had besieged it. From deep within, something shifted, as if the alien power drilling into it had uncovered some vast power, buried and forgotten. Power built and built, pressure climbing like the inside of a volcano. The fading ember of Jason's will ignited into a furious flame and Jason's soul erupted, burning away at the icy clutches of the star seed that had claimed his body. Colin's spirit soared out, the familiar adding its own power as Jason will strove to reclaim the now undefended body.

The Builder's will returned, having sensed the danger to the star seed in Jason's resurgence. There was only a fragment of power left within the star seed and Jason felt a flicker of uncertainty in that ancient, alien mind. It had to stop Jason now before the star seed was fully overcome, impinging upon him with all the strength of its will.

The seed, already drained of all but the last skerrick of energy could not take the strain. The Builder's attempt to head Jason off before he could turn the tables on the seed had itself pushed the seed past its limits, ruining it for good.

The connection was gone and the Builder's will with it, the seed's power burned out, not to return. The physical remnants of the seed were still in Jason's body but they were inert, a spent force. The end of their power was not the end of their threat, however. Those physical remnants riddled Jason's body. Without the seed's power keeping him alive as it transformed him, the foreign matter running through his body was now killing him. If not for the strange nature of his outworlder body, he would have been dead already.

Even as his body failed, however, his soul reclaimed it. Jason's consciousness returned, only to fade away, unable to function.

Jason came to, still hanging from the ceiling. His body was wet with his own blood, leaking from rents in his flesh where the star seed fragments had been pushed back out of his body. Colin had somehow kept him alive through the laborious task of purging his body of the star seed, slowly restoring him to something resembling health. He could feel Colin, now dormant inside him. The familiar had given all that he had to keep Jason alive.

"You did good, buddy," Jason croaked. "You have yourself a good rest."

His body was ravaged, more weak and exhausted as he had ever thought possible. Yet somehow, he felt strong, stronger than he had ever been. He could feel his soul, sense it in a way that never could before. It was his true self, his last refuge, not the meat shell he'd been walking around in. Ever since finding out his body had been destroyed and remade from magic, he had a sense of unease about himself and his very existence. That

was gone, now, as he realised that the body he wore was ultimately no more important than a suit.

He craned his neck to look down at the fragments of start seed on the floor underneath him. The magic circle had turned to ash. He started laughing, hoarse and painful, but he kept on laughed like a madman.

“I don’t know if you can hear me through that your dead magic rectal probe,” Jason said, “but you need to listen up, you interdimensional land bandit. You just got beat by the assistant manager of an office supply retailer while he was hanging from a hook and naked as the day he was born. And reborn, I guess. So you’d best back up your piss weak little cult and take them back to your magic land in the sky because I’m coming for them. And this time, I’m going to have pants.”

Chapter 209

Hanging Around

“Where the hell are the bad guys?”

Still hanging from the ceiling, Jason remembered that his torture had come with torturers. They might have seemed inconsequential when he was facing off against the Builder but now that fight was over and he was still strung up like meat on a butcher’s hook.

Even if he wasn’t and if instead of the suppression collar he was wearing at least some underpants, both men were higher rank than him. At full strength, which he definitely wasn’t, he thought he could probably take Silva. The elf was a different matter.

The weird, pale elf had the kind of rigid aura control Jason associated with expert essence users, and he knew enough of them to judge. What someone with actual skill was doing working for Silva was a mystery.

The more Jason thought about it, the more odd the elf’s presence seemed. He claimed not to be part of the Builder cult, but he had known an awful lot about how the star seed worked. Jason was willing to bet that whatever the elf was up to, he was playing Silva for a fool. It might even be the reason the pair were in absentia.

Jason considered his options. At full strength he could probably pull out the hook the elf had hammered into the ceiling and free himself. He was strong and well-trained enough that he could hoist himself up and put his feet against the ceiling for leverage.

He was nowhere near full strength at the moment, however. His body was visibly emaciated under the coating of blood and pocked with small injuries. Jason could feel that inside him, Colin had gone dormant. The familiar had exhausted himself keeping Jason alive and purging the star seed remnants. The dead fragments had been pushed out of Jason’s body by Colin’s healing, piling up under Jason’s dangling feet. Far more than the mass that had been the original seed, there was almost a fifth of Jason’s body weight in metal, sticky with Jason’s blood.

“Good job, little mate.”

Jason could feel the sting of the remnant wounds all over his body. One was right above his left eye, which he had to force open through the sticky blood welding it shut. He could feel another just to the right of his chin, underneath a scratchy beard that had grown during the time of his captivity. Neither were drastic; like the other wounds they were the places the star seed had invaded his body, then pushed back out again. The real damage

had been wreaked on the inside of his body and the outside of his soul. The wounds were present all across his body, although his most tender parts had been mercifully spared.

The wounds weren't any particular threat to his wellbeing, but they variously stung or itched, which he could do nothing about in his current predicament. He laughed at the absurdity of a few itchy scratches annoying him after the ordeal he had been through, or even the situation he was now in.

Knowledge had once denied that Jason's mind had been altered when he became an outworlder to better process the kind of trauma he was suffered since. Now, considering his odd equanimity after days of literally soul-scourging torture, he was pretty sure she'd been lying. She had likewise skipped over the part about his outworlder body, which was probably for the best. At that point he hadn't been ready to hear it, still desperately clinging to any part of his old identity.

Jason considered his options. One, literally hang around and wait for rescue. His friends were capable and would find him eventually, but would it be before Silva and the elf came back? Option two was... still in the formulation stage. Too weak to move, too powerless to act.

His new awareness of his own soul brought with it a better sense of the pressure being placed on it by the suppression collar. It was like his soul had grown to touch the sides of that containment, like a balloon being inflated inside a box. He felt an intense compulsion to push his way out of that box

Could he? He was hardly in the best state right now and the collar was an oppressive power. It presented no pressure but had the feel of an inviolable boundary, yet he couldn't shake the desire to try. He pondered where that feeling was coming from.

Jason was certain that he had undergone significant changes as a result of overcoming the challenge of the star seed, but for the first time he was without a system message to explain it. Unlike other essence users, Jason had never been forced to fathom out his abilities by feel. There was an element of it, but he always had the system messages to guide and clarify. Was the desire to push back against the suppression just wish fulfilment or an instinctual understanding of an ability that had changed? Perhaps his astral affinity had evolved from the contact with a great astral being.

He decided to go for it, closing his eyes and feeling out the power within his soul. He was uncertain of how to actively use it. Following an instinct, he used the aura projection technique that Farrah had taught him as a foundation, projecting that power outward. The instinct proved itself true as he realised through his attempt that the true nature of his aura was a projection of his soul.

That first attempt was fumbling and inexpert, but armed with his new revelation, he tried again. Jason's aura was completely suppressed by the collar, but he could feel the strength within himself to push back against that confinement. His second attempt felt more refined and powerful than the first but it was like trying to push a boulder off his body. He strained, feeling a tantalising shift in the walls that bound his aura, but could not push them back. Eventually he could not maintain the exertion and was forced to take a pause.

He realised that continuing that way was not going to yield results. He needed to significantly improve the way he wielded the power. With the revelation that his aura and his soul were more intrinsically linked than he had previously thought, he needed to alter the way he used his aura.

Jason had always considered his aura control very strong, and others had told him as much. He thought of Rufus, and his realisation that people telling him how excellent he was had been stopping him from trying to get better. With his improved sense of his own soul and the new understanding of his aura, Jason realised that his aura use had been crude and inefficient. He needed to better incorporate the power of his soul into the way he used his aura.

The foundation that Farrah had helped him lay down was a solid basis in which to inject the core power of his soul that his conflict with the Builder had revealed. Once he mastered it, it would magnify his power and control over his aura by an untold amount. The suppression collar would be the crucible in which he remade his aura. Instead of just projecting it out into nothing, that suppressive force would be the press that concentrated his power, the whetstone on which he sharpened his control.

Previously, Jason had felt like his aura control was pushing the limit of what he was capable of, only the next rank offering a chance to substantially improve. As he forced his aura up against the suppression collar's power he realised how foolish and arrogant he had been. He was once again a fumbling amateur, taking him back to those first days, training with Farrah. He had crested a hill he thought was end of his journey, only to find a grand new vista before him.

There was a long new road ahead of him and he was not going to reach the end here and now, dangling on a hook. What he needed in his current situation was to push back the suppression collar's power, if only for a fleeting moment.

When he had been training Jason, Rufus had often repeated advice his family had hammered into him. This was especially true of his grandfather, the famous, diamond-rank sword master, Roland Remore. From what Rufus had passed on, Jason secretly suspected the Remore patriarch of spending his diamond-rank lifespan figuring out how to

sound as profound as possible. This world didn't have fortune cookies, so he had to find the rhythms himself.

When Jason first began his training, Rufus had talked a lot about his grandfather's ideas about the difference between a good adventurer and a great one. In the wake of Rufus' disastrous foray against the blood cultists, it was a distinction that he obsessed on. He became preoccupied with his failures, doubting his judgement, leadership and even qualifications as an adventurer. It was a pattern that had played out again with Farrah's death.

According to Rufus' grandfather, the difference between a good adventurer and a great one was a matter of moments. The right decision in the right moment was the difference between success and failure, between triumph and death. Great adventurers were alchemists of circumstance, turning opportunity into fortune. After how things played out with the blood cult, Rufus believed it was something Jason had an instinctual gift for.

Jason hoped Rufus was right as threw everything he had against the collar's containment, pushing his aura against it like shouldering a boulder. He pushed and strained until a final surge finally caused it to shift. He had bought himself a moment and now he had to use it.

System messages started erupting in Jason's face but he ignored them, opening his inventory next to his manacled hands and snatching out an item, barely getting it in hand before the suppression snapped back into place, pushing his aura back down. The system windows dissolved into static and vanished.

The backlash scraped against his very soul, something that would have made him pass out before his recent experiences. It did almost make him drop the small vial he now had in his hand and panic flashed through him. He convulsively clutched his fingers around the vial, almost breaking it with the panicked ferocity of his grip.

He once again hung limply from the manacles, panting for breath. Dangling from the ceiling made for a poor recovery position. As he regained his breath he looked up at the small vial. He had used his original lesser miracle potion fighting the giant water elemental, but Jory had joined them and replaced it before they had even gotten all the way through Old City.

He craned his neck, lining up his mouth up as best he could before thumbing the stopper off the vial. Some of the potion splashed onto his face but most went into his mouth and he poked his tongue out to lick up what he could of the rest.

The potion's effects were, as promised, miraculous. He felt the healing sting as emaciated muscle was replenished and the wounds all over his body finished healing.

Looking down at his chest, Jason saw that they had left behind a series of small scars. He knew those on his face had likely done the same.

His body was now flush with energy, the suppression collar having no impact on the magic of the potion, although Jason had no way to use his refilled mana pool. Instead, he went to work of expending some stamina, straining his arms to grip the chain of the manacles.

Jason's fighting style, the Way of the Reaper, was much more comprehensive than a simple martial art. It included mobility techniques, stealth and, immediately relevant, escape methodology. Jason pulled himself up, hand over hand, then shifted his weight to pivot his body, swinging his legs up until his feet were pressed into the ceiling.

The ring the manacles were looped through was held in place by a spike Jason had watch the elf fix it into place with conjured skeleton arms. It hadn't been a carefully bored hole, just a smooth, unthreaded spike that was hammered directly into the brickwork. Jason figured therefore that he could combine leverage, strength and body weight to yank it right out.

It was a task that proved easier to conceive of than to execute and Jason was left hanging upside down, reefing on the chain. He had been at it some time when the spike suddenly gave way and he fell to the floor in a heap.

He stood up, awkwardly reaching around with his manacled hands to brush off the fragments of inert star seed that stuck to his body when he landed. They had formed a pile underneath where he had been hanging and, like Jason, were sticky with Jason's blood. The remnants of the ritual circle was nothing but ash.

There was nothing else in the room and Jason wasted little time, making for the door. Passing through the outer room to the exterior of the building, he surveyed his surroundings. He quickly surmised he was somewhere on the outskirts of the delta, where the last patches of scrubland gave out and the dead sands took over. The layout of the buildings were similar to spirit coin exchange outposts he'd seen, although this one was obviously disused. Patches of yellow grass were growing up between pavers dislodged and uneven from time and weather.

To his surprise, Silva was out in the open, laying in a pool of his own blood. Jason's aura senses were not restricted alongside his aura, so he could sense that Silva was still alive. The same could not be said for another man Jason recognised as the guard who had given him a spirit coin while he was awaiting his fate. The man was definitively dead.

Jason checked on Silva. He had brutal strangulation marks on his neck and multiple stab wound in his arms, legs and torso. Silva had bled quite a lot but didn't seem to be in

any danger. His bronze rank recovery attribute would heal him faster than a normal person, although it hadn't woken him up in all the time Jason had been hanging in the building.

"Someone sure did a number on you," Jason said as he searched Silva's body. He found a small keychain in a jacket pocket, cheering as he found the key to his manacles and the the collar around his neck. The sensation of removing the collar was like taken that first breath after almost drowning; of finding a toilet just in time to avoid soiling yourself in the middle of a shopping centre.

Jason didn't waste more than a moment revelling as he felt his powers return. He minimised all the system messages flooding his vision and snapped the suppression collar around Silva's neck. Silva didn't react, remaining unconscious as Jason then placed the manacles on Silva's ankles.

"Now we'll see how you like being a prisoner," Jason told him. "No, that's no good. You'll have plenty of time for sleep in the slammer? That's worse, this is hard. Are eighties action movies not as good as I remember? Colin, when we get back to my world, I'm going to show you Gymkata. It's literally everything you need to know about western culture."

Jason resumed his search of Silva's person, finding that a pocket in the jacket led to a dimensional storage space. He emptied it out and stole everything that looked interesting or valuable, shoving it all into his inventory except for his missing amulet, which he immediately clasped around his neck.

It was time to get some clothes on but he was still covered in blood. He pulled out a bottle of crystal wash and tipped it over his head. It washed the blood off his body and out of his hair, including his new beard. There was no sign of his missing suit, so he summoned another from his inventory. The dark mist covered his modesty but at this point it didn't really matter. Even if Jason hadn't got used to the nudity, the only people here were either unconscious or dead.

Jason was tweaking his cufflinks when he froze, seeing movement in the distance. Three vehicles were careening over scrubby ground, a trio of skimmers rocketing towards him. As he watched, most of the figures on one of the skimmers vanished and he was suddenly surrounded by people. Danielle Geller had teleported Rufus, Gary and Humphrey from their skimmer directly next to him.

"Ah, you're here," Jason said, and finished adjusting his cufflink. "And here was me just needing a ride."

Jason's attempt at dignity was immediately smothered as Gary grasped him in a hug that was more like a rugby tackle.

Chapter 210

What Doesn't Kill You

The rest of Jason's team arrived in the three skimmers, with Clive driving one and a somewhat shaky Jory and Belinda driving the others, both for the first time. Everyone poured off the vehicles before they had even fully stopped, clamouring around Jason. He met their looks of concerns with easy confidence, assuring them that he was fine.

Clive had so many questions he didn't actually manage to get any of them out. Humphrey gripped Jason on the shoulder, giving him a beaming smile that the young women of Greenstone would sell out their own families to receive.

"We rush out here to rescue you," Belinda said, "and you're standing here like you're waiting for a ride to the damn symphony. Do have any idea how many people we kicked the hell out of looking for you."

"We?" Sophie asked.

"It was a team effort," Belinda said.

"Sophie took out two barrooms full of thugs, single-handed," Neil said. "One was full of criminals and the other was full of sailors."

"In fairness, there's a lot of crossover," Sophie said. "Are you really alright, Asano?"

"I had time to stop and pick you up a gift," Jason said. "It's a little damaged but I don't think you'll mind."

Everyone had been so fixated on Jason that they didn't even glance at the bodies on the ground. Jason walked over to the unconscious Silva and poked him with his foot.

"You got him," Sophie said.

"Yep," Jason said. "He's all yours."

"No," Danielle said. "He's all mine. I have questions Mr Silva there is going to find himself extremely compelled to answer."

"How did you end up kidnapping him?" Gary asked.

"It was an incredible fight," Jason said. "Pitting myself against a bronze-ranker, exhausted after my daring escape. Struggling back and forth until finally I clinched the hard-fought victory."

"He looks pretty fresh for having fought you," Neil said. "There isn't even any rot around the wounds."

"Yeah, I don't know what happened there," Jason said. "I found him like this."

"You found him like this?" Rufus asked.

"I should probably start at the beginning," Jason said.

Suddenly a bird swooped out of the sky, transforming into a puppy that slammed into his chest like an adorable bowling ball.

“Oh, hey mate,” Jason said, holding Stash in his arms and scratching him behind the ears. Humphrey took his familiar back with an admonishing look.

“You have to be more careful,” Humphrey scolded. “What if Jason was hurt? You don’t know what he’s been through.”

“Jason’s fine,” Neil said. After reaching bronze rank, Neil’s perception power, eyes of opportunity, allowed him to see the vulnerabilities of others. That included injuries, not just what they were but what the effects they had on the body. It was a powerful tool for a healer, letting him see the conditions of his team at a glance.

“It got a little rough, I won’t lie,” Jason said. “I chugged that miracle potion Jory gave me. Thanks for that one, Jory.”

“Maybe stop putting yourself in situations where you need them?” Jory said.

“Couldn’t agree more,” Jason said. “No more dashing heroics for this adventurer.”

“And here you just said you won’t lie,” Sophie told him.

Jason ran them through events as best he could remember them, but his memory was rather hazy. Even for the parts he was in control of his brain to form memories, the pain made his recollection rather sketchy. The most important events took place when he retreated into his soul, which he didn’t exactly remember. Instead, it was like his feelings of that time were imprinted on him. Fear, pain, power and defiance. It was difficult to put to words in any way that made sense.

Jason’s veneer of equanimity started to crack as he struggled to explain those moments and Danielle put a stop to it, setting the others to work securing the site.

With the sudden sense of safety, the door Jason had been pushing all the panic, horror and pain behind suddenly opened. His body shuddered, a chill passing over it. Danielle placed a concerned hand on his shoulder and could feel him trembling, even as his face maintained a carefree smile. His legs felt shaky and he pulled a chair from his inventory to sit down before he stumbled. He leaned back, tilting his head to the sky to feel the sun on his face.

The others threw frequent glances back at Jason as they went about their tasks. Rufus and Gary started searching the area, looking out for any sign of the missing elf Jason had described. Clive took the building where Jason had been tortured while Humphrey searched the second building with its reflective glass.

Neil and Jory started examining the unconscious Silva, while Sophie and Belinda concentrated on the dead man lying near him. Belinda found a small, fresh hole in the pavers and spotted more where Silva lay close by. Further examination revealed that the

holes were broken at the edges and tiny fragments were scattered around them. It looked like something thin and hard had broken through from below and Belinda looked from the holes in the ground to the stab wound in Silva's body.

"That elf Jason described," Belinda said to Sophie. "We're assuming Killian Laurent, right?"

"The description fits," Sophie said.

"Did I hear something about him conjuring bone spikes from the ground?"

"I think I've heard that," Sophie said.

"Who's Killian Laurent?" Jory asked from nearby.

"He's been hovering around the periphery of the Silva family for years," Belinda said. "Old Man Silva only kept him around because he was solid with ritual magic."

"There were also rumours that the old man used him to do the truly nasty stuff on the quiet," Sophie added. "The things that even criminals and murderers would think twice about."

"Word is that Laurent rose up sharply after the old man died," Belinda said.

"Why would he do this to Silva?" Sophie wondered aloud. "It can't be a takeover. Silva was unpalatable but he had the family connections and at least some limits. No one would stand for that depraved elf being in charge."

"I imagine the answers will have to wait until this guy wakes up," Jory said, kneeling over Silva. The two women moved to stand over the man who was the genesis of so many of their misfortunes.

"We should kill him now," Belinda said. "It's not like anyone would care."

"No," Sophie said. "He can't suffer if he's dead."

"I won't allow you to just start hurting him," Neil said. "I'll remind you that I'm part of the church of the Healer."

"I wouldn't settle for physical pain," Sophie said. "That fades and I want him to suffer in ways that never end. I want him to see us and realise that chasing us has cost him everything."

"I think he was mostly chasing you," Belinda told her. "I'm pretty sure me, he could take or leave."

"If you want to hurt his feelings, go ahead" Neil said. "So long as you don't stab him or anything, that's your business."

Sophie looked over at Jason, then back down at Silva.

"What if I just kick him a little?"

Neil ignored that request, his eyes still panning over Silva's unconscious body. Jory, also assessing the damage, didn't have Neil's perception power. Instead, he relied on his knowledge and experience to make a physical examination.

"The strangulation, right?" Jory asked Neil.

"Yes," Neil concurred. "Whoever did it either came too close to killing him or didn't come close enough, depending on what they were after. There's damage to the brain that will take time to heal before he can wake up. He's bronze rank, though, so he'll fully recover, even without intervention."

Elsewhere, Rufus and Gary were sweeping the area, but other than the building the others were searching, there was very little to find.

"You don't buy this act of Jason's about being fine because he doesn't remember most of it, do you?" Gary asked quietly, glancing over to where Jason was slumped wearily on his chair.

"Of course not," Rufus said. "It was the same thing with the blood cultists. He was alright so long as things were still wild and dangerous, but once he was safe it all caught up with him. This time will be a lot worse."

"Did you feel his aura?"

"Yes," Rufus said gravely. "His aura power has definitely reached bronze."

"I think it might be stronger than mine," Gary said. "I know my aura control isn't the best, but that shouldn't affect the raw power and I'm almost silver rank. Even if his aura power is bronze, he's still iron. What do you have to do to a person's soul for that?"

"Hopefully, have them fight off a star seed," Rufus said.

"You think it actually took him over?"

"I'm hoping not."

"How do we help him?" Gary asked.

"First, we make sure it's really him in there. Then, we be there for him. Let him know he's safe and among friends. Beyond that, we leave it to my mother. She's good at helping people through things like this."

"You're right," Gary said.

Rufus' mother, Arabella, had made a reputation for herself by helping other adventurers through traumatic events that were an inevitable part of the job. It was only once she arrived to help her son in the wake of Farrah's death that Rufus was able to start truly moving past it.

Humphrey searched through the security building. Along with Jason's missing suit he found another dead body, with a stab wound in the back of the neck. He knew this was

likely Coburn, the man Jerrick had killed in order to sneak back to the city and give them Jason's location.

Only Clive was excited by what he found. In the makeshift ritual room where Jason had been tortured he found the ashen remains of the ritual circle and the inert remnants of the star seed. After making a record of everything with a recording crystal, he started pulling out special sample boxes, collecting ash and sealing away the star seed fragments.

Back outside, Danielle looked with concern at Jason, slumped in the chair.

"I don't like that I have to tell you this," Danielle said, "but after what you told us..."

"You have to assume that I've been compromised by the Builder," Jason finished for her. "I know."

"The church of the Healer has taken over from Purity in dealing with the star seeds," Danielle said. "Healer provided his people with the rituals they needed."

"Good," Jason said. "If you tried to turn me over the Purists, I would not go quietly,"

"I'm glad," Danielle said. "I'm starting to realise that not going quietly is kind of your thing."

Jason looked up from and they shared a smile, hers as motherly as his was weary.

Once the group made sure there were no surprises left behind at the site, Danielle gathered everyone to teleport back to Greenstone.

"What about the skimmers?" Clive asked. "I can't just leave the Magic Society's vehicles here."

"Yes you can," Danielle said. "I'll make sure it's smoothed over. Once the Adventure Society hears about what happened here, they'll be crawling over this place, and roping Magic Society people in with them. They'll bring them back."

Danielle's teleportation power was unable to affect others without their consent, so Jory fed Silva a potion to wake him up. He opened bleary eyes to find he had been sat in Jason's chair with Jason and Sophie looking down at him.

"Good morning, sunshine," Jason said. "You're about to have a rough day, mate."

Silva's eye went wide. He tried to leap out of the chair, only for Gary's huge hands to land on his shoulders and push him back down. Silva was strong but Gary was stronger.

"Asano!" Silva snarled. "Wexler? What happened? How are you not a meat puppet?"

"Rugged good looks," Jason said. "What happened to you creepy elf mate?"

The fury continued to burn in Silva's eyes but he pulled himself under control.

"You have to go after him. This was all his idea. I had no idea he was going to use a star seed."

“Mate, your words won’t be as garbled if you stop talking out your arse. You can lie all you like once we get back to town. Just shut up and accept the teleport.”

“Teleport?”

Silva looked around, noticing the others.

“Why would I go along with you?”

“Because if you don’t”, Sophie said, her voice an icy needle, “then you get to say here with me.”

Silva paled, then angrily covered the flash of fear.

“You’re nothing, Wexler. If it wasn’t for my father I’d have used you up and then tossed you into a brothel. If you were even still alive at this point, you’d be drugged to the eyeballs, laying in a filthy bed, waiting for the next guy to take his turn.”

Sophie leaned forward, bring her face right up to Silva’s, her mouth a hungry smile and her eyes, silver daggers.

“Oh, I know,” she said. “That’s why I’m hoping you make me take you back to town the long way. The very, very long way.”

Jason was finally home, alone in his room in the cloud boathouse. With a thought, dark mist swirled around him and all his clothing but his underwear vanished. He staggered over and fell into the cool embrace of his cloud bed. As the softness enveloped him, all the things he had been holding back were fully unleashed. Everything he had pushed away since his capture flooded over him in full force. Leaving him shuddering, curled up in a foetal position. The exhaustion not of his body but of his soul finally caught up with him and plunged him into a restless slumber.

He was woken by morning light coming through the transparent ceiling he hadn’t turned opaque before falling asleep. He was still shaky but somewhat purged, his reaction of the day before having worked something out of his system. He reconsidered that perhaps Knowledge hadn’t been lying after all. He was better than the day before, but that wasn’t the same as good. His experiences of the last few days were a blurry mess, yet he knew they would haunt him for the rest of his life.

When his team brought him home, Danielle had suggested he remain there with an Adventure Society official to watch over him, if only for the sake of propriety. She knew he wasn’t likely to want to leave anyway, and it was only until the church of the Healer gave him a thorough examination.

“Just until we confirm you’re all clear of the star seed,” she had told him.

The team gathered together on the deck for a big breakfast cooked by Gary, which meant meat, more meat and some eggs. With meat.

Jason had his first genuine smile in what felt like forever as he looked around at everyone happily tucking into breakfast. He was struck with the feeling that he might, eventually, be okay. The team naturally coddled him but he begged off after breakfast, asking for some time alone. He went up to the top deck of the houseboat, staying outside where the Adventure Society official could see him. He wasn't going to give the stranger access to the internal areas of his houseboat.

It was a mild winter day, actually rather pleasant with clear blue skies. With a mental command a cloud-stuff lounge rose up out of the floor. He lay down, and used the wrist razor Gilbert had incorporated into all his outfits to slash the back of his hand, letting a single member of team Colin to emerge. Colin crawled up Jason's arm to rest on his shoulder.

"Feeling better, little mate? How about we take a look to see if you got any stronger from all that?"

Jason looked at the system messages, still minimised at the corner of his vision. Taking a deep breath, he started pulling them up, one by one. Many of them were just warnings about his powers being suppressed, which wasn't much use given he couldn't see them until his abilities were unsuppressed again. Others were more important.

-
- **Outworlder racial ability [Quest System] has evolved to [Defiant].**

Ability: [Defiant]

- **Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Quest System].**
- **Previous effects of racial ability [Quest System] have been lost.**
- **Ignore the enhanced resistances derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced resistance from being higher rank, not other sources of resistance.**
- **Ignore the enhanced aura suppression and aura suppression resistance derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced effects from being higher rank, not the inherently superior strength of higher-rank auras.**
- **Looting abilities used on higher-rank monsters defeated by you will have increased effect.**

"Wait, no more quests? I have a lot of overhead costs coming up when I hit bronze."

The vast majority of the quests Jason had done were simple ones related to his Adventure Society work, earning him a nice bundle of money. As for the more exceptional quests, they had been the source of some of Jason's most important items. His essences, if nothing else. It looked like that part, at least, would still be a factor, with the new version enhancing the loot of more powerful monsters.

The quest system was Jason's variant on the guidance power that all outworlders apparently received. If the quests went away, did it mean he was no longer in need of guidance? Had this world truly become home? He suddenly felt further from his own world than ever.

Jason sorted through the system messages for the relevant ones. Some of them were just garbled nonsense, he guessed due to a combination of the suppression collar and the extreme stress being exerted on his soul, the source of all his powers.

He dug out another relevant message.

"Hey, this one's about you."

-
- Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Iron 8 (100%).
 - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Iron 9 (00%).
 - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).

 - Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Sanguine Horror] (Blood)

- Familiar (ritual, summon).
- Base cost: Extreme mana, extreme stamina, extreme health.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Summon a sanguine horror to serve as a familiar.
- Effect (bronze): Summon a bronze rank vessel for your familiar with enhanced abilities.

- Ability [Sanguine Horror] (Blood) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached bronze rank.

"Look at you, mate, jumping all the way to bronze rank like a big boy."

Colin wiggled happily.

"Good thing I already picked up the materials for your next summoning ritual. I might have to brush up on the ritual knowledge, though, to make sure I do it right."

Jason pulled up another advancement message.

-
- Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (ritual, summon).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.
- Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.
- Ability [Hegemony] (Sin) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached bronze rank.

“Strewth, that’s a fair dinkum upgrade.”

Sin was Jason’s power that increased the effect of necrotic damage, and now any enemy attacking his team would stack up instances on themselves. That would combine nicely not just with his own powers but the abilities that Belinda and Neil had gotten from the awakening stones of the Reaper.

There was one more important system message before Jason cleared off the stack.

New Title: [Spirit Warrior]

- Fighting off a concerted attack on your soul by a transcendent entity has awakened your awareness of your own soul and refined your ability to use it as a weapon.
 - The suppressive force and resistance to suppression of your aura is increased. You can use the suppression resistance of your aura to resist forms of magical suppression beyond just aura suppression.
 - After fully suppressing the aura of others, you may use your aura to attack their soul directly.
 - Your aura signature has changed. Your unyielding nature in the face of even the greatest power can be detected if your aura is examined by an aura sensing power or when projecting your aura. The echo of transcendent power within your aura is increased.
-

Jason sat looking at the description for a long time. His recollection of the Builder's attack on his soul wasn't a memory exactly. It was more like something imprinted on his soul, deeper and more enduring. His own attacks would doubtless be an empty echo of what the builder had done to him, but it still wasn't something he wanted to do to another person.

"It's good," he told himself, unconvincingly. "Of course it's good."

He couldn't shake the questions rising up in the back of his mind. Exactly who and what were his experiences turning him into? He was already no longer human. When he finally found his way home, would anyone even recognise whatever it was he had become?

Chapter 211

Lingering Doubts

A group of people made their way along to the marina toward the houseboat. It was led by Danielle Geller, along with Rufus, his mother, Arabelle, plus Clive and Vincent Trenslow, the Adventure Society official with the grandiose moustache. With them was a gold rank priest from the church of the Healer, freshly portalled into the city.

“How is he?” Danielle asked. It had been a little more than a week since Jason had been returned home.

“He was asleep for four days,” Clive said. “Those miracle potions of Jory’s defer the need for healing recovery, which is impressive, but once it hit him, it hit him hard.”

“Unsurprising,” the priest of the Healer said. His name was Carlos, a broad-shouldered and swarthy man. His features had the polished perfection that was universal at gold rank. His clothes were not the robes of the healer but a casual outfit. The brown colour and plain cut was reminiscent of the church of the Healer’s humble clerical wear, however. Only once they had lost their way did the Healer’s local clergy move into ostentatious variations.

“Even in the case of cultists who are accepting of it,” Carlos continued, “introducing a star seed to the body is deeply traumatic. Removing it is even worse.”

“I saw a star seed removed before it was rendered inert,” Danielle said. “It wasn’t traumatic, it was a meat grinder.”

“Sadly true,” Carlos said. “people were lost all over before we figured out who the cult were and what they were doing. From what you’ve told me about the situation here, you seemed to figure things out before the Adventure and Magic Societies started disseminating the information widely.”

“Clive here is largely responsible for that,” Danielle, making Clive look sheepish.

“While we may have a better idea of what we’re doing,” Carlos said, “we aren’t always successful in helping the people the cult has implanted. Even when they’re inert, extricating star seeds can be lethal without continuous healing. If your friend really managed it on his own, with a suppression collar around his neck, that’s deeply impressive. What has he been doing since he woke up?” Carlos asked.

“He’s been under self-imposed house arrest, at my suggestion,” Danielle said.

“He’s been on the roof deck of the houseboat for days,” Rufus said. “He got up, had breakfast and went up there three days ago. I don’t think he’s come back down since. He’s just been up there, meditating the whole time.”

“It’s very likely that he’s aura training,” Carlos said. “In cases of soul trauma, practising aura control can help re-establish the sense of self. Many people realise this instinctively, while others we strongly suggest it to. Actually having the training beforehand is obviously a tremendous help.”

They arrived at the houseboat, Vincent telling the Adventure Society official stationed on the dock that he could go. One way or another, Jason would no longer be under confinement.

“He must be inside,” Danielle said. “I don’t sense his aura at all.”

“He’s up top,” Rufus’ mother, Arabelle, said. She tilted her head, as if straining to hear something, then frowned.

“His aura isn’t retracted,” she said. “It’s suppressed.”

Using her gold-rank strength, she vaulted directly up to the roof of the houseboat, Danielle had the others all touch and teleported them up. They found Jason sitting peacefully, in a cross-legged meditation pose with a suppression collar around his neck. He opened his eyes as they arrived on his rooftop.

“Jason,” Clive said. “What are you doing with that collar?”

This close, they could all feel the suppressive power of the collar with their own aura senses. They were all startled as Jason’s aura emerged from within it, pushing it back. He took a key from his storage space, unlocking the collar and putting it and the collar away.

“Aura training,” Jason said, pushing himself lightly to his feet.

“Fascinating,” Carlos said. “The ability to counter the magic suppression with aura is a phenomenon that I’ve heard of, but never actually thought I’d see.”

“I didn’t know that something like that was even possible,” Rufus said.

“Extreme soul trauma can prompt some unusual reactions,” Carlos said. “From time to time, some unscrupulous researcher will attempt to study it. They’ll take essence users and subject them to all manner of soul torture to try and figure out a process by which to reliably gain special soul effects. The cost in misery and lives unconscionable. It’s all for nothing, as well, because the research never goes anywhere. The most anyone had ever achieved was a few people with enhanced resistance to aura suppression and a lot of people who died in agony.”

“I’ve heard of instances like that,” Clive said.

“Soul trauma is actually my speciality field of healing,” Carlos said. “I’ve seen more victims of these atrocities than anyone and I’ve come to my own conclusion. The soul withstanding the trauma and growing isn’t about the process, but the person.”

“Don’t I feel special,” Jason said flatly. “Do you have a name, soul trauma expert?”

“Sorry, I’m being rude. Carlos Quilido, church of the Healer.”

Jason looked at him coldly.

“You’re here to decide my fate?”

“I’m here to help you,” Carlos said showing no signs of being affected by Jason’s rudeness. “If you truly don’t have a star seed in you, I’m here to prove that definitively and excise any lingering doubts. If you do have one inside you, I’m here to excise that.”

Jason frowned, unhappily.

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just that I’ve been awaiting judgement for days.”

“I completely understand,” Carlos said. “I have some experience with people in similar circumstances to yours. Because of my specialty, the church and the Adventure Society have had me travelling around to work with people who’ve had star seeds extracted from them. For the most part, the cult only implants their own members. Just as has been the case here, though, they will implant them within others when it serves their purposes. The church of Purity first developed the extraction techniques, but we, under the Healer, have taken over that task.”

“I’ve never understood why they would do that,” Rufus said.

“Because the best way to hide a secret alliance is under the guise of an enemy,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Danielle agreed. “The implanting of start seeds in non-members of the cult has always been a distraction from their actual goals. That is as true everywhere else as it was here.”

“I have a question about the people who were implanted and had them removed,” Jason said to Carlos. “It sounds like you might have the answer, if you don’t mind.”

“Certainly,” Carlos said.

“The people who implanted me,” Jason said. “They told me that once you let the seed into the soul, the Builder has you. For good. That once you open that door, you’re done. It makes me wonder about the people who have had the seeds extracted.”

“My understanding is that it was not the cult that implanted you. It sounds like whoever these people were, their information about the star seeds was not complete. It is true that the Builder imprints itself on the soul of those who relinquish access. Without the star seed as a channel, however, the builder cannot exert control. As best we can understand, the people in question do truly regain themselves, although obviously very changed for the experience. Not to cheapen your experiences, but they were changed far more than you.”

“I can imagine,” Jason said. “I feel like a different person and my soul wasn’t breached. If I’d opened that door...”

“Quite,” Carlos said. “There is a rather disturbing trend we have discovered of people previously implanted feeling a compulsion left behind by the Builder.”

“What kind of compulsion?” Jason asked.

“To seek out another star seed. There seems to be a longing for the power it promised. Most resist that urge, knowing how self-destructive it is. Some of the people, frankly speaking, the weak-willed ones, give in to that urge. We have them all watched now, including the ones here in Greenstone. I understand one local was lost before that protocol was put in place.”

“It’s unconfirmed,” Danielle said, “but yes. The son of a friend.”

“It’s strange feeling sorry for Thadwick,” Jason said. “So, you’re some kind of big deal, Mr Quilido?”

“I wouldn’t say that, and please call me Carlos. I just happen to have a useful speciality for these unfortunate times. Arabelle and I have worked together in the past and she contacted me after what happened to you.”

Jason shared an apologetic smile between Carlos and Arabelle.

“You came all this way to help, and I was rude to you from the moment we met.”

“Seriously?” Clive asked. “All this time, and you apologise to this guy?”

“Don’t mind Clive,” Jason said. “He’s been crabby since I slept with his wife.”

“I don’t have a wife!”

“Yeah, I’m a homewrecker,” Jason said winsomely, turning to look off into the middle distance. “When you’re down with O.P.P. that’s the life you live.”

“What are you even looking at?” Clive asked.

“Am I missing something?” Carlos asked.

“You’ll get used to that,” Rufus said. “I think we just found out that it’s the real Jason in there,” Rufus said. “What is it that Humphrey says?”

“If you don’t understand what Jason is talking about, he’s probably up to something,” Clive said. “If you do know what Jason’s talking about, he’s definitely up to something.”

“Returning to normal behaviour is a good sign,” Carlos said. “Whatever normal behaviour means. In most cases of seed implantation, behaviour begins normally and diverges over the next few days and weeks. If the seed was resisted, we would expect to see behaviour consistent with trauma that returns to normal patterns over time. There will be permanent changes, though. Soul damage is something that marks you forever.”

“We would expect to see?” Jason said, echoing Carlos’ words. “Surely I’m not the only one to resist a seed implantation.”

“No,” Carlos said. “We know of at least six instances, but there are doubtless more. Under normal circumstances, star seeds of the Builder are implanted by cultists of the

Builder. If a seed is rejected, it generally kills the person. If they survive, the cult kills them. The unusual circumstances of your implantation have allowed you to escape without the cult killing you. I am curious how you purged the seed from your body and survived.”

“My familiar,” Jason said. “He heals me. He worked like a trooper to keep me alive.”

“I would be fascinated to examine it.”

Jason’s face froze.

“You can prod and poke me all you like,” he said in a voice of cold, hard granite. “You come after my familiar, though, and I don’t care who sent you or what rank you are. I will find a way to kill you.”

The temperature dropped as everyone fell silent at Jason’s sudden turn. The group looked nervous at the revelation that Jason’s return to his old self was a constructed façade. Rufus thought back to Jason’s first days in the city, where his vulnerability was likewise hidden behind his over-the-top personality.

Only Carlos seemed unfazed by Jason’s outburst.

“Understood,” he said. “I will take you up on that prodding and poking, though. There’s a reason the church and Adventure Society so readily approved Arabelle’s request to have me portalled here. Your survival presents a unique opportunity to learn more about the star seed implantation process. Hidden within your body and experiences may be insight that lets us help others. Mr Asano, you are the only known instance of someone both surviving the rejection and the aftermath. The hope is that what we can improve the process by which we extract star seeds from the cult’s victims.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason said. “You have larger concerns than just me, I know.”

“You don’t need to apologise to anyone for what you went through,” Carlos said. “But you are right about larger concerns. In many respects, the Builder has orchestrated a war on our world that we didn’t even know about until it was in full swing. Anything we can learn to catch up is essential knowledge.”

“I’m not sure how much I can help you,” Jason said.

“Anything we can find out will obviously be excellent,” Carlos said with an open smile. “First and foremost, though I am a priest of the Healer. Before anything else, I’m here to help you, not for you to help me.”

Chapter 212

Scars

Carlos worked with Clive, directing Clive to draw out a ritual circle on the rooftop.

“This is a damage echo ritual,” Carlos explained. “It will let me examine the history of physical damage to Mr Asano’s body.”

As Jason stood the middle of the circle, a man-shaped image of light appeared above him, with red and blue lines running through it like veins. Carlos waved his hand, manipulating the image. The mark of Jason’s first scar appeared, bright and glaring across his torso. Carlos slowly and methodically went through everything, although much of the image was an abstraction, incomprehensible without the appropriate knowledge.

“This is actually rather easy,” Carlos observed as he worked. “Because your body is less than a year old, everything is quite clear. Excellent for obtaining definitive results.”

Eventually he ended the ritual.

“This is consistent from what we’ve seen in others we believe to have rejected the seeds,” Carlos said. “They were all dead, though, so we were working from corpses. The information we have isn’t ideal.”

“You said there had been six that you knew of?” Clive asked.

“Those are just the ones we found,” Carlos said. “We don’t know what the actual numbers are. Obviously, it requires a series of ameliorating factors to even give someone a chance. As to how many more individuals resisted the star seeds and were killed without being found we just don’t know.”

“How accurately can you determine my condition if corpses are your basis for comparison?” Jason asked.

“Even from the corpses we could find specific differences between those who rejected the seed and those who were forced to accept it and then had it removed. If you think of the body as a field, the seed ploughs that field over, ready for planting. If the field accepts the seed, we see changes as the seed takes root. If the seed is rejected, however, all we get is overturned earth. The ground has been torn up but the seed won’t grow.”

“So, he’s in the clear?” Rufus asked. “No star seed?”

Vincent, standing next to Rufus could sense his agitation. He slipped his hand into Rufus’ and gave it a reassuring squeeze. Rufus gave him a grateful glance.

“Provisionally, I am willing to say that indications are good. Because Mr Asano’s body is young enough, the results are unambiguous. The Adventure Society and my church, however, require me to also conduct an examination of your soul, Mr Asano.”

“If you’re going to have a rummage in my soul,” Jason said, “we should probably be on a first name basis.”

“The soul examination isn’t invasive,” Carlos said. “It can’t be. If the Builder can’t get in there, I certainly can’t. It will expose your soul to scrutiny, however, which I have found makes people feel very exposed. The feeling is something like having your aura completely suppressed. I can tell you this from experience, having had the same ritual performed on me.”

“We could have used that ritual a few months ago,” Danielle said.

“It’s a gold rank ritual,” Carlos said. “Not easy to disseminate or use, especially in a place like Greenstone. Also, this version of the ritual is new, devised specifically for this circumstance. I had myself be the first person put through it, to experience what others would be going through, but you are our first actual living subject, Jason. The next ritual will create a projection of your soul that I can examine to confirm that it has not been breached. The sensation is something like projecting your aura, except there will be a powerful flood of energy to make the projection much more powerful than normal.”

“That’s a reliable test?” Rufus asked.

“Very,” Carlos said. “If Mr Asano – Jason – has ever let anything alien into his soul, it will be very evident. This ritual is only now being spread by the Magic Society to test for suspected star seed recipients. Fortunately, the Builder takes time to overcome the sense of self-preservation when he forces unwilling victims to open up their souls. Only those who have been seeded for extended periods are willing to detonate themselves when captured.”

“If he does have a star seed in him,” Danielle asked, “will this ritual harm Jason before we can have it extracted?”

“No. It will just be a projection of the soul, nothing more. But as I said, it’s a profoundly uncomfortable experience. The sense of exposure, of vulnerability, is very real.”

“Not an issue,” Jason said.

“That’s easy to say,” Carlos said. “What the ritual reveals won’t just be visible, although that will be part of it. Anyone with aura senses will be able to sense your fully exposed soul. This is especially true because the ritual incorporates an amplification element. Jason, your soul is only iron rank and I need to examine it clearly, so the projection will be more powerful than your normal aura projection. For that reason, I suggest we move to an enclosed ritual room instead of a high, open space on a busy marina.”

“No,” Jason said, his voice almost a growl. “I want people to see.”

His friends looked at him with concern but remained silent.

“Let’s get started then,” Carlos said.

Clive used his powers to rebalance the ambient magic and start drawing out the ritual circle from a book Carlos handed him.

“The visible representation will be quite noticeable,” Carlos explained as he supervised Clive’s work. “Particularly given our choice of venue. The appearance will be rather similar to your personal crest, if you have one. I do not, so I was rather curious when I underwent this ritual myself. My soul, as it turns out, looks like a sparkly apple. Presumably because I’m sweet and fresh.”

Jason chuckled as his friends looked on awkwardly. After his brooding behaviour and recent outburst, they weren’t sure how to look at him.

“That’s an excellent job,” Carlos assessed, looking over the finished ritual circle. It was easily the most sophisticated circle Jason had ever seen. Normally, Clive’s power drew out magic diagrams in glowing golden lines. Most of the circle was still gold, but it featured a rainbow of colours in various sections, from vibrant red to cool green and bright, sky blue.

“I’d be tempted to let you conduct the ritual yourself, Mr Standish, if channelling the power of a gold rank ritual wouldn’t make you explode.”

“You mentioned that this is a gold rank ritual, earlier,” Rufus said. “I didn’t think a ritual of that rank was possible with the low magical density in this region.”

“Normally, no,” Carlos said. “You could probably perform a silver-rank ritual here, if you were careful, but not a gold. We’ll be using mana condensers.”

Carlos started taking what looked like simple lamps from his dimensional bag and placing them in the corners of the rooftop deck. Where the glow stone would go in a normal lamp, these had swirling lights of blue, silver and gold. It looked very much like the light shed by the transcendent damage of Jason’s execute power.

“Mana condensers are a tool for performing rituals requiring a higher magic density than is available in the local area,” Clive explained as Carlos set them out. “You charge them up, quite slowly, in a low magic area, and they can create an artificial field of high-density ambient magic. Very inefficient, but if it’s what you need, it’s what you need.”

He set out the lamps, along with other materials, most of which seemed to be different coloured crystals. There were also a number of gold spirit coins that, if you ignored certain items like the cloud palace, was more than all the wealth in Jason’s possession.

“Seems like a waste of coin,” Jason said.

“If you’re short on money, the church of the Healer will be happy to help you out,” Carlos said. “The information we get here will be critical going forward. If you’re willing to dedicate a number of hours to go over your experience and answers some questions as best you can. Maybe undergo an extra ritual or three to examine your condition. We can and will pay well for information on a subject that is very hard to come by right now.”

“It’ll help people, right?” Jason asked.

“Very much so,” Carlos said. “Even with the guidance of our god, the current methods we have for extracting star seeds are crude and brutal. Not everyone survives. The information we can potentially get from studying you could help us improve those methods significantly.”

“Helping people and getting paid for my trouble,” Jason said. “Sounds like adventuring to me.”

“Wait, you’re letting this guy study you?” Clive complained. “I ask you all the time.”

“He wants help healing people,” Jason said. “Not help streamlining his bureaucratic process.”

“Bureaucratic process?” Clive explained. “Do you have any idea how critical the work of the Magic Society is to...”

Clive trailed off as he saw Jason’s familiar sly grin and started muttering complaints to himself.

“Just about ready,” Carlos said. “For this one, everyone else should go down to that lower deck. Mr Standish, you can stay, if you think you have the expertise to avoid tainting the ritual.”

“I probably can but I’d rather not take the risk,” Clive said, following the others down the stairs to the lower deck.

From below they could hear, but not see the ritual being conducted. The chant was not in words, but unintelligible sounds.

“Non-linguistic chants are very difficult,” Clive said, “but they become more and more common in the higher-rank rituals.”

Around them on the marina, the surge of magic from the roof deck was drawing attention. The wealthy marina patrons tended to be essence users, many with perception powers that could sense the changes in the ambient magic. Those pointed out the surge in ambient magic density to others.

When the ritual was completed, every essence user in the marina and many in the Marina North district of the city felt an aura blast out. Incredibly domineering, but not the

individual power of a sovereign. It was more like a celestial law had passed over the area, filled with unyielding resolve and an echo of divine power.

Beyond the feel of the aura, it carried with it an overbearing suppressive force. Bronze-rankers and above were able to withstand the surging aura, while iron-rankers without solid aura control found themselves shaken and shivering. The only member of Jason's team present was Clive, who weathered the aura surge despite being at the epicentre. After resuming his adventuring after years as Magic Society official, he had benefited from Farrah's aura training, alongside Jason.

The people without aura senses actually fared better than the essence users, their lack of sensitivity giving them no more than a foreboding sense of unease.

High above the roof deck, darkness started spreading like a sinister cloud, covering a huge space. It was not a complete darkness, with a spread of dim, feeble stars like an oppressive night sky. Within the darkness, indistinct shapes moved and shifted, defined only by being darker than the sky around them. It was hard to make out their shapes or follow their movements, but what onlookers could see of the unnerving, alien forms made them glad that they could not.

In the centre of the darkness, a cluster of stars started glowing brighter, taking on the form of a cloak. The cloak opened and expanded, revealing that within was a clear blue sky and bright sun, like a universe contained within a dark void.

The dark shapes immediately started converging on the starlight cloak, tearing at it with shadowy claws. They rent the cloak but from every tear, sunlight flared out in the form of bright, grasping tendrils, clutching at the dark figures. They wrapping around the dark, alien shapes, which dissolved away like morning mist exposed to the sun. As they did, horrifying shrieks started emerging from the projection with each dark entities that was annihilated.

People looked up at the projection from all across the marina, feeling the source of the strange aura that had washed over them.

"This is Jason's soul?" Rufus asked. "You saw his personal crest, right, Clive?"

"Yeah," said weakly. "It was kind of like this, but it didn't have those things in it. Are they the star seed? Did it get in after all?"

"No," Carlos called out from above. His gold rank senses easily heard their conversation, even over the screeching. "They're the aftermath of the war he fought for his soul. The soul doesn't scar the same way the body does."

Carlos had not been anticipating anything like the power of the soul projection the ritual produced. He was worried that the gold-rank ritual was filtering too much power

through Jason's soul to create the projection but Jason seemed unperturbed. He was standing in the middle of the circle, eyes closed and completely relaxed.

Satisfied that Jason's soul was unviolated, Carlos brought the ritual to an end, the aura fading away and the image fading into nothing.

Chapter 213

I Won't Let Them Turn Me Into That

Jason didn't go straight back to adventuring, instead spending his time in training and recovery. His team spent their days participating in the hunt for Killian Laurent, whose possession and use of the star seed had made him a priority in the efforts to locate and fight against the cultists. He potentially had valuable information and unlike the suicide-prone cultists, he might be possible to capture.

At the same time, Silva had been locked up in the Adventure Society's prison tower, being asked some very pointed questions. It didn't help with the search for Laurent, only revealing the depth of ignorance Silva had about his former henchman. Silva did volunteer other information that was more actionable, however.

Unless someone had a specific power to do so, most long distance communication was conducted through speaking chambers. Two chambers could be connected, allowing the person in each chamber to project into a water clone in the other.

Most speaking chambers were housed within and operated by the Magic Society branches. One of the perks of being a branch director was the use of a private speaking chamber, annexed to their office. Lucian lamprey was using his, but the man on the other end was not telling him what he wanted to hear.

"We don't have anyone who's been there to open a portal, Lucian. Why would we? It's just an out of the way, provincial city that probably wouldn't exist if not for the spirit coin farms."

"Surely you can find someone?" Lamprey asked.

"Probably, but I won't. You were banished there for a reason, Lucian. You're all out of friends, here."

"All I need is one portal out."

The person on the other end of the communication sighed.

"I have someone who can portal to Hornis. If you can get there, I can maybe arrange something. It'll cost you, though."

"You owe me. From the old days."

"The old days are over, Lucian. I don't owe you a thing. Get to Hornis and message me again. We can work something out. If you have something to offer."

Lamprey went to speak but the person on the other end severed the connection. The water that made up the clone lost its animating force and splashed back into the pool.

Lamprey stormed out of the tiled booth.

“Hornis,” he muttered to himself. It was a port city, like Greenstone, south and around the coast. He would either have to take a ship and risk someone exposing his departure, or go overland, east into the veldt and then south. He decided that was the safer route, as the desert was not a threat to a silver ranker.

He opened the hidden safe in his office, shoving the contents into a dimensional bag before making for the door. Just as he left his office, he spotted Danielle Geller at the far end of the long hallway. She spotted him, in turn.

“Going out?” she called out to Lamprey. “That works out, because you need to come with me.”

“I’m busy right now, Lady Geller,” Lamprey said. “Another day.”

“Oh, I insist,” Danielle said.

They stared at each other down the hall for a long moment. Then, as if someone waved a starter’s flag, they both sprang into motion. Lamprey clapped his hands together in front of him, creating a wave of force that sent cracks along the stone walls, floor and ceiling. The art lining the walls was ripped apart, the windows shattered and floor tiles exploded, throwing up dust and debris that shrouded the hallway.

His attack was late before it had even begun; trying to move faster than Danielle Geller was an exercise in futility. By the time the hallway started erupting she had already teleported behind him, her blade cutting into his thick neck muscle. Lamprey was power to Danielle’s speed, however, and her sword barely dug into the flesh. He reached up and grabbed the blade while ramming his other elbow back into Danielle’s chest. His incredible strength fired her back like a rocket, through the doorway and across his office to bounce roughly off the wall.

Lamprey turned around, Danielle’s sword still gripped in his hand by the blade. He probed the wound with his free hand as he watched her push herself back to her feet.

“I knew you were tough,” she said, “but I thought that would do more.”

“You’ll have to cut me like that a thousand times if you want me to go down,” Lamprey sneered. Danielle gave him a predatory smile in return.

“Deal.”

She vanished, as did her sword, leaving behind a cut in Lamprey’s hand. Bloody lines started appearing on his body, Danielle’s movement nothing but a blur.

Even once his Adventure Society minder was gone, Jason rarely left the houseboat. Most of his time was spent refining his aura control. He quickly reached the point where he

could completely negate the effects of an iron-rank suppression collar and had begun working with a bronze-rank one. He could only hold off its effects for a few moments, but he knew exactly how valuable a few moments could be.

When he did leave, he remained unnoticed. He moved through Old City unseen, practicing his shadow teleportation. He needed it to reach bronze rank, hopefully opening a path back to the Order of the Reaper's astral space and the Builder cultists within.

Jason's friends clearly wanted to be supportive, although were largely at a loss as to how. Joining the pursuit for Killian was their way to try and find some closure on Jason's ordeal. In the meantime, Carlos and Arabelle both came by daily, carefully talking Jason through the events of his capture and escape.

Arabelle helped him explore the traumatic memories. For those strange feelings imprinted on his soul from when he had no mind to form memories, Carlos had techniques to help. Guided meditation was a large part of it, as was teaching Jason about the soul from a magical theory perspective. Jason's grasp of magical theory was continually improving and he was able to follow along at least with the fundamentals of what Carlos was talking about.

"Some people find a more intuitive approach helpful," Carlos told him. "Others, like you, seem to get more from understanding the way the soul functions, magically. Understanding and breaking down what they went through helps them process it."

One day, Carlos and Arabelle arrived at the houseboat with Arabelle's old team of her, her husband, the stealthy and enigmatic Callum Morse and Emir. Also with them were Danielle Geller, Constance and Hester.

"We wanted to come earlier," Emir told Jason. "Arabelle said it was best to wait."

Although his original purpose in Greenstone had been concluded, Emir's operation at Sky Scar Lake continued. Knowing that the Builder cult had infiltrated the astral space there, his people had been trying to find a way back in. Jason had been keeping something under his hat, not wanting to speak up until he was certain, but changed his mind.

"You asked me, before, if Shade had any insights that might help you get back into the astral space," Jason told him. "I didn't say anything at the time, but there might be something."

"Oh?" Emir asked.

"We can't test it out until my shadow teleport power reaches bronze rank," Jason said.

"Not what we're here for," Arabelle said, heading off the conversation.

“What are you here for?” Jason asked. “Not that I don’t appreciate the well-wishes.”

Carlos and Arabelle, as it turned out, had arranged an adventurer group therapy session. Jason had been through a lot, but no adventurer reached silver and gold rank without their own horror stories.

In the past, Jason had felt a step between himself and the experienced upper-rankers he knew. As they each shared their own tribulations, he felt a new sense of belonging. It was something he had been missing even before his recent troubles. His very nature as an outworlder marked him as an outsider. To share his story with others and have them share their’s in turn was like a puzzle piece fitting into the right space.

As they left the boathouse afterwards, Danielle took Jason aside.

“Someday, Humphrey and the others will face similar problems,” she told him and Jason nodded, understanding. Neither of them needed to say more.

It had been almost two months since Jason last set foot on the Adventure Society campus. He glanced over at the prison tower where both Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva were incarcerated. Neither’s ultimate fate had yet been decided.

After the disastrous expedition and the subsequent wave of demotions, the campus had, for a time, become an almost desolate place. Then, after the Reaper trials, it had been overrun with time-displaced priests. With the expedition months gone and the priests sent off to whatever their new lives had become, it was back to the same bustle of activity Jason remembered from his early days as an adventurer. A lot of people were looking his way, either with furtive glances or openly staring. One woman even pointed right at him as she whispered to her companions. He ignored it as he made his way into the administration building and rode the elevating platform to the fifth floor.

“Morning, Bert,” Jason greeted, spotting Albert behind the executive level reception desk. “I see from your aura that the training is coming along.”

“Oh, you’re one to talk, Mr Asano. Bertram was working guard duty on the bridge when you set off your little display. You gave him a right good scare.”

“You can put that down to the ritual I was going through, not me.”

“If you say so, Mr Asano. Welcome back, by the way. It’s good to see you out and about, after what happened.”

“What exact are people saying, Bert?”

“All sorts, Mr Asano; you know what rumours are like. Magic mind control, crime lords, now Director Lamprey locked up in the prison tower. It’s all very exciting but no one seems sure if you’re victim or perpetrator, if you don’t mind me saying. And that’s without

that business with the aura projection. Nobody knows what to make of that. Plus there's talk of some village that got destroyed, the Duke sending out all those people and materials to rebuild."

"Thank you, Bert."

"If you don't mind me asking, Mr Asano, what did happen?"

Jason thought about it for a moment.

"Cole Silva and Lucian Lamprey tried to deal with me using the Builder cult as a weapon."

"It doesn't seem to have worked out so well for them," Albert said. "You being here and them locked up in the tower. It all came good in the end, then."

"It isn't the end," Jason said grimly. "Not until the cultists have been dragged out of their holes and tossed right out of our world."

"Well, I don't think I'd bet against you, Mr Asano."

"You know what, Bert? Neither would I."

Jason sat down across from Elspeth Arella. Tabitha Gert and her inquiry team had decamped from Greenstone while he had been on the road contract and Arella was once again in charge.

"Mr Asano."

"Director."

"We have something of a contentious past, you and I."

"We do," Jason agreed. "Rufus Remore agreed to put his support behind you in return for your father's help, however, and your father delivered. Since Rufus' support absolutely includes me, then you can consider yourself to have mine, for whatever worth you find that to have."

Arella examined Jason for a moment in silence. He was worlds apart from the brash, arrogant boy he had seemed in the past. The arrogance was still there, an unmistakable challenge in the eyes. But the precocious boy had been replaced with a steely-faced man.

"I have been looking at my tenure, following the enquiry as a fresh start," she said finally. "Perhaps you and I could do the same."

"That seems fair," Jason said.

"Very well, then on to business. I understand that Danielle Geller has been keeping you apprised of the investigation into Silva and now Lamprey."

"That's right."

“As the primary charges against them are against an Adventure Society member, the Adventure Society will be dealing with them. As it also involves the Builder cult, the decisions regarding them will be made above my level. I understand that Tabitha Gert will be portalling in to take them both. As the victim, however, you have the right to be heard in regards to their ultimate dispensation.”

“I prefer not to think of myself as a victim,” Jason said. “Also, giving the victims a say might feel right, but that’s a tool of vengeance, not justice.”

“You don’t want revenge?”

“Of course I do,” Jason said. “If you’d asked me what to do with them three weeks ago, I’d have said hang them from a tree and beat them until fabulous prizes come out. But that’s not the person I want to be and I won’t let them turn me into that. So long as they aren’t put in a position to keep hurting people, I don’t care what happens to them.”

“How very considered. Does Miss Wexler feel the same way?”

“I don’t think you should try for a fresh start with her,” Jason said. “She knows that you tried to sell her off to Lamprey and has different feelings about vengeance than I do. But you and I both made mistakes that she almost paid the price for, so I won’t go casting any stones.”

“We’ll leave it at that, then, and move on to the next issue. North East Quarry Village Number Four. You did excellent work, there.”

“Thank you,” Jason said.

“You and Henrietta Geller did a superlative job of building the Adventure Society’s reputation.”

“Also, helping people,” Jason said.

“Yes, of course. The Society would like to show its gratitude by supplying the materials required to resummon all your familiars. The ones you lost in that encounter, as well as the one that has now reached bronze rank.”

“You seem to know a lot about the state of my familiars.”

“This reward was suggested by your team. Mr Standish provided the list of supplies. I had to have someone portal them in, but after the expedition I’ve made a policy of always keeping a portal user on hand. Sending them all off together was a mistake I won’t make again.”

Jason gave it a short moment’s consideration, then nodded.

“Thank you,” he said.

“If you speak to the receptionist, he will direct you to pick them up. That just leaves the issue of your star ranking. Tabitha Gert promised that if you conduct yourself

acceptably, your rank will be restored to three stars. I think we can safely say that has happened. You will be needing a new badge because of the changes to your aura and your personal crest, so please present yourself to the Magic Society at your convenience.”

“Speaking of my aura,” Jason said, “are there any repercussions I need to know about following the aura projection incident?”

“Not that you need to concern yourself with.”

Chapter 214

Putting the Band Back Together

In the wake of Cole Silva's arrest, his organisation fell into chaos as Silva's cousins fought to seize control. At first it was restricted to carefully feeling out key people and quietly garnering loyalty. As days passed into weeks without a definitive leader rising up, it started causing trouble with street level operations and the conflict became bloodier.

In the midst of all this, Killian's trail was finally found, but far too late. It was eventually discovered that he had decamped the city entirely, taking a ship loaded with a good chunk of Cole Silva's ill-gotten holdings. Until the crew of that boat turned up somewhere, it was a dead end.

Jason felt that he turned a corner in his recovery with the resummoning of his familiars. He began with Gordon and then Shade, grateful to discover that they were the same familiars he had previously. While the bodies of the familiars would be the same with each summoning, the astral spirits inhabiting them could be different, if the original spirits did not want to re-enter his service.

"Your soul is rather changed," Shade observed. "You have been through an ordeal in the time I've been gone."

"It's been rough," Jason acknowledged. "Glad to have you back, mate."

"I am also glad to return," Shade said. "The Reaper's realm is a rather monotonous place. I did take the time to make enquires while I was there, however, under the assumption that you survived to resummon me. I am now more confident about accessing the Order of the Reaper's astral space."

Resummoning Colin was another thing entirely. Summoning his new bronze-rank vessel would require a bronze-rank ritual. Part of his recovery time had been spent continuing his study of magical theory and he had the instinctive understanding of his power to guide him. Despite this, he wasn't entirely confident about handling the increased sophistication and power the higher-rank ritual would require. He discussed the issue with Clive, who had a suggestion.

"You have that bronze-rank skill book, right? The one you took from Landemere Vane?"

Jason did, indeed, still have skill books detailing bronze-rank ritual and astral magic.

"They require bronze rank to use, though," Jason said.

“So, fake it,” Clive said. “Use a spirit coin before you use the skill book. It’ll be a strain, but nothing you can’t handle after what you’ve been through.”

Jason took Clive’s advice. Taking a seat in his cloud house, he consumed a bronze-rank spirit coin under Clive’s supervision, with Neil on hand in case it became too much. Unlike his previous uses, his enhanced awareness of his own soul let him sense exactly what the coin was doing to him. It flushed through his soul harmlessly, merging with his own power before flooding into his body. He gained a better understanding of the cost of using spirit coins as he could clearly feel the power was more than his body could contain. He would only be able to briefly use the power surge before his body blew a fuse and shut off.

Hurriedly, he used the skill book. As with the previous one he had used, the text floated out of the book, becoming a magical cloud hovering around him. The power of the coin faded, leaving him feebly slumped in the chair, but the it had done it’s work. Without reaching a false bronze-rank state, he wouldn’t have been able to trigger the book at all.

When the cloud of magical text started injecting itself into Jason’s body, something started going horribly wrong. Jason had experienced skill book use before and this was less strenuous than the huge tome that had contained his martial art. At the time he used that skill book, though, he hadn’t experienced the star seed implantation.

It started with a familiar feeling as his body was invaded. The skill book’s magic was entering his mind, not his soul but it was close enough that it awakened buried flashes of memory. Suddenly he was back in that room, hanging from the ceiling, vulnerable and helpless as his body and mind were invaded.

Clive and Neil watched in horror as Jason tumbled out of the chair and onto his knees, clutching at his head and screaming. Neil started to cast a healing spell but Clive stopped him.

“Don’t,” Clive warned urgently. “Muddling the magic going into him right now could do some real damage.”

“What do we do?” Neil asked.

“All we can do is let him go through it,” Clive said unhappily.

Eventually the screaming stopped and Jason was laying on the floor, looking up with blank eyes.

“He’s not breathing,” Clive said.

“He’s been training,” Neil said. “I’ve been helping him with it. He doesn’t breath at all, now.”

After the problem with the skill book, Jason didn't move on to resummoning Colin right away. He continued to work with Arabelle, Carlos having departed the city. He was important to the star seed implantation recovery efforts and couldn't be spared for more than a couple of weeks on one person. He helped Jason through the worst and Jason did everything he could to give Carlos information he could use to help others, the only reason The Adventure Society and his church had let him stay as long as he did.

Having his other familiars back helped. Their presence in his soul was a comfort, a support when he awoke from a nightmare or suffered another flashback.

He concentrated on other tasks. More training, but also more mundane affairs. One of them was his new beard. It was trimmed light, with a line next to the chin where a thin scar was. Another bisected his left eyebrow.

"I'm still not sure about the beard," he said at breakfast.

"I like it," Neil said. "It covers your face."

"No, it's really good," Belinda said. She was the one who suggested he keep it in the first place.

"It doesn't make me look like a villain?"

"Isn't seeming like a villain kind of your thing?" Gary asked.

"Stop discouraging him," Belinda said. "It looks good, doesn't it, Soph?"

Sophie looked up from her sausage and eggs to give Jason an intense stare. Finally she nodded.

"Your face is too pointy," she said. "It softens the edges."

"I'd have said that it flatteringly frames your facial structure," Belinda said, "but I'd take it. For Sophie, that was a gushing compliment."

Eventually Jason decided it was time to resummon Colin. After using the skill book he had delved into the theory to consolidate his knowledge. Now he was as ready as he was going to be. After the skill book, his whole team was going to be present for support, along with Rufus and Gary.

For each earlier familiar re-summoning, he had hired out a ritual room in the Magic Society, rather than do it on the houseboat. The cloud floor of the houseboat was not ideal for drawing out ritual circles, lacking the dedicated, hard-floored ritual rooms of Emir's cloud palace.

Jason did so again for Colin's ritual, Clive helping him pick out the one with the facilities to hose the room down afterward. He began preparations by stripping down to his

underwear. No one mentioned the scars speckling his body, or the one long scar across his torso.

“Is that really necessary?” Neil asked. No one wants to see your skinny body.”

“This will be messy, if the last time is anything to go by,” Jason said.

“It really was,” Gary agreed. “We never actually cleaned that room after, we just picked up his unconscious body and snuck off.”

“There’s no point ruining good clothes,” Jason said. “Sorry we can’t all be super buff like you, Neil. Which reminds me, we need to take you to get some more flattering clothes. Seriously, who makes that stuff?”

“My aunt is quite interested in fashion design.”

“Oh, I get it now,” Jason said. “Is she too influential to tell how bad her work is, or are you all just being nice.”

“She controls a fairly good portion of the family’s holdings, yes,” Neil acknowledged.

“Fair enough, then. Just tell her that your team leader made you get a new wardrobe to fit in with the group.”

“Since when are you the team leader?” Neil asked.

“Of course I’m the team leader,” Jason said. “I have the best hair.”

“Sophie has the best hair,” Neil said.

“I’m the most handsome?”

“Not even top three,” Neil said.

“There’s only four guys in the team,” Jason said dejectedly.

“Maybe you should start the ritual now?” Clive suggested.

Jason nodded and started setting out the circle and the materials, mostly bronze-rank blood quintessence gems. Jason took a razor from his inventory and sliced the back of his hand, letting Colin spill out onto the ground. The leech pile spread out around the diagram, seeming to have an instinctive understanding of where to go.

“Alright, little mate,” Jason told Colin. “See you again soon.”

Jason began the ritual. Lines of red life force drifted out of the leeches and fed into Jason, the leeches withering into nothing. Even with that extra life force, the ritual took a heavy toll on Jason. At the edge of his vision, his mana and stamina bars emptied rapidly as mental and physical exhaustion overtook him. The little body shape indicating damage went from green to red all over as blood started seeping from his pores, spilling down his body to flow into the middle of the circle where it vanished.

Once again, Jason's mind tried to drag him back to his torture, the memory of his body being ravaged by the star seed. He willed himself to stay in the moment. He felt his other familiars residing inside him. He glanced up at his friends, looking on with concern.

He dropped to one knee, struggling to stay conscious. Half as much blood loss would have killed a normal person. It all flowed into the circle and vanished, until all that Jason had put in and more started spilling from the floor like a wellspring, inundating the ritual circle, only to stop when it reached the edge.

Crawling up out of the pool came a leech, no different to Colin's previous form. It had the same slick, wormy body and gaping maw with circular rings of oversized lamprey teeth. It was joined by a second, then a third, more and more emerged until they were being pushed out like meat from a grinder.

Strips of bloody cloth emerged from the mass, gathering the leeches together and wrapping them up. Like compression bandages, they pushed the leeches together into shape, slowly binding them up into a humanoid form.

The sanguine horror Jason, Gary, Rufus and Farrah had fought had taken on the appearance of a mummy. While the basic form Colin has taken was similar it was not identical. Along with bundling the leeches into shape, the strips of cloth had formed a ragged cloak and hood, draping off the humanoid figure.

"I think it's trying to look like you, Jason," Humphrey said.

Jason didn't hear him, kneeling on the floor. His body was ravaged and he was desperately trying to keep his mind from going back to the torture room.

Once the figure finished forming, the bloody strips dried, leaving them a rusty colour. It reached out to help Jason to his feet and he grasped the crude, fingerless hand.

-
- Colin (sanguine horror).
 - Familiar (bronze rank).

 - Swarm. Hive mind.
 - Bites from the leech swarm inflict [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin] and [Necrotoxin].
 - Leech attacks drain health and stamina, allowing the rapid replacement of destroyed biomass.
 - Ranged entangling attacks can be made using cloth strips. Grips inflict minimal constriction damage but periodically inflict [Leech Toxin] and [Necrotoxin] if an area with an open wound is grabbed or the target is suffering the [Bleeding] condition.
 - While subsumed within the summoner, the summoner has accelerated healing and stamina recovery. Healing and recovery rate is determined by how much biomass was absorbed and increases with the summoner's level of injury.
-

In addition to the changes to Colin's form, the healing he provided would now increase the more Jason was injured, the value of which was obvious. Jason had Colin walk around a little, which the familiar did, hesitantly at first and then with increasing confidence. Its new pseudo-human guise was faster than the leech pile of its previous form, although it still couldn't move much faster than a hurried shuffle.

"Alright Colin," Jason said wearily. "Time to come home."

Through his instinctive sense of the familiar ability, Jason could sense that he would no longer need to cut himself for Colin to enter or leave his body. He reached out a hand, Colin doing the same and the familiar was absorbed directly in through the skin. It happened in a comical rush, like a cartoon character being sucked into a vacuum cleaner. Jason immediately felt Colin go to work healing him heal and recover. He looked down at his bloodied body and pulled out a bottle of crystal wash.

Chapter 215

Nothing Speaks Louder Than Power

The return of Jason's familiars went a long way to helping him feel better. With his improved soul sense he could feel their comforting presence within him much more strongly than before, even retaining a sense of connection when they were out of his body. It didn't match the connection of a bonded familiar, like Humphrey had with Stash, but it was enough to give him a confidence that he had been lacking for some time.

He had not yet returned to adventuring but he did start making some social excursions. This started with Gary arriving at the houseboat to take Jason out to the delta, to take a look at the construction site of the training annex for Rufus' academy. They rode out using two of Shade's bodies in horse form, void black but with glowing white hooves, mane and eyes. Mist shrouded each of the hooves, leaving a trail as the horses sped along the delta embankment roads.

"So these are the horses you keep talking about," Gary said. "They're kind of like heidels, but only having one head is weird."

"Most things only have one head," Jason said and patted Horse-Shade on the neck. "Shade is quite a bit more handsome than regular horses, though."

In horse form, Shade manifested with reins and saddle, but no bit. The ride was soft and smooth, Shade not being a true animal but a creature of shadow-stuff. Shade was also able to run over the surface of water, which cut time comfortably off their journey.

They rode around the huge walls marking the edge of the Geller Estate grounds until they reached the construction site. Greenstone was to the west of the estate, while the construction site was just outside the south walls.

The Remore Academy Training Annex would primarily be made of stone, like most buildings in the region where wood was at a premium. Gary had been recruited to create metal frames and reinforcement before the stone went in, using the powers of his forge essence to create alloys heavier and stronger than steel.

"I do a lot of construction work back in Vitesse," Gary explained as he and Rufus led Jason around the site. "Being only bronze rank, we don't get the freedom to go out adventuring that we get here, so it's a nice little side earner."

"It's that restrictive?" Jason asked.

"It's not too bad," Rufus said. "You don't go out without a silver-ranker, though. Even if your team can handle a silver rank monster, if you get a whole pack of them, a bad

match-up for your team or a gold-rank monster then your team can end up dead very quickly. At higher ranks, monsters tend to be harder to run away from.”

“All that is especially true when a monster surge is due,” Gary said. “The increase in silver-rank monsters here is a clearly a surge precursor, and in Vitesse that increase is in gold-rank monsters.”

“It means the monster surge is close, right?” Jason asked.

“Maybe,” Rufus said. “It could be weeks, or even months, still, which is why we went ahead with construction.”

Jason’s friends continued to drag him out of the houseboat, to the point that he realised Arabelle had suggested they help Jason break out of his self-imposed isolation. He started taking his own steps out, including making use of the Musical Society membership he had purchased months ago, only to be too busy to really use. Making use of his own private viewing booth at the concert hall let him get out without needed to deal with other people too much.

Jason’s progress was not all forward, however. Nightmares were frequent and flashbacks could sneak up in him in unexpected moments. Arriving early for the symphony one night, something about the orchestra tuning their instruments triggered a flashback and he fled his booth, stumbling through the hall and into one of the empty rooms around the concert hall. He was leaning against a window when he felt a familiar aura draw closer. He turned, wild-eyed, to the opening door.

“Hello Jason.”

Cassandra’s face was filled with concern.

“I saw you in the hall,” she said. “You didn’t look well and your aura was all over the place.”

“It’s fine,” he said with a grimace, leaning back against the cool glass of the window.

“I heard about what happened to you,” she said softly. She stayed at a distance by the door, as if afraid of scaring off a skittish animal.

“What did you hear?” he asked

“They put one of those things in you. Like Thadwick.”

“Not like Thadwick,” Jason snarled, his face flashing anger, then regret.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I know your brother is still missing. But I wasn’t taken over.”

“I heard that too,” she said. “A lot of people don’t believe it.”

“I don’t care what a lot of people think,” he said. “Everyone I care about the opinion of knows better.”

“I’m sorry for how my family treated you,” she said. “Treated us.”

“They did what’s right for them,” Jason said. “Don’t we all.”

“No,” Cassandra said. “I heard about what happened in that village, too. Not many would stand up to a silver rank monster like that.”

Jason’s aura was settling. Her’s was a calming presence, intermingling with his in an echo of their former connection as lovers. She moved closer, slowly making her way across the room.

“Your aura is so different,” she said. “I can barely recognise it.”

“A lot has happened since we last met.”

Her smile carried the bitterness of their last encounter.

“You got your promotion back.”

“Impatience seems to be a Mercer family trait.”

“It has cost us, more than once.”

She arrived in front of Jason. After a brief pause, she wrapped her arms around him comfortingly and he didn’t resist, resting his head on her chest.

“We could have been something, couldn’t we?” she said sadly.

“Maybe,” he said.

“Probably for the best,” she said. “I would not be putting up with that beard.”

Still leaning into her chest, he burst out laughing.

Danielle had Humphrey drag Jason and his team to a large social gathering at the Geller townhouse on the Island. For Belinda and Sophie it was the first time attending such an event without a plan to steal from the attendees. In an elegant white dress, Sophie garnered no small amount of attention. Humphrey, who was raised in such settings, helped her navigate the new waters, adroitly driving away the sharks. If not for his social expertise she would have had to resort to her own, which was not event appropriate. She had made sure, that if it came to that, the slit in the leg of her dress would free up her high kicks.

“I robbed that guy,” she said quietly as they circulated. “And that one. Good thing Belinda is good at making disguises.”

Jason found himself in an odd social position, due to the various stories and events he had been caught up in. His success in the Reaper trials, along with his closeness to the gold rankers every social climber in the room wanted to connect with lifted up his prestige. The rumours floating around after his kidnapping and the aura projection incident made the waters rather murky, however.

At one point in the evening, the bronze-rank scion of an aristocratic family approached Jason, his breath reeking of drink and his aura reeking of monster cores.

“You shouldn’t even be allowed around decent people,” he slurred in Jason’s direction. “How do we know you don’t still have one of those things in you? You could be working for them.”

“That’s enough brother,” a woman said, stepping out to try and lead the man away. Jason recognised her as Liana Stelline, a member of mid-tier aristocratic clan. She had been part of Jason and Humphrey’s field assessment group, joining the Adventure Society alongside them.

“Kyle, it’s time to go home.”

Her brother shrugged her off, pointing a finger in Jason’s face.

“What do you think you’re doing, coming into our city? You were probably one of them from the start. I bet you set up all our people that died on the expedition!”

The room went very still. The high society of Greenstone had pushed their way onto the expedition, with Sophie and Belinda being the only ones in the room other than the serving staff not to have lost someone close to them.

Kyle was the only one not to sense the shift in the atmosphere, despite it being pointed at him. His aura senses were too addled by drink to feel the auras around the room grow fierce and hard.

“You should take your sister’s advice and go,” Jason said, restraining his own aura. With the fury burning inside him, he didn’t trust what he would do with it if he let it go. The rage he had built up over recent events was more than some drunken idiot deserved to have unleashed on him. Unfortunately, the idiot in question took Jason’s restraint for weakness.

Not sensing any aura, despite the provocation, Kyle used his own aura to push down on Jason. His aura control was sloppy, but still had a bronze-rank soul behind it. There was a limit to Jason’s tolerance, however, and Jason’s own aura rose out like monster from the deep. It devoured Kyle’s bronze rank aura projection with ease, biting down like a vast maw until Kyle felt its teeth against his naked soul.

Jason stopped himself before following through with the soul attack. Kyle’s expression had become stricken with fear and he collapsed to the floor, Jason stepping forward to stand right over him.

“You should be very careful about accusing me of getting my friends killed,” he said, his voice a jagged blade of ice. “Liana, take your brother home.”

Jason retracted his aura and Liana quickly shuffled off her wide-eyed sibling, his resistance now gone. Oddly, this encounter had the opposite effect of what Jason anticipated, bringing the approval of many who had been uncertain about him. In a world of adventurers, wealth and influence were fine but unadulterated magical potency made their acquisition an inevitability. Jason's display made it clear that his potential was blossoming into capability.

Danielle swooped in to lock elbows, reminding everyone that she had the foresight to support him when others were overlooking him.

"Nothing speaks louder than power," she told him.

She wasn't foolish enough to miss a social opportunity when it presented itself and guided Jason around the room to make introductions she had previously been avoiding. One of these was to the Duke of Greenstone, who was talking to his brother and his sister-in-law, Beaufort and Thalia Mercer.

"Beaufort, Thalia," Danielle greeted. "You know Jason, of course."

Thalia knew Jason better than her husband, but Jason had met the man during his relationship with Cassandra.

"I believe this will be your first time speaking with him, Duke," Danielle continued.

"A pleasure, Duke," Jason said, shaking the man's hand. "Naturally, I've seen you at various social functions but I daresay you never noticed a little iron-ranker like me."

"Well, everyone noticed you now," the Duke said with a wry smile. From what he had heard of the man, Jason hadn't anticipated liking the Duke. To his surprise, he found the man very personable, not looking down on Jason at all for his rank or station.

"We've been discussing the issue of Old City," the Duke said. "The infighting in the Silva family as it looks for new leadership is escalating into street violence. The organisation built up by the late Clarissa Ventress is looking to go the same way. It was stable for a while, but her replacement isn't keeping things together and is unlikely to hold his position. Fortunately, Adris Dorgan is keeping quiet instead of fanning the flames. If he changes his approach, however, the streets of Old City may well become a war zone. At that point I will have no choice but to step in to restore order. I'd rather avoid that outcome so soon after the Builder cult purge."

"I still say you should just do it now, before things get out of hand," Beaufort said.

"Perhaps you can offer us some insight, Mr Asano," the Duke said. "You have some experience with the Big Three, do you not?"

"I've met Adris Dorgan and I liked the man. I've heard good things from people I trust that know him better. I never met Clarissa Ventress or her replacement, but again, I know

people that did. They were less flattering. As for Cole Silva, well... if you spend four days hanging from a ceiling with no pants on while a guy stands there watching you the whole time, I guess you could say you know him.”

“How colourful,” the Duke said with a chuckle. “So, what insights can you offer?”

“Well,” Jason said. “I haven’t really been paying attention, so I may be missing some of the political nuance, but the solution seems obvious.”

“Oh?” the Duke prompted.

“It’s time to end your hands-off approach of Old City and take direct control. At this point, Adris Dorgan is essentially the mayor of Old City, so you might as well make it official. Between his daughter running the Adventure Society and his rising level of influence after his assistance flushing out the Builder cult, he’s heavily invested in legitimacy at this point. Place him under you officially and you’ve got a handle on the one man who has a genuine chance to take the pot off the fire before it boils over. It’ll also send a signal to the people scrabbling over the vacant positions in the Big Three. Once they realise that era of criminal overlords is over, they won’t be willing to fight as hard. There will still be crime bosses, obviously, but they won’t have the power they did in the past, which will de-escalate the infighting.”

The Duke raised his eyebrows, turning to Danielle.

“Is this you?” he asked. Danielle held up her hands in a display of blamelessness as Jason looked between her and the Duke.

“You told him the same thing?” Jason asked her.

“She did,” the Duke said. “She also used the word obvious.”

“That’s just my uninformed opinion,” Jason said. “I have no doubt there would be a slew of political obstacles to navigate. And, of course, nothing will prevent the violence altogether. To be honest, I’m biased because I think very poorly of the lack of actual civilian authority in Old City. The Big Three may have done some good to keep order as a de facto government, but they are ultimately a predatory one. They operate in a gap left by the inaction of existing civil authorities.”

The Duke chortled.

“You do realise that the existing civil authorities is essentially me?”

“My friend Humphrey likes to say that privilege comes with responsibility,” Jason said.

“He’s a good boy,” Danielle said.

“I have to say, Mr Asano,” the Duke said. “You certainly live up to your reputation.”

Jason shook his head sadly.

“When you’re this handsome,” he bemoaned, “of course people are going to talk.

Why won’t they let a guy live his life?”

Danielle ran a hand over her face.

“You just can’t help yourself, can you?”

Chapter 216

My Name is Jason Asano

Elizabeth Silva stirred when she felt something press down on her large, canopy bed. There was a young man in a dark suit sitting on the other side, cross-legged. She opened her mouth to call for her guards, before stopping herself. If they could have helped, they already would have. Her bronze rank aura senses couldn't detect the man's aura at all, which meant that he was dangerous.

"Hello, Miss Silva," the man said. "I'm sorry to call on you so late."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want you to understand that Old City is changing," the man said. "The days of criminal rule are coming to an end. Other members of your family have come to understand this, but you've only seen weakness instead of wisdom and pushed them all the harder. People are being hurt, innocent people, and I'm here to convince you to stop."

"So you're one of Dorgan's dogs," she said.

"No," the man said. "I'm an adventurer, and I have a contract. To make people like you understand that these are new times. No one is saying you can't be a crime boss. Wiping out crime altogether would be pointless and foolish to even attempt, and having people like you retain a measure of power keeps the chaos to a minimum. But that's what you get: a measure. The days of the Big Three are over and trying to bring them back will only cause more bloodshed, which I promise will include yours."

"So the high and mighty Island government is going to bring us to heel with death threats?"

The young man smiled.

"If I have to come back here, Miss Silva, you'll find my mercy does not extend to killing you. My name is Jason Asano."

A cold fear washed over her body as she recognised the name.

"Your cousin went to some effort to destroy me. I took longer than I should have to rectify the scenario and my friends interrupted before I had my taste of recompense. I would advise against being the means by which I assuage my disappointment."

A shadow rose up behind Asano, moved over his body and he was gone.

Belinda had finally undertaken her field assessment and the team were gathered in the marshalling yard to await her return. With them was a rather nervous Jory. The marshalling yard was crowded, with many new essence users that had appeared in the

wake of the Reaper trials. The drop in market price for essences wasn't a true democratisation of power, but many of Greenstone's only reasonably well-off families were adding adventurers to their ranks. An adventurer who found success would be able to raise their family up with them.

Normally, the crowd gathered waiting would be the families of the wealthy and powerful. This had been the case when Jason took his field assessment. Before the expedition disaster shook their faith, they had been so proud, so sure of themselves. In the wake of that, some families had realised their errors and corrected. They instituted new training programs for their essence users, frequently turning to the more successful adventuring families like the Cavendish, Mercers and Geller clans for guidance. This helped cement such families at the top of the Greenstone pile.

Other families had been looking for anywhere but themselves to place the blame. Loudly decrying the failures of Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella, they had gone so far as to seek restitution from the Gellers and the Adventure Society itself.

The results of these different approaches were reflected in the changes brought about by the Adventure Society's inquiry team. The families that looked to fix their mistakes and used the people they lost as a chance to grow and improve, their positions within the Adventure Society improved in kind. After the sweeping demotions, these were the groups that most frequently had their previous rankings reinstated.

Those that made an enemy of the Adventure Society obviously fared less well. Arguably the single most powerful political entity on the planet, the Adventure Society had no time for the admonitions of some lower-tier aristocrats in one provincial city. Those families found their demotions upheld, even suffering additional waves of demotion. Many found their family members had their Adventure Society membership revoked entirely.

Oddly, the outcry of fools railing against them was helpful to both Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella. The more they were blamed, the more clearly the blame fell on systemic problems within the local adventurer culture that neither Danielle nor Arella were responsible for. Danielle spent most of her time away from the city, and whatever revelations had come out regarding her motivations, Arella had been taking concrete steps to rectify the corruption within her branch.

While the old adventuring families were undergoing changes in the wake of the expedition, the people gathered in the marshalling yard represented a new, post-expedition movement in Greenstone. Where the old guard had a new sense of caution and humility, these new adventurers were filled with optimism and hope.

The people around Jason's team were more aspirational than established, anxious for the return of the person they had placed all their hopes on. For many families, having an adventurer amongst them was a chance to lift all of them up.

Jason knew that the reality was more harsh. Even amongst Greenstone's elite, only a handful of families were producing quality adventurers. Jason had seen the results of shattered illusions in young adventurers, like those who fell under the sway of insidious nobility like Thadwick Mercer or criminals like Cole Silva. Such people rarely met good ends. Of those that had followed Thadwick, half had ended up dead at Jason's own hand. He at least took solace that some of the others had managed to find fresh beginnings.

Jason considered group that had fallen under Thadwick's thumb. In the course of investigating Thadwick's shady land-grab scheme, Jason had decided the fate of most of them one way or another. The ones who had come for him before had died at his hands.

Months later he was still troubled by how quickly and easily he had turned to killing. He wondered if letting them go would have been better, but they had come for him once before and brought larger numbers the second time. Perhaps the longer he left it, the more killing it would have meant in the end.

Two of Thadwick's former lackeys had managed to find some measure of redemption. Dean was the one Jason had managed to put back on the straight and narrow. Disillusioned when his dreams of being a grand adventurer fell flat, he had been pulled into Thadwick's orbit at his lowest point. Jason helped him find his way back, and while he was never going to be an exceptional adventurer, there was still a place for him in Greenstone's Adventure Society.

The other of the pair was Jerrick. Where Dean had surrendered immediately that day, Jerrick had fought it out, with Jason taking him alive. Rather than being tried, he had been stricken from the Adventure Society as part of the quiet covering-up of Thadwick's activities. After Thadwick, Jerrick had fallen in with Cole Silva. Then risked everything to betray Silva and lead Jason's companions to him in his hour of greatest need.

Whether or not it was a cynical choice to try and get his way back into the Adventure Society, Jason didn't much care. When asked for his input, he voiced no objection to Jerrick's reinstatement to the Adventure Society. Jason met with him once after his reinstatement, advising him to work his way up using his own strength, rather than attach himself to others. Whether Jerrick took his advice or not was up to him, no longer Jason's concern.

Caught up in his thoughts, Jason was stirred out of them by the attention his team was getting. His aura senses detected the attention of normal people with no way to

control their own auras. Humphrey and himself were both fairly well known and his entire team were expensively outfitted. Jason had finally taken Neil into Gilbert's Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman and Neil had come out looking annoyingly good.

Occasionally, someone would try and make a social approach, only to think better of it. Jason was helping this along with the subtle aura he was projecting to heighten their unease. It was a trick he had picked up from Humphrey's mother, who had been showing him some nuances of aura control normally held off until bronze or even silver rank.

"Has my mother spoken to you yet about the training program she was talking about?" Humphrey asked Jason.

"She's mentioned it," Jason said. "I don't hate the idea of what they're doing."

Danielle and Arella had a strained relationship since the expedition, but both women recognised that as important figures in the adventuring community they would need to put aside their differences. Danielle had told Jason about a program they were looking to develop, offering the new wave of adventurers some basic training. The goal was to prevent too many from falling into the patterns that had put so many essence users under the sway of the Big Three.

"Mother quietly thinks they can change the entire tenor of Greenstone's adventuring culture," Humphrey said.

"Her and the director seem determined to have something good come out of their shared mistake," Jason said. "I have a lot of respect for that."

"What do you think?" Humphrey asked. "Are you going to join in?"

"I'm not sure I'm qualified to teach anyone anything," Jason said. "This time last year I didn't even believe in magic."

"It's just fundamental aura control," Humphrey said. "Are you seriously going to stand there, using your aura like that, and say you can't teach someone the basics?"

"What's she roped you into teaching?" Jason asked.

"Basic martial technique. She's roped in a bunch of people, hasn't she, Sophie?"

"If the Adventure Society is paying, I'll take it," Sophie said.

"I've agreed to join in, too," Neil said. "Not to teach anything, but make sure Sophie's instruction doesn't kill anyone."

"I'm not responsible for other people being weak," Sophie said.

"Actually," Jason said, "If you've agreed to teach people to fight, you're directly responsible for them being weak."

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Huh. I guess you're right."

The first wagon full of would-be adventurers arrived in the marshalling yard. It was a large intake, so they had gone out in separate groups.

“She’s going to pass, right?” Jory asked nervously.

“Of course she will,” Sophie said. “Right?”

“Right,” Neil said. “She has her full set of powers and she’s been on a road contract. She’s more qualified than any of us were for our assessments.”

“So, what next?” Neil asked. “Back to adventuring?”

“We need to be looking for the right contracts, ones that will get us to bronze,” Humphrey said. “The hardest iron-rank contracts we can find, plus any bronze ones we can get. Now Jason is back to three stars, the application process to claim a bronze-rank contract is much simpler.”

“We can do that?” Neil asked.

“It isn’t done in Greenstone a lot,” Humphrey said. “Beth Cavendish and her team have been taking some bronze-rank contracts, since the Reaper trials. The approval process is a pain unless you have a three star, which she is.”

Groups of would-be adventurers started arriving, including Belinda’s and she dashed over to share hugs with Sophie and Jory.

“Any problems?” Jason asked.

“I’m quietly confident,” Belinda said. “I thought Vincent would go easy on me, though. Aren’t he and Rufus a thing?”

“The fact that he didn’t go easy on you is the reason he and Rufus are a thing,” Jason said. “They’re both big on integrity.”

With the whole team officially on the Adventure Society rolls, they threw themselves into contracts, with an eye to raising their abilities. Belinda and Sophie had the most abilities in need of raising, so the team put them forward more than the others. Aside from Clive, each member of the team had their own new powers to master, though.

Clive was the closest to hitting bronze, having been an adventurer for the longest and possessing the accelerated advancement speed of a human. He was quietly letting the others take the forefront in the training, not wanting to reach bronze yet. If it was possible to access the Order of the Reaper’s astral space, it was most likely that the iron-rank restriction was still in place. Once inside they would all be free to hit bronze rank, as some of the Reaper trial participants had done the first time through. Leaving the space had not been an issue for them.

For Jason it was his familiars that required the most work but his real attention was on path of shadows, his shadow teleport ability. He had only told Clive that there was a chance of finding a way back into the Order of the Reaper's astral space and Clive had been quietly working on the issue using information both from Emir's people and from Shade.

The iron-rank contracts were a chance for Belinda to keep cutting her teeth on iron rank monsters, since her abilities were at the lowest level on the team. They continued the technique they had learned from Henrietta of mixing up combinations of team members and solo operations to push her into using different powers. The team was always on hand to step in if something went wrong.

The others were seeking out large groups of iron-rank monsters, or bronze-rank ones when they could get them. Humphrey and Jason would even take them on alone, both having powers that helped them to bridge the rank gap.

As the mild desert winter moved almost imperceptibly into spring, the team took an unconventional contract. East of Greenstone, inland beyond the desert, lay the veldt. The people there were hardy and tough, beyond the reach of the desert astral space and its oases. They rarely called on the Adventure Society, but had sent word to Greenstone that a group of essence user bandits had taken up in their area.

The inhabitants of the veldt kept mostly to themselves and even when it came to monsters they usually handled them on their own. The use of every essence found by the loose-knit band of communities was collectively decided on, with a small group of local monster hunters serving them all. They would only turn to the Adventure Society in Greenstone if something beyond their abilities turned up. The people had an isolationist pride, but also a practicality born of hardscrabble survivalist principles.

Led by a bronze-ranker and with too many essence users for the locals to deal with, the bandits had taken over a whole town, killing most of the residents and enslaving the rest. They had started raiding the other small towns of the veldt, trading loot and slaves to the nomadic tribes of the north.

When Elspeth Arella had offered them the contract, Jason and Humphrey had discussed at length whether to take it. With the number of bandits, the remoteness of their location and the chaos they had caused, there was no stipulation for capture in the contract. The order was to put them all down.

Jason was reluctant but Humphrey had been adamant.

"Jason, those people are going to die. The Adventure Society will send someone out there to kill them and not everyone has your scruples. I'd rather do it out of a sense of

responsibility than send someone looking for a chance to kill actual people instead of monsters.”

“Are there really adventurers that bloodthirsty?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “I’ve heard stories from my family. Been told how to recognise the signs of adventurers I should never team up with. The kind of people who will kill the bandits and then kill their victims because they can. Then they’ll blame it on the bandits and no one can say otherwise.”

“And the Adventure Society allows this?”

“Of course not,” Jason said. “But out in the wilderness, who’s to say what happened? Every now and again there’ll be a push to implement rules about using recording crystals when the contract is to take down real people but there is always resistance. There are some valid arguments against it, like the recording crystals being detectable, but mostly adventurers don’t like anything that reeks of shackles.”

“I can sympathise,” Jason said.

Eventually Jason came around. They had taken a boat upriver, then Clive requisitioned a Magic Society skimmer from the local depot and they made their way into the veldt. It was there that they met with Keith of the local monster hunters, who led them to the bandit town. Jason had gone in alone to scout before returning to the team.

He had discovered that the bandits were from Greenstone. Criminal essence users from the Silva and Ventress organisations, they had seen the changes coming and left the city altogether, knowing the Big Three would no longer provide them with the same level of reward for big fish in a small pond. Many feared they would be held to account for past misdeeds, using their power within the criminal underworld to live out their most depraved desires.

Under a charismatic leader, they had gone out into the veldt where they believed the Greenstone authorities would not follow. Without the controlling hand, however, they had gone wild. The escalating series of atrocities they were carrying out as they raided the local townships had quickly led the locals to call on the Adventure Society.

After scouting out their town, Jason told his team that he wanted to handle the bandits alone. They immediately refused, but just as Humphrey had talked him into taking the contract, he talked them into letting him do it alone. They were reluctant but this situation was nothing like when he was taken by Silva. He would be fighting on his own terms, with his team nearby to provide backup if things went wrong. The town, he argued, was perfectly set up for him to fight using tactics that would allow him to use his abilities to their fullest.

It took Jason some time to get them to come around. Ultimately, they were convinced by his determination and resolve. The unflinching hardness of his eyes was a perfect reflection of his aura. Once they agreed, their local guide was flabbergasted.

“He’s just one iron-ranker!”

Jason didn’t respond as his shadow rose up, passing over him and he vanished. Clive sent an expensive, long-range recording crystal flying high up over the town. A projection crystal hovered in front of them, showing what the first crystal recorded.

“You’ll be able to see what happens for yourself,” Clive said.

Chapter 217

While They Watch Me Kill You

The town was little more than a cluster of stone and clay buildings along a single main street. It was not the better for its new residents, with unrepaired signs of essence abilities being thrown about. Walls were cracked with impact rings and scorched with the flash-burn signature of fire powers.

All seemed quiet, with no sign of Jason. There were bandits around the town, along with some miserable-looking unfortunates that the bandits were using as slaves. The bandits sat around, playing cards or molesting one of their more attractive slaves. There were men and women amongst the bandits, who cared more about toughness and malevolence over gender. Essences absolved any natural disparity in physical power between the sexes.

There was a corpse pinned to a wall with large stone spikes, that the bandits paid no mind. Unseen in the shadows, Jason watched one of the enslave former residents look longing at the outskirts of the town, then fearfully at the dead body. Even with a head start, there was nowhere to hide in the sparse, flat terrain of the veldt. It was nothing but low grass marked by the occasional lonely tree.

The bandits languid day was disturbed when one came staggering out of a building. It was a poor village and there were no doors on any of the buildings which had the bandit loudly stumbling through a curtain of beads before collapsing on the ground, blood pooling under his head. His fellows rushed over and turned over the body, finding his throat cut.

“Someone killed Craig!”

Paying attention to the body, they didn't notice a pair of blood-red strips of ragged cloth snake out of the doorway the dead bandit had emerged from. Only once they wrapped themselves around the corpse's legs were they spotted, the bandits watching in startlement as the corpse was rapidly dragged back into the building.

“What was that?”

“Go get the boss while I check it out. Someone thinks they can mess with us and they're about to have a very bad day.”

One of the larger bandits flexed his muscles, dark, hard scales covering his body. Others picked up weapon or conjured them out of thin air, some wreathed in fire or sizzling with electric sparks. The one with the scales went inside and the others heard him crashing about.

“Dammit, there's another one dead in here,” he called out, then stormed back out of the room.

“Two of our guys are dead in there and none of you idiots saw or heard a thing. What is wrong with you idiots?”

“Neither did you!”

That earned the speaker a punch to the face.

“I said go get the boss, idiots.”

He pointed out one of the bandits.

“You, go get him. Everyone else search the town. Whoever did this is here somewhere, and roust everyone out while you’re at it.”

Seeing the images recorded from high above, Jason’s team watched as the bandits started turning over the town. They found no sign of their attacker beyond what had been left behind. Many of the buildings had dead bandits, usually from a slice across the throat or a stab wound to the back of the neck. Others looked like corpses left in the desert for weeks, their bodies dried out and rotted, when they had been seen walking around hours or even just minutes earlier.

They dragged the bodies out into the sandy dirt of the main street as they cleared the building one by one.

“Where’s Vargas?”

“I saw him go into that building over there.”

“Did you see him come out?”

The bandits began to realise that more of their number were going missing in the course of the search. They heard screams coming from one of the buildings and then one of their number came staggering out, looking more dead than alive. The big bandit with the scales rushed over and grabbed the man’s shoulders to keep him upright.

“Who was it?”

The man was barely able to cough out a response.

“Shadow... eye...”

They felt an ominous aura come from the building, along with an icy voice.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

The bandit holding the man up felt flesh soften under his fingers and he dropped the man as they watched his already corpse-like appearance fully rot in front of their eyes. The big man burst into the building, finding it empty.

The bandit’s leader emerged from the largest building in the town, formerly the only tavern before the bandit leader claimed it for himself. He had no shirt and was still pulling up his pants, eyes going wide at the pile of the bodies in the street. The remaining bandits, the better part of two dozen, assembled in front of him.

The leader loudly demanded to know what was going on and a dozen bandits all tried to talk at once, unnerved at finding almost a quarter of their number dead at the hands of unseen enemies.

“SHUT UP!” the leader bellowed and was about to make more demands when he looked behind the bandits assembling in front of him. Following his gaze, they all turned around to see four cloaked figures standing behind them in a line. One was a man in a cloak made of darkness and stars. Another looked to be made of darkness entirely. A third was wrapped head to foot in bloody rags, its hood and cloak made from dangling strips. The final figure was just a cloak with no wearer. All that was inside it was an eye, a little larger than a head, made of what looked like blue and orange fire. Two orbs drifted around the floating cloak, slightly smaller versions of the main eye.

The leader pushed his way forward through his men to stand in front of them. He guessed the man in the cloak was an actual person, the others having the looks of summons or familiars. The only aura he could sense from any of them was a bronze-rank aura from the figure made of bloody rags. Unsurprisingly, the sense he got from the aura was a blood drenched hunger.

“You killed my people?” the leader asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“So you would all gather in one place.”

“What for?”

“To kill the rest.”

The leader frowned. “You’re Adventure Society?”

“Yes.”

“They just said to kill us, instead of bringing us in, right?”

“Yes.”

The leader was worried by his inability to sense the man’s aura. If the man was a strong bronze-ranker, his bandit clan might be enough to kill him with numbers. If it was a silver ranker, they were all dead. Needing to know either way, he pressed his aura down on the man.

The aura that emerged to block it left him almost laughing in surprise.

“An iron ranker?” he asked, disbelievingly. “You really thought you could take us all out and you’re an iron ranker?”

“I still think that,” came the cold reply.

“Who do you think you are?”

“Jason Asano.”

Many of the bandits, formerly operating under Cole Silva, turned pale. They had all heard different stories but it was a fact that going after Asano had brought down Cole Silva and scattered his organisation into pieces. It was the very thing that brought many of them out into the veldt.

“Is that suppose to scare me?” The leader asked.

“No,” Jason said. “It’s meant to scare them, while they watch me kill you.”

The bandit sneered. He pressed his aura down on Jason’s but was startled to find he was throwing an egg against a rock. The sneer vanished as his aura was pushed back by a force that felt as inexorable as the dawning sun.

“Kill this fool!” the leader barked, but Jason’s aura flooded out and over the bandits. It clamped down onto each one, grinding their own auras into nothing. They were flooded with feelings of exposure and vulnerability, then something sharp pricked not against their bodies but their very souls. As if encased in a spiritual iron maiden, the bandits felt like any movement would leave them pained and punctured.

The big bandit with the scales mustered his courage and lunged in Jason’s direction, He immediately collapsed to the ground, letting out an alien, whistling shriek until suddenly he stopped. Laying on the ground, he looked like he was still screaming but was issuing no sound. His eyes were wide and watering, drenched in soul-deep fear. His whole body was rigid and trembling, as if caught in a seizure.

The bandit leader looked down at the fallen bandit, then the others. They were frozen in place, skin slick with cold sweat and eyes filled with terror. He turned back to Jason.

“You expect me to surrender?”

Jason turned his head to look at the corpse pinned to the wall, then back at the bandit.

“The contract has no terms of surrender.”

The bandit leader’s expression went hard, fierce eyes locked on Jason.

Jason’s perception power now included magical senses, which allowed him to detect the magic surging under his feet. He dodged aside as a thick stone spike burst from the ground in the spot where he had been standing. The spike then exploded, showering him in stone fragments. An army of short tendrils shot out from Jason’s shadow cloak, intercepting any that were about to strike him, and leaving him completely unharmed.

Ability: [Cloak of Night] (Dark)

- Conjunction (darkness, light, dimension).
- Base cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a magical cloak that can alter the wearer. Offers limited physical protection. Can generate light, or blend into shadows. Cloak can reduce the weight of the wearer for a low mana-per-second cost, allowing reduced falling speed and water walking. Cannot be given or taken away, although effects can be extended to others in very close proximity.

- Effect (bronze): Cloak reflexively intercepts projectiles. Highly effective against rapid, weaker attacks, but less effective against powerful, singular attacks. Cloak allows gliding for low mana-per-second. Weight reduction no longer costs mana unless affecting additional people.

Jason moved into the midst of the bandits, his movements light and quick, his cloak floating around him. The bandits didn't move, frozen by the sensation of knives against their soul and the memory of what happened to their fellow.

A rack of stag horns grew from the bandit leader's forehead and he barrelled through his own people to get at Jason. One was killed by the spearpoint horns of their leader, while another two were knocked away. They tried scrambling away but then screamed a moment before falling silent, like their fellow before them.

Jason and the leader fought amongst the other bandits like duellists in a statue garden. The leader was stronger and faster but Jason had learned to fight from Rufus Remore. Compared to that, the skills of a failed backwater adventurer were crude and buffoonish. He was all power and no finesse; if it weren't for his bronze-rank reflexes, the fight would have been laughable.

Colin and Gordon remained where they were, not moving to assist. Shade's three bodies, on the other hand, joined Jason and the bandit leader in dancing amongst the other bandits. Jason teleported between Shade's bodies to run rings around the bandit leader, dodging the powerful, but slow attacks. It bought him the space to cast a spell or let him reposition to make attacks of his own, dagger shooting forward in the grip of a shadow arm.

Not many of the bandits actually had aura powers. One of the ones who did had been biding her time and when she found herself behind Jason she pushed back against his aura and lunged at his back with her knife, imbued with electrical energy as she used an

essence power on it. The instant she moved, Jason aura crushed hers like a bug in a fist. She too collapsed to the ground, shrieking like the god of death had grabbed her.

Human essence users typically had a preponderance of special attacks and the bandit leader was no different. Many involved flinging fragments of earth over wide area, which the leader did to try and catch the fast moving Jason, He quickly realised this was pointless, the cloak absorbing the attacks with ease. The leader tried a variety of other approaches, from conjuring and throwing hammers to hurling stone spears. As Jason continued to dance around him, his legs transformed into stag's legs, increasing his agility. Chunks of stone erupted from the ground to encase his arms in battering rams and he sprung about on the stag legs, trying to catch and hammer down Jason.

Catching Jason still remained an elusive prospect. Every time he thought he had landed a blow, it turned out Jason had hidden his true position within his cloak, the blow coming close but hitting nothing.

Jason, in turn, had used a few spells at the beginning that seemed to do nothing, the bandit leader assuming they had failed due to rank disparity. Since then, all Jason could manage were superficial wounds from his dagger, which the leader derisively sneered at. It was hardly surprising that a stealth specialist couldn't truly harm a higher-ranker in open combat.

The bandit paid no mind to the tiny wounds as he struggled to pin Jason down. One good hit was all it would take. It took some time before he realised something was horribly wrong. He had an increasing sense of dread, then spotted the black veins under his skin.

"Poison," he spat, coming to a stop.

"Disease, actually," Jason said, doing likewise. "Not that it matters."

"You think this iron-rank crap is enough to take me down?"

"Yes."

As the bandit lunged, again, Jason once more disappeared into one of Shade's bodies, emerging at a distance from the shadow of one of the buildings. He was already chanting a spell.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

The punishment spell withered the bandit leader's affliction-riddled body with necrosis, his muscle atrophying on the spot. He staggered in place even as Jason cast another spell.

"Feed me your sins."

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.

- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.

- [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

The bandit leader's life force became visible, shining from within his body. It was tainted with afflictions, marked in swirls of bruise colours; ugly shades of yellow, purple and red. The taint streamed out of the bandit leader life force and into Jason's outstretched hand. What it left behind was shining light of gold, silver blue, sinking back into the bandit's body with his life force and lighting him up from within, shining through his skin. The transcendent light started rapidly eating away at his already stricken body as the bandit leader started to scream.

Jason cast one more spell, to finish the job.

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

More transcendent light appeared, hammering down from above like a deity's wrath. The leader's crippled body was entirely eradicated and Jason turned his attention to the remaining bandits.

"You aren't going to just kill us, right?" one of them asked, voice strained with panic.

Jason looked round the little town, seeing the people the bandits had taken as slaves, watching from hiding. His eyes once again fell on the corpse pinned to the wall.

"How many innocent people have you killed?" Jason asked. "There are adventurers heading north, even as we speak, to bring back the people you sold into slavery. In the face of that, you ask for mercy? If I took you back to the city, they would just kill you there."

Horror filled their faces as they realised they were about to die. The bandits started scattering, in spite of the fear Jason's aura suppression was still inflicting. The results were the same as those who had gone before as they all immediately collapsed, screaming with a pain unlike anything they had ever known before going silent, like the others.

Jason looked over them writhing on the ground and took a shuddering breath. He had killed before, quite a lot now. This would be his first execution. He was troubled by how little that prospect troubled him.

"Colin," he said flatly. "Feed."

Still standing by, Colin suddenly exploded like a bomb had hit him, raining leeches down onto the bandits. Caught up in Jason's soul attack, none of them screamed until Colin's afflictions claimed their lives.

Jason stood in the middle of the dead bandits, held his arms out to his side and chanted a spell.

"As your lives were mine to reap, your deaths are mine to harvest."

Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.

- Effect (bronze): Affects any number of bodies in a wide area.

Using their remote viewing crystal, the team watched as blood red life force streamed out of the bodies and into Jason. From above, he looked like a spider at the centre of a bloody web.

"Now, I'm not looking to give no offence," their guide said, "but your man there seems worse than the folk he was sent after."

"An opinion you'll keep to yourself," Humphrey said sharply, although his eyes didn't waver from the projection. "If I hear you say that where he can hear it, you'll be answering to me."

"Oh, don't worry on that account," the man said. "He's going to find everyone real polite."

Chapter 218

Inherently Corrupting

The ordinary people left in the town weren't inclined to come out after Jason's display. From their perspective, the shadowy figure with the monstrous companions was demonstrably more dangerous than the bandits. Jason left, leaving the heroic-looking Humphrey and their local guide to come in and play rescuer.

There was a floating barge coming to take the townsfolk away. It moved slower than the skimmer they had arrived in and would be waiting in another town for word of the all clear. Jason volunteered to go and bring back the barge.

"You've done your part," Humphrey told him. "Clive can go back in the skimmer."

"I'd like to do it," Jason told him. "I could use a ride to clear my head."

"At least take someone with you. Sophie isn't the exactly the sensitive rescuing type."

"What I'm looking for is some solitude, Humphrey. Some time to settle myself after..."

Jason looked over at the remains of the bandits, not finishing the sentence.

In horse form, Shade at full gallop was no slower than the skimmer and just as tireless. The midnight horse with glowing white eyes, hooves and mane sped across the grassy flatland of the veldt, leaving behind a trail of white mist, rising off the hooves. Shade's horse form was made of shadow-stuff, rather than flesh and bone, and had a similar feel to the soft cloud-substance that made up Jason's cloud house. It made for a smooth, comfortable ride.

He reached the town that was being used as a base of operations for the Adventure Society. It had turned out that the criminals coming from Greenstone had set up a number of bandit operations and Jason had only wiped out one of several groups. More teams like Jason's had been dispatched to key areas while the Adventure Society set up an operations hub. Jason went inside and reported that his team had been successful to the silver-ranker in charge, someone he hadn't met before.

The Adventure Society wasn't just going to leave the people Jason had liberated in a town full of the dead, so the barge was sent off. Jason made his way onto the roof, sitting down to quietly meditate as the hovering vehicle smoothly made its way across the veldt.

Jason's meditation was uneasy. He had become accustomed to his life being one of violence and he felt largely untouched by it anymore. This was a source of concern, since while it was useful, he worried about losing his humanity. He was, after all, no longer human.

Each time he killed people, rather than monsters, he thought back to his first night in his new world and his conversation with Rufus. Every time, he felt more and more separate from the man who wondered if his innocence was a worthwhile price for power.

Meditation had long been one of Jason's key coping mechanisms. After his encounter with the star seed, he had a much stronger sense of his own soul, which made meditation a very different experience. It was more involved, more controlled; a journey through an inner world.

He began by guiding his thoughts and feelings away, placing his mind and soul into a state of perfect stillness. His sense of his surroundings was somehow both heightened yet pushed aside, not intruding as he cultivated an inner peace.

In the past, his deepest meditative state had felt like a vast, still emptiness. Now he was able to sense things within that inner space. There was the comforting presence of his familiars, residing in his soul. As he reached a state of stillness and calm, he felt them do likewise. Over time he had come to feel the symbiosis between them much more clearly.

Within his soul he opened his eyes and was standing in a garden, lit up by the sun, shining in a blue sky. The plant beds were his powers, flowering in shades of red, white and black. The flowers of his bronze-rank powers had grown to fill their space, unable to grow further until the garden was enlarged.

The borders of the garden were marked by a high fortress wall of dark stone. There was damage, as if they had been besieged, but the gaps were filled with black metal, as if the damage had uncovered something stronger and stranger. The metal was polished mirror smooth, dark and reflective with a eerie and fathomless feel to it. It was easy to sense that it was much harder than the stone of the original construction, which it made seem like a façade, daring an invader to strip it away.

Jason walked through the gardens, letting his finger touch the flower petals. When he first began his training, Rufus had told Jason of the three pillars of effective advancement: training, practise and consolidation. At the time he had simply trusted Rufus' word, training his body and skills, then using them in combat and using meditation to make the most of his gains, using them to build a foundation and grow his power upon it.

Now, Jason had a much better sense of that process. Above his head, unconsolidated power shimmered like a heat haze. He could feel it, shaped by his training and stimulated by combat. He drew that power down and fed it into the garden beds, fertiliser to be soaked up by the roots of his powers. He worked carefully, methodically, always respecting the power and never acting with haste. He cultivated the garden to grow well, rather than quickly, and grow it did.

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- Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).

 - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has gained a new effect.
 - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has changed from [Special Ability] to [Special Ability/Conjuration]. The type for any given use of the ability is based on the effect.
 - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has gained the [Darkness] subtype.
 - Base cost of ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has changed from [Low] to [Varies].
 - Cooldown of ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has changed from [None] to [Varies].

Ability: [Path of Shadows] (Dark)

- Special Ability/Conjuration (dimension, teleport, darkness).
- Base cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: Varies.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Teleport using shadows as a portal. You must be able to see the destination shadow. This effect is a special ability with a low mana cost and no cooldown.

- Effect (bronze): You can sense nearby shadows and teleport to them without requiring line of sight. By increasing the cost to moderate, small shadows can be enlarged to serve as viable portals at both the ingress and egress points. Alternatively, conjure a shadow gate between two locations on a regional scale. The distant gate must appear in a location you have previously visited. This effect is a conjuration with a very high mana cost and a 10 minute cooldown. The iron-rank effect can still be used while this ability is on cooldown.

With his new awareness and more controlled advancement, an ability transitioning to bronze was a different experience to what he had gone through in the past. The advancement of his perception power had been unpleasant, painful and disorienting. This time he slowed and guided the process, making it painless, smooth and invigorating.

“Very impressive,” Arabelle said and Jason’s eyes snapped open. In spite of his aura senses being heightened by his meditation, he had not sensed her approach at all. Of course, if a gold ranker with even basic aura control wanted to avoid his senses, they could. He still couldn’t detect her presence with his aura senses, which was a little off-putting while looking right at her. It made her seem illusory and unreal.

She was standing casually at the edge of the barge roof, looking down at him, still sat in a meditative pose.

“You’re not here as part of the barge team,” Jason said. “You’ve been hiding. From me.”

“Yes,” she said. “I couldn’t help but tell you how impressed I am, though. Most people reach bronze or even or silver before they can self-guide their advancement like that.”

“You could see that?”

“I can see your soul, Jason.”

“Because that’s not ominous at all.”

She gave him a warm smile.

“I can see the scars on your soul,” she said. “More clearly than the ones on your body, even if you were standing naked before me.”

“Best not,” Jason said. “A bloke can’t go around doing funny business with his mate’s Mum.”

She let out an easy laugh.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what I’m doing here?” she asked.

“People wanted to make sure nothing happened to me again,” Jason said.

“And that you weren’t doing anything foolish,” she added. “I almost intervened when you convinced your team to let you face the bandits alone.”

“They have faith in me.”

“I heard you didn’t care much for faith.”

“Yeah, but you use what you’ve got,” Jason said.

“That’s an interesting choice of words,” Arabelle said. “You said ‘use.’ These are your friends and companions we’re talking about. You use them?”

“Manipulation is just a tool,” Jason said. “Like killing. Dangerous when used inappropriately, but sometimes it’s the right choice, even when people look down on you for it.”

“And you wanted to manipulate them into letting you do the killing. Why is that?”

“Slaughtering some thirty-odd people isn’t a small thing, even if you’ve killed before, which not all of the others have.”

“But it’s alright for you to do it alone?”

“I’ve been working my way up. I’m alright with it.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?” she asked.

“No.”

“Good, because we will be talking about this again. Just not on the rooftop of a barge, a hundred miles from a decent cup of tea.”

“I have some iced tea, if that interests you.”

“Really?”

Jason hopped lightly to his feet and took a pair of tall glasses filled with fruit-flavoured ice tea, the chunk of ice in each clinking against the glass.

“Thanks,” Arabelle said, taking the proffered glass and sipping at the paper straw.

“That’s a good straw,” she said.

“I know a guy with the paper essence,” Jason said as they sat on the edge of the roof, their legs hanging over the side. “Mostly he works in publishing but I’ve been talking him into some side projects. Ever had a drink with a tiny umbrella in it?”

“Why would a drink have a tiny umbrella?”

“It makes it better.”

“How?”

“It’s a kind of magic from my world.”

“I thought your world didn’t have magic.”

“That’s why we have to get creative. There’s a magician in my world who made a Ninety metre statue vanish and reappear, right in front of people. It’s probably the most famous statue on the whole planet. It’s called Liberty Enlightening the World, which ultimately proved a bit ironic.”

“How can someone be a magician in a world without magic?”

“With misdirection and deceit, which aren’t inherently bad. They can be used to entertain and delight. It’s just that people can also use them for untoward ends, because there’s money and power in it. Let me tell you, politics in this world is child’s play. In my world, everyone has a recording crystal device and no one has magic. Even the most ignorant, at least in my homeland, just have a better idea of how it all works. No inherent hierarchies of power. You have to build them yourself, or be born into them.”

“That’s why you are so dismissive of them,” Arabelle said.

“That, and they shaft people over.”

“It sounds fertile soil for corruption,” Arabelle said.

“There’s no such thing as an incorruptible system. All you can do is your best to make it less crappy.”

“What about if a god was running it? Who could influence a god to corrupt them?”

“I’ll refer that question to the church of Purity,” Jason said.

Arabelle scowled.

“I don’t like what’s happening there,” she said. “Why would Purity throw his followers in with these cultists. They’re defilers.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Jason said. “I’ve got the scars on my soul to prove it.”

“Yes, your soul is almost unrecognisable from when we first met. Actual, aura-changing events are rare and you’ve had three in a series of months. It’s probably for the best that you have that personal crest, because between the changes and your anti-tracking ability, trying to identify you from your aura without it would be an unreliable prospect.”

“The changes aren’t completely bereft of benefits,” Jason said.

“Yes, your ability to suppress auras and attack souls is impressive in action,” she said. “At iron-rank, only those with highly trained aura control or an ability to counter aura suppression will be able to stand up to you. That said, don’t go thinking you could do to the likes of Humphrey or your friend Valdis what you did to a bunch of untrained dregs. You should keep in mind all the elite adventurers who assembled for Emir’s event. They are your contemporaries, not these locals.”

“I’m aware,” Jason said. “We sparred with some great teams and they handed back out butts in a box on the regular.”

“I recommend you practice your aura control with your team mates,” Arabelle said. “It’s hard to find people you can trust to do suppression and anti-suppression drills with.”

“I’m wary of that,” Jason said. “When I first gained the power to use soul attacks, I told myself I wouldn’t if I didn’t have to. Of course, that didn’t last long. It’s almost as if power were inherently corrupting.”

“We can discuss that at length, later,” Arabelle said.

“There may not be time for that,” Jason said. “The ability I’ve been waiting on was the one that just reached bronze. It’s time to start trying to get into the astral space in earnest.”

When the sand barge arrived, the Adventure Society officials on board took over from Jason’s team in managing the rescued people. The team gathered around Jason, obviously worried.

“I’m fine,” he assured them, not mentioning Arabelle’s presence in the veldt. If she wanted to remain hidden, he wasn’t going to spoil it.

As his team prepared to return to Greenstone via the skimmer they had rode out on, Jason tested his newly bronze-rank power. Jason waved his hand and a line of substantive shadows appeared on the ground, dancing like dark flames. Then an archway rose up out of it, made from what looked like of a whole piece of polished obsidian. The dark fire then rose up to fill the arch.

“That looks an awful lot like the shadow gates in the Order of the Reaper’s astral space,” Humphrey said, then looked to Jason and Clive. “Something neither of you seem surprised about.”

“I had an inkling,” Jason said. “Shade has seen that power before.”

“What aren’t you telling us?” Humphrey asked.

“That’s a conversation for later,” Jason said.

“Where does the gate go?” Clive asked.

“Back to the town where the Adventure Society set up their management hub.”

Jason squared his shoulders before walking through, emerging in the middle of the town’s main street. The sensation was very familiar to him; a disembodied sensation of movement, as if the world was turning around him. It was more intense than his usual shadow jumps, but he had experienced it a number of times now, with Hester’s portals.

A number of people were looking at him, having seen the archway rise up out of the ground. Sophie came through the portal after him, then Clive. He lacked the astral affinity that made portal travel more of an exhilarating rush than stomach-churning lurch.

“Alright, test over,” Jason said. “Back we go.”

“Give me a moment,” Clive groaned.

On the way back to the city they experimented with the power, finding three major limitations. One was distance. As best they could tell, the range was around forty kilometres. Clive’s told Jason that was normal for a portal ability and he could expect it to rapidly improve. It would increase by it’s current range at each minor threshold of advancement, meaning that by the time it reached the peak of bronze rank, it would have ten times the range.

The next second limitation was capacity. Ten iron-rankers or one bronze ranker could pass through the gate in either direction before the power was consumed. One iron ranker would be able to pass through and come back five times before the gate was depleted.

They were able to talk a bronze-ranker they encountered on the way back into testing it, but could not find enough regular people willing to walk through the sinister magic archway for testing purposes. Suggesting that the ones who were up for it go through and back multiple times resulted in the few they could find backing out. It was at that point that Belinda asked the obvious question.

“Why not just ask your interface power?”

Jason and Clive looked at each other, then shared a nod.

Help: Ability limitations, [Path of Shadows] (Dark).

- Capacity (Bronze 0): 1 bronze-rank, living entity. Alternatively, 10 iron-rank instead of 1 bronze, and 10 normal-rank instead of 1 iron-rank.
- Capacity is reduced by taking large amounts of non-living material through, either directly or in dimensional bags. Items in dimensional storage generated by personal powers do not count against the capacity.
- Range (Bronze 0): 40 kilometres. Destination must have been previously visited, before or after obtaining this ability.

“That was deliberate,” Jason said.

“We wanted to field-test the power with unbiased views before looking to the interface,” Clive added.

“You forgot the blindingly obvious thing, didn’t you?” Belinda asked.

“Yes,” Clive said immediately. “Yes we did.”

“Seriously, Clive?” Jason asked. “You folded like an origami swan you have to put somewhere without throwing it away for long enough that the person who made it for you won’t get offended when you finally throw it out and claim the humidity made it fall over or something.”

“That was very specific,” Sophie said.

“Completely hypothetical,” Jason asserted firmly.

“What’s origami?” Neil asked.

After getting back to the city, Clive and Jason told the team about the idea of going back into the Order of the Reaper’s astral space.

“There are no guarantees,” Clive said. “Jason’s ability doesn’t say anything about breaching dimensional barriers. That means we have no idea if we can get it to work, or how long it will take to figure that out. I’ll be going to stay with Emir’s team at Sky Scar Lake to work on the issue and Jason will be portalling in every day so we can do a series of tests.”

“In the meantime,” Jason suggested, “those of us who planned to work at the training centre being set up should do just that. We can also use this time to decide, as a team, if going back to the astral space is something we want to do. We have no idea how many unknown dangers we would face, so even if we can go back, it doesn’t mean that we should.”

Chapter 219

Beholden to No One

One of the ways Jason had made positive use of his recovery time was to get himself back into a training pattern. Rufus, Gary and Farrah had worked to instil good habits during his initial training, but the eventful life of an adventurer inevitably led to him letting things slide.

Rufus, Gary and Jason's team had often felt helpless at their inability to help Jason after his ordeal. They were forced to leave things in the hands of first Carlos and then Arabelle, who had the experience and expertise to give Jason the help he needed. When Jason expressed a desire to reformulate his training habits, then, they leapt at the chance to be useful.

The regimented training schedule also helped them maximise their own efforts, whether that was learning and developing their powers like Belinda, or making the final push toward bronze, like Humphrey and Jason.

After Clive, Humphrey was the closest to reaching the bronze-rank threshold. Like the others, he had powers to raise from scratch after completing his power set, but being a human meant his powers increased slightly, but measurably faster than Jason's, Neil's or Sophie's. He followed Clive in drawing back from the training until they knew if they would need to stay at iron to return to the astral space.

Clive had decamped for Sky Scar Lake, living in Emir's cloud palace and working with his people. Many were more experienced than Clive, even in his specialty field of astral magic, yet Clive's insightful thinking and prodigious capacity for learning never failed to impress. It was all the more so since he had gained the ability to learn the mundane things through skill books, leaving his mind free to tackle the esoterica.

Jason practiced his portal ability, visiting the domes at the bottom of the lake every day. He couldn't advance it, but aiming the portal over vast distances was a skill he worked on developing. It required a level of visualisation that made it tricky to target places he did not know very well. The ability to distinguish places in his mind with landmarks was very helpful.

The distance between Greenstone and Sky Scar Lake meant that it took Jason an hour to get there by opening a portal at his maximum distance, going through, then waiting for the ten minute cooldown before going again. To accomplish this, he first had to cross the desert in between, finding landmarks he could remember well enough to use as

waypoints. For that journey, Shade had transformed not into a horse, but a giant sand lizard to stride across the desert sands.

Each day on his arrival, he would meet with Clive and Emir's people to go over the ritual configurations they had devised. The end goal was to use his power to reopen the portal, but they were not yet at the point where they expected that to work. The astral magic involved, like that used by the Builder cult, was incredibly advanced. The astral magic theory that Knowledge had given to Jason, who then shared it with Clive, was proving invaluable.

Jason did his best to follow along with Clive's explanations as they worked. He learned a lot but it was largely above his head, even with all the magical theory he'd been studying. This was the new cutting edge of astral magic theory.

Jason frequently felt that his presence was superfluous beyond being a wand to produce the right kind of portal. The true collaborator was Shade, who was an endless source of fascination for Clive and Emir's people. His insights drove their work forward, until they declared that it was no longer a matter of if they could access the astral space, but when.

"What do you think of all this?" Jason asked Shade, after they'd been visiting the site for a week. "Does it annoy you to be dragged off every day to constantly answer questions?"

"Just the opposite," Shade assured him. "I first became a familiar to have more experiences than can be had in the bleak void of the Reaper's realm. Being affixed within the astral space for centuries left me rather desirous of company. A group of intelligent people eager to hear everything I have to say has been entirely satisfactory."

"I'm glad. I'm also glad that you decided to re-up after I went and got you killed fighting that elemental."

"My only regret is that it kept me from offering my support during your recent tribulation."

From within his soul, Jason could sense a surge of feelings from Gordon, reflecting Shade's sentiment.

"Well, I'm glad," Jason said. "As much as I would have appreciated the support, I don't know what would have happened to you if that thing had gotten into my soul."

"We would have been annihilated," Shade said. "Our true, spiritual selves, not just the vessel. Star seeds are quite destructive to familiars. I have heard of them breaking the connection of a bonded familiar, too, although summoned familiars suffer the worst of it."

While Clive worked on getting access to the astral space, Jason kept pushing off any actual discussion of whether they should go in once he did. His team largely felt that it was a pointless question with an obvious answer, confused by Jason's evasiveness.

He dodged the discussion until finally calling the group together, including Clive who was portalled back to the city by Hester. They met on the deck of the houseboat, where Jason had put on an impressive lunch spread of spring salads and ingredients to build sandwich wraps. They were sat around a long table, talking as they ate.

"Why have you been putting this off?" Sophie asked. "I don't think there are going to be any surprises, here. We all want in on this astral space."

"It should be you and I, at the very least," Clive told Jason. "As we continue to unravel how the seal on the astral space works, we've confirmed that only iron-rankers will be able to get in and we don't know if there will be problems getting back out. Your portal ability may well be necessary, and I'm the only iron-ranker with the requisite knowledge of the seal."

Jason turned to Sophie.

"I was waiting for you," he told her.

"Me? I've been bugging you about this for two weeks. Why would you be waiting for me?"

Jason took a thick document envelope from his inventory and handed it over. She frowned as she opened it up and pulled out the contents.

"This is my indenture contract," she said, looking over the first page.

"Yes," Jason said. "The contract expired today."

"It finished?" Sophie asked, surprised. "Honestly, I haven't even thought about it since..."

She trailed off, looking at Jason apologetically.

"Since I was taken and you didn't know who would end up with it if I died," Jason finished.

"Sorry," she said.

"No," Jason said. "You don't owe me an apology for having a reasonable concern. But now, you're free. Completely. Beholden to no one but yourself. From today onward, you are a member of this team for no more reason than you want to be."

He flashed her a grin.

"Welcome to the team, adventurer," he said and rest of the team echoed Jason's congratulations. Humphrey then apologised after giving her a clap on the shoulder that

made her grunt with pain. His strength-enhancing power had reached bronze and he was still getting a handle on his increased might.

As Sophie looked around at the sincere, smiling faces she made a rare bashful expression.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

Brash young adventurers moved into one of the Adventure Society’s instruction halls. It was remarkably similar to a lecture hall from Jason’s world, complete with a projector screen on the wall behind the lectern to display images from recording crystals. Traditionally there had been little formalised instruction in Greenstone, with Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella’s joint initiative a very new development. The sudden increase in demand for venues was something that was still being sorted out.

Some of the adventurers were nervous, quietly taking their seats, while others were brash and overconfident, lounging back with their feet over the seat in front of them. They ranged from their mid teen through their early twenties, many older than normal iron rankers because they only just received the chance to be essence users.

“Is this Asano guy even qualified to teach us?” someone asked. “He’s been an adventurer for what? A week?”

“A lot of us have been adventurers for literally a week,” a young woman said. “I’ll take any good advice I can get.”

“No, he’s right,” another guy said. “This is just another example of favouritism. They give the good trainers to the big name families and leave some nothing guy for us.”

“The big families don’t need this training, idiot. This whole thing is for people like us.”

“Which is why some iron-ranker to teach us. How is that guy’s aura any better than ours?”

“That’s easy,” a powerful, confident voice came into the room, followed by it’s owner. He was tall and handsome, broad shouldered and walking in through a side door with easy confidence to stand next to the lectern. “Jason has had excellent training and some experiences I don’t wish on any of you. For those who don’t know me, my name is Humphrey Geller. You may have heard of my family, or perhaps just my mother, Danielle. I’m here to assist Jason, as well as make sure he doesn’t do anything too outrageous. If you want a more specific example of his qualifications, then I’m sure you all heard about the aura blast incident in Marina North. Some of you may have even experienced it for yourself.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” someone called out. “We aren’t exactly the pleasure yacht crowd.”

“That was Asano?” someone else asked.

“It was,” Humphrey said.

“Can’t you just teach us instead?” someone called out.

“I’ve only been asked to assist,” Humphrey said. “Also, to make sure he doesn’t get carried away.”

“Carried away?” someone asked. “How would he get carried away?”

“Well, you never can be sure, with Jason. There’s a chance he might try and recruit you into some kind of underground movement and overthrow the existing political structures. Or a sandwich business.”

“That’s sounds very far-fetched,” someone said.

“Yes, but I’ve found that assuming Jason won’t do something just because its crazy or impossible is not a sensible approach.”

“You aren’t concerned about undermining his authority, here?” the same person asked.

“Jason has his own way of doing things, and he can establish his own authority once he comes on stage.”

“What’s he like?” a girl asked hesitantly. “I’ve heard some stories that almost made me stay home.”

“He’s sneaky,” Humphrey said.

“Sneaky?” the girl asked.

“That seems harsh,” the previous person said. “I’ve heard he’s very handsome.”

“I didn’t hear that,” someone else said.

“Me either.”

“I’ve picked a lot of stories about him and that never came up.”

“I’ve seen his face in recordings and it’s kind of pointy. Especially the chin.”

“He’s started wearing a beard,” Humphrey said. “What I meant by sneaky is that he’s the kind of person that, after agreeing to teach a group of new adventurers, would mix in with them and start bad mouthing himself to see how people reacted.”

Most of the group looked confused, while the ones quicker on the uptake turned to the man who had started the conversation.

“Seriously?” the man they were all looking at said. “There’s nothing wrong with my chin.”

Jason stood up and walked down to the front of the stage. As he went, his loosely controlled aura grew tighter and stronger, transforming from a weak, glob of power into an unyielding steel sphere.

“Aura disguise,” he said, turning around to face the group, “is an advanced technique beyond the scope of this foundational course. To be honest, I’ve only just started to learn it myself. What we’ll be going over are the basics. Projection, retraction, suppression. Mastery of these three things will have a transformative effect on your adventuring career.”

“Even I know those are the basics,” someone called out. “If that’s all you’re going to teach us, what good is all this.”

Jason panned a predatory grin over the group like he was sweeping them with a laser.

“You should all be able to sense the auras in this room. Look at all of you, and then look at Humphrey and myself.”

He waited a moment, then pointed at the nervous girl from earlier.

“What’s your name?”

“Janice.”

“Alright, Janice. How do mine and Humphrey’s auras feel compared to everyone else’s?”

“They’re solid,” Janice said. “They don’t fluctuate.”

“And what do you think when you sense an aura like that? Don’t think about it now, just say the first thing that pops into your head. When you sense an aura like ours on someone, what is your first thought about that person?”

“That they know what they’re doing.”

Jason pointed at Janice again with an approving gesture.

“Exactly, thank you, Janice. You sense someone with their aura under tight control and they seem to know what they’re doing. That is your foot in the door. If you want to be respected in this business, then that is your first step. If you’re looking to find yourself with a big name, standing next to a Cavendish or...”

He gestured at Humphrey.

“...a Geller, then you need to realise that your aura is the first thing another adventurer will know about you. If your aura control is sloppy, it will also be the last thing. If you get a contract, one of the juicy one with the extra incentives, and you turn up to meet the client and he can see through you like a window, then you’ll find those contracts drying up.”

“Obviously,” Humphrey took over, “there is a lot more to being an adventurer than just putting up a good front. But if you can’t manage even that, then you may never get a chance to show what else you can do.”

“That isn’t all aura control is good for,” Jason said. “But it’s important, and they don’t always tell you what’s important when you’re starting at the bottom, do they?”

“Damn right, they don’t,” someone called out.

“Well, you have us, now,” Jason said. “We’re here to teach you how to use your aura, and maybe you’ll pick up a few tricks along the way that the big boys have been keeping to themselves.”

“We’ll be starting with projection,” Humphrey said. “It’s the most basic form of aura control and the easiest to learn.”

“It’s also, arguably, the most important,” Jason added. “Not only does it determine how the adventuring world will look at you, but good projection control will better equip you to resist suppression.”

“Is that such a big deal?” someone asked.

“It is,” Jason said. “Over the course of this program, you will all experience having your auras fully suppressed. Good aura projection makes suppressing your aura that much harder.”

“I’m sure you all heard about the recent bandit issues,” Humphrey said.

“We had the chance to see one of the bandit camps subdued almost entirely by someone using their aura,” Jason stepped in. “Those bandits all had auras like yours are now. If they had had the training that we’re going to impart, that wouldn’t have been possible, not on more than twenty at once.”

“Then why didn’t they send that person to teach us?” someone called out. Humphrey turned to look at Jason.

“They did,” Humphrey said.

Chapter 220

Evil Detector

Jason sat on the roof of his houseboat, cross-legged, with the rest of his team sitting around him. They all had their eyes closed, concentrating on forcefully projecting their auras. His team all pushed against Jason, while he pushed back in turn.

Humphrey, Neil and Clive had the most training and experience with aura control and their projections were stable and consistent. Their auras didn't fluctuate, revealing no weaknesses as they tackled Jason's unyielding aura head on.

Sophie and Belinda were less practised and less polished. They had taken on all of the guidance of their team mates, but their were so many things they had to learn and do as adventurers that they simply didn't have the time and experience spent on it that the others had. Jason's aura inundated theirs, seeking out any flaw or inconsistency and pressing against it until they rectified it and pushed back.

They continued the exercise for hours until all but Jason started to flag, falling back onto the soft, cloud-stuff rooftop in exhaustion. After Jason produced snacks and drinks on trays, the team sat back up to voraciously dug in.

"I used a lot of magical ingredients with these," he said. "They should replenish you just as effectively as spirit coins, but with a better taste."

"I like the taste of spirit coins," Neil said. "I like that tingly feeling on your tongue."

"Really?" Clive said. "I can't stand it".

"How are you not tired?" Belinda asked Jason. "I don't think I could stand up right now but you were holding all of us off and you look fine."

"Aura projection is about the soul," Jason said. "It's difficult to differentiate the mind and the soul, and if you put too much of your mind into it, your mind will become strained. The soul, by contrast, and so far as I can tell, is inexhaustible. I don't know if it's some wellspring of power hidden within us or if it's connected to the astral somehow and draws strength from there. Clive might no better than me."

"No idea," Clive said. "The soul is a mysterious thing and experimenting on it is the taboo of taboos. Not to say there aren't people running unethical projects on the quiet, but the Magic Society and the Adventure Society are always on the lookout for things like that. Not to mention the churches. If you want one issue that unites people across religions, see how quickly they team up to go after someone doing soul experiments."

"The trick," Jason said, "is to make the aura control come not from the mind, but the soul. The meditation techniques help, but I realise that distinguishing mind from soul is not

easy. I became much more consciously aware of my soul after being forced to retreat into it when the star seed took over my body. During our meditation training, I've been working with Humphrey and Neil to try and help them make the distinction without going through what I did. Having a solid foundation of aura control is a gateway to that, which is the point of today's exercise. When you're stronger, I'll try and help you the same way."

"It's good to have you here for this," Humphrey said to Clive. "We've been missing you while you've been off with Emir."

"There's a meeting today to update about the anti-Builder cult operations," Clive said. "They've been having them regularly since we found out about the cult and the star seeds, and I've been a part of that since I was the one who figured out it was the Builder. Today they want me to bring Jason. The focus right now is on the cultists we think are in the Order of the Reaper's astral space, and Shade's input will be invaluable. Not to mention that he's the one who'll be getting us in."

"I think saying that is a bit much," Jason said. "There have been people working on that for months, now, where I just show up once a day to knock out my power a few times and see what happens. If something happened to me, you could just go find someone with the same power and have them portalled in."

"That's true," Clive said. "You are at the perfect stage for what we need, though. Your power is at bronze rank, therefore usable to us, but you aren't, so you can go through the portal once it's opened. Your presence may be necessary to getting back out, we can't be sure. It could well be that once we're there, we can just leave without issues."

Jason and Clive were making their way through the streets of the island, each riding on a shadow horse.

"I have a rather important request, Mr Asano, if you are willing to hear me out," Shade said. Jason had long ago stopped trying to get Shade to use his first name.

"Of course," Jason said. "Request away."

"This is not a small matter," Shade said. "It is in regards to the flesh abominations in the astral space. The former Reaper acolytes affected by the Vorger."

"There are probably a few there now who used to be adventurers," Clive added.

"Indeed there are," Shade said. "Fourteen, as of the time the trials ended. I have no knowledge beyond that, as my purpose had been served and I was released back into the astral."

"What about them?" Jason asked.

“If you are going to be revisiting the astral space,” Shade said, “I would request that you hunt them all down and kill them. These were people who venerated the Reaper, whose most core value is the finality of death. They are trapped in an inaccessible realm, inside prisons of unaging flesh. If we have the chance, I would like to release them.”

Jason frowned.

“I know what it’s like to be trapped inside a body taken over by outside forces,” he said. “Our priority has to be to deal with the Builder cult and we will have to assess the situation once we’re there. Once we make sure the astral space is out of the Builder’s hands, I’ll do everything I can to help them. I’m sure the rest of the team will feel the same.”

“Of course we will,” Clive said.

“Thank you,” Shade said.

“My concern would be finding them all,” Jason said. “It’s a big city.”

“A soul compass,” Clive said. “They operate on the same principals as the tracking stones the Adventure Society uses on its members. Instead of tracking a specific aura signature, we can make one that will point at anything. We just filter out ourselves and the motive spirit false souls that monsters have and anything it points at will be either a cultist or one of the abominations. Providing there aren’t any natural creatures in the astral space.”

“There are not,” Shade said. “The plant life is natural, if frequently magical. There are no animals or normal people, however.”

“Sounds like a plan, then,” Jason said.

They were far from the only ones out on the streets, and they were passing by a busy eatery when Jason suddenly pulled up the shadow horse. Jason turned his head to peer intensely at the building, then dismounted.

“Jason,” Clive said, pulling to a halt himself. “We don’t have time for you to go exploring some new kind of sack.”

“It isn’t that,” Jason said. Clive’s expression went serious as he heard Jason’s voice. It was the icy tone he used for enemies.

Jason strode past the outdoor dining tables and into the busy shop, clearing a space with an aura projection that sent people rushing to get out of his way. He stopped in front of an ordinary man Clive didn’t recognise. The man had an iron-rank aura and looked nervous, but Clive didn’t find that surprising. It would be more strange if someone had Jason’s aura hovering over them like an executioner’s axe and looked perfectly calm.

“What do you want?” the man asked uncertainly.

“You’re coming with me,” Jason said.

“What are you talking about? What is happening?”

Clive had the same question but knew better than to voice it aloud.

“You know who I am,” Jason said. “You can feel it can’t you? Just like I can feel who you are. What you are.”

Clive watched the man’s feigned confusion give way to angry contempt.

“We will kill you, Rejector,” the man spat at Jason and Clive sensed a huge power suddenly swell within the man’s body. Jason’s aura came crashing down, shredding the man’s aura and clamping down on the power, squashing it into nothing. The man’s eyes went wide, his face stricken.

“How.. you can’t... that isn’t possible!”

“Now I’m the confused one,” Clive said.

“You know the Magic Society has been looking for a way to find star seeds without an extensive ritual?” Jason asked. “It looks like I’m it. I’ve locked down his soul so he can’t detonate it and kill himself. I bet we can find some people at the Adventure Society who would like to have a long conversation with this guy.”

The attempts to find a way to prevent Builder cultists from killing themselves when exposed had limited success. The Magic Society had developed a suppression collar variant that could, in theory, prevent the explosive function from triggering, but in the time it took to activate, the seed would complete its activation to explode as normal.

Jason’s aura senses were stronger than before his ordeal, but still not as strong as Sophie’s with her aura sensing power. He had an intimate understanding of the Builder’s star seeds, however, and sensed the subtle affect it had on that of the secret cultist. Aura suppression alone would not have been enough to prevent the seed being triggered. Jason’s unusual power to attack the soul directly was able to disrupt the trigger and prevent the seed from exploding into a crystal star. By holding the man’s soul in a vice with his aura, Jason was able to take him to the Adventure Society to be fitted with one of the special collars.

“This is exceptional work, Asano,” Elspeth Arella told him as he left the secured room. “Very few of the Builder’s cultists have been taken alive.”

“Hopefully he knows something we can use,” Emir said.

Both had been preparing for the meeting when they got word of Jason’s capturing a cultist.

“Who is going to do the interrogating?” Clive asked.

“The deputy director is notifying the Adventure Society’s Continental Council as we speak,” Arella said. “They will want to send someone. In the meantime, the timing of this is excellent. We can discuss the potential ramifications in the meeting.”

The meeting was something of a war council for the anti-Builder cult efforts. It had been formed after the gruesome first removal of a star seed and Clive’s declaration that the Builder was their unseen enemy. From the beginning it had included Elspeth Arella, Emir, Danielle Geller, Thalia Mercer and Clive himself.

It had also included Nicolas Hendren, the archbishop of the church of Purity. Following the revelation of Purity’s apparent involvement, the archbishop had vanished, along with other key members on what his church referred to as previously-scheduled sabbaticals. In the place of Hendren was the new Chief Priest of the Healer.

Like the rest of the Healer’s local clergy, the Healer had brought him in after excising the previous corruption. The new Chief Priest was now in charge of handling matters regarding the purgation of star seeds, although no new instances had come up since the original five. The closest was Jason, who was himself a unique case for whom a specialised member of the church had been brought in.

The Duke of Greenstone was now also included, as were Arabelle and Gabriel Remore. Of the visiting gold-rankers, only their team mate Callum was absent.

Lucian Lamprey had been a conspicuous absentee from previous meetings. Excluding the director of the Magic Society had been a bold move, but his penchant for corruption was well known. Given that he had been hauled away in chains, it proved to be a prescient move.

Lamprey’s successor was Pochard Finn, who was an equally distasteful individual but one with a better understanding of where the line was when it came to breaking the rules. Even with security tightened in the wake of Archbishop Hendren’s disappearance, Finn had been included as acting director of the Magic Society. Arella was confident that Finn knew he would need to be completely above reproach to have his position made permanent, especially considering his friendship with Lamprey.

The meeting began by bringing everyone up to speed on the new prisoner and the revelation that Jason could sense star seeds.

“It was as much of a surprise to me as anyone,” Jason said. “The applications are obvious, but I don’t know if it’s possible to hide from my senses. The man we captured may simply not have been trying because he didn’t know he needed to.”

“Even if they can hide it from you,” Danielle Geller said, “they are most likely as uncertain about it as we are, which we can use.”

“What do you mean?” Thalia Mercer asked.

“She means that we start using me as an evil detector to check all the most important people in Greenstone,” Jason said. “We do it on the quiet, because there’s no stopping word getting out and keeping secrets will make them fearful and paranoid. Some will make mistakes, others will run.”

“So, we kick the cupboard and see what bugs come scurrying out,” Gabriel said.

“That would be the idea,” Danielle said. “We won’t be able to catch as many as we’d like to put in a jar, but at least we would clear out some of the infestation and get some idea of just how bad it is.”

They made some preliminary decisions but largely left the details to be arranged later. They then moved on to the original main topic, the upcoming incursion into the astral space. The only real decision to be made was who to send through. Jason’s team was a given, leaving the question of who would go alone.

“I think the more the better,” the Duke opined. “We need to make absolutely certain that these people are stopped.”

“There is a question of capability,” Emir said. “Frankly, the local adventurers are lacking, which is why I brought in more people for the first time we sent people in. Aside from Jason and Clive’s team, Bethany Cavendish’s team and some of the Geller trainees are the only ones I would consider reliable enough to send.”

“We don’t have a lot of iron-rankers left on the estate,” Danielle said. “With the monster surge imminent and all this business with the Builder, the decision was made to send them all home.”

“You brought in more people before, Bahadir,” Thalia said. “We could do so again. Portal them in directly, instead of all that pomp of bringing them in by ship.”

“There are some specifics related to how we are getting in that need to be considered,” Clive ventured. “We can’t be sure that the people we send through will arrive in the same place. The city within the astral space is surrounded by entry point towers, and while we may all emerge from the same one, we might not, as happened the last time we went in. Additionally, Jason’s power currently only allows for ten iron rankers to pass through per use. We have the expectation that that limit will hold true when using it to access the astral space.”

“What’s the most likely outcome?” Arella asked.

“We can’t be sure,” Clive said. “The astral magic involved is operating on principles we’re only just beginning to understand.”

“What do you think is the best approach?” Arabelle asked Clive.

“There is a chance,” Clive said, “that once we force the door open, we won’t be able to do it again. Not from this side, at least. If we don’t send Jason through, in the hope that he can keep opening the door to send more people through, there’s a chance that we leave whoever we did send stranded. From what we understand, leaving the astral space should be much easier than getting in but there is no way to be sure of that before we make the transition. There is far more uncertainty than I would be comfortable risking if we don’t have to”

“You’re giving us a lot of qualifiers, Standish,” Pochard Finn said. “Are you not confident in your understanding of what you’re working on?”

“Of course I’m not,” Clive said. “You’re an administrator, Finn. You have no idea of what we’re dealing with. It isn’t just about complexity. This astral magic we’re dealing with is rewriting the foundations of our understanding. Once this is all over, people will build careers in the Magic Society on the back of what we’re learning. If someone has been telling you they’re confident that they have a handle on all this, then get rid of them, as fast as you can. That person isn’t just ignorant. They’re a dangerous idiot.”

Jason hid a quiet chuckle behind his hand.

“My advice is to send one team,” Clive said. “Ours has six people. Potentially it could be supplemented by four.”

“Is that enough?” Arella asked. “We know exactly who went into that astral space and who came back out. Granted, we don’t know how many of those died because the tracking stones can’t record a death across a dimensional boundary.”

“I do,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “At the time the trials ended, forty-eight people had died and fourteen had been turned into flesh abominations.”

“Seventy-five failed to come back,” Arella said. “That’s potentially thirteen Builder cultists.”

“I would bet on my son’s team against any fifteen cultists,” Danielle said.

“Don’t let yourself be blinded by family,” Thalia said bitterly. “I made that mistake and it cost me my son.”

“She’s right,” Gabriel said. “Arella, can you use that list to figure out which people those thirteen are?”

“If Jason’s familiar can tell me which one’s were transformed or killed, then yes.”

“Then we figure out what whoever goes through will potentially be up against and decide from there,” Gabriel said.

After more discussion, Clive’s suggestion was provisionally taken up, pending further investigation.

“The last question, then, is when this will actually happen,” Arella said. “When can we expect to have a ritual that will get the door open?”

“Jason has been coming out daily to the site,” Clive said. “In about a week we should have the rest of the team come with him because at that point, we may get the portal open at any time. And as I said, we may only get one chance to send people through.”

“Actually, there is one more thing to discuss,” Jason said. “Once the Builder cult is dealt with we intend to release all the people trapped in flesh prisons by the astral creatures infesting the astral space. I’m sure you’ve all heard of the vorger.”

“Asano,” Arella said, “as long as you stop the cultists from making off with the astral space, I don’t care if you move in there and set up a fried octopus stall. Just make sure you remember the priority.”

Chapter 221

The World Needs People Like You

Jason and his team made preparations for their entry into the astral space, with some preparations being more important than others.

"I just can't make that much crystal wash," Jory said. "A lot of my workshop is tied up in making the lesser miracle potions, now."

"We'll be spending months in that place, hunting down these abominations," Jason said. "There's hundreds of them."

"Your cloud house uses crystal wash more efficiently than just tipping it over your head, right?"

"Yeah," Jason reluctantly acknowledged. "It adds a diluted amount into the shower."

"There you are, then. Look, I'll delay a few orders and give you everything I can, but there's only so much I have to give."

"That's all I can ask for. Thanks, mate. Belinda told you we're having a big blow out barbie before we go, yeah?"

"She did."

"Alright, then. Best head off."

Jory and Jason went back out through the waiting room, where the Chief Priest of the Healer was just coming in.

"Mr Asano, Mr Tillman," he greeted.

"Chief Priest," Jason greeted, before heading out.

"If you have a moment, Mr Tillman," the Chief Priest said, "I would like to discuss something with you."

"Of course," Jory said, leading the Chief Priest into the break room in the back. "Can I offer you refreshments, Chief Priest?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Are you sure? Jason's frosted frost pepper squares aren't to be missed."

"Very well," The Chief Priest acceded and Jory put some tea on to brew as he plated a few of the sweet slices from the chiller.

"The reason I've come to see you today is to discuss the future of the clinic, here," the Chief Priest said.

"Oh?" Jory prompted, warily.

"The Healer is extremely happy with what you've accomplished here. He believes it is time for you to look at training someone to take over and move on."

Jory frowned.

“You’re trying to kick me out of my own clinic? I realise and appreciate that the Healer sanctified it, but that doesn’t give you the right to make me leave.”

“You misunderstand, Mr Tillman,” the Chief Priest said. “What you’ve done here, studying the local resources and finding the best way to make effective and affordable medicines, is a joy to my god. There are many alchemists within the church, but your dedication to those who need the most, rather than those who can afford the most, fills him with delight. He wants you to do it again, and teach others to do the same. We want the Tillman method to be spread across the world, and we’ll give you all the funding and resources you could possibly need.”

Jory looked over at the Chief priest, then turned back to the task of brewing the tea, thinking over what the priest had said. He poured out a pair of cups and brought them over with the plate of slices.

“I’m not sure how to respond to that,” Jory said. “I don’t know if I have the kind of expertise to teach others.”

“Your humility is a credit to you, Mr Tillman. Yes, you do not have the skills of a master alchemist, but you are far from incompetent and we will help you develop your proficiencies further. What is important to my god, however, is not your ability, but the way you think. We can produce the alchemists; what we want is the vision. Your vision.”

“I... I never considered anything like you’re describing. I mean, the whole world?”

“The world needs people like you, Mr Tillman. We would very much like to give you to it.”

Jory bit absently into a confectionary slice, lost in thought. The Chief Priest did the same as he waited for Jory to think things over.

“Oh, these are rather good,” the priest said.

Jory took a moment to gather his thoughts while the priest appreciatively devoured his slice as swiftly as decorum would allow.

“Why now?” Jory asked as the priest wiped his fingers on a napkin. “There’s a monster surge coming up and crazy cultists running all over the world. It seems like a bad time for a new endeavour.”

“If you wait for everything to be perfect,” the priest said, “you’ll never do anything at all. We’ve been watching you, Mr Tillman, through your recent and rapid changes of circumstances. First you were able to build your new facility, then you obtained the public endorsement of my god and the support of our church. Now, your new enterprise with the miracle potions is already bringing in wealth.”

“So, this is because I have more resources?”

“No, Mr Tillman. Compared to our church, the scale of your resources and operations are inconsequential. What matters is character. What did you do after you went from a struggling alchemist trying to help people to a moneyed and respected member of the community? You worked even harder to help people. More research into expanding your existing range of cheaper medicines. Hiring people to work on production so you could extend your operations without comprising care. We’ve been watching, Mtw Tillman, and we like what we see. You have made a place for yourself in my god’s affections.”

Jory had an awkward and embarrassed expression as he searched for an appropriate response.

“Thank you?”

“No, Mr Tillman, thank *you*.”

The priest stood up.

“Take some time to think about our proposal, Mr Tillman. When you’re ready to discuss it further, or if you have any questions at all, don’t hesitate to come find me.”

Half-turning to go, the priest paused, glancing down at the plate on the table and it’s remaining slices.

“Can I take one of these?”

Jason looked at the combat robe set out on the standing rack. It was mostly the scaled, matte black of umbral snakeskin, with grey leather trim. It was darker than his current combat robes, keeping the grey/black colouration but reversing it, switching the black from the embellishments to the main colour. It maintained the sleek, draping lines, enhanced by the scaled texture of the snakeskin. It looked to compromise toughness with flexibility in a ratio he was very happy with.

“I know you have been satisfied with your existing combat robes,” Gilbert said, “so I didn’t diverge too wildly with this design. That said, I took advantage of the umbral snake leather you provided, and was able to tailor the outfit to your personal needs, rather than an off the rack item. I added marsh hydra leather to the umbral snake hide and the lining is deep wrym silk, which I was quite lucky to get my hands on. It did add to the cost a little, but I’m confident that you’ll find the expense reflected in the results. The aesthetics I largely maintained, although obviously the material has made for a darker result. I designed the look to compliment your famous cloak power.”

Jason reached out to touch the robes.

Item: [Dark Hydra Robe] (bronze rank, epic)

A full body armour, carefully hand-crafted from the leather of an umbral mountain snake and a marsh hydra, lined with deep wyrm silk. (armour, cloth/leather).

- Effect: Increased resistance to damage. Highly effective against cutting and piercing damage, less effective against blunt damage.
- Effect: Rapidly repairs damage. Can reconstitute itself from near-total destruction.
- Effect: Heal over time effects have increased strength and duration.
- Effect: Increases natural poison resistance. Abilities that enhance poison resistance are enhanced.
- Effect: Weapons conjured while wearing the robes inflict [Umbral Snake Venom].
- Effect: Adapts to fit the wearer, within a certain range.

- [Umbral Snake Venom] (damage-over-time, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

“Bert, you have well and truly outdone yourself,” Jason said.

“I aim to please, Mr Asano.”

“Then you overshot, because I’m delighted.”

With a potential stay of months in the monster-infested astral space, Jason and his team anticipated reaching bronze during their stay. There was a good chance that a lengthy stay would make them miss the monster surge, but months in the magically saturated astral space would be like a private monster surge that never ended. As the astral space was short on shopping outlets, they were buying equipment now. They would each need at least some basic bronze-rank gear to make the most of their new rank.

Humphrey’s expenses were slight, as he conjured his most critical equipment. Since he was from the wealthiest family, he took on the costs of most of the team’s general pool of consumables. This was mostly healing and mana potions of both bronze and iron-rank. Rather than go to Jory, he largely purchased high-cost, high-yield potions from the trade hall.

He did buy a supply of miracle potions from Jory, although it was a low-cook, low-batch potion. Jory spared them what he could, letting the Adventure Society contact his far-flung customer base to explain why their were delays in shipping. Most of the customers for the miracle potion were distant, but the demand was high.

Sophie and Belinda, but mostly Sophie, had earned some money adventuring. To that they added the nest egg once intended to fund their escape from the city. Sophie purchased the armour made from leftover umbral snake leather, although the design was different to Jason's. She preferred a fitted but still supple outfit, in this case with chitinous plates supplementing the snakeskin where flexibility was not required. It offered some extra protection over critical areas, looking to Jason like sexy tactical armour.

Belinda had a few costs, as her role-switching powers required some basic gear for different roles, including wands, light armour, heavy armour, a bow, a shield and a selection of melee weapons. This kind of equipment was outside of her knowledge base, so Gary served as her expert guide. He helped her pick out some reliable, basic gear at good prices, making sure she wasn't fed a lemon.

Belinda also had her own familiars that would rank up at some stage, but didn't have the cash Jason did during their trip to the markets of Jayapura. She only had enough materials to summon her familiars once at bronze rank.

Clive and Neil both had growth items, courtesy of Clive's efforts on their first trip to the astral space. Much like a familiar re-summoning, the ritual of bronze ascension each one required came with expensive material requirements.

Of all the team, Jason had it the worst in terms of expenses, although he made no complaints. His growth items and familiars were a blessing than many adventurers would and did envy, and he firmly believe that every coin spent on them was completely worthwhile.

Jason had blown a huge chunk of his money on summoning materials for his familiars, which were his first priority. Compared to his equipment, they were his allies, valuable and important. Nothing took precedence in Jason's mind over giving them everything he could after the support they had given him. Their comforting presence within his soul had been a boon during his recovery, and without Colin, especially, there may not have been a soul to recover.

He had made sure that he had enough to summon them at bronze-rank and resummon them once more if something happened to them. With the Adventure Society supplying the materials for Colin's rank-up ritual, he had enough to summon the already-bronze leech monster twice more times.

Between those materials and what he had spent feeding materials into his cloud house, he had largely expended his funds. If not for the huge monetary reward from the final quest before his quest system went away, he would have had trouble affording anything.

Luckily, he was able to conjure his own weapon, saving the cost of that. He restricted himself to upgraded versions of his existing armour and boots, courtesy of Gilbert and Filbert, respectively. Supplying the main material for his armour also brought down the cost, although it remained a premium product with a premium price. Aside from those, Jason bought a large supply of cheap consumables, mostly potions from Jory and a large supply of the throwing darts that he used.

His last notable expense was a pair of skill books. They were common topics, therefore not too expensive. One covered the basics of alchemy and the other and artifice, the construction of magical items. They gave him none of the expertise of Jory or the man who supplied his darts. They were a contingency, should he find himself able to scrape together the materials for some consumables, but lack for a craftsman. More than the books themselves, it was the basic tools of artifice and alchemy that were the larger cost.

Jason had been trepidatious about using skill books again, after the last time triggered flashbacks. Mercifully, using the iron-rank books proved less stressful than the bronze-rank book he had used previously and did not trigger any flashbacks.

In the conference room next to the office of the Adventure Society director, Jason's team was lined up along one side of the table. On the other was Elspeth Arella.

"The Cavendish family have declined to let Beth Cavendish and her team join you," Arella said. "A lot of capable adventurers died the first time around, and that was a matter of weeks, rather than months. There also weren't Builder cultists to contend with."

"Then who is being tapped to supplement us?" Jason asked.

"There has been some discussion of that," Arella said. "Once we realised that Humphrey's familiar would take up one of the available spaces We considered bringing in four-person team from outside the city, we ultimately decided that your team would go alone. Assume you are still willing to do that."

"Of course we are," Sophie said fiercely. Jason and Arella might have reached an amicable détente, but Sophie still harboured resentment over Arella's attempt to sell her off to Lucian Lamprey.

"Did you manage to find out which people were left behind when the trial ended?" Clive asked.

"We did," Arella said. "All locals; none of the people Bahadir brought in from outside. We've been looking into their families and other connections. For most of them, their teams thought they were dead. If your familiar is accurate about them still being alive but remaining behind, then we have our cultists."

“How capable are they in a fight?” Humphrey asked.

“Not great,” Arella said. “Decent by Greenstone standards, but we all know about Greenstone standards. The danger they represent is not to be underestimated, however. With the amount of time they’ve spent in there, they will almost certainly be bronze rank by now. They also have the numbers. If all thirteen are still alive, that’s better than two to one against you.”

“Our best bet would be to bide our time once we get there,” Neil said. “Get some of our own people over the line to bronze-rank before taking the fight to them.”

“The problem is, we don’t know how much time we have,” Clive said. “We don’t know exactly what they’re doing in there, or how they’re doing it.”

“Well, finding out will be something we have to figure out,” Jason said.

“We can offer you one possible advantage,” Arella said. “Everyone who went into the astral space had their aura signatures checked. We couldn’t test for star seeds specifically at that point, but anyone with an aura signature that didn’t match their existing record was excluded.”

“Meaning the cult probably sent through people who didn’t have seeds,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Arella said. “It means that if any of them haven’t reached bronze rank, their tracking stones will still work, if you take them with you into the astral space. If they’ve all reached bronze rank, though, the change to their aura will obviate the power of the stones. Adventurers need new badges at each rank for a reason.”

“The stones should still tell us if they’re alive or dead though,” Clive said. “That’s not nothing. The Order of the Reaper’s astral space is a dangerous zone and some or all of them could very well have perished.”

“That would be the most fortuitous result,” Arella said. “Whatever circumstance you walk into, however, your ultimate goal is the same: Find out what they are doing and stop it. This is that exceptionally rare three star iron-rank mission. We can’t predict the situation, so the specifics of how you go about that are for you to decide.”

“Trust the person on the ground,” Humphrey said.

“That was how your mother put it, yes,” Arella said. “She has a lot of faith in you.”

“It does sound dangerous,” Belinda said.

“Still better odds than what we were looking at a year ago,” Sophie told her. “We’d just come under Ventress’ protection, with Silva breathing down our necks.”

Sophie turned to Arella.

“Any word on Silva?”

Jason knew that long-term incarceration was a rare form of punishment in his new world. Punishment was more immediately punitive, often through fines and seizures to the wealthy, or indentured servitude for the poor. For the powerful, denial of access to the services like the Magic and Adventure Societies could be very harmful. Execution was also available for more heinous crimes.

“Yes,” Arella said. “He will be returned here, with Lamprey being sent to his own birth city. Both will be receiving skeletal suppression.”

Clive let out a low whistle, while Humphrey and Neil winced. It wasn’t a form of punishment Jason had heard of.

“What’s skeletal suppression?” he asked.

“It’s like a suppression collar,” Clive said. “Except instead of a collar, the magic is inscribed directly onto the skeleton. Permanent loss of powers. It’s an incredibly invasive and painful procedure derived from necromancy techniques. It’s a controversial punishment that many, including the church of the Healer, think should be outlawed.”

“It’s usually a death sentence anyway,” Neil said. “People who receive that kind of punishment usually have enemies. Once they’re cut loose without any power, those enemies catch up with them fast.”

“Works for me,” Sophie said. “I’m exactly the kind of enemy who’d like to catch up with him.”

“What about the cultist I caught?” Jason asked, forcibly changing the topic. “Has he coughed up anything useful?”

“The Adventure Society’s Continental Council sent people to work on him,” Arella said. “They’re doing so as we speak and haven’t told me much, yet. They did say that there seems to be an awareness amongst the Builder cultists of you, Jason. They call you the Rejector.”

“That’s not a cool nickname,” Jason said. “Why couldn’t it have been something more awesome, like ‘the Defiant,’ or ‘Captain Tremendous.’”

“You actually want people to call you Captain Tremendous?” Sophie asked.

“Doesn’t everyone want that?”

“This conversation has officially crossed my idiocy threshold,” Arella said, getting up. “This meeting is adjourned.”

Chapter 222

I'm Very Big on Cowardice

As Emir's team came closer to opening the portal, the decision was made to move the team to the site under the lake. Jason's ongoing availability would be useful for the final push to open the portal and the team needed to be ready to go. They weren't exactly sure when Emir's researchers would finally succeed and the team had to be packed and waiting.

Even if they navigated the dangers and returned safely, it would be months before they saw family and friends again. There was a large barbecue party in the park district the day before, friends and family making big farewells before the more private ones that would take place the following morning.

Having been the organiser, Jason played smiling host, shaking hands and chatting with the friends he had made over the better part of the last year. Danielle Geller told him to look after her son, but also himself. Neil's mother harangued him about not getting her boy into any trouble.

The event started before lunch, continued through the afternoon and on into the evening as the barbecues were fired up again for dinner. Over the course of the day, Jason would discreetly slip away, though, watching from afar or wandering through the pretty gardens of the park district alone. Jason had made close, amazing friends, but as he watched them with their families, he was reminded that he hadn't known any of them longer than a year.

Jason's powerful and controlled aura allowed to hide his inner turmoil effectively from most of the people present. A silver ranker would have to rudely explore his aura, and the gold rankers followed decorum and had their auras non-intrusively alert for danger without probing the people around them. This was true for all but Arabelle. Her sensitive and powerful aura senses shamelessly, if subtly, examined Jason's condition. To her surprise, Jason sensed her intrusion and gave her a flat look.

During one of Jason's little disappearances, she sent Gary after him, rather than follow herself. The big leonid was also one of the few with no family present, with even the wanderlustful Emir having his granddaughter. Sophie and Belinda were the others, the pair having considered each other their only real family for years.

The park district was a combination of open, grassy spaces and feature gardens. Gary found Jason sitting alone in a small gazebo in a garden that artfully showed off the more attractive plant life of the delta. It was rather like a small version of the Geller Estate.

“It feels like we haven’t seen so much of each other in a while,” Gary said, sitting down next to Jason. “Even when I’m living in your houseboat.”

Rufus’ reaction to Farrah’s death had been loud and immediate. Gary’s mourning of their friend had been slower, affecting more of a lasting change. He was more sober and withdrawn, and there was still uncertainty about his team, now just him and Rufus. Farrah had been the glue holding their trio so neatly together and, in her absence, they hadn’t really done any adventuring as a pair. Rufus had worked out his anger through a series of solitary monster hunts, while Gary threw himself into craftsmanship.

Gary was older than Rufus and Farrah, like Jory having spent much of his time at iron rank on his profession as a weaponsmith. In the wake of Farrah’s death he had retreated back into his profession, using the hammering of steel and the heat of the forge to still the thoughts in his head. It was a meditative process as he produced one weapon after another.

Rufus had split his time between the academy annex project with the Geller family and the investigation into the Builder cult. Gary had, in turn, spent most of the last few months working with the Magic Society on the Builder cult’s construct creatures, looking for effective ways to combat what seemed to be the cult’s main fighting force.

Gary had made a weapon for Jason that would be effective against construct enemies. His subsequent work didn’t share the same care and time that went into Jason’s sword, instead focusing on volume. Greenstone’s weapons market had become flush with anti-construct weapons that were inexpensive and reliable.

Slowly the pair had started to come back together. Rufus had reached out to Gary to help with the construction of his training complex. It was not high-skill work and it could have been any decent smith, but Gary had taken to the task with enthusiasm.

More recently, with Jason’s team about to enter the astral space, they had come together to help the team prepare. Rufus took them through everything they knew about the cult, while Gary took them through everything they knew about the cult’s weapons. Any advantage they could get over the cult or their construct monsters could be the difference between life and death. Gary had also helped the team prepare equipment for bronze rank. Belinda had received the most help, ending up with a number of Gary’s personal creations at very friendly prices.

Jason and Gary sat together amiably in the gazebo.

“Nothing seems to fit together quite right with her gone, does it?” Jason asked.

“No,” Gary said. “It’s like I’m waiting for things to go back to normal, when it already has. I just don’t like that normal has a big, Farrah-shaped hole in it. I don’t even know

when my team became such a big part of who I am, but it feels like a part of me went with her.”

Jason couldn't find any words to support him that didn't sound trite, so instead he briefly leaned into the big man; a simple gesture of solidarity.

“She'd be proud of you, you know,” Gary said. “The adventurer you've become.”

“I was so bratty to her,” Jason said with a sad, reminiscent laugh. “Moralising at her, when I didn't know a damn thing. She must have thought I was a spoiled child.”

“The thing about children,” Gary said, “is that they're innocent. She didn't want you to lose that.”

“I don't think I've succeeded,” Jason said. “There's a lot of blood on my hands, now.”

“Arabelle told me that there is only so much value to be had in looking at the things we've done,” Gary said. “In the end, all they can do is help us decide what we're going to do next. That's what matters.”

Jason nodded. He wasn't the only one Rufus' mother had guided through dark times.

“What's next for you?” Jason asked Gary.

“Well, Rufus is here for a while, with the training complex he's doing. Our contract with Emir has really been over since he got here. I was thinking it might be time to go home, help them ride out the monster surge. Home, home, not Vitesse.”

“You have family back home?”

“Yeah, I'm thick with them,” Gary said. “Becoming an adventurer has really helped them out, and I've been able to send home essences for more of them. It's kept me away from them too, though. I think it might be time to go back for a while.”

“I squandered my family,” Jason said. “I only really saw my sister anymore. She's a lot older than me and my brother and didn't really grow up with us. She lived close to me with her husband and little girl and tried to mend fences between me, Mum and my brother. I didn't realise what I was throwing away in refusing to let go of the past. Not until I came here and no longer had the choice.”

“Once you're done with the astral space, you can come visit my family,” Gary said. “You'll get all the mothering you could ask for and then some.”

“I'd like that,” Jason said. “Our plan is to go to Vitesse, after we get back out. We're staying focused on the task in front of us, though.”

“The way it should be,” Gary said. “Treasure your team, Jason. Adventuring is a dangerous business, and you're about to face about as much danger as this job has to offer.”

Each of Jason's team members went through their own farewells. For Humphrey, it was an almost formal affair. The Gellers had been sending their young people out into lives of adventure for hundreds of years and Humphrey felt the weight of them all as he took his place amongst that tradition. All his family members were present to wish him well. There might be various factions within the family, but adventuring was a sacred duty to them all.

For Neil and Clive, it was also a matter of large family affairs. For all the differences in the station of eel farmers versus mid-tier aristocracy, they were unaware that each was experiencing oddly similar circumstances at the same time. Their families gathered in boisterous celebration, with both being fussed over by their mothers. Both were also warned not to 'let that Asano boy lead you into trouble.'

"Mum," Clive said. "I know Jason well. I know the things he's been through and the things he's done. You've met him yourself, multiple times. You were talking to him yesterday."

"He does seem like a nice boy."

"Then why is it that you always seem to think that something Aunt Helen heard from some guy is somehow a more reliable source of information than me?"

As those with families were getting their farewells, Belinda spent her last morning with Jory. Sophie roamed the streets of Old City, aimless and alone. Like Jason, she had no family, while lacking his ability to make such fast friends. With her looks she had always been good at getting attention, but with her circumstances, it had rarely been welcome.

If not for Belinda, she would have been completely alone in the world. She had no family, not that she knew of. She didn't even know the name of the city she had been born in, her father having brought them to Greenstone after her mother's death when she was a small girl.

Until the revelation that the martial arts her father taught her was the inheritance of some ancient order of assassins, she had never been curious about where she came from. Now she awaited Emir's investigation into her background, as interested in the results as he was.

The idea of an apparently famous treasure hunter helping her find her background was one of many strange things that had come from falling into Jason Asano's field of influence. He had turned much of her understanding and experience on its head. Suddenly she was surrounded by people who didn't live lives of trying to take everything they could, because they didn't need to. They already had it. She had always resented the rich and

powerful, but being amongst them gave her the unfamiliar sensation of people wanting nothing more from her than companionship. A friend and an ally, rather than a tool or a object of lust.

There was a strange charisma to Asano that affected the people around him. It was like he could obviate social hierarchy through sheer force of personality, putting farmers and thieves shoulder to shoulder with princes and nobles. It had brought her into a strange world of possibility that even now felt delicate, as if it could all be snatched away in a moment.

With a blast of air that startled the people around her, she launched herself up to a rooftop and sat down on the edge. Her dimensional bag took the form of a vest, from which she took out an envelope, worn from handling. Inside was her indenture contract; the symbol of six months during which she was ostensibly enslaved, yet had given her freedom and opportunity. That period had taken her from desperation and hopelessness to a world of potential. She turned the envelope over in her hands, looking at it without opening it, before putting it away again.

She had more friends now than she knew what to do with. Humphrey, righteous and kind, with an unwavering sense of responsibility. Clive, smart like Belinda, but filled with a boyish curiosity. Neil, whose sensible practicality would have blended in most places, but stood out in a group of extreme personalities. Then there was Jason. Strange and unpredictable, yet also fierce and principled. Capable of inflicting terrible horrors, yet would go to great lengths to help not just a friend, but a stranger.

Her feelings about Jason were complicated. He was compelling, yet infuriating. Clever, yet foolish; naïve, but also cunning. He would hide his virtues and proudly announce his failings. He seemed to have neither pride nor honour, yet she had come to realise that he was filled with his own versions of both.

More and more, she found herself wondering what he thought of her. Friendship? Pity? He had always maintained a certain distance, painfully aware of the indenture contract. It was as if he didn't understand the degree which he had turned it from a cage into a tool of liberation, despite it being his plan in the first place.

She wasn't what he was drawn to in a woman, she knew that. He had seen her with his lover, Cassandra, and his flirtations with the sapphire-haired celestine princess. He was attracted to sultry, socially aggressive women, rather than ones who were standoffish and the regular kind of aggressive.

She had felt his gaze from time to time, but she had also sensed him trying to be respectful. He knew that things she had been through and the kinds of men she had

known. He was almost infuriatingly different from the men who had been pursuing her for most of her life.

In some ways, Jason reminded her of Jory. For a long time, Jory been the only decent man in her and Belinda's lives. Even Old Man Silva, whose protection she had enjoyed for years, was a man she had no illusions about. He told her he thought of her as a daughter, but treated her as a pet. Like many men of power, he looked at other people as possessions.

While Belinda was drawn to Jory's kindness and generosity, Sophie had been more compelled by clever, playful men. In her world, though, such men had inevitably been predators, with more than one lover learning the hard way that she wasn't prey.

She stood up, using her powers to climb the tallest building in the area and look out over Old City. For most of her life it had been her whole world, and she wondered when it had started to seem so small. Now, just one world was no longer enough. Soon she would be headed to an otherworldly city of ancient assassins and ambitious cultists.

She checked her watch, which had been annoyingly expensive, but the cheap ones tended to lose time in her dimensional bag. She laughed, thinking about the kind of problems she had now, compared to when she had lived in the streets below. Her thoughts returned to Jason.

Jory had wanted to help her, but Jason was the one who found a way. He looked at her seemingly insurmountable problems and went from hunting her down to transforming her world for no more reason than she needed him to. He did it in the face of her suspicion and hostility and he did it so thoroughly that it rewrote her entire future. She thought about his smug, smirking face, the impish grin and made an admission to herself.

"Damn it," she muttered.

Jason and his team moved into the strange, ruined village at the bottom of the lake, water pressing down on the magical dome above them. While Emir maintained the palace on the surface of the lake above, Jason set up his cloud house under the dome. Rather than the adaptive version he had been using, he tried the more ostentatious version. The result was a large, two-storey building with that same beautiful sunset colours of the cloud palace, without being so vast and grandiose. He had to return it to the flask before each attempt of the portal, otherwise he would have to leave it behind.

Jason had invited Jory along who had elected to join them until they left, spending a few extra days with Belinda. The team even offered him a chance to come along, which no few adventurers would have jumped at but he firmly declined. One trip to the astral space

was enough to confirm to Jory that he was a healer and an alchemist out of choice and only an adventurer out of necessity.

The archway they had used to enter the astral space was still there, a sleek, obsidian object that looked much the same as Jason's shadow gate power. The archway was now surrounded by the largest and most complicated magical diagram Jason had ever seen. Multiple times a day, Clive would trot Jason out to try and activate the portal with the latest permutation of the diagram.

As days became a week, Jason became used to his power fizzling out. When it finally worked, then, he was almost startled. A dark line of dark energy appeared at the bottom of the arch, rising up to fill the archway and establish the portal. Watching on, Emir's eyes glistened with triumph and he congratulated his team, who were standing around with Clive, celebrating their success.

The rest of the team had been on standby for each attempt and rapidly gathered themselves together.

"Jason and I will go first," Clive said, "as we have the best chance of getting back if something goes wrong. The rest of you quickly follow, as we don't know long the portal will remain stable."

"We've all discussed what to do if we're separated," Humphrey added. "If you find yourself alone on the other side, you know what to do."

Jason turned his gaze to Emir, trying to impart all the gratitude he felt in a simple nod, receiving Emir's smiling nod in return. He took a steeling breath, then stepped through the portal, practically pushed by Clive, who followed right after. Humphrey and Stash were next, followed by Neil, all picking their way carefully through the magical diagram on the floor. Sophie looked at Belinda, arms wrapped around Jory.

"You heard the man," Sophie said. "Don't take too long."

Sophie made her own way across the room, glancing back before stepping through the shadowy gate.

"I know you're still thinking about the what Healer asked of you," Belinda told Jory, moving her arms up from his waist to around his neck. He opened his mouth to speak but she put a hand over it.

"You need to stop thinking and just do it," she said. "I don't want to get back and find you where I left you, Tillman."

Jory's eyes sparkled and she took her hand away.

"Yes, Ma'am."

She gave him a lingering kiss and made her way across the circle to the portal, when he called out to her.

“Stay safe!”

“Don’t worry,” she said, flashing him a grin. “I’m very big on cowardice.”

“I’ve heard Jason say the same thing,” he told her. “And he’s a big, fat liar.”

She stepped through the portal and the smile sank from Jory’s face. He sighed, then looked up at the dome above him, holding off all the water.

“How do I get out of here?”

Chapter 223

More Powerful Than We Anticipated

In their hidden lair in the ruins of the Vane Estate, the leader of the local Builder cult, Zato, was fuming. One of the cultists had used a stone-shaping power to construct rooms in the subterranean cavern, of which Zato's personal quarters was the largest.

Timos, who had risen to his second-in-command, was waiting out the rage. He knew that while Zato seemed consumed in fury, once he had worked through his anger he would be ready to make more considered decisions. For the moment though, he was cursing the walls. The subject of his incoherent ranting was Jason Asano.

It was a name that now preyed on the minds of the cultists; the very idea of someone resisting the Builder's power sent chills through every cultist with a star seed. As volunteers, they had only surrendered a portion of their will to the Builder, compared the complete takeover that unwilling subjects suffered. They nonetheless had a direct connection to the unimaginable immensity of the Builder's power. The idea of someone withstanding that power filled them with dread.

The most infuriating part was that the cult hadn't even been responsible for the creation of the Rejector. Killian Laurent had seemed like an invaluable ally in getting the cult's resources out of the city during the purge and giving him what he needed to bring another person under the Builder's control seemed a small price to pay, given that he already had a star seed.

The results of this bargain had been a disaster. Not only did Asano withstand the star seed, but he was allowed to live, which was as grave a sin as was to be found in the cult. The results, from the exposed agents to the demoralised cultists were ample demonstrations of why. The promise of power was what had brought so many people into the cult in the first place. There was never a shortage of disenfranchised people looking for a place to belong and to escape the powerlessness of their lives. The Rejector was a living demonstration that the Builder's power was not absolute, and he was still running around and causing trouble. Normally, those incredibly rare few who managed to somehow outlast the star seed were put down, hard and fast.

Laurent's failure to kill Asano was only the beginning of his betrayal. The logistical assistance he provided the cult had not been in as good faith as they thought, being used to his own ends. Not many had the nerve to deal and then double-cross the cult. As it turned out, Laurent had used the purge as cover to prepare his own flight from the city. Many of the losses the cult suffered during the purge were actually fed to the Adventure

Society by Laurent himself, drawing attention away as he plundered the Silva family's wealth. Now Laurent was gone with a small fortune in money and resources, leaving the cult and the Silva family both to deal with the aftermath.

On top of the demoralising factor of the Rejector's mere existence was the impact he had on their operations. It was bad enough that he had somehow found a way into the astral space they were still months away from breaching themselves. It was worse that the Adventure Society had been able to use him to flush out some of the cult's key people still embedded in Greenstone. What's more, some of those uncovered had been taken alive, something that shouldn't have been possible. From what little information they gathered before completely severing their Greenstone contacts for safety was that the Rejector's encounter with the Builder had given Asano some power to shock their star seeds into inaction long enough to suppress the seed's power to detonate.

The fortunate thing was that Timos, who had facilitated most of those insertions years ago, had been fastidious in his precautions. He ran cult operatives in small groups, keeping them isolated from one another and the information compartmentalised. None of the people infiltrating the Adventure and Magic Societies had any information that could critically impact the cult's larger plans if revealed. The information flow had all been one way, through a network of dead drops.

The infiltrators could identify Timos, but as Timos has already been exposed that was no longer an issue. They could also reveal the very basics of the plan to claim the Order of the Reaper's astral space, but that, too, had largely been exposed already. Timos had kept them in the dark about the details not relating to their specific roles, which made their exposure only a limited liability.

The biggest loss was that their most valuable information sources in the city had been uprooted. The directors of the Adventure and Magic Societies had paraded all their key officials past Asano, who started picking them out like selecting fruit at a market. Zato and Timos had managed to get word out to some of their people who had either made their escape, or detonated themselves pre-emptively. But dead, escaped or taken alive, those people were no longer feeding the cult information. They had to assume their entire dead-drop information network was compromised and had closed it down entirely.

Eventually Zato calmed down, taking a seat on an ornate chair looted from the manor above before they destroyed it. He let out a long, slow breath, purging the residual rage and once again taking control of himself.

"I'm sorry you had to put up with that," Zato said to Timos. "I find it best to get all the anger out, rather than let it simmer and compromise my judgement."

“Understandable,” Timos said. “It’s another in a long line of setbacks, but this doesn’t compromise our ultimate plan.”

“A team of adventurers has gotten into the astral space,” Zato said. “All we have there are some unseeded recruits. You’ve seen the reports on the Rejector’s team. I don’t care if our people have double the numbers or if they’ve reached bronze rank. Asano, Geller and their team will tear through them like they were wet paper.”

“It doesn’t matter; their task is done. The beacon was emplaced months ago and the astral tunnel is well on its way to formation. Our astral magic specialists here have assured me that, at this point, the beacon is unnecessary. The tunnel’s destination is affixed. The Rejector can run around all he likes, take our people alive or even destroy the beacon itself. They could have gone into the astral space a month ago and still been too late to stop us. Short of finding us here and stopping the tunnel from this end, there is no keeping us out of the astral space.”

“But they’ll know we’re coming.”

A sinister smile played across Timos’ lips.

“Actually, I made sure the people we sent believe that the beacon is essential to our plans. A little extra precaution I put in place. Asano and his team can go ahead and destroy it and assume that has put paid to our plans. It just frees us up to move in unexpectedly, once the tunnel is finished.”

Zato chuckled.

“You know, I was one of those who looked down on your cautious nature,” he told Timos. “Yet you were the only one who even imagined things could go this badly for us. You have my gratitude.”

“Gratitude enough to let me finally kill Thadwick Mercer?” Timos asked.

“No,” Zato said. “Mercer knows Asano, which could be useful to us.”

“Thinking Thadwick could be of use is a large part of what got us here in the first place,” Timos argued. “I’ve already spoken to him at length about Asano but the petty-minded little scum is so biased that I don’t trust any of what he gave me.”

“Mercer lives,” Zato said firmly. “Why don’t you put that cautious mind of yours to work and see if you can’t find a way to make Thadwick an asset?”

Jason stepped out of the shadow gate. With his astral affinity, dimensional travel powers gave him an enjoyable rush. It seemed to be a lengthier transition than his previous portal experiences, even his previous use of the portal through which they just travelled.

-
- You have entered a zone of high magical saturation. Magical manifestations will occur at an increased rate.
-

Clive had a different opinion, which he demonstrated by stumbling out of the portal, and dropping to all fours and loudly throwing up. The others followed through the portal in quick succession. Humphrey was a practised teleporter himself, but still came out looking peaky.

“That was quite rough,” he said in a strained voice.

Neil came through and ended up in the same condition as Clive. Sophie followed after, giving a sympathetic wince over her beleaguered team mates. Like Jason, she had an astral affinity that made the transition exhilarating, rather than stomach-churning.

“Was Belinda sent to one of the other entrances?” Humphrey wondered aloud. A glance around them was enough to see they were on one of the portal towers that ringed the outside of the city.

“I don’t think so,” Sophie said. “She’s probably just sluggish in peeling herself off of Jory.”

“Good for them,” Jason said happily. “Who doesn’t love love?”

Belinda finally came through the portal, looking unwell but managing to hold down her lunch. By that point, Clive and Neil had crawled away from the mess they had made on the flat brickwork top of the tower. They were sat together, leaning back and looking queasy.

“Once we get that weird magic body like Jason, we stop being able to throw up, right?” Neil asked.

“Yep,” Clive confirmed. “I am now officially looking forward to it.”

“You and me both, brother,” Neil told him.

“We dodged the first arrow,” Humphrey said. “We arrived together and don’t need to regroup.”

“That was actually my main concern,” Jason said, sharing Humphrey’s relief. “Of all the uncertain threats here, my biggest fear was facing them in isolation.”

“We aren’t all well-suited to solitary operation, no,” Clive agreed. Being separated reduced their potential answers to any given situation. This was the largest potential threat they had foreseen, because it made every other threat more dangerous. They had made a number of contingency preparations for that eventuality, including tracking stones for all but Jason, who was untraceable.

“So, we don’t need the tracking stones for each other,” Neil said.

“They may be useful if we end up separated for some reason,” Humphrey said. “Keep them on hand. We should take a look at the ones we have for the cultists.”

“Speaking of which,” Neil said, “why couldn’t we check them from outside the astral space? Isn’t that how they knew the expedition had gone wrong? Tracking stones for the people in the desert astral space?”

“The difference is the astral spaces themselves,” Clive explained. “The desert astral space is naturally formed and has many, perpetually open apertures. The dimensional wall between our world and that astral space is paper thin, filled with holes. This astral space, by contrast, is artificially stabilised and very difficult to penetrate. It’s a rock face you need to drill through, hence the trouble we had returning.”

“That means they’ll need to find a different way to separate this astral space from our world, right?” Belinda asked. “Not the same technique they used before.”

“Almost certainly,” Clive said. “I have no idea what that will entail, however. It could be easier or could be harder. This astral space is smaller than the desert one. It’s one of the things we need to figure out.”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Humphrey said. “We should approach things in order. First, we take stock. Where are we and what is our situation? I’m concerned about the ambient magic.”

Most perception powers enhanced magical senses and aura senses somewhere in the first three ranks, along with a third power that was a precursor to the more unique upper-rank effects. For Jason that was seeing through darkness, for Neil it was sensing vulnerabilities. Humphrey already had both their magical and aura senses enhanced. Everyone but Sophie and Belinda had their perception powers at bronze already, with only Sophie lacking the enhanced magic senses. She wouldn’t have them until silver rank, when Neil and Jason would have their aura senses enhanced.

“I can feel all the extra magic in the air,” Jason said. “I figured that was normal. This place had always had a higher magical saturation, right?”

“Yes,” Clive said, “but the last time we came here, the magical density was the same as the Greenstone region. It’s now higher.”

“I didn’t realise that was even possible,” Jason said. He had never experienced a zone of different magical density, so he hadn’t recognised the change.

“Can you explain that for the guy who studied healing magic instead of astral magic?” Neil asked.

“Or the person who never studied magic at all,” Sophie added.

“Magical saturation is how much magic there is,” Clive explained. “It determines how many monsters, essences and awakening stones manifest. A monster surge is a temporary period of heightened magical saturation, which is why so many monsters appear.”

“Magical density is the quality of the magic,” Belinda said, picking up the explanation. “It determines that the rank of monsters that manifest, along with a bunch of other things. What rituals can be performed, whether certain magic items can function.”

“The heightened saturation we were expecting,” Clive said. “An increase in magical density means that all the monsters we’ll be facing will be more powerful than we thought. It also means they’ll stay around for longer. An iron-rank monster will naturally break back down into magic after a month. Depending on how long ago this change happened, the astral space could be thick with more powerful monsters that have been manifesting without breaking down.”

“How powerful do you think?” Humphrey asked, looking at the air around them. “I’d guess the new standard is low bronze.”

“I’d say that’s about right,” Clive said. “Greenstone’s density is about mid-iron, which is very low.”

“What do you mean by mid-iron?” Neil asked.

“Oh, that’s just a rating for the most common kind of monster that will appear. In Greenstone, iron-rank monsters are easily the most common, with semi-regular bronze and only very rare silvers. What we’re looking at here will mostly be low-end bronze, with some high-end of iron and bronze sprinkled in. Encountering a silver-rank monster will still be unusual, but with how many monsters we’re going to see, it’s an inevitability. Hopefully we’ll be strong enough to fight it by that point, or at least to run away.”

“We could chum Asano and have him lure it away,” Neil said.

“Because of his evasive abilities,” Humphrey said, nodding.

“Uh, sure, that’s why,” Neil said. Jason gave Neil a flat look, who wiggled his eyebrows back at him.

“We knew we would be dealing with unknown dangers,” Humphrey said. “This is just the first. If anything, the monsters being more powerful than we anticipated will be better for our advancement.”

“I think we may be missing the forest for the trees here,” Jason said. “More importantly than the monsters, something is raising the magical density of this astral space. That should be a foundational element of any patch of physical reality, right?”

“That’s right,” Clive said. “Altering it in an astral space would be orders of magnitude easier than a true world, but even so, the forces involved are disconcerting, to say the least.”

“It has to be something to do with what the Builder cult is up to,” Humphrey said. “I suggest we go find them and ask.”

Chapter 224

Fate Can't Wait to Kill Us All

The astral space was an island city of ancient stone buildings, reclaimed by jungle. Broad boulevards were covered in vines, grass growing up between displaced pavers. Buildings that were three, four, even five storeys tall, ranging from nearly intact to little more than rubble strewn around the lush, verdant greenery. Strange, magical plants could be seen. Bulbous, purple growths, adhering to the sides of buildings. Huge, towering trees, incongruent with the jungle around them. They stretched up, higher than any of the buildings, clutching at the sky with leafy fingers.

As they had in their initial foray into the city, the team had arrived on one of the portal towers that ringed the outer edge of the city. Situated where the island shore met the water, each tower had an archway akin to the one through which they had arrived. Their's was still open, an obsidian arch filled with dark energy. There was something eerie about the power within it. Not a mere absence of light, but a void that sought to devour it.

Jason's power allowed ten travellers before the power was expended. It remained active, only seven having passed through, including Stash. Perched on Humphrey's head in the form of a small bird, Stash was bobbing his head around with curiosity. The transit did not seem to have impacted the little dragon at all.

"So, who built this city?" Neil asked. "I mean, did this used to be a chunk of world, like the ones the Builder keeps tearing off? Or did someone come along and build this huge city in this astral space? Was is that order of assassins?"

"It was not," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. "This city was as you see it when the Order of the Reaper first discovered this place and began working to stabilise it. Even these towers, which were used to connect it to your world, were already in place, waiting to be used."

"They were already here?" Clive asked. "We've been postulating that the primary function of the towers was to serve as the connection to our world. If they predate the people who used them that way, then it suggests that this astral space was attached to another reality in the past, or perhaps to ours and was severed somehow. Oh, that's fascinating."

"Fascination is a luxury for later," Humphrey said. "What matters is the Builder cult."

"That may be what I'm talking about," Clive said. "We already know that the cult has access to astral magic that makes our own look like a child's sand drawings. What we're talking about, with this astral space, is reality engineering. The Builder is the greatest

reality engineer is existence and beyond. Is the Builder trying to claim this astral space, or reclaim it? Where did the Order of the Reaper get the knowledge to do what they did here? It wasn't from our world."

"Are you suggesting that the Order of the Reaper, or perhaps even the Reaper itself, somehow stole this astral space from the Builder?" Jason asked.

"I wouldn't engage in that kind of postulation without significantly more to go on," Clive said. "I need to examine this tower, quite thoroughly."

"Not yet," Belinda reminded Clive. "The portal, first."

"Right, yes."

Belinda still served as Clive's on and off research assistant, although the stipend that earned her was inconsequential, relative to adventuring money. She had proven good for Clive, as she was very detail oriented, while he liked to careen from one big idea to the next.

His previous assistants had never been able to meet Clive's standards, leading to clashes and problems. There were reasons he had never advanced beyond Greenstone in spite of his talent. Belinda helped him bring ideas to fruition instead of getting bogged down in the details he had been dismissive of, while she found, in Clive, an enthusiastic magical tutor. As Jason well knew, Clive was downright ebullient when it came to sharing the study of magic.

Clive and Belinda went over to examine the still-open portal. They needed to know if it was safe to return to their own world, and how easy it would be to reopen the portal from this side. They set out a series of carved stones around the portal. They looked like dice; six-sided cubes with a sigil engraved onto each face.

Clive took a pair of wands, handing one to Belinda, and they started waving them about. The cubes floated up into the air and started turning, over and over until they stopped again, one of the engravings of each cube lighting up. Clive hastily scribbled in a notebook before the pair started waving their wands again.

"I would strongly advise against trying to go back through this portal," Clive said after several sequences of this.

"It seems normal," Humphrey said. "As much as any of this is. It looks like Jason's portal power."

"But it isn't," Clive said. "We used Jason's power to incite the portal into opening, but this is not Jason's ability, whatever it may look like. This archway was able to serve as an anchor, allowing the portal to originate from the other side. Whatever power is affecting the ambient magic of the city is having a disruptive effect on anything originating on this side,

though. Trying to go back from this side, even though this already-open portal, would be less like stepping through a door and more like jumping into a meat grinder.”

“So, we’re trapped here?” Neil asked.

“I don’t know about trapped,” Clive said. “Everything we learned while figuring out how to open the portal suggested that leaving should be much easier than intruding in the first place. If I can determine what is going on with the magic, I’m confident I can compensate for it. We can likely trigger the exit without even needing Jason’s power to get things started.”

“We have to assume that whatever is affecting the magic is part of what the cult are doing,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “The first step to solving this puzzle is figuring that out and finding a way to stop it.”

“I vote we start by killing them all and go from there,” Sophie said.

“You’re probably right,” Jason said with resignation in his voice. “We need to question them, if we can, but I don’t see a diplomatic resolution as a likely outcome.”

“It’s never good, going in knowing that you’re going to be killing people,” Humphrey said. “You shielded the team from that before, Jason, but I won’t let you, this time. We’re adventurers, and adventurers fight monsters, even when they’re people. We all need to come to terms with that.”

Belinda and Neil shared a look, neither having killed anyone before. The others gave them sober but encouraging smiles of reassurance.

“I’d like to start by investigating this tower quite thoroughly,” Clive said. “They are most likely the medium for whatever the cult are up to.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “How long will that take?”

“I know this isn’t a great answer,” Clive said, “but it’ll take as long as it takes. Once I’ve started, I can probably get you a better estimate.”

“Once *we’ve* started,” Belinda corrected.

“Just so,” Clive agreed.

The others were at loose ends as Clive started pulling out magical paraphernalia him and Belinda to use. They ended up sitting at the edge of the tower, legs dangling over the side.

With the strange beauty of the overgrown city laid out before him, Jason took a deep breath of the hot, heavy air. It was rich with the scent of plants and earth, mixing with a gentle, salty breeze coming off the water. He had mastered the art of not breathing but he

did it anyway, for the pure pleasure of the sensation. He relished the feel of the warm sun on his skin.

“I know we’re here to fight evil and whatnot,” Jason said, “but damn if I don’t love this job, sometimes.”

Jason spotted the rest of the team sharing a glance.

“What’s that about,” he asked.

“It’s just good to see a real smile,” Neil said. “You’ve been forcing them for a while now, which takes a lot of the fun out of mocking you.”

Sophie thumped Neil on the arm.

“Hey...” Neil complained.

Before Clive and Belinda started their investigation, Humphrey had Clive take out the tracking stones for the cultists. They didn’t expect to get actual locations, since not only were the cultists most likely bronze-rank after all this time, but the tracking stones traced their Adventure Society badges, not the people themselves.

“They might still have their badges,” Clive said. “They needed them to get in here in the first place. Remember Emir’s people checking the aura signatures on them against Magic Society records?”

“Once they stayed behind, they new their Adventure Society days were done,” Neil said. “I bet they tossed their badges away the second they got here.”

Whether the Cultists kept their badges or not, the tracking stones would at least keep track of who was alive or dead. Even after their aura signature changed enough from ranking up to desynchronise them from their badges,

“Five of them are dead,” Clive said.

“That’s a big win for us,” Sophie said. “It went from six on thirteen to six on eight.”

“Don’t go thinking that makes things easy,” Humphrey warned as he saw the lack of activity from the stones. “The rest aren’t tracking, which means they’re bronze-rank.”

“Or they got turned into flesh abominations,” Belinda added.

“Yes,” Humphrey agreed. “Even if they aren’t the strongest essence users, the tyranny of rank is not something to be dismissive of. We all watched Jason take out one bronze-rankers, but that was just one. A whole cluster of them together is a multiplicative danger, not an additive one.”

“Humphrey, you’ve given us this speech before,” Neil pointed out. “So has your Mother, your sister, Mr Bahadir, Gabriel Remore...”

“And you’ll hear it again before we’re done because it matters,” Humphrey said. “I’m bringing every single one of you out of this place alive.”

“Don’t say things like that,” Jason admonished. “That’s a huge death flag. You might as well pull out a picture of your girl from back home, explain that you’re about to be a father and that you’re two days away from retirement.”

“Jason, this is serious,” Humphrey said.

“I am serious,” Jason said. “How would you feel if I said that nothing can possibly go wrong?”

“Definitely don’t say that,” Neil said.

“Don’t go tempting fate,” Sophie agreed. “Fate can’t wait to kill us all.”

Clive and Belinda almost seemed to be going over the huge tower brick by huge brick, starting with the top of the tower and making their way down the stairs that wound their way around the outside. Despite the size of the tower, there was no apparent way inside, or any indication whether it was solid or hollow.

“This is really what we’re doing?” Neil complained. “All this build up over going back into the astral space, squaring off against monsters and cultists, and what are we doing? Standing around while Clive looks at bricks.”

“That’s Neil you can hear whinging,” Jason said into a recording crystal. There was a long gap in Jason’s recording crystal travelogue, from just before his kidnapping until he finally felt ready to resume them.

Neil walked over to peer into the recording crystal.

“Jason’s family,” Neil said. “Next time you are going to send us someone, send us someone better. You have a brother, right, Jason?”

“Sod off,” Jason said, pushing Neil out of frame.

Sophie was meditating, knowing that her aura control was not as strong as most of the team. Humphrey patrolled the edge of the tower, looking out for threats. At his heels, Stash was transforming into a series of increasingly adorable puppies. Occasionally he would change into something stranger, such as a replica of one of the Berts, but with a huge moustache.

“I’m really one person pretending to be a lot!” Stash declared enthusiastically.

“Stash!” Humphrey scolded. “What did I say? The Bertinelli brothers are all different people.”

“No!” Stash yelled, turning back into a puppy and sprinting to jump into the lap of Sophie, in her meditative pose. She smiled without opening her eyes, reaching down to scratch the puppy behind the ears as he snuggled into her.

Belinda returned to the top of the tower, calling everyone together. They gathered up and followed her down the stairs to the base of the tower, where Clive was using his power to draw out an incredibly sophisticated ritual diagram on the wall.

“What did you find?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m not sure,” Clive said absently, still drawing the diagram. He waved his finger in the air like a pen and golden lines appeared within the diagram to match. “Some kind of hidden door, although I can’t tell if it’s a cupboard or the whole thing is empty.”

Eventually Clive finished the diagram and chanted out an opening spell. A section of wall soundlessly slid back into the tower and slid up, revealing a large, dark space beyond. The others could make out a shape from the light coming through door, only Jason seeing clearly. He stepped up and looked around the interior of what turned out to be the hollow tower. He realised what the looming shape taking up most of the space was and his eyes went wide.

“What is that?” Humphrey asked, peering into the dark.

The lump of metal the size of a car they were looking at was the front half of a giant, metallic foot.

Chapter 225

Running Towards Something

Clive tossed out some glow stones that floated up into the darkness, illuminating the huge figure that occupied the interior of the tower.

“A giant statue?” Neil postulated.

“Not a statue,” Clive said. “There are articulation points on the ankles and knees. I can’t see clearly from down here, but likely all the other joints, as well. This is some kind of golem. A ridiculously enormous golem.

The air inside the tower was cold and clammy. Jason stepped forward and touched a hand to the chilly metal foot.

-
- ??? (world engineer).
 - Construct (diamond rank).

 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
-

Clive quickly followed to see the same message, the others doing the same. All but Sophie, who lacked enhanced magical senses, could sense an incredible but dormant power within.

“What’s a world engineer?” Neil asked.

“I have no idea,” Clive said.

“I suspect it’s best for everyone if none of us ever find out,” Neil said. “I don’t know about you, but I’m getting a very Builder feeling off of this thing.”

“You can sense it too?” Jason asked.

“What?” Neil asked. “No, I just meant, you know, world engineer, giant construct. It kind of screams ‘Builder’ right?”

“I can feel an echo of the Builder in this thing’s power,” Jason said. “This belongs to it.”

“Then why did the Order of the Reaper have it?” Humphrey asked.

“Shade?” Jason asked.

“I do not know,” Shade said. “The existence of these constructs was unknown to me.”

“It seems this place has more secrets than anyone realised,” Humphrey said.

“We thought they were just trying to take the astral space,” Clive said. “Are these things the true goal?”

“Maybe it’s both,” Jason said. “The Builder wants these back, which is what it’ll get if it claims this astral space.”

“It doesn’t matter what the Builder wants,” Sophie said. “It doesn’t change what we want. We’re here to stop the cultists, whatever they’re up to.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “The important part of this discovery is to figure out how it helps us.”

“I’m not sure it does,” Clive said. “I don’t have the resources, or frankly the knowledge to begin unravelling what this thing is, what it’s for or what it’s doing here.”

“It at least tells us what to do next, right?” Sophie asked. “Even if we don’t know exactly what they’re up to, it’s going to involve these towers. We already thought that, and this just makes it all the more evident.”

“She’s right,” Humphrey agreed. “Our first move should be to make our way around the outskirts of the city and check out all of these towers. The cultists may well be set up at one of them.”

“We can also see if all the towers hold one of these things,” Clive said.

“Do we know how many towers there are?” Neil asked.

“Twelve,” Clive said. “Each around eight kilometres apart.”

“Alright, Clive, see if you can’t seal this thing back up and we’ll leave.”

Clive called back the glow stones he had sent floating up into the tower and the team left. Once he removed the magical diagram he had used to open it, the doorway closed again, leaving no trace it was ever there.

“I know the original idea was to make our way from tower to tower on foot,” Belinda said, “but from the top of these towers we can see some of the others. Should we be portalling or teleporting or whatever?”

Jason was not the only member of the team to unlock a mass-transit power with a bronze-rank ability. Clive could open a portal, while Humphrey could now teleport people as a group. Their carry capacity and cooldown for each was the same as Jason’s gate portal.

“We want to come at each tower as quietly as we can,” Humphrey said. “Teleporting into the middle of eight bronze-rankers is a good way to get killed. We should stick with going on foot and have Jason scout it out.”

Jason's stealth abilities had become quite formidable by the time all his powers were awakened. His cloak helped him blend into shadows and he received further boosts from his familiars, Shade and Gordon. For each body subsumed into Jason's shadow, Shade could mask one giveaway element like scent, heat or even muffle Jason's movements against sensitive ears. While Gordon was subsumed into Jason's aura, Jason's ability to retract it completely was enhanced. Combined with Jason's current aura strength, even most bronze-rankers would be unable to sense it.

They set out from the tower, in the direction of the next. The shoreline was made up of large rocks that were not easily navigable, so they followed the overgrown streets. Even then, the terrain was not easy going. They could have moved faster, after all the mobility training they had done, but Humphrey insisted on slow but steady. They were expecting monsters and worse, and he didn't want them stumbling into too much danger at once.

Sophie ranged ahead as two of Shade's three bodies watched their flanks, while the last took its place as Jason's shadow. Jason's tactical map and voice communication made sure everyone could be alerted the moment a threat appeared.

Sophie was not a stealthy scout like Jason but her mobility was incomparable. Whether running up the sides of buildings or sailing between them, she was the embodiment of agility and grace. Sometimes she would blast herself into the air with a burst of wind and glide above them, using further bursts to throw herself higher. In this way, she could effectively fly, scouting ahead with the vantage that offered. She was also seemingly inexhaustible. Her celestine nature reduced the ongoing mana costs of powers, while her avatar of speed power reduced those costs even further.

"She's really getting a handle of her powers," Jason said, looking up in admiration. "She's like a bird on the wing."

"They used to call her the Nightingale, in the fighting pits," Belinda said. "If only they could see her now."

They had a soul compass that would point to the closest thing with a soul, except for themselves, who had been filtered out. That meant cultists or flesh abominations, which could very well be the same thing. It would not forewarn them of monsters, however.

They had already determined a policy of how to handle monster encounters. To begin with, they would fight anything they didn't recognise all together, even if it was iron rank. Once they had an idea of what they were up against, they would start sending out their members who could best handle, or best learn from any given encounter.

The astral space's magical saturation promised monsters, which it quickly delivered. It was only eight or so kilometres from one tower to the next, yet they had two monster

encounters on the way. The first was a pair of bronze-rank monsters that were quite tough, but no match for the team's rapidly growing capabilities. The next was a cluster of bark lurkers, a type of iron-rank monster commonly seen in the delta. It was normally a solitary creature, but they encountered a half-dozen, all at once. They were very hardy creatures and proved more difficult to deal with than the two bronze-rank ones.

They sat around on strewn, moss-covered rubble, resting after the fight.

"Looks like we might be fighting all together for a bit," Neil said. "Those extra numbers are rough."

"That's the magical saturation at work," Clive said. "The weaker the monster, the more of them we can expect to see."

"What about something that already travels in packs?" Neil said. "Will there be a whole army of them?"

"Probably," Clive said.

"Jason fought a bark lurker during our field assessment," Humphrey said.

"Back then, my afflictions were the best way to handle them," Jason said. "Your special attacks seem to be doing just fine, now."

"I envy those high damage attacks," Sophie said.

"I like your retaliation power," Humphrey told her. "You stopped that thing like it had run into a cliff face."

Bark lurkers were largely slow, but would make charging rush attacks. One of them tried to use it on Sophie, to unfortunate effect. Her balance essence ability, moment of oneness, could absorb attacks for a brief moment, then return their power back on an enemy. She had jammed her fingers into a gap between the thick carapace plates of the bark lurker and unleashed the full power of its own charge onto it.

"I'm not sure it was as harsh as you say," Humphrey told Neil. "We will need to be pushed further than these fights did, if we want to cross that line into bronze," Humphrey said.

"Speak for yourself," Belinda said. "I found those plenty rough enough."

"I'm sorry," Humphrey said to her. "I know this will be harder on you than any of us. We all awakened our powers more slowly than you, and worked our way up through easier fights than you have and will continue to face. All the more, since your powers are a lot more sophisticated than a set like mine."

The others nodded.

"You've had it harder than all of us," Jason said. "You went out on a road contract before you were even a member of the Adventure Society. It must be fairly overwhelming."

“It’s been a lot of changes,” Belinda acknowledged, then shared a look with Sophie, before turning her gaze back to the team. “We know what it’s like to be running on a knife edge, though. At least now, we’re running towards something, instead of away.”

Between rough terrain and monster fights, it took the team hours to close the distance to the second tower

They reached the second tower, finding it with no more signs of cultist activity than the first. Clive, now knowing what to look for, was able to find the hidden door quite quickly, revealing another enormous golem.

The sun was descending over the city and it was unlikely they would make the next tower before dark without picking up the pace.

While the others were at the base of the tower as Clive closed the door back up, Jason and Humphrey made their way to the top, looking out to the next tower.

“What do you think?” Humphrey asked. “Do we camp here, or push it?”

“Neither,” Jason said. “We shouldn’t camp near the towers. The cultists probably don’t know we’re here but let’s not make it easy for them, just in case. We pick somewhere more hidden and defensible between here and the next tower.”

“Alright,” Humphrey agreed.

Jason set up his cloud house. Choosing the adaptive version, it took on the appearance of an overgrown stone building, blending perfectly into the surroundings.

The next morning, Humphrey roused the team not to press on, but for the day’s training routine.

The training took up a solid chunk of the morning, going from physical training to movement training to combat training to mental training. They had brought along the set of weights Jason had inherited from Farrah, which were simple but would serve them through bronze rank.

“We’re in a strange dimension full of monsters and treasure,” Neil’s complained, “and I’m here doing arm curls?”

“The best are the best because they don’t slack off,” Humphrey told him.

“Do I have to be the best?” Neil asked. “Couldn’t I just be pretty good, but with a sexy wife?”

Sophie led the way with mobility training, the strange terrain actually making for a good training ground. Jason guided the team through meditation, aura training and the mental exercises that Farrah had taught to him.

They kept up the slow but steady pace, monster after monster and tower after tower, with no sign of the cultists. They would check two or three new towers each day, depending on the terrain and how many monsters they encountered. Each tower seemed to have one of the huge golems inside.

They couldn't travel for more than a few hours without encountering monsters. Of a night they would retire to the cloud house, a much more luxurious accommodation than what they had for the Reaper trials. That was still only a limited respite, as each night, some magically-sensitive monster would find the house and attack it.

What limited damage they were able to do before the team emerged to handle the problem, the house would repair easily. It did mean Jason needed to replenish the magic expended to do so, by dropping spirit coins into the cloud flask as if it were a slot machine. The raw magic of the coins was exactly what the house needed to reconstitute any damage.

They were frugal with their supplies. They did not use crystal wash, instead showing off what were inevitably blood and gore-caked bodies in the cloud house showers every evening. Food was in short supply, the team having allocated the room in their personal storage spaces and dimensional bags for critical adventuring supplies. They sustained themselves on spirit coins, Jason hoarding his small stock of actual food to celebrate rank-ups, when they eventually came.

"At this point, it seems like they haven't set up around one of the towers," Humphrey said on their fourth night in the city, as the team was sitting in the lounge of the cloud house.

"Where do we check next, then?" Neil asked. "The centre of the city, where the last trials were?"

"It's as good a place as any," Humphrey said. "What can we expect to find there, Shade?"

"The trials tower should be quite thoroughly destroyed by now," Shade said. "The magic maintaining the tower's integrity was withdrawn with the completion of the trials. Without control over the dimensional spaces within, they most likely devoured themselves and the bulk of the tower with them. There may be some things of value in what remains. It is possible that treasures unclaimed during the trials were not annihilated and could still be waiting to be excavated."

"Now we're talking," Neil said. "Hidden secrets, buried treasure. Now, that's an adventure."

The soul compass was not a flat object, but spherical, with the needle, floating magically within. The needle moved on a central pivot point, like a regular compass, but could also indicate verticality. Its moved slowly, suggesting that the closest soul was still some distance away.

“I think it’s safe to say that the cultists are deeper into the city,” Clive said.

“We’ll still check the last two towers today, just in case,” Humphrey said. “Tomorrow, we head for the centre.”

“And the loot,” Neil added.

They had already encountered some treasure, in the form of three awakening stones they had picked up along the way. They hadn’t been looking, but with so many enhanced magical senses on the team, they were easy to find by simple proximity.

Although the flesh abominations and cultists remained distant, the monsters were still attacking with enthusiasm. The team was reminded that those were not the only threats the astral space had to offer when Sophie dropped lightly to the ground in front of them.

“Vorger,” she warned. “Lots of them. It was like a cloud bank moving in.”

Jason used the lightness of his cloak and the leaping power of his magical boots to reach the top of a building in a few easy jumps. He looked out at the incorporeal, ghost-like astral creatures bearing down on them as the team made preparations below. They drew closer and closer as he stood and watched, until it was like a wall of whiteness moving through the sky.

Jason’s aura erupted out of him like a tsunami, washing over the vorger. The astral beings were themselves like ragged scraps of soul, so he made a soul attack against them. There was a piercing shriek of noise and a horrible tearing sound, and then the vorger were gone, as if they had never existed at all.

Chapter 226

Greenhouse Flowers

As they anticipated, they reached all twelve towers without encountering the cultists.

“Shouldn’t the pillars be central to what they’re trying to achieve?” Jason asked as they team stood atop the final tower. “Whether it’s trying to sever the connection to the world, or do something with the giant golems inside them, the towers should be key, right?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “Between their absence here and whatever they’re doing to raise the magical density, I find myself extremely concerned. Before we even came in here, we knew that none of the people on our potential cultist list had the kind of astral magic expertise that would be required to truly accomplish anything. There was always the question of how they were going to sever this astral space, but now it seems that there is more to the cult’s scheme than we realised.”

Before they had left, the backgrounds of the suspected cultists had been thoroughly investigated. They were all local, from lower-tier aristocracy or wealthy non-aristocrat families. Because the families involved didn’t have the political clout to stop it, the Adventure Society had scoured the homes and investigated the relations of the suspects for any and all information they could find. Most of the families had no indication of cult activity, while others had already been exposed as cult sympathisers during the purge.

“Our biggest point of confusion was that the people we’re after simply don’t have the skill set to accomplish the cult’s goals, as we understand them,” Clive continued. “Our best guess was that they brought something with them, some manner of artefact or device that could do what they needed. Now, it seems that our ignorance of their objectives was even greater than we thought. We don’t know if they still want to claim the astral space, awaken these constructs or if it’s something to do with the changes to the ambient magic.”

“Are we sure we shouldn’t try destroying one of those constructs?” Neil asked.

“Very,” Clive said. “We wouldn’t be able to, anyway. Even Humphrey and Jason, who can overlook rank disparity in certain regards, wouldn’t be able to damage them. All they would accomplish would be to trigger any defence mechanisms that might be in place. That’s not even considering that the golems might, in some way, be essential to the core function of the towers, which is to stabilise this astral space.”

“The astral space is going to become unstable anyway, though, isn’t it?” Jason asked. “Won’t an unnaturally high level of magical density eventually make the dimensional wall break down?”

“That’s right,” Clive said. “If something is pushing through magic that’s too high-grade for the dimensional wall to endure, it will eventually break down. It’ll take quite a while, by which I mean a decade or longer, but if whatever is causing the change isn’t stopped, it will happen eventually. Even if it is stopped, if that happens too late, the damage will be done.”

“What would the effects of that be?” Humphrey asked.

“If the dimensional wall between the physical reality of this astral space breaks down,” Clive said, “then astral forces will pour in like a tide and wash everything away. This astral space will no longer exist.”

“What would the repercussions of that be for our world?” Humphrey asked.

“Actually, that would be fine for our world,” Clive said, “The astral space would be washed off the side of our world like washing dirt off your arm.”

“That’s not what the Builder wants, though,” Jason said. “He wants to take astral spaces, not destroy them. Especially, I would think, when they’re loaded up with his property.”

“Hopefully the cultists have some answers,” Humphrey said. “If they aren’t in the centre of the city, we’ll just have to start following the soul compass, clearing out the flesh abominations as we find them. Eventually it will lead us to the cultists.”

The team turned their monster-filled trek toward the interior of the city. For the first time, they experienced a rapid shift in the direction the soul compass was pointing. It signalled their proximity to what, unsurprisingly, turned out to be a flesh abomination. The abominations outnumbered the cultists by more than fifty to one and the cultists were almost certainly together. The abominations were solitary by nature, aggressively lashing out at any living thing they encountered. That left them scattered all around the city, compared to whatever rock the cultists were hiding under.

Given that fighting the abominations was one of their explicit goals in returning to the astral space, they had given some consideration to how to do so. The abominations had two advantages, being their ability to adapt and the power of an upper-tier bronze-rank monster. The weaknesses the team sought to exploit was a lack of intelligence and the fact that while it could adapt, it always remained a creature of living flesh.

The first weakness they hoped to exploit by ‘confusing’ the monster’s adaptations, alternating modes of attack to soak up time as it changed back and forth. To do this, the plan was to have Sophie and Humphrey repeatedly switch off against the monster, forcing it to adapt alternately to her speed and then to his power. The hope was that doing so would prevent a singular adaptation it could use to effectively fight the team.

The purpose in stalling out the fight was to exploit the abomination's second weakness, the inability to overcome Jason's afflictions. They knew from fighting one previously that it would adapt to prevent itself from losing combat effectiveness, but that eventually there would be a threshold beyond which it could no longer sustain itself.

The abomination was lairing in an old church, although not one of any god the team recognised. What little remained of the iconography was wholly unfamiliar, and they had little time to examine it before the abomination sensed their presence. They waited outside where they could take advantage of the open space and have the bulk of the team at a safe remove. It was a large, blobby mass of pink and yellow flesh, ambling out onto the street on four stubby legs.

The abomination's inactive state was its weakest, when it was slow and soft, which Jason took full advantage of. He opened with spells and then followed with special attacks, using his shadow arm to keep his distance. He laid on his afflictions with practised efficiency as the abomination was already changing its form in response.

As Jason danced around it, casting spells and reaching out with special attacks, the abomination grew tentacles, all over its round body, that ended in vicious claws. The result looked like a Lovecraftian echidna, the flexible limbs lashing too try and catch Jason wherever he went.

By the time the creature truly got going, Jason's job was done and he cleanly teleported away. Communicating through voice chat, Humphrey teleported in, directly taking his place. The quick and flexible limbs, useful for pinning down the elusive Jason, lacked the strength to dig through Humphrey's armour as he launched himself forward, burying his sword in the abomination's side.

The creature reacted by growing thick, chitinous plates that would protect it, while the many limbs consolidated into fewer larger, more powerful ones. These were also covered in chitin; resembling long, sharp, preying mantis arms. The completion of its adaptation signalled Humphrey's departure, as he teleported out again. In his place, Sophie rushed in like a storm to face the now sluggish, heavily-plated creature.

The creature swung its powerful limbs at her. They weren't slow, but it took more than not slow to catch Sophie. She deftly avoided them as she attacked the plated body with fists and feet. Her attacks were not as powerful as Humphrey's, but the resonating-force power her abilities added to her unarmed strikes was able to penetrate the heavy armour.

It seemed like everything would go perfectly to plan as Sophie and Humphrey switched off in rapid succession, forcing the monstrosity into continuous adaptation. It became evident it would not be quite so easy as it first seemed, however, as the

abomination's adaptations became more and more refined. Slowly it transmogrified into a lean, insect-like creature with strong plates but agile limbs, hard to catch and hard to hurt.

It had two, whip-like tendrils with segmented shards of razor-sharp chitin. They thrashed and danced, strong enough to hurt Humphrey, yet swift and unpredictable enough to catch Sophie. Neil threw out shields and healing from a safe distance but the fight was slowly turning against them. The longer the fight went on, the closer the abomination came to finding the perfect combination of traits.

The fight seemed of the verge of flipping against them as the abomination continued to morph itself into the perfect weapon. Sophie and Humphrey were desperately fighting together, as Clive and Belinda added their support. They had been holding off for the most dangerous moment, not wanting the abomination to have adapted when they came in at a critical point.

Clive opened up with his powerful attack spell, then unleashed it a second and third time with Belinda's help. Before she then copied it to use herself. Clive's spell was slow and difficult to use, but one of the advantages as it could attack in multiple ways.

Ability: [Wrath of the Magister] (Magic)

- Spell (fire, magic, curse, poison, wounding, ice, dimension)
 - Cost: Moderate mana plus additional mana per effect.
 - Cooldown: 1 minute.

 - Current rank: Iron 9 (61%).

 - Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to alter the target's reality, using any combination of the available colour effects. This cannot be used in conjunction with the other variant of this spell, which requires an alternate incantation.

 - Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to unmake reality in a localised area, creating an annihilating void sphere inside the target. This effect requires magic to be channelled into the target at an extreme mana cost until sufficient mana has been channelled to trigger the effect.

 - [Red] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly increased (frost burn if combined with blue).
 - [Yellow] (high mana): Target's abilities have increased mana cost.
 - [Pink] (moderate mana): Target's resistances are reduced.
 - [Green] (moderate mana): Target's blood is poisonous to itself.
 - [Purple] (very high mana): Expending mana harms the target.
 - [Orange] (very high mana): Target suffers increased damage from all sources.
 - [Blue] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly decreased (frost burn if combined with red).
-

Clive had various abilities that gave him a larger mana pool than most adventurers of his rank. Knowing that he would only be casting a few spells, he went all out. His first casting of the spell reduced the abomination's resistances, made its own blood poisonous and made it take more damage from all sources. The second spell combined heat and cold into a potent frost burn effect, stronger than either individually. His third spell used the void sphere variation to devastating effect, Belinda following up immediately with a second one.

The overwhelming barrage of magic pushed the abomination over the edge. The chitin was scored and cracked from the frost burn, while chunks were missing altogether, the annihilation sphere carving them out like scoops of ice cream. No longer able to hold back the afflictions, the creature collapsed on the ground, dark filth spilling out like a rotten egg that had been cracked open.

The team had seen some graphic things in their time, but the miserable, rotting demise of the flesh creature was especially hard to watch. The stench that struck them after was even worse, a near match for the rainbow smoke of a monster dissolving.

"It's hard to imagine that thing used to be a person," Neil said.

"It's about as bad an end as I can imagine," Clive said. "A prison of rage and madness built from your own twisted body. The only escape you can hope for is the release of death, yet you cannot die until someone brings about your violent demise."

"It's good that we're doing this," Sophie said. "I've had my share of bad situations, but nothing like this. I'm glad we can help them."

The rest of the team nodded their sombre agreement.

"Thank you," Shade said. "Most of these abominations have been suffering for centuries."

"One down, a few hundred to go," Humphrey said. "We have a lot of work ahead of us."

The island city was a roughly circular forty kilometres across. If not for the streets being overrun by monster-filled jungle, it would be a matter of hours to reach the centre. During the trials, the teams had all taken their time, testing themselves against the environment and seeking out treasure, knowing they had the time to do so. Jason and his team took a more direct approach, but were careful.

They could have taken hours if they pushed it, or teleported directly in. Clive, Jason and Humphrey each could have taken them into the building they had rested in while awaiting the final stage of the trials, which would have been a relatively safe place to

arrive. While hidden from the eyes of any cultists present, though, there would be no hiding the ostentatious magic of a portal opening from their magical senses. Given that the cultists were bronze-rank now, they would have as many people with enhanced magic senses as Jason and his team.

Their time in the astral space was increasingly an ordeal. Every day had been an endless slog of monsters, from the numerous to the powerful, and the team was rapidly becoming exhausted. One evening, as the team rested in the cloud house, Jason and Humphrey were sitting together on the roof.

“At some stage, we’ll need to stop for a rest day,” Humphrey said.

“Just hide out in the cloud house and recover?” Jason asked.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “This ongoing pressure is good for our advancement, but I don’t want to go past the point it stops driving us forward and starts dragging us down.”

“I don’t think we’re there yet,” Jason said. “These monsters are either bronze-rank or a crowd of iron-ranks, so it’s been driving the team to rely on each other more. If we’re ever going to have the kind of teamwork that Valdis’ team has, we need that.”

“I don’t want to come into a conflict with the cultists when the team is blunted from overuse,” Humphrey said. “I want to meet them while we’re a freshly-sharpened knife. Does that mean refreshed from a well earned rest, though, or in a strong rhythm, on the back of a series of successful monster fights?”

“Ask Neil,” Jason said. “He’s our healer and he does his job well. He pays more attention to the condition of the team than anyone.”

Humphrey nodded.

“You’re right,” he said. “One of the last pieces of advice my mother gave me before we left was to rely on the team. She said I shouldn’t fall into the trap of trying to do everything myself. I suppose that isn’t just restricted to combat, is it?”

“No,” Jason said. “It’s a trap we could both easily fall into. I’ve learned the hard way that I’m not always as clever and insightful as I think I am.”

He let out a sigh, heavy with regret.

“I’ve been thinking about Thadwick a lot,” Jason said. “I’ve come to realise that he and I are very similar.”

“Really?” Humphrey asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “We share the same flaws. Arrogance, vanity, being self-impressed and having a need to show off. The real difference between us is that I’ve had people to slap some sense into me, where the people around him just reinforced the idea that he was special. His mother was off adventuring for most of his life and his father was

grooming him as heir. His head was filled with how great and important he was going to be, without tempering it with humility. He never had the sense of responsibility your mother drilled into you, or the friends that pull me back into line when I go too far off the rails.”

“I suppose I can see it,” Humphrey said. “Perhaps Thadwick saw it too. Maybe that’s why he was so fixated on you.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “I eventually realised that the reason I took such a dislike to Thadwick is that but for sycophancy, there goes I.”

“Things have worked out for you a lot better than they have for Thadwick,” Humphrey said.

“Thadwick is what we call a greenhouse flower, in my world,” Jason said. “Outside of the specific environment in which he was raised, he withers. He was never taught to withstand rough weather.”

“I had some of that, too,” Humphrey said. “I think my mother regrets how much she shielded me from.”

“I’m the same,” Jason said. “My homeland is much safer than this world. My family has money, not like yours, but enough to live better lives than most. For you and I, though, there was always someone who recognised that we would have to make our own way, sooner or later. They prepared us for that. For Thadwick, his parents always intended to make his way for him, and he paid the price of that.”

“You still feel sorry for him, after all that he’s done?” Humphrey said. “Trying to kill you, running off to the Builder cult?”

“I do,” Jason said.

“Do you think there’s a path to redemption for him?”

“No,” Jason said. “He’s gone too far, done too much. His choices have hurt too many. There’s no way back for him, now.”

Chapter 227

A Man Transformed

The team congratulated Jason as another of his abilities reached bronze rank during his evening meditation. As they were all perpetually using the party interface, they had shared the notification.

-
- Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has gained a new effect.
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has gained the [Curse], [Disease] and [Poison] subtypes.

Ability: [Blade of Doom] (Doom)

- Conjunction (unholy, curse, disease, poison).
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Conjures [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation]. Attacks made with Ruin will inflict an instance of [Vulnerable] and refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by Ruin require more healing than normal to negate. Ruin is an unholy object.
 - Effect (bronze): Ruin inflicts one instance each of [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit].
 - [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.
 - [Ruin of the Blood] (damage-over-time, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Ruin of the Flesh] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Ruin of the Spirit] (damage-over-time, curse, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

“That’s a strong boost to your short-term damage output,” Clive said. “It’s not the same as a direct damage power, but for weaker enemies, a quick handful of damaging afflictions will let you spread a lot of misery in not a lot of time.”

“That will help you a lot against groups,” Humphrey agreed. “That’s always been an issue for you because it took more time than it was worth to layer afflictions. Now you can put, what? Four damage afflictions with a simple cut from your dagger?”

“It’s probably for the best you’re not evil,” Neil said. “You’re not evil, right?”

“No, I’m not evil,” Jason said.

“Because you seem evil. With your powers.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“That’s good to know,” Neil said. “Thankfully, someone evil wouldn’t lie about that. Oh, wait...”

“You realise who is at the top of my list if I really am evil, right?” Jason asked.

“The guy who bought out the cheesemonger on Maple Street and replaced it with a building supply store?” Neil suggested

“Oh yeah. I hate that guy.”

Clive was standing atop a broken spire as monsters swarmed towards it like a river. They were akin to apes, but leaner and with longer legs. They approached the tower on which he stood with a quick, semi-quadrupedal lope.

Clive was standing on what had once been the interior of a tower-top, now exposed on all sides with the walls and roof long gone. Under his feet, the floor glowed with a ritual circles drawn by his power in lines of golden light. It was the result of the bronze-rank variant of his strong attack spell.

Ability: [Wrath of the Magister] (Magic)

- Spell/ritual (fire, magic, curse, poison, wounding, ice, dimension)
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: Varies.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (bronze): Create a ritual circle in which the magical attacks of spells, staves and wands have increased effect. This effect has a very high mana cost and a one hour cooldown.

Rather than enhancing what was already a potent and versatile attack spell, the bronze-rank variant offered another means to enhance combat effectiveness. Clive was

wielding one of his two legendary set weapons, the wand and the staff, in each hand. At the end of each were more ritual circles, floating in the air like magical barrel attachments.

Ability: [Tools of the Magister] (Magic)

- Special ability/ritual.
 - Cost: Varies.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Utilise specialty magic tools, vehicles and weapons.

 - Effect (bronze): Use a ritual circle to enhance the magical attack of a staff or wand. This variant requires high mana.
-

Clive unleashed bolts from his staff that hurtled into the approaching monsters. He wasn't even really aiming as he essentially hip-fired the staff, gripping it in one hand and tucked into his armpit. Whether the bolts hit the ground or a monster, the results were explosive, throwing out splinters of wood and stone from the overgrown environment, or chunks of aggressively disincorporated monster.

In his other hand, his wand emitted a continuous beam that he worked back and forth through the monsters with little more accuracy than the staff. Normally the wand required continual focus to be deadly, but the enhanced beam sliced through the monsters in a sweeping line, lopping off limbs or killing outright.

Through a far-seeing crystal, Jason and the rest of the team watched on. To Jason's eyes, Clive had turned the broken spire into a sci-fi beam tower from an RTS. The monsters were undeterred by their losses, however, and continued their zerg rush at Clive's position.

"I can see why he had you bait them now," Jason said to Sophie. She was freshly returned from lured the monsters in Clive's direction.

"He's making a mess, but he's rather imprecise," Humphrey observed. "They'll start climbing that tower any moment."

"I imagine that's what his backup is for," Belinda said.

Just as Humphrey said, the monsters reached the tower and started to climb, for which the ape-like creatures were well-suited. As they did, a large, round figure floated slowly through the air from behind the tower.

Clive's familiar, Onslow, drifted ponderously into view, suspended in the sky on a cushion of shimmering air. Now bronze rank, he was roughly the size and shape of a Volkswagen Beetle, with more runes engraved into his shell than ever before.

The rune tortoise started blasting the creatures climbing up with elemental attacks, sourced from the runes on his shell. An explosive bolt of flame blasted several off at once, while a bolt of lightning chained from one to another to another, sending them screaming off the side. A dark, heavy cloud rose up from Onslow's shell, growing larger than the tortoise itself, and started peppering the side of the tower with water bullets. They weren't very lethal, even to the iron-rank monsters, but did serve to dislodge them, while also leaving the stone of the tower wet and harder to climb.

Clive continued blasting away at the main force of the monsters, which was rapidly thinning out, as Onslow continued to pick off the stragglers. There was a brief pause as Onslow floated up to Clive, who used his own mana to recharge the runes on Onslow's shell before the pair returned to action.

Even though most of their number were cut down before even reaching the tower, the monsters continued, unabated. The team, watching from a distance, had been poised to jump in at any time. When Clive told them he wanted to face the horde alone, they were wary but accepting. Now they just looked on in amazement at the pyrotechnic display as the monsters charged into a futile death.

"Well, damn," Sophie said.

"Won't all this get a lot of attention?" Neil asked.

"Probably," Humphrey said. "Anything with even a modicum of sense will take one look at this and run in the other direction, though."

In amongst the several dozen iron rank monsters were two larger, bronze-rank variants. Clive seemed to ignore them as they reached the spire and started rapidly climbing. Onslow didn't react either, other than to float further away from the tower. As the first one reached the top, Clive used his switch-teleport power.

Ability: [Juxtapose] (Balance)

- Special ability.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Swap the location of two allies and/or enemies. You must be able to see both subjects of the spell. If an ally resists or otherwise prevents the effect, this ability is negated but the cooldown is reduced to 30 seconds.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by this ability take additional damage from all sources for a brief period.

The monster vanished, with Onslow appearing in its place. Now in the air where Onslow had been, the monster fell, wildly flailing its limbs. It landed hard, right on one of Clive's invisible rune traps. The trap triggered, sending the monster, or at least the parts that used to be a monster, back into the air and scattering them over the battlefield. A few moments later, smaller explosions rang out where the larger chunks of monster had fallen.

Ability: [Rune Trap] (Rune)

- Spell.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Create an explosive rune that will disappear after a short period. The rune can be set to trigger by proximity, caster trigger, or both.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by the rune trap will be the source of a secondary explosion after a brief period.

The second monster crested the tower and launched a huge fist at Clive. The air around the ape-like creature's fist shimmered, much like the cushion holding up Onslow. The fist crashed in on Clive like a hammer, striking the shield around Clive which briefly became visible as it sucked up Clive's mana to withstand the blow.

Clive shoved his wand between his teeth and his now empty hand turned mirror-silver. The air around it shimmered, just as the monster's had, and he rammed his fist into the hairy monster's torso. Despite the lanky man punching a monster at least three times

his weight, the monster went sailing off the spire. Clive quickly aimed and blasted out a shot from his staff, hitting the monster in mid air.

The red of life force emerged from Clive's body, a tendril snaking out and into the rune circle that was floating at the edge of his staff. The golden lines of the ritual circle transformed into an angry, bloody crimson.

Ability: [Blood Magic] (Balance)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Consume an amount of your own life force to replenish your mana.

- Effect (bronze): Consume an amount of your life force to enhance the effect of an active ritual.

The next blast that emerged from the staff was much larger than those that had come before. The energy bolt hit the monster at the same time the monster hit the ground, from which it did not get up.

By this point, the iron rank monsters were a scattered remnant of the original horde, but the wildly aggressive creatures kept rampaging forward in the face of inevitable destruction. When the last of them were dead, Clive hopped lightly onto Onslow's shell, sitting cross-legged as the tortoise floated back to the team. The familiar's new flight ability was much faster when hovering close to the ground, so Onslow dropped low and floated just over the bodies of the dead monsters as they made their return to the team.

Clive arrived at the ruined building where the team had been watching from hiding. He lightly slid down Onslow's shell, wand held casually in one hand and staff slung over one shoulder.

"You know," he told the waiting team, "I'm starting to think I might not be too bad at this."

The night before they expected to reach the centre of the city, the team was doing their evening meditation. Jason was leading Neil, Sophie, Belinda and Humphrey in the Dance of the Sword Fairy, a meditation technique that incorporated dance-like physical movements using a sword as a focus. It was something that Rufus had taught to him and had proven one of the more successful techniques for Sophie.

Clive was outside, having made preparations for his anticipated ascension to bronze. He had set aside a space for the messy transition, picking a spot inside some ruins near the cloud house. He had stripped down to his underwear and placed fresh clothes where he could reach them later. Close to hand was one of Jason's precious few bottles of undiluted crystal wash.

Clive was settled into some soft moss, meditating.

"No, Onslow, don't eat the moss. That's my seat."

Clive called Onslow back into the tattoo on his torso before resuming meditation.

When he crossed the final threshold, the rest of the team knew immediately.

-
- Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Replicate the last spell or special attack used on you by an enemy. Mana cost is determined by the ability replicated. You may still use this ability if the triggering effect was negated by your abilities but not if it was negated by the abilities of an ally. The replicated power functions at the rank of this ability, not the rank of the enemy that originally used it.
- Effect (bronze): Use the replicated ability a second time.

That was just the beginning of a strenuous series of changes.

-
- All [Karmic Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
 - Linked attribute [Power] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].
 - Progress to bronze rank: 100% (4/4 essences complete).

Amber light started shining from within Clive's body as he felt pressure build up inside him like a balloon inflated toward the point of bursting. The team rushed outside but didn't intrude on his secluded area in the ruins, instead standing back and watching the amber light shine from within.

-
- All your attributes have reached bronze rank.
 - You have reached bronze rank.
 - You have gained resistance to iron-rank and lower damage sources and effects.
 - The potency of your aura has increased.
 - Your aura senses have improved.
-
- Progress to silver rank: 00%.
-

“Oh, this feels amazing,” Clive said through voice chat. “I’m just waiting for the... oh, there it is.”

The sounds coming from Clive’s secluded spot were bad, but nothing compared to the smell. The coughing, spluttering vomit noises were matched by a stench they had all experienced before on reaching iron rank, when their bodies had purged and renewed all the biomass it would immediately replace.

“I wish I hadn’t just got my spirit attribute to bronze,” Neil winced, holding his nose. “The improved senses are not appreciated right now.”

“You should take this as a training opportunity,” Humphrey said. “There are monsters that will use stench against you, so you should adjust now.”

“Tell me that again when you’re smelling this with a bronze-rank sense of smell and maybe I’ll listen.”

The noises stopped and all they could hear was heavy, exhausted breathing.

“You still conscious in there, mate?” Jason called out.

“Yes,” Clive said wearily. He used voice chat again, rather than expend the effort to yell out. “Give me a moment to clean up. I suspect that once I’ve gotten away from the smell, I’m going to be very hungry.”

“No worries,” Jason said. “I’m just going to move the cloud house upwind a bit, and then I’ll set out a feast for a king. A small king; we only had so much space.”

Clive arrived at the slightly relocated cloud house, crystal wash clean and with a fresh set of clothes. He was a man literally transformed; the awkward, lanky frame and hapless, bookish features were gone. In their place was a tall and lean figure with an easy grace to his step and effortlessly appealing facial features.

“You’re the scientist no one listens to at the start of a disaster movie,” Jason said. “Except now you’re at the end of the movie, when you’ve lost your glasses, your hair is attractively tousled, you’ve found the heroism within and realised your unrealistically attractive lab assistant was pining for you the whole time.”

“I’m not even going to try and follow that,” Clive said. “I’ll just assume it’s a compliment and say thank you.”

“Also, I’m not pining,” Belinda said. “I did like the unrealistically attractive part, though. You should try finding a man you like when Sophie’s standing next to you. Thank the gods Jory has depth of character.”

“Are you suggesting people are only interested in my looks?” Sophie asked.

“Of course I’m saying that,” Belinda said. “You’re like a treasure chest full of swords with no handles. It looks enticing, but rummaging about inside is going to get you hurt.”

“Thank you,” Sophie said brightly.

“That was not a compliment!”

“How is that not a compliment?” Sophie asked. “Who doesn’t want to be full of swords?”

“Can we just move on to the food?” Clive asked.

Chapter 228

The Worst Possible Option

With a fully-fledged bronze ranker in their number, the team felt more secure as they made their way to the city's interior. They progressed more swiftly than any of them had during the Reaper trials, for two main reasons. The first was confidence. Rather than scattered across the city and forced into makeshift teams, they had allies they knew and could rely on. Even a powerful ally like Valdis was no substitute for a true comrade when life and death were on the line.

The second reason was that they weren't scouring the place for treasures, although treasures they still found. In spite of the people that had flooded the astral space during the trials, the team still stumbled over a small fortune in awakening stones, essences and other goods. In an old training hall they found an adept essence and a whole rack of bronze-rank magic weapons. None were exceptional, but they were valuable, nevertheless. In a library they found a knowledge essence, plus some skill books whose magic had kept them intact despite the hot, humid air. The normal books had long ago rotted away, making the skill books easy to pick out.

The central region of the city had been clearly demarked into two areas during the trials. The very core of the city was its most intact region, with the jungle prevented from reclaiming it by means unknown. In direct opposition to this, the area that ringed the centremost region was the most heavily reclaimed by jungle, as if all the growth not happening at the centre was somehow piling up around it. The buildings there were little more than rubble, and much of the ruins had been entirely engulfed by jungle.

This ring of thick overgrowth had been the location of the giant carnivorous plant that occupied a staggering amount of space underground. It had been almost entirely annihilated through the efforts of Jason and a large force of adventurers. Only a few dead remnants of the plant monster had remained after it had been annihilated by the transcendent damage of Jason's execute power. His afflictions had never escalated to such a grand scale before, and he considered it unlikely that they ever would again. Creatures the size of a small city weren't easy to come by, and he'd rather avoid fighting any more.

The team paused as they reached the ring of thick jungle.

"You don't suppose it's grown back, do you?" Neil asked.

"It has not," Shade said, his voice coming from Jason's shadow. "Whatever opinion one might have of Mr Casino's abilities, a lack of thoroughness in their lethality is not a

criticism likely to be levelled against them. I can assure you that the blood root vine was quite thoroughly destroyed.”

“We need to be careful, going through this section of jungle,” Humphrey said. “The jungle looks thicker than where I crossed over. From the looks of it, we’ll have to cut our way through in places. It’ll make for slow going and scouting won’t be easy.”

“There’s little point watching from above,” Sophie said. “That canopy is too thick. I could track you by your auras but I don’t know how useful that would be.”

“I don’t think the risk of showing our auras off like that is worth it. We should keep our auras as retracted as we can,” Humphrey said. “We should all stay close until we’re through.”

“Should we look for a place where the growth isn’t so heavy?” Sophie asked. “This is definitely thicker than where we through last time.”

“The growth of this area seems to have rapidly expanded in the absence of the blood root vine,” Shade said. “At the time of the trials, none of the city had jungle this dense. It stands to reason that the rest of the central ring would have experienced similar growth during our absence.”

“Should we reconsider teleporting through?” Neil asked.

“It’s not the worst idea in the world,” Jason said. “Now that I’m looking at this jungle, I don’t fancy hacking our way through. Not when the local monsters are stronger than ever, and you can bet that any manifesting in there will make better use of the environment than we do.”

Humphrey looked into the dense foliage as he considered.

“What does everyone else think?” he asked.

“I’m a city girl,” Belinda said. “If we can skip trudging through all that, then I’m for it.”

“It’s a simple question of risk assessment,” Clive said. “Is going through monster-infested jungle more dangerous than teleporting into what is potentially the very midst of the cultists? Given that we should be able to teleport into an area of relative safety, I would say teleporting is the superior option.”

“And if they sense the magic of us all teleporting in?” Sophie asked.

“Then we fight,” Humphrey said. “We’re going there for that fight, in any case. That said, I would rather initiate it on our own terms.”

“Looks like we have a consensus,” Clive said. “I’ll open a portal to the roof of the building we stayed in before the final trials.”

Clive held out a hand and a circle of runes appeared, alternating blue and gold. Normally they would then fill with shimmering air and a blurred image of the destination, but instead the runes simply blinked out, like someone had pulled the plug on them.

“That’s odd,” Clive said.

“Could portals be somehow impeded here?” Belinda asked.

“That should not be the case,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “That being said, this space has undergone many changes in the months since my tenure here. We have made a number of disconcerting revelations of which I was unaware, so my knowledge of this realm is not as reliable as I believed. If there is some manner of impedance on portals, I believe your power, Mr Asano, has the best chance of retaining functionality. It is the basis for the portals incorporated into this place, after all.”

Jason tried his portal ability, but had no more success than Clive. The obsidian arch appeared, but the shadow gate did not fill with the darkness, instead retreating without activating. Humphrey tried to teleport them, but likewise achieved nothing.

“My short range teleport works fine,” Humphrey said, vanishing and reappearing close by to prove his point. “Jason you haven’t had any issues shadow-jumping, right?”

“It’s been working just fine,” Jason said.

“These results suggest one of three possibilities,” Clive said. “One, as Belinda posited, is some manner of environmental interference. We know that the portals to leave this astral space are currently non-functional. My best guess is that it’s related to the changes in the ambient magic and may be affecting our portal abilities in the same way.”

“That makes sense,” Humphrey said.

“The other possibilities,” Clive continued, “are the usual reasons that portal abilities fail. As we all know, a portal destination must be somewhere the person with the portal ability has visited in the past. They must also be able to clearly visualise that space, however. If the space is too generic to be memorable, or if time and failing memory warp the recollection, it won’t work.”

“That’s why big cities have portal stations,” Humphrey said. “They make them memorable, visually striking places so that they are easy to remember from only a single visit.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “When I was finding way points across the desert to portal to for when I travelled to Sky Scar Lake, I had to find landmarks that stood out. I don’t think I could portal to a random patch of desert, just because I happened to have passed through one time.”

“I remember that place quite well, though,” Humphrey said. “I remember the view from the rooftop very vividly. The square full of adventurers, the huge trial tower.”

“Which brings us to the third possibility the portals failed,” Clive said. “If the destination has significantly changed, then the visualisation will be wrong and the portal will fail. It’s not enough to redecorate a room, but if you demolish the building the room is in?”

“Shade, you said the tower has most likely been destroyed already,” Jason said.

“That is correct,” Shade answered. “The dimensional spaces within will likely have collapsed, to destructive effect.”

“It could be that the destruction was widespread enough that our building was badly damaged,” Humphrey said.

“It’s only a few kilometres, right?” Belinda said. “Sophie, couldn’t you air-jump your way up high enough to check?”

“Does it really matter what causing it?” Sophie asked. “Whether the magic has gone weird or the building was knocked down, we can’t do anything about either.”

“You’re right,” Humphrey agreed. “Whatever the reason, portals can’t get us where we want to go. We can do some testing later, but for now, we have to make our way through this jungle. Shade, can we rely on you to do the scouting for us?”

“Of course, Mr Geller. It would be my pleasure to contribute.”

The rough terrain was the result of more than just thick jungle. The ground was wildly uneven, from overgrown piles of rubble to areas where the ground had collapsed into deep holes. The team followed the path of least resistance as best they could, relying on Jason’s map to keep them headed in roughly the right direction. Sometimes it was just too rough, forcing Humphrey to hack their way through the undergrowth with his sword.

“These holes look relatively recent,” Clive observed. “I suspect there may be significant spaces beneath the ground that were previously filled by the plant creature. Jason annihilating it entirely with transcendent damage may have left the ground here unstable.”

“The going definitely wasn’t this rough during the trials,” Humphrey said. “It was definitely easier to find a path through.”

“When we were looking for a way to get past the plant monster,” Jason said, “Jory told me that the plants in this astral space have adapted to feed on the heavy magic saturation. Maybe the plant monster was soaking most of that up and now it’s gone. It could be that the remaining plant life has been gorging, leading to the explosion in growth.”

"I'm more concerned about the monsters," Sophie said.

"What monsters?" Neil asked. "We haven't seen one since we entered this thick patch of jungle."

"Exactly," Sophie said. "The only other time we've gone this long without a monster coming at us is when we've stopped for the night."

"It has been a while," Humphrey agreed. "I would have expected at least some kind of snake monster by now, in terrain like this."

"Maybe we're just lucky," Neil said.

"Or maybe the local monsters know something we don't," Sophie said.

Most of the team were city folk. Jason had grown up in a small beach town, while Neil, Belinda and Sophie were all city folk. Humphrey had mostly grown up in the delta, but the carefully landscaped Geller Estate was hardly the open wilds.

While they had all spent time adventuring in the delta, it was the academic Clive who turned out to be the most comfortable in the terrain. He had grown up in the proper delta, on the family eel farm. He was the surest of foot and the most observant of their surroundings.

Clive was also the most educated about the potential threats, with a knowledge of monsters second only to the Magic Society records he had spent so much time cataloguing. This allowed him to spot something that the others overlooked, and he stopped to examine it.

"What did you find?" Humphrey asked as Clive peered intently at some white residue on a large, green leaf. Clive looked around, spotting more of it.

"Not sure," Clive said. "Some kind of secretion, probably from a monster. This is old, so it's hard to be sure. If you look close, there are some lingering traces of magic."

Most of the team had magical senses, so they joined Clive in peering at the residue.

"I can barely sense it," Neil said. "You have no idea what this could be?"

"I have hundreds of ideas of what this could be," Clive said. "I need more information to shave them down before I'd be comfortable making any kind of guess."

The team continued onward, still not encountering any monsters but occasionally spotting more of the residue. They found some that was fresher, dangling from a tree branch like string. The residual magic on it was stronger and Jason rubbed the substance between his thumb and forefinger.

"Should you be touching that?" Belinda asked. "I'm pretty sure the first rule of dealing with mysterious magical stuff is not to touch it."

"I thought I felt something in the magic," Jason said. "Blood magic."

"And that made you want to touch it?" Neil asked.

"I'm definitely getting a feel of blood magic off of this," Jason said. "Not essence magic, like mine, though. Some kind of monster power."

Humphrey spotted Clive's frown.

"What is it?" Humphrey asked him.

"It's still early to speculate," Clive said.

"Something just popped into your head," Humphrey said. "We trust your instincts."

Clive gave another, reluctant frown.

"This residue," he said. "Does it look like old spider web to anyone else?"

"Could be," Humphrey said.

"This residual magic had lasted long enough that we're likely looking at something silver rank," Clive said. "If we combine that with blood magic and webs, then something does come to mind. Something I would rather be wrong about."

"Which is?" Neil asked.

"Have any of you heard of a blood weaver?"

Humphrey let out a low breath, while the others shook their heads.

"What's a blood weaver?" Jason asked.

"A spider monster, as you might surmise from the webs. It's silver rank, and more intelligent than most lower rank monsters. It's still more animal cunning than real intellect, but it is very much capable of planning and long-term thinking."

"That's not what it's famous for, though," Humphrey said. "After it feeds on a normal animal or monster, it can turn them into a deathless servant. Zombies, but there is something worse."

"Why is it always something worse?" Neil asked. "Why can't it ever be something better. Like cake."

"Oh, I could go a nice fluffy sponge cake," Jason said.

"Did you bring one?" Neil asked hopefully.

"Yes, but you can't have it until you rank up."

"Do try and keep on topic, boys," Belinda chided.

"Sorry," Neil and Jason said together.

"As I was saying," Humphrey said, "A blood weaver can turn regular people and animals into undead, shambling husks. Nothing too dangerous. A monster or essence user, though, it can turn into a vampire. A blood puppet to go out and collect more victims for the blood weaver to consume."

“So, you’re saying these cultists might be vampires, now?” Neil said.

“It’s only a possibility,” Clive said. “Given the environment, current magical density and the blood magic in the webs, though, it all fits.”

“Can we even fight the cultists if they’re vampires on top of everything else?” Neil asked.

“Actually, they would be easier to fight,” Clive said. “Individually, anyway. They have vampiric powers, but they can no longer access their essence abilities. They still have those abilities, because the soul is still in there, but they can’t use them without the body they no longer control. The body will still be effected by passive powers, but the controlled body can’t use any active abilities because it can’t control the soul, which is essentially trapped.”

“I know what that feels like,” Jason said darkly.

“What about the tracking stones?” Belinda asked. “If the cultists were turned into undead, would their stones still show them as alive?”

“I’m not sure,” Clive said. “It’s possible, since they do still have their souls. Or I could be wrong about all of this, there’s no blood weavers and the cultists are off playing cards somewhere.”

“Can you think of something worse it could be rather than a blood weaver?” Neil asked.

“Not off the top of my head,” Clive said.

“Then that’s probably what we’re dealing with,” Neil said. “It always turns out to be the worst possible option.”

“I can think of something worse,” Jason said and the team all looked at him. “They could have called it a vampider.”

The team continued on, the white residue becoming more and more evident. It quickly became clear that it was definitively remnant webs and they found a clearing where the trees were draped with webbing like curtains. There were old web sacs, the size of people and larger, that had been burst open from the inside. There was dried blood caked inside them, that still reeked.

“An old nest,” Clive said. “It’s definitely a blood weaver.”

Chapter 229

Brave Little Tailor

Clive stood up from where he had been crouching to examine one of the empty web sacks. The clearing turned out to only be the beginning, with empty web sacks hanging from trees or fallen to the ground, extending well back into the jungle. Clive had gone over them all, carefully examining the interior of each one.

“Unless there are some other people here that we weren’t aware of,” Clive said, “I would say that all of our cultists were snatched up by the blood weaver. The web sacks pack their victim in, nice and snug, and there are thirteen of these things that look like human moulds inside. Looks like she either ate the five that died completely and turned the rest, or the process has a failure rate.”

“So now we know for certain that we have to hunt this thing,” Sophie said. “How do we find it?”

“We don’t,” Clive said. “We’ve all seen what a silver rank monster can do. I doubt we could take the monster down if we caught it by itself, let alone with what I hope is only a small army of vampiric monsters. The weaver’s minions are something of a hive mind, controlled by the monster itself. Once we start fighting any of them, we’re fighting all of them. We can’t beat them all and the blood weaver on top.”

“We don’t know how long we have to stop whatever the cult is up to,” Belinda said. “As much as I like the backing off idea, don’t we have to go after it now, if it will take us to the cultists?”

“At this point, I don’t know how much the cultists have to offer us,” Clive said. “I doubt we’ll ever find them in a state where we can question them. Maybe if we kill the blood weaver they’ll regain some sense of self and be able to talk to us. More likely, we’ll have to try and find some clue from their corpses.”

“The cultists were a dangerous enough proposition when they were a bundle of cut-rate adventurers,” Neil said. “Now they have a silver-rank monster behind them? We’ve all seen what a silver-rank monster can do.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “We can’t stop anything if we’re the blood puppets of some giant spider. Clive, where do we have to get to before we can take that thing down?”

“At the very least, Jason has to hit bronze rank,” Clive said. “The blood weaver is silver-rank tough, heals fast and can heal even faster by feeding on its own minions. Jason’s escalating damage is our only means of getting through that, even once we hit bronze.”

“Can’t he do that now?” Sophie asked. “He has an ability to get past higher-rank resistances, right?”

“That is a silver rank monster,” Clive said, “and not some lumbering giant he can outpace. At iron-rank he’s too slow, too weak and too frail. He’ll die before he can lock those afflictions in. And that is just considering the monster itself. The rest of us need to hold off the vampiric monster army long enough for Jason to get the job done. Given the magical density, we have to assume there will be a ready supply of bronze-rank monsters for that, and the cultists certainly will be. Maybe there’ll only be as many of them as there are web sacs around here, but from the state of this webbing, I think this is an older nest. I’m willing to bet that there’s more, and that’s a bet we’re gambling our lives with.”

“So you’re saying we need to run for the hills,” Jason said.

“We have the best training environment any of us will ever experience,” Clive said. “Every adventurer rises up during a monster surge and we have one that never ends, all to ourselves. We have to use it. I say we stop chasing the trail of the cultists and focus solely on getting as strong as we can, as quick as we can.”

“I completely agree,” Humphrey said. “I know that stopping the cult was hammered into us as the first priority once we got here, but now that path leads somewhere that we aren’t ready to go yet. I propose we walk right back out of here and start following the soul compass to abomination after abomination, taking on anything that gets in our path.”

“That isn’t also silver rank,” Neil amended.

“That isn’t also silver rank,” Humphrey agreed. “We stick to the training regimen, maximise our advancement. I’ll reach bronze before Jason, and Neil probably will as well. That’s our threshold to return. Sophie and Belinda will take longer than the rest of us, which is time we may not have. We don’t know that we have enough as is.”

Humphrey gave Belinda and Sophie a sympathetic look.

“It means that when we do go after the blood weaver, you will be the most vulnerable.”

“Speak for yourself,” Sophie said. “I’ll hold my own.”

“I’m pretty sure he meant me,” Belinda said. “I’ll stick with Clive and Neil. Boosting bronze-rankers will give me the chance to carry my own weight.”

“Wait,” Neil said. “Did we just make the sensible decision and not charge into the hopeless fight? Go team!”

After trying to portal past the jungle, the team had also tried portals to other locations and had confirmed that portal abilities wouldn’t work at all. This forced them to extract from

the thick ring of jungle by tracking back the way they had come. It quickly became evident that their presence had already been noticed.

“There are monsters approaching from multiple sides,” Shade warned from Jason’s shadow as his other two bodies scouted the jungle around them. “Judging from their physical appearance, disparate nature and cohesive movement, I believe them to be the blood weaver’s vampiric puppets.”

The team had developed their teamwork enough that they had no need to discuss tactics as they moved into a defensive formation. In the tight confines of the dense jungle, Humphrey and Sophie stood guard over Neil, Belinda and Clive as Jason vanished into the darkness.

Onslow emerged and Clive vaulted lightly onto his back. Even at the very start of bronze rank, Clive’s power and speed attributes gave him the strength of a huge powerlifter and the agility of a tiny gymnast. Belinda also called on her familiars, the silver lantern floating above her and the living illusion, a flickering replica of herself that shimmered into existence at her side.

“Why only move on us now?” Neil wondered.

“They were waiting for us to go deeper into the blood weaver’s territory,” Clive said. “Now, we’re trying to leave.”

“We didn’t sense them at all.”

“Many spider-type monsters can use networks of webbing to track their prey over a wide territory,” Humphrey said.

“Clive didn’t mention that before,” Neil said.

“Clive didn’t know,” Clive said testily. “Maybe if adventurers were less dismissive about sharing information with the Magic Society then there’d be fewer gaps in our knowledge.”

“Focus,” Humphrey said. “Jason should be starting right about...”

An alien shriek echoed through the jungle. They sensed the approaching auras before they saw the monsters. It was a disparate group, bronze and iron-ranks mixed together, but the same thread ran through each of the different auras. It felt like a blood-soaked wire leash, held in the grip of an unseen master.

“I definitely don’t want that in my aura,” Sophie said.

Monsters came pouring out of the jungle, varieties they had encountered before in the city, but changed. Eyes were bloodshot, skin was pale and tauged over ropy muscle. There were snakes with barbs lining their backs, two-headed cats and colourful, spike-

spitting frogs. Almost half their number were the ape-like creatures Clive had fought, but even more feral. Their was a crazed hunger about them as they rushed at the team.

Humphrey and Sophie leapt into action. Sophie was a veritable blur, deflecting flying spikes and crippling ape monsters one after the other. It was almost like they were standing still as fists and feet, elbows, knees and palm strikes were rained down on joints, throats and eyes. Despite the onslaught, her face was calm, her movements as clinical and precise as they were fast. She fought with the clean efficiency of a machine, with no waste, no hesitation and no mercy.

A two-headed cat leapt high over the other monsters, sailing through the air towards her. She threw out a hand and a blast of wind sent it hurtling back into the jungle.

Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 6 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 6 (41%).

- Effect (iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.

A barbed snake jumped at her from a low angle and she snatched it out of the air, one hand on each of its upper and lower jaws. She reeled her hands apart and the snake's head with it, not even pausing as she continued to square off with the ape creatures.

One of the bronze-rank apes emerged, faster and stronger than the others. It barrelled through its fellows as it charged at Sophie. She activated an ability and time slowed to a stop around her.

Ability: [Eternal Moment] (Swift)

- Special Ability.
 - Cost: Extreme mana-per-second and stamina-per-second.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 5 (91%).

 - Effect (iron): Operate at a highly accelerated speed for one second of actual time, which is extended in subjective time.
-

Sophie's massive acceleration power only gave her a fleeting moment of near-frozen time to act. She waved her arms rapidly back and forth in front of her, each sweep producing an arced blade of wind that froze the moment it was separated from her body.

Ability: [Wind Blade] (Wind)

- Special attack.
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 8 (88%).

 - Effect (iron): Create a cutting projectile of air.
-

The frozen time ended after the briefest interval, but Sophie's quick movements had primed a wall of wind blades. The instant the power ended, they were all unleashed on the monster charging at her, shredding the hulking ape into a bloody mess. Its charge became a stagger and she kicked it square in the chest, bloodying her boot. It fell over backwards and didn't move again.

Although she was incredibly quick on her feet, Sophie was holding her ground, not moving far as she fended off attackers. Humphrey, in the meantime, was the sword to her shield, charging forward to take the fight to the enemy. He conjured up his enormous sword, stylised in the form of a dragon's wing, that was immediately wreathed in flames.

Ability: [Dragon Wing Sword] (Wing)

- Conjuration (fire).
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: 1 minute.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

 - Effect (iron): Conjures a huge sword in the shape of a dragon's wing. Special attacks with the movement subtype performed with this weapon inflict additional damage.

 - Effect (bronze): Normal and special attacks made with this weapon inflict fire damage and inflict the [Burning] condition.

 - [Burning] (affliction, damage-over-time, elemental): Inflicts ongoing fire damage.
-

The fire damage hardly seemed relevant as the sword brushed away enemies like fallen leaves.

Ability: [Unstoppable Force] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: High mana, extreme stamina.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Melee attack with massive momentum, dealing large amounts of additional resonating-force and disruptive-force damage. Requires a heavy weapon.

- Effect (bronze): For each enemy struck the cooldown of this ability and the cost of the next use of this ability are reduced.

Three of the ape monsters and a two-headed cat all but exploded, their bodies not even slowing the horizontal sweep of the enormous sword. Humphrey paid no mind to self-protection as he arrived amidst the monsters like a lobbed grenade. He was far from without protection, however, starting with the dragon scale armour he conjured directly onto his body.

Ability: [Dragon Armour] (Dragon)

- Conjuration.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a suit of dragon scale armour that confers strong physical protection and increases resistance to fire damage and effects.

- Effect (bronze): Armour confers increased resistance to non-physical damage and further increased resistance to fire damage and effects.

As Humphrey laid into the enemy, an illusory image fought beside him, harmless but distracting, making his attacks hard to anticipate. Just when the monsters thought they had the real Humphrey pegged, it would turn out to be his illusionary double. This was Belinda's familiar, Gemini, who could not only mimic allies, but switch-teleport with them. It used a mental connection with the mimicked ally to do so, like a more instinctual version of Jason's voice chat. It was an oddly intimate connection that allowed the ally to trigger the power.

The power of Belinda's familiar was quite similar to one of Humphrey's own.

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.
-

With every special attack, he not only created another, short-lived double, but Gemini did the same, leaving four of Humphrey running around for the monsters to try and pin down. Only Humphrey's allies were able to see the hazy blur that signalled which ones were illusions.

Dashing into the swarm of attackers had opened him up to their attacks and some inevitably went for Humphrey's true body. Many were intercepted by well-timed but short-lived bubble shields, courtesy of Neil.

Ability: [Absorbing Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution, drain).
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: 20 seconds.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and generates mana-over-time with a strength that scales with the amount of damage negated. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.
 - Effect (bronze): Drains health and mana from the attacker and bestows it upon the recipient of the shield.
-

Neil's absorbing shield simultaneously protected Humphrey and replenished his health and mana, allowing him to keep fighting at full strength. In addition to the drain effect, one of Neil's evolved racial gifts was incredibly valuable.

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.

If too many enemies were crowding on Humphrey, Neil would deploy his other bubble shield power.

Ability: [Burst Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and explodes out, knocking-back nearby enemies and inflicting concussive damage. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the blast.

- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage.

While Humphrey and Sophie were both fighting multiple monsters, just the pair of them was not enough to cover every angle of approach. Monsters that tried to snake into the gaps were met by elemental attacks from Onslow and bolts of force from Belinda's lantern familiar, Shimmer. Belinda used her spurious sorcerer ability, granting her the power to use a wand from which she was blasting bolts of fire.

Clive's weapons were still stowed in his storage space as he sat atop Onslow, chanting out an extremely lengthy spell. When he was done, a huge red and gold eye appeared in the sky like a celestial body. It had the look of a fiery nebula, resembling an angry version of the eye in the torso of Jason's familiar, Gordon.

Ability: [Eye of Karma] (Karmic)

- Spell (zone, retribution).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (04%).

- Effect (iron): Creates a wide-area zone. Within the zone, all damage inflicted by enemies or by effects generated by enemies cause disruptive-force damage to be inflicted on the enemy that was the source of the damage.

- Effect (bronze): Whenever damage triggers the zone effect, the damaged ally gains an instance of [Good Karma] and the enemy gains an instance of [Bad Karma].

- [Good Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): Damage from enemies with [Bad Karma] is reduced; this does not reduce the retributive damage suffered by enemies with [Bad Karma]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

- [Bad Karma] (affliction, holy, retribution, stacking): A portion of damage you deal to enemies with [Good Karma] is also suffered by you as transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, to a maximum of 100% damage return.

The team was spending mana like water, knowing that mana recovery was one of their greatest strengths. Clive, Neil and Sophie all had powers that would replenish the mana of team mates within their overlapping auras, with Clive and Neil also having spells to replenish team mana.

After completing the zone spell, Clive pulled out his weapons and started blasting away. They were not as effective without the time to set up ritual enhancements, but were still potent weapons. He also started replenishing Onslow's powers.

The monsters attacking Humphrey and Sophie were now harming themselves as a result of the zone spell, but the sheer number of enemies threatened to overrun the team. From Clive's quick count, there were at least thirty, not counting however many Jason was off fighting in the jungle.

In spite of the team's efforts, however, the monsters still threatened to overwhelm them. Belinda started chanting her own long spell, and just as it seemed like the team would be overrun, the battlefield shifted.

Ability: [Unexpected Allies] (Charlatan)

- Spell (illusion, dimension, teleport).

- Cost: Extreme mana.
 - Cooldown: 1 hour.
 - Current rank: Iron 4 (16%).
 - Effect (iron): You and your allies take on illusory forms of nearby enemies, but your allies can still recognise one another. All allies and enemies in the area are randomly switch-teleported.
-

Just as the team's formation was about to be broken up by the press of opponents, Belinda's spell detonated it. The team was randomly teleported, as were the monsters. The teleport was short and relatively gentle, barely fazing those members of the team sensitive to it. The monsters were thrown into confusion by their sudden displacement and the seeming disappearance of their enemies. Unable to see through the illusory shrouds now covering the team, they milled about in confusion.

Belinda's power was the keystone of one of the team's tactics for engaging larger groups, which Jason dubbed the 'Brave Little Tailor' strategy. They made judicious attacks that prompted the monsters to attack one another, their discord briefly disrupting the thread of control in their aura. On top of the monsters harming one another, Clive's zone spell inflicted even more damage.

The controlling force quickly reasserted itself, but the sudden chaos had given the team time to gather together. Jason had notified them that all the surviving monsters had gathered close and he emerged from the shadows. It was just in time to vanish with the team as Neil used an ability.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- Special ability (dimension).
 - Cost: Extreme mana.
 - Cooldown: 6 hours.
 - Current rank: Iron 8 (64%).
 - Effect (iron): Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death] on everything in the area.
 - [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

When the team re-emerged from the dimensional space a few short moments later, the landscape had been transformed into a horrifying Tartarus. The death energy of Neil's

Reaper power had riven the jungle around them, leaving dead and rotting monsters amongst blackened and withered jungle. The undergrowth was black mulch underfoot, while the wood of the trees had rotted and split, sending them tumbling to the ground.

A few bronze-rank monsters had survived, but they were hurt and no longer had numbers on their side. The team made short work of them.

“Was anyone bitten in all of that?” Clive asked. “Vampire bites can have some unpleasant effects.”

“Their teeth only found my armour,” Humphrey said.

“I took a few claws and a spike or two, but no bites,” Sophie said.

Jason used his affliction absorbing power on Sophie, cleansing the poison of the spitter-frog spines.

“My blood powers were quite effective,” Jason said. “Turns out vampires are a bit susceptible to blood magic.”

“We can have the post-fight discussion later,” Humphrey said. “For now, we put as much distance between us and that spider as we can.”

Chapter 230

Terms of the Pact

“Those vampiric monsters were a bit disappointing,” Jason said. “They didn’t seem so much vampiric as hung over. A bit peaky, bloodshot eyes. They didn’t even summon any bats.”

“They’re spider vampires,” Neil said. “Why would they summon bats?”

“Well they didn’t summon any spiders, either.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” Belinda said. “Didn’t the spider kind of summon them?”

“That’s a good point,” Jason said.

The team had extricated themselves from the ring of dense jungle, returning to relatively intact streets and buildings of the overgrown city. They made sure they were well clear before putting up the cloud house and stopping to rest.

“Everyone take a good rest,” Humphrey said. “From here on out, our sole focus is on getting stronger.”

“It’s a shame there’s no movie essence,” Jason mused to himself. “A training montage power would be OP.”

“What nonsense are you talking now?” Sophie asked.

“I think I know this,” Clive. “There’s a fable from your world about learning to fight by cleaning an old man’s carriage, right?”

“There are different renditions of the story,” Jason said. “A lot of it comes down to your tolerance for power ballads. The message, though, is that everything we do is kung fu. That’s a term that, where I come from, has come to mean martial arts. What it really means, though, is accomplishment through diligent effort. Every action we take and every word we say is something that shapes us. The diligent person acts to improve and empower themselves.”

“Then why do you run around like a mad person, talking nonsense, instead of being all diligent?” Neil asked.

“Because everything is a weapon,” Jason said, “and there are few weapons as powerful as the way people look at you.”

Jason’s expression went through a subtle, yet powerful change. The cocky smile was suddenly sinister, his laughing eyes becoming predatory as they locked down on Neil. Neil shifted uncomfortably in his seat, unnerved as Jason watched him like a hawk eying a

mouse. Then Jason flashed a grin, eyes twinkling as he dissolved the tension as suddenly as he brought it about.

“Everything is a weapon,” Jason repeated, “if you know how to use it. There’s no better weapon you can hand an enemy than being predictable. Every one of you has, at some point, told someone to not bother trying to understand what I’m talking about. If someone doesn’t even try and understand me, that’s a weapon and shield they’ve just handed to me for nothing.”

“What about your allies?” Neil asked. “Don’t they need to rely on you?”

“They do need to, yes. Do you trust me, Humphrey?”

“Yes.”

“Clive?”

“Yeah.”

“Sophie?”

“Yes.”

Jason smiled at Neil.

“What about you, Neil? Do you trust me to stand at your back? That I’ll be there when you need me to be?”

“I guess I do,” Neil admitted.

“You grew up in a world of magical power,” Jason said, turning his gaze from Neil to address the whole team. “Direct, objective, honest power. I come from a political world, where power is nebulous and the wars are as much about ideology as territory. We grow up watching leaders who need to sway the populace in order to hold power, even as the populace can share information in ways that would be as amazing to you as magic was to me.”

Jason nodded at Humphrey.

“Humphrey’s mother encouraged our friendship because she recognised that I had a more political mind than is normally to be found in Greenstone. I’m sure it’s different in more cosmopolitan cities, but the politics here are amateurish and crude. Dangerous, yes, because power always is, but not especially complicated. She wanted Humphrey to get to know me so that he would see the next guy like me coming.”

Jason conjured his dagger into his hand.

“This,” he said, “is the weakest weapon there is. A blade can cut down a person but words can bring down a kingdom. Adultery can end a dynasty, greed can start a war and compassion can end one. People will die for strangers out of faith and kill their neighbours out of fear.”

He casually tossed aside the dagger and it vanished.

“Everything is a weapon,” he concluded. “The trick is learning to wield them without doing yourself an injury.”

The room fell quiet in the wake of Jason’s impromptu speech, until Sophie broke the silence.

“Gods damn, you like to hear yourself talk.”

The team fell into a regimented schedule of physical training, skill training, mental training and monster hunting. Days became weeks and Humphrey joined Clive at bronze rank, his square-jawed handsomeness becoming even more pronounced.

Clive had already reached bronze rank and was relegated to lowest priority during training. This afforded him the time to study the changes to the astral space’s ambient magic. He was trying to learn what was causing the changes and how it was preventing them from using portals or escaping. He didn’t find the answers he was looking for, but he did make other discoveries, which he laid out one evening in the cloud house.

“The magical density is increasing,” he announced to the team. “I’m not exactly sure why, but something seems to be forcing a highly dense magic into this astral space.”

“What does that mean for us?” Humphrey asked.

“A few things,” Clive said. “One, we aren’t getting out of here until we find whatever is causing this and stop it. Two, we need to keep up this training because the monsters are going to be getting stronger. We’ll see less iron-ranks over time and running into a silver will become more and more of an inevitability. Three, the rate at which this astral space will break down is on an increasingly steep curve. We’re still talking a matter of years, for the moment, but as the magical density goes up, the time frame will come down.”

“Well that’s only completely terrifying,” Neil said.

“What do you recommend we do?” Humphrey asked.

“We already have the right plan,” Clive said. “Improving our strength is more important than ever, and the cultists are still our best chance at getting a handle on what’s happening. We need to deal with that blood weaver and hopefully figure out what they were up to.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “Jason, Sophie and Belinda; we’ll be pushing all the focus onto you. Once Jason reaches bronze we’ll move immediately on the blood weaver. Sophie and Belinda, we’ll get you to bronze as quickly as we can. We can’t have you still at iron rank if we’re going to be meeting silver rank monsters with any regularity.”

Belinda's abilities were progressing at a steady, but not exceptional pace. She had reached the point where she could comfortably fight small groups of iron-rank monsters alone, using the abilities that gave her temporary skills. They found that she actually advanced more quickly from group fights, where more of her powers could be used effectively.

Belinda's jack-of-all-trades power set lacked the punch to jump ranks and fight a bronze-rank monster alone. Sophie had no such problems, relishing both the fights and the resulting rapid advancement of her abilities. The monster-infested city was eager to oblige as they saw as many fights in a day as an active adventurer in Greenstone would in a week.

Ranking up the latter stages of an ability was a harder, slower progress, but iron-rank monsters were getting harder to come by, being replaced with more bronze-rankers who offered enough challenge to keep their advancement proceeding at their original pace. The monsters started appearing in the kind of numbers the team had originally encountered the iron-rank ones in and the team was more and more required to fight as a whole instead of peeling off members to maximise the challenge.

Jason had expected his familiar ability for Shade to be the hardest to rank up. Colin and Gordon were both able to engage directly in combat, whereas Shade's power to attack amounted to little more than some mana draining. To Jason's surprise, Shade kept pace with Gordon, rapidly passing through the lower levels of advancement.

While not an attacker, Shade's utility as a shadow-jump target saw Jason heavily rely on him in combat. In hindsight, Jason realised that of course a utility-type familiar would advance from utility tasks. To help that along, he practised sharing the senses of one of Shade's remote bodies. It would be useful in allowing him to directly observe from safety whatever his familiar was scouting out. He could even speak through Shade, although his voice chat was still a superior communication method.

The cult hidden at the Vane Estate had a visitor in the form of Anisa Lasalle. Timos led her through the grounds, now dead and dry as the desert reclaimed them. The hedge maze was now more of a dry twig maze and the cult had cut a more direct path to the centre, through which Timos led the priestess. She had arrived alone, while Timos had a pair of iron-rank lackeys on hand.

"It's been a while, Priestess," Timos said, a smile playing on his lips. "How was your... sabbatical?"

Walking beside him, Anisa Lasalle glanced at Timos with disdain. The elven priestess was wearing extremely fitted adventuring gear, it's monochromatic white barely more pale than her skin. Her platinum hair was bound back in a simple and practical ponytail.

"I detest you and your kind," she said. "Frankly, I would rather have stayed in hiding than deal with you. Each indignity I have suffered over the past months can be laid solely at the feet of your failures."

"Your memory is poor, Priestess," Timos said. "I think you'll find that the impatience of your god has..."

Timos was cut off as Anisa's gloved hand clutched his throat, her thumb pressing savagely into his windpipe. His two lackeys moved to assist but a trio of searing orbs of light appeared to hover threateningly in front of them.

"You will not disparage my god," Anisa told Timos calmly. "In fact, it would be best for all involved if you never profaned his name with your tainted lips. Am I making myself clear?"

Timos nodded, choking all the more at the action, but she released him and he fell to his knees, coughing and spluttering. His eyes shot venom up at her as he rubbed his throat, but he nodded again.

"I understand," he said.

"See that you do. Now stand up; I'm not going to stand idle, waiting for you to recover from the latest in a long series of errors."

Timos's people looked ready to act, but he stilled them with a head shake. The gesture was not unnoticed by Anisa, but she did not deign to comment. He staggered to his feet and they continued on, reaching what had once been the well at the centre of the maze.

No one had checked on the estate since the Rejector's party had passed through and the cult had decided excavating the well and the crawl tunnel at the bottom was an acceptable risk. One of the cultists with earth-shaping powers had created a set of stone stairs into what was originally a natural cavern. The wooden walkway once traversed by Jason had been removed and the walls and floor smoothed out. Stone walls had been put up to form a subterranean complex. They had no woodworker, so despite ample materials above, curtains were hanging in place of doors. Glow stones affixed to the walls lit the rooms and hallways.

Timos led the priestess through the complex, but she stopped halfway. Her eyes were boring into one of the cultists, a grizzled man moving a crate of supplies.

"You," she said to the man. "I know you."

“Yes, Miss. I’m Dougall. I let you out of the cage, when the blood cult had you captured.”

“A rat jumping ship,” she said. “You caught wind of Remore putting paid to your little branch of the Red Table and realised you would need a new master. The blood cult deals with failure in very carnivorous ways, after all. Clearly you knew much more of Landemere Vane’s loyalties than anyone in the household realised. The opportunistic loyalty of a cultist is revealed as base and self-serving in the face of adversity. Where does your faith lie?”

“I…”

“I don’t want you to speak. Or perhaps you should. I remember that you were looking for a taste of elf flesh. Are you still looking to feast on my bones, cultist?”

“I would never, Miss…”

“Pathetic. You aren’t worth the blood stain to kill.”

She swept off, Timos hurrying to keep showing the way. They went all the way to the metal door leading into Landemere Vane’s old ritual room. Everything had been stripped away to the bare stone, the only features being an archway in the centre of the room, the complex ritual circle around it and the mana lamps that artificially heightened the ambient magic, allowing the circle to function. The cult was charging a large number of lamps around the estate to keep the ritual circle operational.

The archway looked like it had been made from salvaged building materials, an irregular construction of cheap-looking, mismatched bricks, held in place with what looked like ordinary mortar.

The silver rank leader of the cultists, Zato, was standing with his back to the door, looking at an inert archway. He turned at their entry, eyes lingering on the marks on Timos’ neck but saying nothing.

“How long?” Anisa demanded, without preamble.

“Weeks,” Zato said. “Two and a half months, at the outside.”

“Two and a half months!” Anisa raged. “You have already had more than enough time!”

“And your church has nowhere near enough patience!” Zato yelled back. “Every problem you blame us for goes back to your church refusing to wait, the way you were counselled. Your insistence on acting so early cost us everything and gained us nothing. It’s like you somehow think you worship the god of time, able to make things happen whenever you want. If your church had been willing to wait, then the cult’s identity and

your trafficking with us would both remain secret. We are still years away from the true beginning, but you had to be impatient children.”

Anisa fumed, but she was bronze to his silver rank and had her orders.

“I am here to inform you that your request is unacceptable,” she said, biting off every word. “We will not be acceding to it.”

“You go and tell your archbishop that not only will his people be joining us in the astral space, but so will he. The laxity of your church cost us every silver-ranker we had in this region. I’m the only exception and I had barely ranked up when your people led the Remores to the island. I hadn’t even been fully inducted into the leadership.”

“The blame for the island does not fall on us.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” Zato sneered. “Every success is your people and every failure is mine. I might as well argue with a child.”

“We lost a gold-ranker in the island attack, so do not come complaining to me,” Anisa said.

“I did not call you here to hear complaints,” Zato said, regaining his composure “I am invoking the terms of the pact. Nicolas Hendren will be leading his people to join us when the tunnel finishes forming and the portal opens. I expect all of you here in two months.”

Anisa gave him a smile that somehow perfectly encapsulated hatred, but said nothing. She turned on the spot and swept out of the room like an angry wind.

Chapter 231

Trading Safety Today For Death Tomorrow

The team had been aware going in that there were locations within the city that were more than just empty ruins. A number of trial-goers had reported such locations to the Magic Society and Emir's people, who had undertaken a large-scale debrief of the iron rankers who survived the trials. In addition to monsters unlike those found elsewhere in the city, such locations held unusually valuable treasure.

Clive had been one of those who encountered such a place during the trials, where he obtained the legendary set items both he and Neil were wielding. For him it was a staff and wand set that had become a crucial part of his combat potential. For Neil, it was a fist-sized orb that shone with a blue light when held, and a gold circlet with a blue gem set into the forehead. The abilities combined to powerfully enhance his shielding powers, which the team appreciated.

Given the formidable power of the abilities on those items, the team eagerly explored any location that was outside the ordinary. In addition to being as likely as any other place to have monsters to confront, there was always the chance of treasure. With the battles to come, any advantage was a much-needed blessing.

Most such places were either subterranean complexes or atop unusually tall buildings, much as Clive's had been. The first of these locations the team encountered for themselves was a sprawling complex of underground forges, foundries and furnaces. In addition to having dangerous fire and iron elementals, it was infested with bizarre undead, with metal fused into their bodies like magical cyborgs.

Jason had found it a frustrating place to fight, with most of the enemies highly resistant, if not outright immune to his abilities. He made good use of the sword Gary had given him, but it was a marked step-down in his capabilities.

"It's good for you," Sophie had told him.

"If you only train for when things go right, you die the moment they go wrong," Humphrey said.

"Yeah," Jason acknowledged unhappily. "Rufus used to tell me almost the exact same thing."

That place had eventually yielded some impressive treasures, although not so useful as those Clive had found. There was a pair of gloves that enhanced fire and iron-based abilities, and an anvil that enhanced the crafting of weapons. They took them with the intention of delivering them to Gary.

The complex had also delivered a solid haul of essences and awakening stones, almost all fire and iron. They were both common, but very popular, meaning they would fetch a good price once they returned to civilisation. They were a welcome addition to the piles of spirit coins and quintessence gems piling up in their storage spaces, courtesy of Jason and Neil's looting powers.

The next similar location they came across was likewise underground. They were uncertain to its nature, at first, as it was very plain, but they could tell it was unusual from how intact it was. Most subterranean spaces in the city were thick with mould and root systems breaking in through the walls and ceiling. This complex was all square tunnels and empty rooms, the brickwork uniform and unblemished.

"There doesn't seem to be anything here," Belinda said as they looked over another empty room. "No loot, no monsters nesting in here. Not even the dilapidated furniture and such you get in most of the ruins.

"All these empty rooms remind of the place we found in the delta under the swamp," Humphrey said.

"That's worth remembering," Clive said. "That place seemed empty until we had a face full of marsh hydra."

"A good lesson," Humphrey agreed. "This place may well be empty because the one thing in here has scared off the rest."

"Are we ready to face a silver-rank monster?" Neil asked. "We haven't had to do it yet, but the monsters have been getting stronger and stronger. We hardly see any iron-ranks anymore."

"If we caught one in isolation, then maybe," Humphrey said. "The problem is that we still have too many iron-rankers."

"I'm so close to bronze I can taste it," Neil said.

They continued through the complex, finally discovering what it was.

"A prison," Jason said as he surveyed the latest room they had entered. "That's great. Nothing bad ever happened in a creepy, abandoned, subterranean prison. I'm so glad monsters turned out to be real."

They were in a large, long cell block, with a mezzanine level running along each side. The cells, running the length of the room on both levels were barred, giving the team a clear look inside. None of the cells had occupants, being as empty as every other room they had come across. Moving through the large cell block, they found stairs that led down into another, and then a third. It was there that they finally found something.

"Signs of combat," Clive said. "This really does remind me of that place we found."

“This is fresher,” Humphrey said, examining a scorch mark on the wall. “Most likely, someone found this place during the trials.”

“There’s something at the far end of the room,” Jason said. His ability to see through darkness extended beyond where the light of the team’s glow stones grew dim.

The team moved forward carefully, finding a handful of corpses scattered about where they had fallen. A violent demise and months in the muggy, underground chamber had not left them in a pleasant state, but as Jason’s powers left enemies in much the same condition, they were used to it. Rather than dwell on the state of the bodies, they considered what might have left them that way.

“No trace of whatever killed them,” Jason said. “It seems the fight was either one-sided, or whoever killed them took their own fallen when they left.”

“Hard to determine what killed them from the bodies,” Neil said. “They’re too far gone to make out much. I am seeing some broken bones, so something physically powerful maybe.”

“We didn’t fight anything on the way in here,” Sophie said, already eyeing the room around them. “There weren’t any signs of combat before this, and I think they would have left some. I’m seeing scorch marks, chunks torn out of the stone floor. I think that whatever killed them didn’t show up until they reached this point.”

None of the team had let up their guard, but for the moment, nothing was making an attack.

“It could have been other adventurers,” Jason said. “We know that at least some of us were killing each other.”

“All we can do is be cautious moving forward,” Humphrey said. “That, and collect these poor souls for return to their families.”

They went about the grisly task of retrieving Adventure Society badges, for identification and to return to the families. There had been discussion of retrieving remains before they came in, but storage space was at a premium for coffins and any remains were likely to be a mess. A number of families made quiet approaches to try and make specific arrangements for their lost people, but Humphrey flatly refused. He insisted on keeping things even handed and restricting recovery to Adventure Society badges.

“What about their equipment?” Belinda asked. “It feels ghoulish to loot the dead.”

“We’ll return their gear to the families, along with the remains,” Humphrey said. “Once they’re identified.”

At the end of the cell block. Not far past the bodies, was a pair of large doors. They were metal, but unlike the bars of the cells, were unblemished by time and moisture. They

were plain and heavy, with a large keyhole on each. There were traces of a ritual circle drawn around each keyhole.

“Maybe that’s what brought out whatever killed them,” Jason said. “Trying to break-in triggered some kind of defences, maybe?”

“The obvious solution, then, would be to not break-in,” Neil said. “I mean, treasure is nice, but we just picked up a dead adventuring team. Do we really want to be the next one?”

“He’s not wrong,” Jason said. “We have a responsibility, here. We may be the only ones who can stop the cult from tearing this astral space off the side of the world. Or whatever it is they’re going to do with those giant golems. We can’t go getting ourselves killed over some loot.”

“On the other hand,” Humphrey said, “we need to push ourselves to the limit, and beyond. We don’t know what kind of challenges we’ll have to face in stopping the cult, but I don’t think the cultists being captured by the blood weaver is the end of it. I’m certain there are greater challenges ahead before we can put paid to the cult’s intentions.”

“So, you’re saying we should face whatever killed these people as a training exercise?” Jason asked.

“Since when are you the voice of moderation?” Clive asked.

“I’m not saying we shouldn’t do it,” Jason said. “I just think that the idea of not doing it is worth exploring. I’ve been too reckless, too often. I’ve survived too many times on luck which, sooner or later, is going to run out. This isn’t a monster we have some idea about, before we go in. We backed off because we weren’t ready for the blood weaver. What if this is worse?”

“We need to get you and Neil over the threshold for bronze,” Humphrey said.

“I’m not sure this will do it,” Jason said. “If there is a still-active defence system here, then it has to be something that didn’t die out in all the years this place has been dormant. My guess would be some kind of construct guardian, or maybe some undead. I won’t get to workout my powers like that.”

“Your familiars are the last abilities you have to advance,” Humphrey said. “If your other abilities are less useful, your familiars become more important.”

“I say we go for it,” Sophie said. “Humphrey’s right that we need to have the experience of having something dropped on us that we aren’t ready for. Better we experience that now, so we have the experience before the cultists do it to us.”

“What do you think, Clive?” Humphrey asked.

Clive rubbed his chin, thoughtfully.

“The biggest danger is to our iron-rankers,” he said. “I think we leave the decision to them.”

“That’s fair,” Humphrey said. “So, what’s it going to be?”

“I’m still up for it.”

“If Sophie’s in, I’m in,” Belinda said.

“I’m going to say no,” Jason said. “If Neil wants to make it three to one, I’m fine with that, but if he wants to play it safe, I’ll back him.”

Everyone turned to Neil.

“Great,” Neil said. “Now it’s my fault if everybody dies.”

“You’re saying go for it?” Jason asked.

“Jason, you weren’t there during the expedition,” Neil said. “You haven’t fought these people. You haven’t seen the monstrosities they turned themselves into. The endless sea of constructs at their command. I don’t know what they’re going to bring to bear against us, but we can’t be ready enough. Not taking every chance we have to get stronger is trading safety today for death tomorrow.”

“And here was I thinking that you were the sensible one,” Jason said. “Alright, then. Of course, if we’re wrong about the defence mechanisms, this whole conversation was pointless.”

The decision made, Clive turned his attention to the large doors.

“They messed up their unlocking ritual,” Clive said. “Even at a glance I can see how amateurish it was. No wonder they set off any defences.”

“Then do what they did,” Jason said. “You can worry about getting it right afterwards.”

“That’s not very professional,” Clive complained.

“Being professional isn’t the objective, right now,” Jason said.

“If the goal isn’t to get it right, then you might as well do it,” Clive said.

“That’s hurtful,” Jason said. “But fair enough. Everyone else get ready.”

While the team gathered in preparation for a fight, Jason examined the doors and the remnant lines of a ritual circle drawn onto each in chalk.

“You weren’t kidding, Clive,” Jason said. “Even I can tell this is a dog’s breakfast. It looks like someone who barely knew what they were doing just copied this ritual out of a book.”

“Probably someone who used a ritual magic skill book and never took the time to learn any theory,” Clive said.

“Was that aimed at me?” Jason asked. “I’ve been hitting the books pretty hard, as you well know.”

“Can you please just get on with it?” Humphrey asked.

“Sorry,” Jason said.

Jason took out a stick of chalk to redraw in the faded lines. He recognised the basic unlocking ritual, which was indeed something that had been in the ritual magic skill book he had used himself. That fortunately meant that he had the ritual incantation memorised, which was somewhat tricky. The chant was one of those that were series a series of sounds rather than words, in and of themselves, meaningless. They simply existed to set up a resonance and begin channelling magic through the ritualist and into the ritual diagram.

Jason carried out the ritual, but the locks in the middle of the ritual circles glowed red hot. Much of the redrawn circles burst off the doors in a puff of chalk dust. Jason turned and joined the others, drawing his sword in readiness for whatever appeared to meet them. They did not have to wait long.

Individual bricks in the walls and floor sank drew back into recesses with a grinding of stone. Moments later, small stone and metal spiders came swarming out of the holes all over the room. They immediately started scuttling toward the group, swarming over the walls and across the ceiling.

The construct creatures had minimal auras, but they were clearly iron-rank.

“Belinda, Neil.” Humphrey said.

“Yeah,” Belinda said.

“Got it,” Neil followed. “On your call, Belinda.”

The tiny constructs had painted the walls and ceiling as they moved on the team. As the front runners edged closer and closer, some of the team started throwing Belinda glances.

“Uh, Belinda?” Neil asked.

“Wait,” she said calmly.

Construct spiders started dropping off the ceiling and the upper parts of the walls as they drew excruciatingly close to the team. Clive raised his staff to fire off a blast and Belinda waved him down with a gesture.

“Not yet,” she said.

“Are you kidding?” Clive asked.

“I have to catch a lot of them,” Belinda said. “Alright, Neil. Now.”

Neil chanted out a quick spell.

“Let your power fulminate.”

Ability: [Bolster] (Growth)

- Spell (boon).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): The next essence ability used by the target ally has increased effect. This can affect parameters including damage, range and number of targets, depending on the affected ability. Cannot be used on self.

- Effect (bronze): Mana and stamina costs of the affected ability are reduced. In the case of ongoing mana and stamina costs, only costs initiated with the ability are affected. Costs invoked subsequent to the ability being activated are unaffected.

As soon as she felt the power of Neil's spell affecting her, Belinda threw out her hand and a crystal rod rose up from the floor.

Ability: [Force Tether] (Trap)

- Conjunction.
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 7 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a crystal rod, from which a tether of shimmering force connects to all nearby enemies within a moderate range. Tethered enemies are dragged toward the rod, which is protected by a force field that inflicts moderate resonating force-damage to anyone in contact with it. If the force-field is ruptured, it explodes in a wave of resonating-force damage. If the rod is destroyed or removed from its location then it explodes in a wave of disruptive-force damage. Dimensional displacement, such as teleportation, severs the tether. Untethered enemies who enter within range of the rod become tethered. Only one force tether rod may exist at a time.

Shimmering tethers of force shot out to every spider in range, which was almost all of them given how close Belinda had allowed the mass to encroach on the team. There were so many it seemed less like a series of tethers and more like a wall. All the spiders were plucked from the walls, ceiling or where they had fallen to the floor and dragged toward the crystal rod. The constructs were so light and weak that they all were yanked right up to the tip of the rod, piling into a ball at the end of the shaft like the head of a dandelion. The innermost spiders were constantly damaged as they were dragged against the force-field surrounding the crystal rod.

Not every one of the spiders had fallen within the range of the bolstered tether, but it was the significant majority. Belinda followed up with another power.

Ability: [Pit of the Reaper] (Trap)

- Conjunction (dimension).
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: 2 minutes.

 - Current rank: Iron 6 (14%).

 - Effect (iron): Conjures a dimensional space pit on any horizontal surface. The surface does not need to be solid or supportive. Anyone inside the pit suffers ongoing necrotic damage. If this spell is cast again while a pit already exists, the existing pit vanishes, depositing anyone inside upon the surface on which the pit was conjured.
-

The rod fell into the pit that opened up underneath them, dragging the spiders down. Having moved from its original location, it detonated. The force field around the crystal rod blew up first, then the rod itself shortly after, both blasting the spiders with force and crushing them against the sides of the dimensional pit. Some were launched back up and out of the pit, although they landed inert and unmoving.

The team moved to clean up the spider constructs that had escaped the tether-pit combination, clearing out the rest with wand, staff, sword and, in Sophie's case, boot. It wasn't long before everything was done. The pit vanished, and the destroyed construct remnants disgorged up from the vanishing pit and into a pile.

"Does anyone else feel like that was a bit anticlimactic, after all that talk?" Neil asked, and Jason immediately let out a groan.

"Why in the world would you go and say something like that?" Jason asked.

"What?" Neil asked in turn. Suddenly there was a grinding sound as large sections of the floor started to descend, leaving large holes.

"That's what," Jason said.

"I think they would have opened, whether I said anything or not," Neil said.

"Well, now we'll never know."

Chapter 232

Stalwart

The spider constructs had appeared from holes that had opened in the walls and ceiling. This time, it was the floor that opened up, six large, evenly-spaced but much larger holes, appearing in a straight line down the length of the cell block. The team didn't wait for whatever was within to emerge, springing straight into action.

"I'll take the first, you the second," Clive said to Belinda and they both quickly chanted out their rune trap spell.

"Emplace the mark of power."

Runes appeared on the floor, in front of the first and second holes. They glowed brightly for a brief moment before vanishing. As they cast their spells, Humphrey vaulted into the air, a pair of dragon wings appearing on his back and pushing him upwards.

Ability: [Dragon Wings] (Wing)

- **Conjuration (movement).**
- **Cost: High mana-per-second.**
- **Cooldown: None.**

- **Current rank: Bronze 0 (01%).**

- **Effect (iron): Manifest wings that are powerful but lack agility.**

- **Effect (bronze): The strength and resilience of the wings is increased, allowing them to be used for crude attacks to the sides and rear. The wings have strong damage resistance and very strong fire resistance. Ongoing mana cost is reduced from very high to high.**

Humphrey alighted on the upper mezzanine level, letting the mana-hungry wings vanish again. Sophie sauntered forward, ready to meet whatever emerged, while Jason vanished into the shadows.

Neil had been hastily pouring salt from a small sack to make a circle. He knelt briefly and touched a finger to the circle when it was done. The salt crystals started sparkling like flecks of diamond in the sun before a dervish of crystal appeared above the circle, swiftly cohering into the shape of Neil's summon.

Ability: [Chrysalis Golem] (Growth)

- **Summoning.**
 - **Cost: Very high mana.**
 - **Cooldown: 6 hours.**

 - **Current rank: Iron 9 (97%).**

 - **Effect (iron): Summons a chrysalis golem.**
-

The golem was a large, humanoid edifice of translucent crystal, half as tall again as its summoner. Neil gestured it forward, where it positioned itself between the team's support contingent and the holes from which the enemy was about to emerge.

From each hole, a single figure rose up from below. Like Neil's golem, they were constructs, ascending on platforms that sealed the holes from which they came. They also shared the golem's intimidating size, but not its humanoid appearance. These new constructs had a body that was a vertical cylinder of plain, dark stone. From the base, four legs held it up, obviously built for stability over speed.

Equidistant at cardinal points around the middle of the cylinder were long, inhuman arms. Each arm was segmented with a pair of elbows that allowed them to move in uncanny gestures. The arms ended in blunted, four-fingered claws. Atop each cylinder, in place of a head, was a stone bowl. As the constructs rose up, spheres of magical force manifested into each bowl, shimmering like a soap bubble, and the constructs began to move.

Like all constructs, they didn't have a soul and their auras were the meagre product of the magic animating them. It was enough to let the team know their opponents were somewhere in the mid-range of bronze-rank power.

The two sides were moving on each other before the platforms bringing the constructs up had even completed their task. Sophie was the quickest, ignoring the first two constructs to go after the third, rapidly hammering attacks into the joints of its arms. The movement of the arms was quick and tricky, but Sophie's reflexes were up to the task. As it continued to rise up, she went after the leg joints as well. The effectiveness of her attacks was limited, but the resonating-force damage of her special ability did succeed in chipping away at the hard stone of the leg.

Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 8 (21%).

- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional resonating-force damage, which is highly effective against physical defences. Suffer no damage from making unarmed strikes against objects and negate all damage from actively intercepted attacks. Not all damage from very powerful or higher-ranked attacks will be negated.

The two constructs she had passed stepped over the edge of their holes before the platforms they rode reached the level of the floor to seal them. They moved forward towards the main group, only to walk over the now-invisible runes, which detonated as they did so. The explosion was not enough to knock the heavy creatures over but they were successful in causing enough damage to have cracks appear in their legs. This was most true of the closest construct, which had walked over Clive's trap. It suffered the full effect of the bronze-rank power, then the secondary explosion on afterward.

Ability: [Rune Trap] (Rune)

- Spell.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (03%).

- Effect (iron): Create an explosive rune that will disappear after a short period. The rune can be set to trigger by proximity, caster trigger, or both.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by the rune trap will be the source of a secondary explosion after a brief period.

The second construct was not much more than briefly staggered by Belinda's trap, but Humphrey made the most of the immobile target. He plummeted down like a meteor, stacking up powers into a single, potent attack. He started by invoking one of his racial gifts.

Ability: [Dragon Blood]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
 - [Power] and [Spirit] attributes are enhanced for moderate mana-per-second.
-

His dragon wings appeared once again as he plunged from above, driving him forcefully towards his target below.

Ability: [Dive Bomb] (Wing)

- Special attack (movement, combination).
 - Cost: High stamina.
 - Cooldown: 20 seconds.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (02%).
 - Effect (iron): Accelerate down to attack a target from above; can be combined with normal or special melee attacks. Physical damage from these attacks is increased. No falling damage is suffered when using this ability, even if the attack misses.
 - Effect (bronze): A resonating-force shockwave is produced from the impact point.
-

Another of Humphrey's racial gifts further enhanced the power of his attack.

Ability: [Wing Raider]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
 - Speed, momentum and damage of movement-type special attacks is increased. Heavy conjured weapons and armour do not increase stamina consumption, regardless of weight, and do not impede movement abilities. Light conjured weapons have increased weight and momentum without being heavier to wield, counting as heavy weapons for the purposes of special attack requirements.
-

Dive bomb would do damage alone, but as it was a combination special attack, Humphrey added another power that would be especially effective against the construct.

Ability: [Shield Breaker] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Low mana, moderate stamina.
- Cooldown: 10 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (04%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts additional resonating-force damage, highly effective against physical defences. Requires a heavy weapon.

- Effect (bronze): Damage to rigid material is significantly increased.

As Humphrey plunged through the air, the sphere that had formed in the monster's strange bowl head floated up to intercept him. It grew as it moved into his path, large enough to engulf his whole body. Humphrey passed through the sphere, which popped like the soap bubble it resembled. It had not so much as slowed him down.

-
- You have been trapped in [Sphere of Incarceration].
 - [Sphere of Incarceration] has triggered ability [Unstoppable].
 - [Sphere of Incarceration] has been destroyed.

In a team full of unconventional members, it was easy to overlook Humphrey and his powers that were as straightforward as Humphrey himself. What he brought to the team was something that they otherwise lacked: simple, reliable power. When Humphrey Geller wanted to attack you, you were getting attacked.

Ability: [Unstoppable]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].

- Movement abilities cannot be negated or impaired. Resonating-force damage and disruptive-force damage are imparted to any obstructing object, increased for each movement ability and special attack in effect. This is a movement effect.

Humphrey came down on the construct like the United States military on an oil-rich nation. His assault from above was domineering, overwhelming and inflicted a level of widespread damage that went way beyond his expectations.

The initial strike smashed right through the stone bowl and burying itself deep in the cylindrical body. The construct was riddled with cracks and half destroyed, a job finished by

the dive bomb attack's secondary shock wave. It freed Humphrey's sword as the construct was blasted into shrapnel

As Humphrey destroyed the second construct Sophie continued to tie up the third. It tried to catch her with its own sphere, but her speed and mobility powers allowed her to nimbly avoid it, even as her attacks continued, unabated. The closest she came to being caught was when she looked back as fragments of the construct behind her explosively showered her with shrapnel.

One of her construct's legs gave out beneath her unrelenting attacks, but it continued to fight back with the lengthy, multi-jointed arms that tried to slam her into the floor. Some attacks she blocked, others she neatly side-stepped, all the while continuing her own assault. She was able to more than hold her own against her bronze-rank enemy, but it remained a dangerous opponent. She was all too aware that getting caught up fighting just one meant she was not protecting the team from the others.

Sophie and Humphrey had left one construct between them and the bulk of the team, which was intercepted by Neil's summon. Although the two constructs were of a similar size, the bronze-rank enemy quickly began to overpower the summon. It started by using two of its four clawed hands to grab the chrysalis golem's arms, holding them out of the way as a third claw hammered away on the golem's crystalline body. With each blow, a new rune appeared on the myriad facets of the chrysalis golem, even as it struggled, ineffectually.

While this was going on, Neil watched in silence, primed to throw out any necessary shields and healing for his teammates. Belinda was likewise actively prepared to support the team, as needed. Clive in contrast was drawing a ritual circle at the end of his staff, lines of golden light appearing at a wave of his finger.

Ability: [Enact Ritual] (Rune)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: varies.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (09%).

 - Effect (iron): Manifest lines of magic to draw out ritual diagrams. Materials required for a ritual may be used directly from a dimensional storage space instead of being placed within the diagram.

 - Effect (bronze): Create simple ritual diagrams to alter the parameters of magical items.
-

Quickly completed, the ritual circle floated in the air, affixed by an invisible force to the end of his staff.

-
- You have altered the effect of [Spell Lance of the Magister]. Damage has been altered from disruptive-force to resonating-force.
-

The disruptive-force of his staff attacks were highly-effective against magic and adequate for most enemies, but would suffer against the hard and tough bodies of the constructs. The time it cost him to alter his weapons would be made up for in the effectiveness of their new, temporary damage type. He left his wand unchanged, however, as he was wary of the magic spheres the constructs each had. His senses could clearly make out their magical nature, which his wand's original damage would be effective against.

As the construct continued to hammer away at the chrysalis golem, its sphere floated out to hover over the golem's head. The construct's final arm rose from behind its main body to touch the sphere, which started to vibrate and grow. Clive immediately directed the beam of his wand to lock onto the sphere, while his staff repeatedly fired bolts into the construct's body. The magical bolts exploded on contact, also affecting the chrysalis golem. The damage caused new runes to form on the golem's body. The sphere above the Golem continued to grow but the disruptive power of the wand slowed that growth to a crawl.

At the far end of the cell, the distance from the rest of the team and the glow stones they carried made the shadowy darkness a playground for Jason. He danced among the last three constructs, an elusive, flickering shadow. The disadvantage was that his only viable source of damage was his sword, which would take time to build up enough power to be an effective threat.

Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).

- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a physical immunity to it, an instance of [Stone Cutter] is applied to the blade.
- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a magical immunity to it, an instance of [Spell Breaker] is applied to the blade.

- [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage; highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Spell Breaker] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage; highly effective against magical defences and incorporeal entities. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Jason moved amongst the constructs like a spirit, doing all he could to hold their attention with his minimal damage. The more he could distract the back half of the enemies, the quicker his allies would deal with the front and move to assist him.

- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] and [Price of Absolution] on [Tartarian Golem].
 - [Tartarian Golem] is immune to [Sin].
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].

 - [Tartarian Golem] is immune to [Price of Absolution].
 - [Price of Absolution] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
-

Until his allies could join move to help, Jason had the assistance of Gordon, whose beam attacks proved more attention-getting than Jason. One beam was disruptive-force, which weakened and eventually broke the magical spheres, forcing the constructs to form new ones. The other beam was resonating force, an effective weapon against the rigid, stone bodies of the constructs.

Shade had informed Jason that the constructs almost certainly relied on purely magical senses, lacking the sensory organs of a living creature. As Jason had little need of Shade's shadow bodies in the darkened area, Shade posited that he might be able to hide Jason from their senses entirely. For each of Shade's bodies subsumed into Jason's shadow, he could mask an aspect of Jason's presence, such as heat or sound. It apparently also extended to more unusual senses.

Jason declined, however, as he needed to hold the constructs' attention. Their spheres moved around and their arms lashed out, striking nothing but hard floor and empty air. Jason may not have been Sophie's equal, but he had the skills imprinted on him by skill books and consolidate with a year of training and experience. He had become formidable in his own right.

The three constructs became two as Humphrey moved past Sophie and started hammering on one of them, diverting its attention. He started with the strongest of his special attacks, which rocked the construct back, in spite of its great weight.

Ability: [Unstoppable Force] (Might)

- Special attack.
 - Cost: High mana, extreme stamina.
 - Cooldown: 1 minute.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (07%).

 - Effect (iron): Melee attack with massive momentum, dealing large amounts of additional resonating-force and disruptive-force damage. Requires a heavy weapon.

 - Effect (bronze): For each enemy struck the cooldown of this ability and the cost of the next use of this ability are reduced.
-

After week after week of almost hourly battles, the team was quick to pick up on one another's rhythms. Belinda was at the ready and immediately reset Humphrey's attack.

Ability: [Blessing of Readiness] (Adept)

- Special ability (recovery).
 - Base cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: Varies.

 - Current rank: Iron 8 (14%).

 - Effect (iron): This spell can only affect an ally and not yourself. The cooldown of the next ability used by the target is reduced by up to one minute. The cooldown of this ability is equal to the time taken from the cooldown of the target ability.
-

Using her magical tattoo, she ended the cooldown on her power, allowing it to reset Humphrey's attack a second time. Jason was almost caught in a sphere as he watched, boggle-eyed, as Humphrey pushed around the giant stone monstrosity as if it were a small child. Humphrey finished the construct off with a shield breaker attack, the specialty resonating-force power inflicting even more damage than his unstoppable force attack.

Sophie, in the mean time, had neatly disassembled her opponent. Where Humphrey left nothing but ruined chunks, Sophie had taken her golem apart joint by joint and then smashed the bowl, causing the sphere she had been dodging to wink out and not return.

"Sophie!" Neil called out, and she turned to look. The sphere of the first construct had finally grown large enough to encapsulate Neil's golem, which was suddenly covered in a crystal cocoon within the sphere. Trapped in the sphere and entered into its inert, chrysalis

state, the golem was no longer any kind of protector for Belinda, Neil and Clive. Belinda stepped up to buy the time the team needed.

With her power-resetting abilities expended, Belinda knew it was time to change roles. She starting by summoning a suit of heavy armour, plus a hammer and shield, which blinked into existence on her person.

Ability: [Bag of Tricks] (Magic)

- Special Ability (dimension).
- Cost: None
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 8 (08%).

- Effect (iron): You have a personal, dimensional storage space. You may equip any item in your storage space directly onto your person or unequip anything on your person directly to your storage space.

She activated another power that made her grow taller and bulk-out with muscle, her clothes and equipment growing with her.

Ability: [Counterfeit Combatant] (Charlatan)

- Special ability (boon).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Iron 4 (74%).

- Effect (iron): Gain a significant increase to the [Power] attribute and temporary proficiency with armour and melee weaponry. Your physique enlarges, with equipment shifting to match.

As prepared as she could be, she squared her shoulders and moved to intercept the construct. She was only an iron-rank combatant, however, and a makeshift one at that. This became painfully obvious as she was rapidly pushed back, overwhelmed by the construct's multiple, irregular attacks. Her only saving grace was the construct's sphere was still occupied containing the chrysalis golem. The construct apparently unaware that the golem was in an inert state.

Sophie appeared, moving through the room like a breeze. She took over from a grateful Belinda, who had suffered something of a beating from the many-armed construct. The

shields and healing supplied by Neil had been the only thing that let her hold up against the higher-rank enemy even for the short time she had managed.

At the other end of the cell block, Humphrey moved on one of the now two remaining constructs. They were now ignoring Jason, in spite of the growing power of his sword, rightly recognising the larger threat.

Humphrey could not take the two constructs down as quickly as the first two, needing to wait for his most potent abilities to come off cooldown. His shield breaker attack, fortunately, had a short cooldown, made all the shorter by Belinda's aura.

Ability: [Masterful] (Adept)

- Aura (recovery).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 7 (55%).

- Effect (iron): Abilities of allies within the aura come off cooldown more quickly.

In between hits with his big-ticket attack, Humphrey fought using another of his special attacks. The human aptitude for special attacks had caused him to awaken an array of them, contributing to his potent offensive capability.

Ability: [Relentless Assault] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: Low stamina, increasing with each successive attack.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (02%).

- Effect (iron): Each use of this attack in quick succession increases the damage of this attack. Damage is of the same type caused by a normal attack.

- Effect (bronze): After a threshold of successive attacks is reached, escalating resonating-force damage is dealt with each attack.

Even this back-up attack of Humphrey's started putting paid to the construct he was fighting in relatively short order. He finished it with a shield breaker attack and moved onto the next construct as Jason realised that his contribution to the fight really would be minimal.

As he and Humphrey engaged the last construct at the back, the remaining one at the front was now squaring off against Sophie. Clive's staff had left it pocked with damage and

Sophie was doing the same, but it was the awakening of Neil's golem that signalled the end of that fight.

The golem explosively emerged from the crystal chrysalis. Shards of razor-sharp crystal shot out wildly, shredding the sphere containing the golem. Revealed in the wake of the detonated cocoon, the golem was leaner than it had been before, now with four arms, like that of its opponent, although more traditionally placed, two to each side of the golem's body.

With the disappearance of its first glowing sphere the construct created another in its bowl, which began floating it towards the newly reformed golem. The golem hammered the sphere with a fist and the bubble not only burst, but blasted force back at its creator. As the construct was rocked back on its legs the golem, more agile than before, moved in smoothly to start hammering away with its fists. The crude, blunt appendages vibrated as they struck, sending shockwaves through the enemy construct.

The new and improved chrysalis golem took out its enemy almost as quick as Humphrey, who was finishing the last of the last of the constructs up the back.

The team regrouped in the middle of the cell block. Clive and Neil enthusiastically told Jason and Humphrey about Belinda's stalwart efforts in buying time for Sophie to come to their aid.

"Still," Neil said. "Not as bad as we thought, in the end."

"Seriously?" Jason asked. "You're doing it again?"

"The bad thing already came out," Neil said. "What are the odds of there being another..."

He trailed off as the cell block filled with the sound of grinding stone.

Chapter 233

I'm Sick of Fighting Magic Rocks

The now-familiar sound of griding stone echoed through the cell block. The first time, it had been small holes in the walls and ceiling. The second, large holes in the floor. The group looked around for the new source of the grating noise.

"It's coming from the cells," Humphrey said. "All the cells."

The team looked through the rusty bars and spotted apertures that had appeared in the floor behind them.

"How many cells are there?" Sophie asked.

"Twelve cells to a side, per level; two levels to each side," Belinda said. "Almost fifty, all up."

"How can stuff rise up from the floors of the upper cells?" Neil asked. "They'd just come from the ones below, right?"

"Dimensional spaces," Belinda said. "Like the powers you and I got from the Reaper stones, Neil."

In each cell, a large glass box rose up from the floor. All of them were filled with a sickly yellow fog, from which the team could sense the auras within, currently in a dormant state.

"Those are bronze-rank auras," Sophie said. "Are we ready for that?"

"We have to be," Humphrey said. "So, yes."

Blood red light shone over their feet and they turned to see it was shining under the large doors they had used to trigger the room's defences in the first place. It seemed to be a trigger for whatever was inside the glass cases as the team felt the auras within them surge into wakefulness.

"Time to even out the numbers a little," Humphrey said, producing a bag of chalk dust and hurriedly pouring out a circle. He took out his summoner's die and rolled it on the floor, the face up rune glowing as it came to a stop.

"Oh no," Humphrey said as five large fish made of carved bone were summoned into being and started, flopping helplessly on the floor.

"The fish again?" Jason said. "Maybe you shouldn't be rolling the dice on the important fights. Literally and figuratively."

"It's a one in twelve chance," Humphrey said. Rather than have his helpless summons underfoot he dismissed them and they vanished. Neil's summon was still present, the crystalline golem maintaining its more advanced, post-chrysalis form. Leaner

and more agile than its basic shape, it had four arms ending in fists capable of powerful vibration attacks.

“Do we go smash those glass cases?” Neil asked. “We’d have to kick our way through the bars, right?”

“I suspect whatever is in there will come to us,” Jason said. “If you want to go into a prison cell were some unknown creature is about to burst out, though, be my guest. Actually, you’re the healer. You have to stay here.”

The sound of shattering glass signalled that their thus-far unknown enemies were about to make an appearance. The sickly-looking smoke that had been in the glass boxes came pouring out through the cell bars. The volume of it suggested that either the fog had been incredibly compressed in the glass cases or it was being continually fed through wherever the glass cases had arisen from. It obscured the team’s vision of the cell interiors as they heard the bars start to swing open with reluctant, rusty shrieks.

The creatures that emerged from the smoke were roughly humanoid; broad, heavy and hairless, with dark, scaly skin. Their arms were longer and more powerful than their legs, ending in thick, three-fingered hands. They had tiny, sunken eyes and nostrils in flat, noiseless faces. Their wide mouths were filled with misshapen teeth, like fragments of shattered, yellow stone. They pushed their way through cell doors barely large enough to fit them.

“They don’t look weak,” Neil said.

The smoke thinned as it moved into the room ahead of the creatures, filling the cell block with an unpleasant haze.

-
- Poison cloud had inflicted you with [Breath of Tartarus].
 - You have resisted [Breath of Tartarus].
 - You have gained in instance of [Resistant].
 - You have gained in instance of [Integrity].

Jason looked to his companions with concern. They were more vulnerable than he was, not sharing the power to grow stronger from afflictions.

Ability: [Sin Eater] (Sin)

- Special ability (recovery, holy).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Increased resistance to afflictions. Gain an instance of [Resistant] each time you resist an affliction or cleanse an affliction using essence abilities.
 - Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Integrity] for each affliction you resist or remove using essence abilities.
 - [Resistant] (boon, holy, stacking): Resistance to afflictions is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to negate instances of [Vulnerable] on a 1:1 basis.
 - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

The rest of the team were not completely vulnerable, with Sophie and Jason's auras both shielding them.

Ability: [Cleansing Breeze] (Swift)

- Aura (holy, cleanse).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. This is a holy effect. Negates poisons in the air; this is a cleanse effect.
 - Effect (bronze): Allies within the aura are periodically cleansed of curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. Mana and stamina recovery effects on allies have greater effect.
-

Cleansing breeze was one of the precious few powers that had reached bronze for Sophie, accelerated by a preponderance of poisonous monsters in the city. Thorny plant monsters, spitting frog monsters, snake monsters. The team had a good amount of cleansing between them, which made such creatures easy pickings, as well as helping them accelerate the advancement of those powers.

In the case of Sophie's aura, it would slowly but surely cleanse many types of affliction from her allies. It was already purifying the fog around them and, added to Jason's aura, left the team was in relatively good stead.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy).

- Base cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.
 - Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.
-

Belinda, Sophie and Neil suffered the worst, their iron-rank constitutions struggling against the poison even with the powers bolstering their resistance. Jason clasped a hand on Neil's shoulder.

"Feed me your sins."

Red life force emerged from Neil, tainted by the same colour as the mist. The taint disappeared into Jason's hand, leaving Neil looking relieved as his now-healthy life force returned to his body.

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
 - Base cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.
 - Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.
 - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
 - [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

While this was going on, some of the monsters had already moved in to the attack. The team had their backs to the large doors, so the monsters wouldn't be able to flank them, although they would be able to drop down from above. While Sophie stepped forward with Neil's golem to hold off the first wave of attackers, Humphrey vaulted up to the mezzanine on their left with a flap of conjured dragon wings.

Humphrey engaged with one of the creatures that had been about to drop down. It's lengthy arms gave it reach, and the knobby scales running along them made those arms as tough as any weapon. The monster may not have been a match for Humphrey but it was still disconcertingly strong and tough, given how many they knew to be gathering, unseen in the poison haze.

Jason used his magic boots to leap up to the mezzanine on the other side, likewise engaging a monster. He inflicted a rapid series of slashes, the creature's reach no match for that of Jason's shadowy arm.

Ability: [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Conjunction (disease, unholy).
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjure a highly flexible, semi-substantial shadow-arm that can extend or shrink. Conjured items can be conjured into the shadow hand. Can be used to make melee special attacks. Special attacks made using the arm inflict [Creeping Death] in addition to other effects.

- Effect (bronze): You can conjure a second arm. Special attacks made using the arms inflict [Rigor Mortis] in addition to other effects.

- [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

- [Rigor Mortis] (affliction, unholy, stacking): Penalty to the [Speed] and [Recovery] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Each time a new instance is inflicted, deals necrotic damage for each existing instance.

Jason's dagger barely drew blood from the scaly skin, but all Jason needed were shallow cuts. With just a few slashes, more than a dozen afflictions were loaded onto the monster. Jason's conjured dagger was the source of many, but not all of them, such as the special attack he was using

Ability: [Punish] (Sin)

- Special attack (melee, curse, holy).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage and the [Sin] affliction.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Price of Absolution].

- [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

- [Price of Absolution] (affliction, holy): Suffer transcendent damage for each instance of [Sin] cleansed from you.

Neither Jason nor the creature were going to wait for the afflictions to slowly devour it. It lunged at Jason, although its relatively short legs and the afflictions it already suffered from made it a little slow. Jason easily stepped into one of Shade's bodies and out from another that had slipped past the creature while it was engaged with Jason, giving him plenty of time to cast a quick spell before the creature turned around to face him again.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell.
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: 30 seconds.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.

 - Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration of [Penitence].

 - [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Gain an instance of [Penance] for each a curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from you. This is a holy effect.

 - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
-

The creature staggered as its muscles withered with necrosis, even as its wounds glowed with the transcendent damage starting to ravage it from the inside out. It lunged at Jason again with no more effect, Jason easily able to move from one of Shade's bodies to the other like a bully playing keep-away. He cast another spell.

"Feed me your sins."

The creature's life force became visible, tainted with the storm of affliction within it. Ugly curses, poisons and other horrors Jason inflicted swirled about with the shining transcendence of holy afflictions until they were drained out, siphoned off into Jason's outstretched hand. Even more of the holy afflictions were left in their place as the creature's life force once again became unseen.

-
- 18 afflictions have been cleansed from [Tartarian Brute].
 - 36 Instances of [Penance] have been inflicted on [Tartarian Brute].
 - 18 Instances of [Legacy of Sin] have been inflicted on [Tartarian Brute].

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

The brute stumbled to a halt as the transcendent damage devastated its body, lighting it up from the inside like some divine being, alighted upon the earth. Jason tilted his head as he watched the creature, one of the few he had encountered capable of surviving this far into his ability sequence. He chanted the incantation for the coup de grâce.

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

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

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

- Current rank: Bronze 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.

- Effect (bronze): Base damage is increased for each instance of [Penance] on the target.

The penance afflictions on the creature increased the base damage of the execute power, while the legacy of sin affliction made the damage escalation ramp up much faster.

The multiplicative affect of the two affliction stacks made for a shower of transcendent light that left behind not so much as a drop of blood.

Jason had never killed something that tough that quickly, but of course Humphrey had already finished his first and was making short work of a second. Another brute came lumbering out of the poison fog and Jason just raised his hand. Blood seeped from his palm for a short moment, after which a torrent of leeches came spraying out over the creature. Jason paid it no more attention and leapt from his side of the room over the gap to Humphrey on the opposite mezzanine.

“Can you drop these upper levels at this end, so they can’t drop down on the team?” Jason asked as Humphrey kicked a dead brute off his sword.

Humphrey gave the brick floor beneath them an assessing glance.

“Yeah. You want to go backs to the wall and let them come to us?”

“No, but we can’t have them fall on our heads either,” Jason said. “You keep the others safe while Neil and Sophie hold the poison at bay.”

“And what about the room full of monsters and poison gas?”

Shade emerged from Jason’s shadow as Gordon manifested with a surge of his aura. Jason glanced across at Colin, now bound up in his bloody-cloth humanoid shape.

“I’m sick of fighting magic rocks,” Jason said. “You can leave this lot to us.”

Sophie’s aura was thinning out the gas in the area immediately surrounding the team and would soon have it cleansed entirely. Humphrey had used his shield breaker attack to shatter the mezzanine at their end of the room, so the creatures were only able to come at them at ground level, from one direction.

Sophie, Humphrey and Neil’s golem beat them back, assisted by Clive and his magical weapons. Neil watched over the whole group but made sure to keep a careful eye on Belinda, who was suffering the most from the gas not yet fully cleared out. Whenever it started to get the best of her, he would purge it from her with a spell.

Ability: [Clean Slate] (Prosperity)

- Spell (cleanse, heal-over-time, holy).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- **Effect (iron):** Negate boons on a willing subject. Cleanse target of afflictions of all types except wounding. The base strength of the cleanse effect is enhanced for each boon negated.
 - **Effect (bronze):** Target gains a heal-over-time effect that had additional effectiveness against wounding afflictions. The strength of the healing effect is increased for each boon negated.
-

From the haze of poison fog, the team saw flashes of transcendent light and heard horrifying screams. They could only assume they came from the creatures because it definitely wasn't Jason's voice, although none of the creatures Humphrey and Sophie cut down had made so much as a grunt as they died.

At first the brutes surged in on them but slowly their numbers petered out. Finally, the last one to appear was in such a miserable state of decomposition that it looked like a zombie, complete with staggering shamble as it emerged from the fog before falling onto what was left of its face. A bloody strip of cloth snaked out of the fog, wrapping around its leg and dragging it back out of sight.

The next thing to come out of the fog were four cloaked figures; Jason, flanked by his familiars. He looked the team over, nodded as he saw they were fine, and his gaze turned to the large doors behind them.

"What's say we see what's back there?"

Chapter 234

Crossing the Threshold

The team waited for the sound of grinding stone that would signal another wave of combat, but the room was as silent as Neil, under Jason's baleful glare.

"I think we're clear," Humphrey said, finally.

The team stopped to rest in the zone of clean air Sophie's power had finishing clearing out, while the poison mist in the rest of the room slowly dispersed. As the haze disappeared, it revealed a horror show of dead creatures piled around the broken remains of the constructs they had destroyed earlier.

Neil tried looting the enemies, but while the constructs yielded a few crafting materials, the creatures yielded nothing. They also didn't disappear into rainbow smoke, showing them to not be monsters, but real creatures.

"These things have been sealed away for who knows how long," Neil said. "Kind of like those priests that Jason set loose."

"My interface called them Tartarian Brutes," Jason said. "The constructs were Tartarian Golems. Does that mean something to anyone?"

All eyes turned to Clive, who shook his head.

"In my world," Jason said, "there's a myth about a realm called Tartarus. It's a prison realm."

"We do seem to be in a prison," Belinda said. "It makes me curious about what's behind these doors."

While Neil had been looting, Clive had been examining the doors. He started drawing magic diagrams on them in golden lines with his ritual power. Jason noted that, unlike the attempts of the adventurers that came before, they were being placed in the middle of the doors, rather than around the locks.

"You're not trying to crack the locks?" he asked Clive.

"Those are a decoy," Clive said. "A key tip for ritual magic – and life, really – is to not do the same thing as the people who died trying. Also, a twin-circle ritual is a very bad idea if you don't know what you're doing."

Clive completed the ritual, the two magical circles lighting up on the door. The red light shining from underneath faded away and there was a pair of audible clicks from the locks. Clive dismissed his glowing ritual circles with a wave of his hands and pushed on the doors, swinging them open.

Beyond was a circular chamber with a vaulted ceiling and only one feature. In the middle of the room was a stone plinth, on which was what looked like a solid block of crystal encasing a sword. Around the block of crystal was a sphere of shimmering light, the same gold, silver and blue produced by Jason's transcendent damage powers.

The sword in the block was elaborately crafted into a sinister form. The blade was some kind of black metal, engraved with glowing red runes down its length. The hilt was constructed of some manner of red crystal and black stone, like ruby and onyx. The grip had sharp thorns, meaning that anyone who grasped it would be stabbing their own hand.

"It kind of looks like Jason's dagger," Neil said. Jason conjured his dagger into his hand, holding up for the group to compare. Jason's dagger was likewise an ornate object of black obsidian and red crystal.

"You're not wrong," Jason said. "It has to be coincidence, though right? I mean, if you're making a sweet-looking red and black bladed weapon, they're all going to end up with a certain level of similarity."

"Do those runes on the blade mean anything?" Sophie asked. Jason and Clive both had translation powers, so they looked closer.

"They don't say anything coherent," Jason said. "They just represent various concepts."

"Not ideal concepts, either," Clive added. "Soul. Power. Hunger. Life. Feast."

"That does sound pretty bad," Neil said. "As in, Jason's powers bad."

"Hey..."

"I'm more interested in that energy around it," Clive said. "It seems very strange to both aura and magical senses."

"It looks like Jason's dissolve people into nothing powers," Sophie said. "I'm not going near it."

"Agreed," Neil said.

Jason turned his attention to the shimmering light, slowly moving closer.

"Be careful," Humphrey warned, but Jason instead extended a hand toward the light.

"Jason, you should give me time to examine that before doing anything rash," Clive said.

Jason ignored them, having felt something familiar about the energy. As his fingertips came in contact with it, a bolt of sensation rocketed through his body and he yanked his arm back, like it had been shocked. He stumbled back a couple of steps before righting himself.

“It’s a soul,” Jason said, his voice haunted. “This light is a disembodied soul, somehow held here.”

“Are you sure?” Clive asked.

“Completely.”

Clive scratched his head as he looked at the light in confusion.

“That shouldn’t even be possible.”

“I’m increasingly convinced that impossible isn’t a thing,” Jason said.

“So, someone has turned an actual, living soul into a box?” Humphrey asked. “Isn’t that a lot to keep people away from a sword?”

“It isn’t trying to keep things out,” Jason said. “It’s trying to keep something in.”

“Are you sure?” Clive said. “Even with enhanced aura senses, it’s like there’s something obscuring it.”

“You can touch it, if you like,” Jason said. “I wouldn’t advise it, though. It’s much higher rank than we are. At least gold, and possibly even diamond. Just coming into contact with it had quite the spiritual kick, but its purpose was immediately clear. Everything it is has been directed to a singular intent: keeping this sword exactly where it is.”

“I’m going to touch it,” Clive said.

“Just be warned,” Jason said. “It’s going to kick you right in the soul.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” Humphrey suggested.

“I have to,” Clive said. “Call it a spirit of enquiry. I’d rather go through whatever punch-back it will give me than live my life knowing I had the chance to experience something so rare and unique, but didn’t have the courage.”

Clive reached out his hand and, after a brief moment of hesitation, touched the light. The breath shot out of him and he toppled like a tree, falling to the ground, unconscious. Neil quickly dropped to one knee to examine him.

“He’s fine,” Neil quickly said. “He just had a jolt to the system, causing some soul-body dysphoria. Best to let it settle than try and forcibly wake him up.”

“That soul-body thing sounds bad,” Sophie said.

“On a regular person it would be,” Neil said as he pulled a pillow from his dimensional satchel and placed it under Clive’s head. “For an essence user, it’s kind of like holding your breath for too long and passing out. He’s going to wake up with a fierce headache, but nothing more than that.”

The team gathered around Clive, looking down at him with concern.

“Really, he’ll be fine,” Neil said. “It won’t take him long to wake up.”

“Alright,” Belinda said. “I guess we decide what to do about this sword while we wait.”

“We don’t do anything,” Jason said. “Someone or something went to considerable effort to contain it here. All that stuff we fought in the cell block was little more than a no trespassing sign compared to the power involved with this. If someone went to the trouble of doing this to a person’s soul, just to keep this thing locked up, I don’t think letting it loose is a good idea. Even assuming we can figure out how.”

“So, after all the fighting we did to get here, you just want to walk away?” Belinda asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “That’s exactly what I want to do.”

“I’m willing to take Jason’s advice on that,” Humphrey said. “Sophie, Neil?”

“Oh, I was happy to leave it there when I saw that fact that the handle stabs you,” Neil said. “That tells you all you need to know about the kind of weapon it is.”

“It’s not as if we’re even looking for a sword,” Sophie said. “You conjure yours, Humphrey, and you’re not giving up the one Gary made, right Asano?”

“Exactly right,” Jason said.

“That just leaves you, Lindy,” Sophie said. “It might not hurt to have some good equipment for your turn into a warrior power.”

“No thanks,” Belinda said. “I’ll stick with weapons that only stab the other guy.”

Clive groaned loudly as he gained consciousness. He groggily sat up, gripped his head in his hands and let out another coughing groan. Neil dropped back down to examine him.

“How do you feel?” Neil asked.

“Like someone dropped a sailing ship on me,” Clive said, looking past Neil to Jason.

“How did you avoid that thing hitting your soul like a hammer?” Clive asked.

“I didn’t,” Jason said. “I did warn you.”

“I wish I had your resilience of soul,” Clive said.

“No,” Jason said flatly. “You don’t.”

“We’ve decided to leave the sword where it is,” Humphrey said to Clive. “Unless you’re looking to reopen the debate.”

“No,” Clive said, shaking his head and then wincing at the pain it brought. “I felt that soul. What it went through to put that thing there and keep it there. I’m not even sure we could get that sword out, but I am very sure that we shouldn’t.”

Neil and Jason were meditating outside where the cloud house had been set up. They were both anticipating an ascension to bronze-rank after the battle in the cell block

and didn't want to make a mess inside. The cloud house would be able to clear it up, but doing so would just accelerate the rate at which it would consume the supply of crystal wash Jason had fed into it. It had been a huge amount and should be sufficient for years, but there was no point accelerating the consumption when it wasn't necessary.

Neil's summoning power was his last remaining iron-rank ability. The golem had fought like a champion in their most recent conflict, so no one was surprised when Neil crossed the threshold into bronze. He wandered out from the secluded bit of ruin where he had finished his advancement, having washed himself down with a bottle of crystal wash after purging all the muck from his body in the transition.

He had stripped down to his underwear, so his waiting teammates could see that his blocky, weight-lifter physique had clearly changed to one of more sleek, yet still built-up muscle. It had also made his hair fall out and his fingernails grow strangely long. Jason helped remedy those minor issues with grooming scissors and some of Jory's hair growth cream.

Jason's change did not come that day, but Humphrey designated a day for rest. It was something they had done around once a week, taking a break from the otherwise unrelenting schedule of training and combat. They had killed more monsters than it was worth bothering to count, although they had been counting the flesh abominations. They had found and destroyed forty-one of the abominations thus far, which Shade's numbers put at around a tenth of the city's total.

Shade's familiar power advanced ahead of Gordon's, the shadow Jason's most constant companion. Jason had come to rely on his shadowy presence, available even when an apocalypse monster or an interdimensional reality assassin were socially inappropriate.

-
- All [Dark Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
 - Linked attribute [Speed] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].
-

Jason's power attribute had reached bronze over the course of their time in the astral space, taking his strength officially beyond what any normal human was capable of. It was the transition of his speed attribute that really made him feel like he had truly transformed, however. It affected not just his ability to run fast, but his reflexes, agility, dexterity and proprioception.

His newly ascended speed attribute also combined with his power attribute to make him capable of incredible feats. When he really should have gone back to meditation, his

team found him doing somersaults on the spot and climbing up ruins by jumping from wall to wall.

“I feel like a video game character!”

“No one knows what that means,” Sophie said.

“You’ve been able to move like this for as long as I’ve known you,” Jason told her.

“How are you not constantly running around and giggling like an idiot?”

“You should have seen her when she was younger,” Belinda confided, getting a glare from Sophie.

Jason finally settled down and resumed his meditation, after which it did not take long before Gordon’s power likewise crossed the line.

-
- All [Doom Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
 - Linked attribute [Spirit] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].

 - Progress to bronze rank: 100% (4/4 essences complete).

 - All your attributes have reached bronze rank.

 - You have reached bronze rank.
 - You have gained resistance to iron-rank and lower damage sources and effects.
 - The potency of your aura has increased.
 - Your aura senses have improved.

 - Progress to silver rank: 00%.
-

Jason’s transition from iron to bronze rank was much less violent than from normal to iron. That time, his newly created body had been composed of what Clive called trash magic, while his iron-rank one was closer to an ideal state for his rank. It still purged a large quantity of black, stinking biomass, however, that he washed off with crystal wash.

He trimmed his suddenly grown nails and regrew his hair with the cream, leaving his beard to grow back on its own. Humphrey and Clive had both grown beards during their time in the astral space, likewise losing them during their rank-ups. Neil, being an elf, had never grown more than a light scruff that Jason found enviably appealing.

Jason really did feel transformed. He was a new man and he felt it. Just moving around in his bronze-rank body felt different. His spirit attribute reaching bronze also had a big impact as it increased not just the sixth sense that detected auras but took his other five senses beyond the bounds of human potential. The world was suddenly alive with a nuance of colour like nothing he had experienced. He could pick out scents like he was cataloguing them and his hearing could pick out the world around him almost as well as

his vision. He could feel the air on his skin, taste it on his tongue. It was as if the world had transformed with him.

“Good, right?” Humphrey asked with a smile as he found Jason looking into the distance with a goofy grin.

“Oh, yeah.”

“We can handle monsters, or equivalent, of higher rank than us in large numbers, now,” Humphrey said. “Remember those teams we saw at the mirage arena in Jayapura? We can stand shoulder to shoulder with any of them, now.”

“Some people might think that means we can relax a little,” Jason asked. “Something tells me that you think it means we have to train even harder.”

“I can confidently say that we’re at an elite level for our rank,” Humphrey said. “That’s not such a big deal at iron rank, though. If we’re going to say the same at bronze and silver, we need to start the work now.”

“You know, Humphrey, the parents of every girlfriend you ever have are going to love you.”

“What do they think of you?” Humphrey asked.

“I haven’t gotten that far too many times,” Jason said. “There was my first girlfriend, whose parents liked my brother more. Which worked out, in the end. Everyone between her and Cassandra was more casual. Thalia Mercer liked me. Her husband, not so much, I think. The thing with Thadwick, you know.”

“I was always uneasy about Gabrielle’s parents,” Humphrey said. “Religious is good, but some people take it to a point that it gets a little unnerving.”

“Putting aside the religious being good thing, I know what you mean,” Jason said. “You get those really religious people with that weird intensity, you know?”

“Oh yeah,” Humphrey said. “I mean, the goddess of knowledge. It should be a fairly relaxed group, right? They kept asking me what I was reading. They did not like hearing that I didn’t have a lot of time to read with all the training. Speaking of which, we will be getting back to it. A few days to let you and Neil get a feel for your new power level. Then we’ll go after the blood weaver and see what we can find from what’s left of the cultists.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “I have some stuff to do before that, though. Growth items, familiar summoning. Basically, a bunch of rituals. Neil has his growth items, too.”

“We can take tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “After that, though, it’s back to work.”

Chapter 235

Anyone Can Be Useful

"I actually got the materials pretty cheap," Jason said. "Gary made it from local materials in the first place, so I just needed higher-grade versions of the same stuff."

Jason had drawn out the diagram for the ritual of ascension that would have his sword, like he had himself, advance from iron-rank to bronze. He was now laying out ingots of blood gold and star-fall silver, piles of quintessence gems and neat stacks of bronze-rank spirit coins.

The rest of the team were lounging about on the porch of the cloud house in hanging chairs. Jason turned to look at Sophie who had been staring at him all day.

"What?" he asked.

"What?" she asked.

"You've been looking at me like that all day."

"Like what?" Sophie asked.

"Impassively, I guess," Jason said. "You do everything impassively, so it's hard to differentiate."

"Your face," she said.

"What about my face?"

"Bronze rank," she said. "It made it less awful."

"Yep," Belinda agreed.

"I miss the chin," Neil said. "It kind of looked like some weird essence power."

"It wasn't that bad," Jason said. "Humphrey, tell them it wasn't that bad."

"It wasn't that bad," Humphrey said. "I'd even say it was good."

"Thank you," Jason said.

"I mean," Humphrey continued, "if I ever ran out of mana and couldn't conjure a sword, it was right there. What do I use for a backup, now?"

Jason looked put upon as the team laughed.

"It really does look good," Belinda said, taking pity on him. "Bronze rank's been good to you. The square-jaw thing you have happening now that is actually not bad. Right, Soph?"

"Its... not terrible."

"That's Sophie language for 'sexy as all get-out,' which I think is a little excessive, but each to their own," Belinda said. It earned her a glare from Sophie, while Jason shook his head and went back to his ritual.

It would have been faster for Clive to perform the ritual, as he had with Neil's growth items, but Clive hadn't offered and Jason hadn't asked. They both understood that if you could advance your growth items yourself, you did it yourself.

The sword was simple and elegant in its design; silvery blade, a simple, red gold hilt with black binding and a short black tassel. Jason carefully placed it at the centre of the magic circle and performed the ritual.

-
- Growth item [Dread Salvation] has advanced from iron rank to bronze rank.
 - Growth item [Dread Salvation] has reached its maximum potential. It must be reforged by the original craftsman in order to advance further.
 - Item [Dread Salvation] has gained new abilities.
-

Clive, Neil and Humphrey had already ranked-up their growth items with no additional effects, and the same had happened for Jason's amulet. His sword was the first of their items to gain new effects.

Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- *A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).*
 - Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a physical immunity to it, an instance of [Stone Cutter] is applied to the blade and an instance of [Vibrant Echo] is inflicted to the enemy.
 - Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a magical immunity to it, an instance of [Spell Breaker] is applied to the blade and an instance of [Radiant Echo] is inflicted to the enemy.
 - [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage; highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Vibrant Echo] (damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Deal ongoing, resonating-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Spell Breaker] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage; highly effective against magical defences and incorporeal entities. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Radiant Echo] (damage-over-time, magic, stacking): Deal ongoing, disruptive-force damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

In addition to getting more powerful over time, the sword's new abilities allowed it to leave behind ongoing damage effects, bringing it more in line with Jason's own power set. Magic-type afflictions were easier to dispel than most, but almost nothing was immune to them, unlike Jason's various maledictions. To advance the sword further would require Gary's help, but silver rank was, for the moment, a distant horizon.

He was saving his familiar upgrades for last, so he moved on to the cloud flask. He shoed everyone off the porch and returned the cloud house to its flask, the house taking several minutes to dissolve into smoke and pour into the bottle like a genie.

"There must be a big, involved ritual for an item like the cloud flask," Neil said.

"Nope," Jason said. "You just have to get to bronze rank, then feed the greedy bugger about a squillion bucks worth of goodies."

He shook his head at the bottle as he pulled a funnel from his inventory, placed it in the mouth of flask and then started shoving in fistfuls of quintessence.

"Twenty-two hundred quintessence," he complained. "Two hundred of it dimension quintessence. Remind me to thank to thank Emir again for supplying the goods for the first rank up. No way could I have afforded this, on top of everything else."

Shovelling in all the quintessence gems and then ten thousand spirit coins took longer than the rituals for Jason and Neil's growth weapons put together. Deprived of their comfortable cloud seats, some of the team grew impatient.

"Could you have just used silver coins?" Neil asked. "Or gold. That would have sent it along nicely."

"It's not about the value of the coins," Clive said. "It's about the magic inside them. All that power doesn't just fuel the upgrade but balances out all the magic involved in the transformation, so it doesn't go awry."

"You know," Neil said to Clive, "just once, I'd like something to come up and have you say that you have no idea."

"Hey Clive," Belinda said.

"Yes?"

"How would Neil kill any monsters if we weren't around?"

"I have no idea," Clive said.

"You two are hilarious," Neil said flatly.

"Actually, that was pretty good," Jason said.

"Shut up and play with your bottle."

The cult leader Zato, led Timos and Thadwick across the ruined grounds of the Vane estate. The last remnants of the climate-shifting magic were gone and the desert was

rapidly reclaiming the once lush territory. Now it was nothing but withered remnants and piled ruins, only the now-dormant magical pylons marking had once been a stark line between the estate and the desert.

They arrived at what had one been the manor house, now crumbling stone and dried wood. Zato held out an arm and the limb segmented into pieces, revealing not warm flesh and blood within, but cold iron. The pieces were strung together on a wire, which spooled out as the segments sprung forward, burying themselves in the piled debris.

Moments later, chunks of that debris started floating into the air, more and more of them, moving into an organised shape. The materials melted, wood and stone flowing like water as they blended together to form a strange hybrid material. The material flowed into lines, creating a ritual circle on the ground and then a dome that covered it, leaving only a hole large enough to crawl through.

“As you grow stronger,” Zato said, “Your meagre essence abilities will be supplanted, one by one, by the superior power of the Builder. You will not be bound by mortal limitations, scrabbling for scraps of might from worthless training or miserable monster cores.”

“This will make me strong?” Thadwick asked, nodding at the dome as it neared completion.

“Yes,” Zato said. “So many have passed you over, Thadwick, but I see your true potential. You will prove of supreme value to the Builder, once you are stronger. Enter, and feel the power flow through you.”

After a last, wary look, Thadwick got down and crawled through the hole. When the hole closed behind him and he was plunged into darkness, he panicked for a moment. Then he felt the promised power surging into him. It had only been a matter of moments, but he could feel the strength flowing through him and he started laughing like a madman.

Outside the dome, Zato and Timos could no more hear Thadwick than he could hear them as they walked away.

“When you said you would find something for Thadwick, I was not optimistic,” Timos said. “I didn’t realise that something like this was possible.”

“More than possible, it is necessary,” Zato said. “I was not fully inducted into the leadership, who took their plans with them to the grave fighting on the island. We have need of guidance. Thadwick and the other one...?”

“Dougall,” Timos reminded.

“Right, yes. Thadwick and Dougall are not true believers. They came to us out of desperate, mercenary sensibilities. Half loyalties will be met with half membership. They will pay the rest of their way with sacrifice and will be venerated for their service.”

“Why bother with the ruse?” Timos asked. “Why not just force Thadwick along?”

“Because even with the soul seed inside it, altering a soul is difficult business unless that soul is willing. Why force the poison down his throat when a spoonful of honey will have him gulping it down?”

“Honestly? I want to make him choke on the spoon?”

Zato chuckled.

“How close to ready is Dougall?” Timos asked.

“He will reach the requisite state shortly before the Church of Purity’s people arrive,” Zato said. “The timing is fortuitous. For the moment, make sure that neither Dougall nor Thadwick realise that they are receiving the same treatment.”

“Not a problem,” Timos said. “Dougall is so keen on ingratiating himself that he will do exactly as asked. Thadwick is so self-obsessed that he is oblivious to any of the goings on.”

Zato smiled.

“See? Anyone can be useful, if you find the task that best suits their abilities.”

“It’s big,” Neil said.

“It wouldn’t let me use the blending-in version,” Jason said.

“I don’t think there’s a version of this that you can discreetly move through a jungle,” Humphrey said.

Item: [Cloud Flask] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

- This item is bound to you and cannot be used by anyone else.
- Use the energies within the cloud flask to create buildings and vehicles made of clouds. Available forms are restricted by rank.
- Items contained within the cloud construct when it is returned to the flask are stored in a dimensional space and cannot be recovered until another cloud construct is formed.
- Available forms (iron rank): Cloud house (grand), cloud house (adaptive).
- Available forms (bronze rank): Carriage house (grand).
- Unavailable forms (bronze rank): Carriage house (adaptive).

“A carriage house is meant to be a building that holds carriages,” Jason said. “Not a building that trundles about like one.”

To Jason, the cloud flask’s bronze-rank form looked as much as anything like a massive recreational vehicle, one of the stupidly expensive ones with two levels and a roof deck that movie stars lived in on set. It even had a spot for a driver at the front, although it

was directed by placing hands on a misty orb, rather than a steering wheel. Other than that, Jason could direct its movements mentally.

The cloudy white vehicle with its sunset embellishments stood out brightly amongst the dark stone and deep greenery of the overgrown jungle. There were no wheels, making it something of a hovercraft RV. The boulevards of the overgrown streets were wide, but thick with jungle, making them impassable for the huge vehicle. Jason had moved it back and forth a little, but there really wasn't room to drive around.

The interior was likewise akin to a luxurious RV, with beds, couches and comfortable chairs. There actually was a roof deck. From the inside, translucent mist made for clear windows, although they could not be seen through from the outside.

"Well," Humphrey consoled, "it'll be nice once we're back out of the astral space. "It'll be great for taking long trip so you, me and Clive can visit locations to portal to, later. That's what my mother did all through bronze rank. Travelling the world, having adventures."

"Actually, that sounds kind of awesome. Neil doesn't get an opening credit until season two, though, and it'll be an 'also starring' with his face hidden by a melon or something."

"What?"

"We can figure it out later," Jason said. "I guess I should turn it back into a house, and then finish up. What do you say, fellas? Saving the best for last?"

Gordon appeared with a flash of Jason's aura as Shade appeared from his shadow.

"Gordon says that I should be last," Shade said. Gordon orange orb flashed brightly, which was his signal for no.

"See?" Shade asked. "He really doesn't want to go last."

The orange orb started angrily strobing.

"He's quite vociferous on the topic," Shade continued.

"Shade, stop teasing Gordon," Jason said. "Gordon, it's just an expression. Being last doesn't actually mean you're the best."

A small patch of blood seeped from Jason's neck, turning into a leech that crawled along his shoulder. Jason turned to look at it.

"Colin, you've already ranked up. You can't do it again."

The disconsolate leech slinked back into Jason's neck.

Chapter 236

A Series of Familiar Powers

Shade was not visibly changed in his new, bronze rank vessel; he remained a shadowy figure in a cloak of darkness. The only visible difference was an increase in his number of bodies, from three to seven. He had also gained the ability to exert a small amount of physical force, while remaining an incorporeal entity. It wasn't enough to inflict damage but it would allow him to perform tasks in places too dangerous for people who weren't intangible and didn't have six extra bodies.

It also meant that it was unlikely that Shade's vessel would be completely eliminated in battle. Barring an unusual fight, such as the one against the elemental tyrant that claimed his original iron-rank vessel, he would remain intact. Any bodies that were destroyed could be remade, so long as at least one remained. The only cost would be time and almost all of Jason's mana, making it something not to be done in the midst of combat.

The other new ability Shade had acquired was his own dimensional storage space. It wasn't as capacious as that of Jason, Humphrey or Clive, but was accessible from any of Shade's bodies.

Jason's own storage space, his inventory power, had likewise improved as he reached bronze rank. One of its nuances was the ability to expand the number of slots available through the use of dimensional bags. There were five slots in the corner of the inventory screen interface for placing dimensional bags, but only one had been available and could only be filed with an iron-rank bag.

Jason had filled that slot early in his adventuring career, but he brought two bronze rank bags with him for use once he ranked up. He had to carry them empty, as dimensional bags could only be placed into other dimensional spaces when they themselves contained nothing.

Another boost to his inventory was an increase to the maximum volume per item. He could feel the change instinctively, but would need to experiment to find the exact new limit.

Humphrey and Clive had likewise experienced improvements from their storage abilities reaching bronze. Unlike Jason's power, theirs were essence abilities that gained not just incremental improvements but whole new effects on ranking up. Humphrey's storage space power, magic armoury, now significantly reduced the mana cost of conjuring his weapons and armour. It meant that he no longer had to burn a notable chunk

of mana at the start of every fight, of whenever he switched between his two conjured swords.

Clive's rune gate power had gone through the most impressive change. The original function opened a rune circle portal to his storage space, but was now a full-fledged portal power. Combining dimensional storage and a travel portal in one ability wasn't useful in a fight, but it was easily the most concentrated utility power on the team.

The increase in utility was another indication of the somewhat unusual makeup of the team. Humphrey and Neil were the only members that would slot easily into conventional team roles, with Jason, Clive, Belinda and Sophie all outside the norm to various degrees.

On the relatively normal end of the spectrum were Jason and Sophie. Affliction specialists and dodge tanks were less common variations of the common damage-dealer and guardian roles. Clive was a spell-based damage dealer who only had one attack spell. Belinda was the most extreme, simultaneously filling no set roles and most of them.

A traditional adventuring team used reliable strengths and fixed roles to approach every situation in a similar way, in order to maximise their strengths and minimise their weaknesses. The weakness of Jason's team was the inability to do that. They needed to strategise and adapt to any given circumstance.

The team, in a way, had become something of a reflection of Jason. There were better power sets for everyday monster hunting, but they thrived in meeting challenges that more conventional teams would struggle against. By not being pinned down to one approach, they would be ready when unusual circumstances were thrown their way.

Part of the team's adaptive nature was the inclusion of a lot of utility. Most teams would include at least one storage space power and would count any more as a happy bonus. As for portal or teleportation powers, there was no team that wouldn't jump at the chance. Many teams would take on an otherwise unremarkable, or even downright incompetent member for the simple reason that their repertoire included a portal ability. Jason's team commanded four storage powers and three long-distance travel powers, making them rather enviable.

Stash had also evolved to bronze rank alongside Humphrey, the bonded familiar not requiring a new body to be summoned in the way Jason's familiars did. While as mischievous as ever, he was more confident about revealing his true form, which only Humphrey had seen before. His true shape was small, with a long, serpentine body covered in rainbow scales that ran along him in waves of colour that shimmered and changed. Belinda became completely enchanted with his draconic true form and Stash became enchanted with the praise she heaped upon him.

Gordon went through a slight change when his new body was summoned, with a second pair of glowing, blue and orange eyeball orbs joining the first in floating around his body. This gave him four simultaneous attack beams; two of resonating force that was effective against tough opponents and two of disruptive force, effective against magic and incorporeal beings like Gordon himself. Additionally, he could send two orbs of the same type hurtling off, even flying them around corners before coming together and detonating. The resultant explosion was powerful, but the orbs would take a minute to reform, during which they could not be used to make further attacks..

Making good on his threat, Humphrey pushed the team to stay on the move, hunting down more of the flesh abominations and whatever ordinary monsters they encountered along the way. Eager to push the limits of their new capabilities, both Humphrey and Jason took on flesh abominations alone for the first time.

In Jason's case, his bronze-rank powers were enough to overwhelm the monster's recovery powers much faster. He had already been able to bypass the rank-based damage resistance but now his powers were doing bronze-rank damage. That was only part of the change, as his new afflictions also played a role.

Rigor mortis, inflicted by his shadow arm Reaper power, gave a stacking penalty to the speed and recovery attributes of whatever poor soul he inflicted it upon. His inexorable doom power caused the effect to stack up and up, the penalty to speed making the creature more and more sluggish, even when it took swift forms to try and pin down the elusive Jason. Meanwhile, the penalty to recovery left its ability to hold off the afflictions increasingly diminished, even as the afflictions themselves became worse and worse.

Another key affliction came from Jason's special attack, leech bite. Along with inflicting the bleeding effect, it now also inflicted the same leech toxin poison that Colin did. An instance of the stacking toxin would refresh the bleeding effect whenever it was healed through, leaving the adaptive powers of the flesh abominations unable to stave off Jason's malign powers as effectively as they had in the past.

Humphrey was likewise able to overcome the ability of the abominations to adapt to him, in his case with raw power. He showed off the advantage of being a human special attack specialist with an array of offensive techniques that could take on any kind of enemy. If it took a solid form, the resonating force of his shield breaker attack would crack it like an egg. A more amorphous form would absorb heavy physical blows but be vulnerable to the disruptive force of his spirit reaper attack. His unstoppable force power had a longer cooldown, but would devastate the abominations in whatever form they took.

Humphrey had not taken on any of them himself before Jason and Neil ranked up, as getting them over the line to bronze rank had always been the priority. Now they had, he was happier to let himself loose. Like Jason, he had already been ignoring the rank disparity, but increasing the power of his attacks from iron to bronze-rank had turned him from a threat to a nemesis. He relentlessly pounded away at an abomination that simply couldn't find a form to withstand the oppressive might.

The team were put through their paces as they made a beeline for the centre of the city and the territory of the blood weaver. Of a night they continued to rest in the cloud house, which was now a more secure than ever. The magic of the house was more sophisticated at bronze rank, with stronger defences and a superior ability to hide itself from the senses of wandering monsters.

As they stopped to rest each night, Clive had been taking more precise measurements of the ambient magic, which had been rising at a precipitous rate. He updated the team as they rested for the evening.

"Isn't that a barely measurable increase?" Jason asked as Clive gave them the results of his latest analysis.

"The fact that the increase is measurable at all is alarming," Clive told him. "That it's occurred over just a matter of weeks is insane. We need to figure out what these cultists have done."

"And if we can't question them, because they're mindless blood thralls?" Sophie asked.

"I doubt they'll be mindless," Clive said. "A blood weaver could turn them into witless blood puppets, but more likely it has employed a traditional form of vampirism, where they are subject to the will of the one that turned them, while retaining their own minds."

"We take them alive if we can," Humphrey said. "Not at the risk of endangering the team, though. If we have to put them down, we do it."

"If they aren't any help, that's not the end of the road," Clive said. "Whatever is causing this change isn't something you can just knock out a magic ritual for and off you go. What's happening is more involved than that."

"Any closer to an idea of what that is?" Humphrey asked.

"I've been going through the books Knowledge gave Jason, looking for something that would produce these results. Without more information, though, I'm not even sure what to look for. At this point, more than talking to these cultists, I need to see what tools they brought with them."

Shade now had enough bodies that he could transform into a mount for each member of the team, and bronze rank had apparently enhanced the nature of the mounts he could transform into. For one thing, he could collect multiple bodies together to replicate the self-propelled magical carriages favoured by the Greenstone elite. That was of little use on streets overgrown with jungle, but not the only new trick he had picked up.

Rather than a full vehicle, Shade could also merge fewer bodies to create different individual mounts. By merging his bodies in pairs, he became three creatures that were somewhere between a narrow-bodied beetle and a preying mantis. Each had a glossy black carapace, glowing eyes and huge blade arms with glowing white edges, from which mist softly drifted. They were an intimidating sight.

“Very nice,” Jason said approvingly. “Shade, you’re an absolute champion.”

“These creatures do not appear in this world,” Shade said with his remaining body. “They exist in another world I spent time in while serving as a familiar.”

“Hold on,” Humphrey said. “Jason, you have no problem with these terrifying blade-armed monstrosities, but heidels disturbing?”

“They have two heads, Humphrey. Two heads. Can you imagine having two heads? Imagine if you had a great idea for a recipe, then had to explain it to your other head. That’s not right.”

“Wait, *that’s* your problem?” Humphrey asked.

“What if you’re eating something delicious? Either one head gets left out or each one only gets half as much, because they have to share a stomach. Half as much! What if it’s a delicious cake!”

“That was a nice cake you brought out for the rank-up feast,” Neil said. “Did you make that yourself?”

“I did. The secret is to sweeten the cream before whipping it and really make it the highlight.”

“Was there leftover cake?” Sophie asked, with a suspiciously bushy moustache.

“There was not,” Jason said.

“Boo,” she jeered, before turning into an iridescent blue jungle lizard.

“At least he’s figured out how to shape shift clothes, now,” actual Sophie said.

“They’re still part of his body, so technically he was naked,” Jason said.

Humphrey said nothing, pinching the bridge of his nose and shaking his head.

Not all of the team rode the mantis beetles. Sophie maintaining her scouting glide-flight over their heads, while Humphrey rode Stash in lizard form. Clive joined Sophie, drifting slowly through the air on Onslow, the flying tortoise. His familiar wasn't very fast at any altitude beyond just above ground height, but as he didn't need to navigate the terrain there was no problem keeping up.

That left the three mantis beetles, the most Shade could produce. It was enough for Jason, Neil and Belinda, giving the whole team effective transport. The blade arms of the mounts were ideal for cutting a path through the jungle, while the remaining six beetle legs offered a solid platform that could navigate the uneven ground with ease.

"Shade, how do you think this form would hold up in combat?" Jason asked. Although the mantis beetle looked to have a hard, chitinous exterior, it was actually composed of the same soft, comfortable shadow-stuff Shade's horse form had been. The blade arms were effectively cutting through the undergrowth, however.

"That would be unreliable, at best," Shade said. "I strongly suspect that any amount of damage would make me unable to sustain this form. You do not have to tell anyone that, however. I could be used to make an effective bluff."

"I like the way you think."

"Oh, great," Neil said. "As if Asano wasn't dodgy enough already. Now he's got a partner."

The team reached the interior of the city where the buildings were completely shattered and the jungle in complete ascendance. As with their first visit, they were unharassed by monsters as they pushed in. Rather than ride mounts, they made a slogging path on foot through the thick undergrowth.

"Do you think the blood weaver took control of all the monsters in this area?" Neil asked.

"There might have been some too strong to take over," Humphrey said. "Other silver rank monsters. They were more likely driven out of the weaver's territory, rather than subjugated. You can expect to encounter vampire versions of everything bronze and below that was here, though."

"It kind of worries me that we still aren't seeing any," Neil said.

"It almost certainly knows we're here by now," Clive said. "It's smart enough to try and bait us in, the way it did last time, but not smart enough to realise we'd see through it."

"Yeah, but we're walking into the trap anyway," Neil said.

"Once the fighting starts, it probably won't stop until we reach the blood weaver," Humphrey said. "We're going to be fighting all the monsters from a large area, all in one

wave. Let Jason and Sophie do the heavy lifting as much as possible, since they're our endurance players. Obviously do what you have to, but conserve your mana and stamina as much as you can. We have a lot of mana recovery, but expect a lot of fight."

Humphrey stopped, looking around at the team.

"Make no mistake," he said. "This will be a battle, not a fight. We are about to experience the single most gruelling combat scenario that any of us have ever encountered. More than the expedition into the desert astral space, more than Jason playing distraction to the silver-rank elemental. We're going to war against an army of vampire monsters and we'll be wading through the bodies of the dead before we're done."

"So, what I'm hearing is that it will be easy and we shouldn't worry," Neil said.

Humphrey glared at him and Jason put a reassuring hand on Humphrey's arm.

"Mate, it's alright," Jason said. "We know the stakes, we know what we're up against and we know what we'll have to face before we're done. Don't go wasting your energy now on being tense; you'll have intensity enough, once the fighting starts. For now, just trust in your team."

Jason glanced at the jungle around them, as if waiting for something.

"Damn," he said.

"What?" Humphrey asked.

"That would have been an epic moment for the monsters to appear," Jason. "You'd think vampires would have a more appropriate sense of drama."

Chapter 237

It's Not About Killing Monsters

They heard the monsters before they saw them. It began with the sound of something moving loudly through the thick jungle, pushing its way roughly through the undergrowth. Humphrey had them turn around and go back the way they came, making for one of the defensible points he had been looking out for as they travelled.

He had picked out a construction that had held up better than most, due to being a solid, flat, stone platform. It was only around chest high, far from enough to stop monsters, but was at least an impediment they could work with. It was also sized fairly well for the team, giving Sophie and Humphrey the chance to move about while staying close to the more vulnerable party members.

Shade returned to his normal form, gently depositing his riders on the ground. The others took a moment to begin calling up their summons and familiars while Stash turned from a riding lizard into a giant marsh hydra. At bronze rank he could take the physical form of bronze-rank monsters but could only use the full magical powers of iron-rank monsters. He could use some minor magical abilities of bronze-rank monsters, but certainly nothing as powerful as the hydra's potent rapid healing. What he did get was the hydra's strength, toughness and multiple, teeth-laden heads.

Jason directed Gordon to stay with the main group as the familiar's direct damage would be more useful to the team than it would for Jason in the fight to come. He was about to leave when Humphrey held him up.

"Jason," Humphrey said. "We're going to lean on you heavily for this, but I know you can do it."

Jason chuckled.

"Humphrey," he said, shaking his head, "you still don't really understand adventuring. It's not about killing monsters."

Jason tugged casually at his new, bronze-rank battle robe.

"It's about how you look while you're killing monsters. And you have to admit..."

Jason's shadow cloak manifested around him.

"...I make this look good."

"Dear gods, you're insufferable," Neil called out from where he was setting up a summoning circle. "Also, good luck and please don't die."

Jason slipped the hood of his magical cloak back, giving Humphrey a rare smile completely devoid of smirk.

“Don’t go getting it into your head that you have to do all the work,” Jason warned him. “Don’t go thinking that you’re the one who has to save everyone, to make the big sacrifice. Remember when I got it into my head to go of and kill all those bandits alone? I was wrong to do that. Be the beneficiary of my mistakes. It’s not just about you. Or me, which I need to be reminded of, from time to time.”

“Happy to help!” Neil called out, still pouring the salt for his summoning circle.

“Thank you, Neil,” Jason said flatly, then turned his attention back to Humphrey.

“Trust the team, Humphrey. Rely on the team. We’re pretty good. Well, Neil’s okay. But the rest of us...”

Jason slipped his hood back up and lightly ran off, vanishing into the jungle. He was stronger when he was free to run rampant, but would remain in contact with the team through the voice chat.

There were ropey vines all over the platform and Clive handed Sophie and Belinda vials they used to rapidly wither the plants and give themselves clear footing. It was a concoction of Jory’s that Clive had acquired a supply of before returning to the jungle-covered city. They didn’t have enough for it to waste on pathfinding through jungle scrub, but to give them some much-needed solid footing in a crucial moment it was perfect.

As the two women cleared off the plants, Clive started drawing out ritual circles. He started with a large one in the centre of the platform, his battle platform ritual that would enhance the wand and staff attacks, as well as any damage spells of the group. Then he moved on to circles attached to the end of his weapons. The glowing lines moved with the weapons as he waved them about.

The advantage of staff and wand weapons was that they were highly mana efficient, compared to combat magic. The disadvantage was that they were also weaker, but Clive’s ritual circles would help remedy that.

The circles he was using would refine the ambient magic of the area and feed it into the weapons, providing additional power without requiring additional mana from Clive’s own pool. The impact this would have on the ambient magic once he started using his weapons meant that any further rituals in the area would be tricky to use for a while, but that was hardly a concern with what was about to happen.

Clive decided to get in before then and try something he had been working on. It wasn’t related to his essence abilities, instead being a work of pure ritual magic. Ritual magic designed for combat some exceptionally rare, and it was something Clive had developed himself.

He started drawing ritual circles in the air, one after another in a line, like a tube. He poured large amount of his own mana into each one, largely depleting his mana pool by the time he was done. It ran from the centre of the battle platform circle directly toward the jungle where the sound of rushing monsters was growing louder by the moment.

Humphrey and Neil, in the meantime, were calling up their summons. Neil's chrysalis golem looked different at bronze rank. It was just as tall but the formerly chunky, ogrish form was now more refined, like a powerfully muscled giant.

For his own summon, Humphrey hesitated before throwing the summoner's die. He ultimately decided to use it, knowing that it could provide a crucial advantage in what would be a punishing battle. Hopefully, even a bad role would be mitigated by the new ability it had gained on reaching bronze rank. At first, Humphrey had thought there was no change to the function of the die, as there was little change to the description.

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

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

- Requirements: Summoning power.
- Effect: Rolling this die while enacting a bronze-rank or lower 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.

What he had only later realised was that three of the faces on the die had changed. It had only been the day before when he used the die and one of the new faces rolled up. After stopping, the symbol that lit up was not that of an animal, but one that Clive quickly translated as meaning 'power.' The die had then rolled again, on its own, landing on the symbol for wolf. The result had been Humphrey's summons turning into werewolf like creatures, larger, more powerful and standing on two legs. They were still made of dragon bone and had the conjured equipment generated by Humphrey's storage power, in this case, bronze-rank armour perfectly tailored to fit their unusual body shape.

Humphrey hoped for a similar result as he rolled again. When it stopped, a glowing symbol rose up from the die; another of the new symbols. Humphrey had gone over them with Clive after finding out about the new sides and knew this one meant double. He had been hoping that meant it doubled the number of summons it called up. Even unenhanced by the die, ten of his bone soldiers would be of critical value against the numbers they were expecting.

After falling to a stop, the die rolled itself again, the symbol for bird rising up to float next to the one for double. Then the die rolled for a third time, stopping on cat. The three symbols merged to form a new symbol, one that Humphrey didn't know. Then his summons began to appear.

There were five, the normal number for his summoning power at bronze rank. They had the hind legs and body of oversized lions, and the wings and head of a giant eagle. Their front legs were also those of an eagle, ending in powerful talons.

"Griffins," Humphrey said in a half-whisper. He had seen them as a child, while travelling with his mother. Sailing on a ship near the coast, they had spotted the griffins come soaring majestically off the top of a cliff. They had swooped down, snatching sharks right out of the water before winging away with them.

It had been young Humphrey's first encounter with a magical beast that was natural, rather than a monster. Such creatures were rare in the low-magic Greenstone region where he was born and raised. It had left griffins with a special place in his heart and he was entranced as his summons took their form. These were all white, the colour of dragon bone, and wearing armoured barding suited to their forms.

"Humphrey," Sophie called out. "Eyes up."

Humphrey stirred from his unexpected, nostalgic reverie and realised that the sounds of the approaching monsters had grown from a few individuals crashing through the jungle into what sounded like a wave. Like water crashing onto a rocky shore, the violent sounds of monsters tearing through the undergrowth came washing over them.

Humphrey touched one of the griffins.

"Swoop, grab and drop," he instructed them and they took to the air. He then leapt lightly onto the platform, where Neil and his golem had already clambered up. Most of the team were gathered with their familiars and summons, the exception being Humphrey and Jason. Jason had taken Colin and Shade with him, leaving Gordon behind. Humphrey was present, but his griffon's were winging overhead as Clive's floating tortoise watched their majestic swooping forlornly.

Humphrey had sent Stash, in his domineering hydra form, back behind the platform. The monsters would largely try and swarm them from the front, which is where their main defensive strength was positioned. It was inevitable, though, that the platform would become surrounded. Stash would be their main line of defence from that approach.

Clive and Neil both started casting spells on their teammates. Humphrey grew half his height again from Neil's first offering.

Ability: [Giant's Might] (Growth)

- Spell (boon).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 10 minutes.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (04%).

- Effect (iron): Target ally and their equipment grow larger, gaining an enhanced [Power] attribute.

- Effect (bronze): Ally also gains resistance to physical damage and high-momentum effects.

Clive's first spell affected the whole team on the platform, including their summons and familiars. Jason, Shade, Colin and the Griffons who were out of range were not so blessed. The ability created rings of glowing runes that floated around everyone.

Ability: [Rune Mantle] (Rune)

- Spell (boon, this ability has variable subtypes, contingent on effect).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: 10 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (02%).

- Effect (iron): Bestow a ring of random runes around an ally. Each rune is associated with a specific effect that affects the ally or an enemy. Attacks against the ally trigger the destruction of a random rune, causing its effect to occur.

- Effect (bronze): Increasing the cost to moderate mana allows the rune mantle to be bestowed on all nearby allies.

Clive's second spell likewise affected the whole team, making them glow gold-red for a moment before fading.

Ability: [Mantle of Retribution] (Karmic)

- Spell (boon, retributive).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: 10 seconds.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (01%).

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts retributive impact damage on anyone who attacks the target ally.

 - Effect (bronze): Increasing the cost to moderate mana allows the mantle of retribution to be bestowed on all nearby allies.
-

While the spells were being cast, the monsters grew louder and louder, yet there were no roars or shrieks. They were silent, save for the commotion of their passage through the jungle as they flattened everything in their path.

Finally they appeared in front of the team, erupting out of the jungle. As unnerving as the fact that they weren't issuing any noises was the way the disparate group moved as one. Normally, such a wild collection of monsters would be more eager to fight each other than they would adventurers..

As the creatures reached the platform, they finally started to make noise, all in harmony. It was an alien, sonorous cry, filled with hunger.

"Throw your heaviest attacks to blunt the first wave, then conserve mana," Humphrey called out, as if the team hadn't gone over and over the plans for the battle.

Clive had already made his big mana expenditure on his row of ritual circles. They were lined up like the barrel of a gun and he fired a bolt from his staff through the first. The bolt froze, as if caught in an invisible hand, and the mana Clive had put into the circle was fed into the bolt until the circle collapsed. The bolt shot forward again, stopping and draining mana from each circle until it was a huge globe of force that made the air around the team vibrate.

While the bolt was going through its stop-start passage, the rest of the team opened up. Belinda used her force tether power to gather a large cluster of the shoulder-to-shoulder monsters and then open her reaper pit power underneath. The tether exploded and the rest of their health would be eaten away by the pit. Only a few of the tough bronze-rankers would eventually escape when the pit's duration came to an end.

Clive's bolt finished its passage, having consumed all the ritual circles. It landed amongst the monsters like military ordinance, throwing up a huge cloud of dirt and dust,

along with a low boom that rammed into their eardrums. The cloud obscured most of the monsters from their sight, while gobbets of wet jungle earth and wet former monster rained down on the team. They didn't have time to pay it any mind, as what they could see of the monsters showed that they hadn't slowed down.

"What the hell was that?" Jason asked through voice chat.

"Sorry," Clive said. "I didn't realise the effect would be that big."

"Just watch where you're aiming that thing!"

Chapter 238

Sin Eater

Sophie and Humphrey were waiting for the monsters to get closer, while Neil cast a spell, conjuring two sets of three stone reels above his head. There were pictures of the various monsters present on the reels, like a giant, archaic slot machine. There were also images of the team, although massively out numbered by those of the monsters.

Ability: [Reels of Fortune] (Prosperity)

- Spell (this ability has variable subtypes, contingent on effect).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 10 minutes.

- Current rank: bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures three immaterial reels. Channel mana into the reels to generate random effects on random individuals within the area. If an individual is affected more than once by the same use of the reels, the effect is increased for each reel.

- Effect (bronze): Conjures a second set of reels. Each reel is more likely to match sets for additional effect when large numbers of a creature type are present.

The reels wheeled around before slowing and locking into place, one after another. Due to the bronze rank effect and preponderance of monsters, it was all but a given that each reel would produce a matching set. The first turned up three matching images of a snake monster and sent a stroke of electricity into the cloud. The team could only see flashes of the lightning through the dirt and dust of the cloud that Clive had thrown up.

The second orb showed a three-set of a gorilla-like monster and sent a huge ball of fire sailing into the air. At the peak of its arc, it broke into numerous, smaller fireballs, plunging into the cloud as the reels above Neil faded. By this point, the monsters were almost upon them.

Humphrey turned his gaze to the sky and teleported high into the air, before initiating his dive bomb and unstoppable force attacks, descending through the air like the sword of judgement. He carved a heavily armoured beetle-type creature clean in half and sent out a shockwave that scattered the surrounding monsters, dispersing the momentum they rebuilt after Clive's attack. Humphrey's wings appeared on his back and with a heavy flap they pushed his back onto the platform.

The first monsters had reached the platform and Sophie used her massive acceleration power, eternal moment. Time seemed to freeze as she rapidly produced wind blades that shot off as the power faded, so many that even the iron-rank attack eliminated a bronze-rank monster.

With everyone having fired off their big openers, Neil cast a spell.

Ability: [Cornucopia] (Prosperity)

- Spell (boon, recovery).
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: 1 hour.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (01%).

- Effect (iron): Bestow a very strong mana and stamina recovery effects on all nearby allies, with a moderate duration.

- Effect (bronze): Provide boons that adapt to the needs of each ally. These effects have a long duration.

The team's mana started rapidly replenishing, and the team received various bonuses. Clive received an increase to wand and staff damage, as did Belinda, who had used her spurious sorcerer power to also gain the power to use magic weapons. Humphrey received a cost reduction for special attacks, while Sophie had her passive damage abilities strengthened. As for Neil, he had his cooldown times reduced. Even the familiars received bonuses, Only Jason missing out by being out of range.

Everything was turning to chaos as monsters piled up around the platform. After Clive's blast gutted the centre mass of the monster wave, it was the flanks that pushed in hardest, with Humphrey and Sophie each holding a side while Neil's golem took the less hectic front. It was higher rank than Sophie, but the tenacious adventurer was still better able to hold the line than the summon.

The monsters were primarily a mix of high-end iron and low-end bronze, with a few powerful standouts among them. The horde spread to the rear of the platform faster than expected after being pushed around the sides. There, they ran into hydra-form Stash, Humphrey directing the griffins to move in and support him.

The monsters started piling up around the platform, held off by Stash, Sophie, Humphrey and the golem. Humphrey was swinging his sword back and forth in workmanlike fashion, his normal blows enough to put paid to the iron-rankers. His special attacks he saved for the bronzes.

Sophie was moving so fast she looked like a flipbook animation, like a series of still images leading one into the other. She made the most of her increased damage buff and battering her foes with a dazzling series of hits that looked more like the speed of a bronze ranker.

Her wind blade power was of limited effect against the strength and number of the enemy. Instead, she relied on her wind wave power that could blast powerful gusts of air and send enemies flying. Usable every six seconds, it was an effective tool for disrupting the enemy and buying time. With the teams mana regeneration and her own efficiency, it was a pattern she could keep up indefinitely.

The others poured out damage from behind, Belinda and Clive with staves, Gordon and Belinda's lantern familiar with beams and bolts of force. Onslow floated above them blasting out powers from his shell. The magically saturated astral space was kind to the rune tortoise, allowing its powers to recharge more swiftly than normal and making it less reliant on Clive's mana.

The ranged attackers mostly focused on Sophie's side and the golem at the front, as Humphrey brought strength and resilience enough to hold a side largely on his own.

An unstable détente was formed, the monsters blindly attacking, but unable to make it past the teams defences for the moment. The initially impassive monsters were increasingly entering a state of blood frenzy, their vampiric natures revealed in a clamouring thirst for the blood of the team.

The powers Clive had placed on the team, the rings of runes and the retributive damage, were proving a highly efficient use of his mana. Their effects weren't great, but they were ongoing and cheaply reapplied. The mantle of retribution inflicted damage back onto enemies, not in huge amounts, but it accumulated as the monsters threw themselves at Humphrey, the golem and Stash, all of whom were taking regular hits.

Each attack also triggered one of the runes from the rune mantle, to wildly varied effect. Some gave the ally a heal over time, an instant burst of mana recovery or bestowed boons like damage reduction, enhanced strength or even more retributive damage.

When the runes affected the attacking enemy they usually blasted out damage that could be of any type. Elemental damage was the most common, but also varieties of force, from the powerful resonating and disruptive types to sonic shockwaves. At other times, the runes applied afflictions, from a weakening poison to flames that wouldn't seem to go out.

One more effect was impinging upon the enemies with every attack they made. It was one that had little immediate effect, but threatened to ultimately determine the fight.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy).
 - Base cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (09%).

 - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.

 - Effect (bronze): Inflicts an instance of [Sin] on enemies that make physical or magical attacks against allies within the aura. Instances applied in this way cannot be resisted.

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Jason's initial plans had been literally blasted into dust by Clive, forcing him to reorient himself. He and Shade's bodies were shadowy figures moving amongst the monsters, elusive and fleeting presences that monsters had no more than a swipe or two at before they were gone.

His aura was blanketing the area without giving away his position, akin to hiding a tree in the forest. It was one of the first aura techniques Farrah had ever shown him and now it was second nature. He might not be able to hide his aura from a well-trained silver ranker, but even they would have trouble pinpointing his location when he used this technique.

He was staying relatively close to the platform, where his aura could blanket the monsters attacking his team. Every attack earned the monsters an instance of the necrosis-enhancing sin affliction, setting them up for a later fall. Every enemy that struck out against his allies was slowly shovelling earth from their own grave.

Jason himself also took damage. Even without his aura revealing his presence, simply weaving through the monsters meant that many were taking swipes at him as he passed. They were a small price to pay for the havoc he was wreaking in return.

For the bronze rankers he was lashing out with his dagger, piling on afflictions with every sweeping slice. In his other hand was a bronze rank weapon he had stowed away in his inventory since looting it from the marsh hydra he had fought with Humphrey and Clive.

Item: [Flail of the Hydra] (bronze rank, rare)

A whip imbued with the life-force of a hydra (weapon, whip).

- **Effect:** The whip does not function like a normal whip. When swung, the heads of the whip will seek out enemies to attack.
 - **Effect:** Poison inflicted using the whip as a medium is more potent.
-

The whip had five thick, thick, brown, leathery tails that ended in bulbs, within which were mouths filled with wickedly sharp teeth. They flailed uncontrollably, springing eagerly at any flesh that wasn't attached to the arm holding it. As Jason could use two shadow arms now, he had one for flexibility with the dagger and one to add reach to the whip.

The disadvantage of the whip was that it didn't inflict the trio of afflictions the conjured dagger produced, which is why Jason used that for the tougher monsters. It still applied the disease added by his shadow arm power and the effect of any special attack he used.

Most importantly, those effects were delivered by each of the five heads. That meant a single target special attack could now affect five at a time, albeit randomly in whatever vague direction the whip was swung. In a thick crowd of monsters, it was an excellent tool for thinning out the weaker ones. The whip's bites might have not dealt a lot of damage, but as an affliction delivery system it was amazing.

Jason was unconcerned about the damage being inflicted on him, in spite of being amidst a sea of monsters. Pain was an old friend to any adventurer that truly threw themselves into the work, and his powers gave him powerful advantages over the vampiric enemy. His blood abilities were especially potent against the vampiric creatures and the blood magic that fuelled them. As he lay into them with his dagger, that made his choice of special attack obvious.

Ability: [Leech Bite] (Blood)

- **Special attack** (wounding, blood, drain, poison).
- **Base cost:** Low stamina.
- **Cooldown:** None.

- **Current rank:** Bronze 0 (07%).

- **Effect (iron):** Inflicts or refreshes the [Bleeding] condition. Drains a small amount of health and stamina when refreshing the [Bleeding] condition.

- **Effect (bronze):** Inflicts an instance of [Leech Toxin].

- **[Bleeding]** (affliction, wounding, blood): Deals ongoing damage by causing or increasing blood loss. As a wounding effect, this condition absorbs and negates an amount of incoming healing, after which this affliction immediately ends.

- [Leech Toxin] (affliction, poison, blood, stacking): When [Bleeding] is negated, an instance of [Leech Toxin] on the target is consumed to reapply [Bleeding]. Additional instances can be accumulated.
-

Against the vampiric monsters both the bleeding effect and the health drain were operating more powerfully than normal, even accounting for the increase to bronze rank. The health drain helped keep him going, although alone, it was not enough to outpace the regular swipes and bites that he suffered. Fortunately, he was able to devour the very means the vampires sought to bring him down with. Every bite he suffered only made him stronger as his sin eater ability devoured the curses they carried.

- You have been afflicted with [Vampiric Blood Curse].
 - [Vampiric Blood Curse] (affliction, poison, blood, stacking): Has a slight disorienting effect that increases with stacks. Beyond a certain threshold, dying under this effect will cause you to rise as a vampiric ghoul.
 - You have resisted [Vampiric Blood Curse].
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
 - You have gained an instance of [Integrity].
-

For Jason, the vampiric powers of their enemies were not an issue. He had some concerns about his team, but they were holding it off to a degree. Sophie and Jason's auras protected them, and Neil was on hand to cleanse if necessary. The plan was to leave that to Jason, though, who not only didn't spend mana to cleanse, but got it back in return.

Jason's sin eater ability already increased his resistances, and increased them even further for each effect he resisted. At bronze rank, each effect resisted also bestowed a new boon, alongside each instance of the resistance boon.

- [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy, stacking): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

The effect of a single instance was very mild, but with every bite he suffered, the healing continued to stack up. On top of this, he also had his protective amulet.

Item: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] (growth, bronze rank, legendary)

- Effect: For each instance of an affliction applied to an enemy, gain an instance of [Guardian's Blessing]. You may bestow all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] upon another person by touch.
 - [Guardian's Blessing] (boon, holy): Instances are consumed to absorb damage from any source. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. For each instance consumed, gain an instance of [Blessing's Bounty].
 - [Blessing's Bounty] (heal-over-time, holy, stacking): Heal over time. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

As he laid out afflictions, he gained stacks of protection that were consumed as fast as they were laid on, leaving a heal effect in their wake. Between the two healing effects and the drain, Jason was healing much of the damage monsters landed on him with their opportunistic strikes.

He constantly flickered around using Shade's bodies to stay on the move. He never stopped long enough in any particular location for the monsters around him to stop and make concerted attacks. That kind of focus when surrounded would easily be enough to overwhelm him in short order.

Even staying on the move, he was taking damage faster than he was healing it. That, and the slowly accruing vampiric curse affecting the team made it time for a return to the platform. He sent one of Shade's bodies ahead, allowing him to step through another and right into the middle of his team.

Chapter 239

The Most Dangerous Thing in the Dark

Behind his front-line team members, Jason injuries swiftly started healing over. The recovery power he gained from devouring vampiric curses combined with the healing Colin provided to close his wounds without requiring intervention from Neil. In most cases, his armour had mitigated the bulk of the damage, so here were no individual injuries that were egregious.

Jason did not immediately turn his attention to the team. First, he looked out at the amassing monsters, picking out the sturdier bronze-rank one. His eyes sought out those who were affected by his afflictions but tough enough that they were still far from being overcome. He cast inexorable doom on them, one after the other, to start churning out the automatic afflictions that would stack his amulet.

Ability: [Inexorable Doom] (Doom)

- Spell (curse)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Periodically applies an additional instance of each stacking curse, disease, poison or unholy affliction the target is suffering from. This is a curse effect. This effect cannot be cleansed while any other curse or any disease, poison or unholy affliction is in effect.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the [Inescapable] affliction.

- [Inescapable] (affliction, magic): Subject cannot be affected by teleport or non-damaging dimension effects.

With his afflictions ticking up, Jason turned his attention to the team. Sophie was relatively undamaged, the advantage of being an evasive-type defender. Holding out against numbers was not her strong suit, however, and her own armour was marked with the rents of bite and claw. Jason used his feast of absolution power to absorb the vampiric blood curse from her and stack his own healing in the process.

The others holding the line were Humphrey, Neil's golem and Stash, guarding their rear from behind the platform at the back. He was still in the shape of the massive hydra from which Jason had looted his whip.

The golem was immune to the vampire's curse and didn't require Jason's attention. It had suffered enough damage to be forced into its chrysalis state, but that was not enough to let the enemy past the now bronze-rank summon. The crystalline cocoon was no longer the inert mass it had been in the past. It was now a rune-covered obelisk of crystal, rapid-firing crystal spikes into the crowd. Anything that got close was struck by crystal spears, that shot out to strike a target, then remained bristling from the obelisk like diamond pikes. Given the mass of monsters trying to push past, it had swiftly transitioned from obelisk to tall, diamond echidna, covered in bloody spines. The chrysalis stage, as it turned out, was proving a better blocker than the golem had before entering it.

Humphrey was standing strong against the horde, his strength and fortitude an impassable bulwark as his sword threshed the monsters before him like an apocalyptic farming implement. His armour was much stronger than Sophie's but he had, nonetheless, suffered injuries as he put himself fearless forward. Neil's healing was on top of the injuries, but he had left the afflictions for Jason to drink up, which he did.

That left Stash, who was faring the worst of all, being off the platform and essentially holding the rear alone. Neil had been helping, but the lack of the hydra's regenerative powers was obvious, and the large size of the hydra form made it easy to swarm. Jason drained the afflictions from Stash, then called out to him.

"I'm coming in, Stash!"

Stash stilled his body for a moment, not that the hydra form was agile. Jason jumped directly onto his back, behind the five, long hydra necks, and slapped a hand onto one of them.

-
- You have bestowed all instances of [Guardian's Blessing] to a party member's familiar, [Velitraxistaasch].
-

Jason made use of his bronze rank agility, the equal of any circus acrobat, and back-flipped off Stash and back to the platform. His cloak didn't entangle him as he could make it incorporeal at will and have it drift right through his body to settle, shrouding his flipping form in shadow.

"Is anyone recording this fight?" he asked.

"We're a little busy, Jason," Clive admonished.

"Right, yep."

Jason cast a gaze over the situation around Stash. The multi-headed hydra form was good at picking off the weaker monsters quickly and Humphrey's familiars were also working that rear side of the battle. They likewise went for the weaker ones, flying in and

snatching them in their talons before carrying them into the air. While their griffin forms were powerful and their dragon-bone bodies not subject to vampiric powers, they did not risk alighting amongst the massing horde. They would peck the monster to death in the air, or carry them high enough that the subsequent drop did the job.

As a result, there was a growing percentage of bronze-rank and tougher iron-rank monsters surrounding Stash, increasingly putting him under pressure. Jason began his intervention, throwing out quick spells at the monsters that presented the biggest threats. He didn't have a lot of afflictions on them yet, but he started with inexorable doom in preparation and followed up with a blood spell.

Ability: [Haemorrhage] (Blood)

- Spell (wounding, unholy, blood)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (06%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts or refreshes the [Bleeding] and [Sacrificial Victim] afflictions.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts the [Necrotoxin] affliction.

- [Bleeding] (affliction, wounding, blood): Deals ongoing damage by causing or increasing blood loss. As a wounding effect, this condition absorbs and negates an amount of incoming healing, after which this affliction immediately ends.

- [Sacrificial Victim] (affliction, unholy): Any drain attacks or blood afflictions suffered have increased effect.

- [Necrotoxin] (affliction, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

He went through the strongest enemies, dropping the two-spell combination on each. When he was happy with his coverage, he leapt into the fray once more, wading through the monsters to support Stash. He went after the monsters he had thrown spells on, one to the next. He would hit each of them just once, laying on afflictions with his dagger before moving on. His whip he continued to thrash in the direction of the weaker enemies, using it to make space as best he could in the press of monsters.

By the time he was done, so many afflictions were ticking over that his amulet accrued blessings faster than the hits he was taking could consume them. On his way

back to the platform, he once again bestowed them on Stash. They would only last so long, but it was a respite for Neil's healing that was welcome in the endurance battle.

Back on the platform, Jason turned back to look at the monsters held back by Stash's massive hydra body and five snapping heads. He looked for one of the tougher, now heavy afflicted monsters and cast a spell. Instead of his usual finishers, punishment or verdict, he hit it with something different.

Ability: [Feast of Blood] (Blood)

- Spell (drain, blood)
- Base Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (03%).

- Effect (iron): Drain health and stamina. Only affects targets with bleeding wounds or who are suffering from the [Bleeding] affliction.

- Effect (bronze): Drains additional health and stamina for each instance of poison on the target.

Of all Jason's abilities, bar one, feast of blood had proven the most powerful against vampires, feeding on the blood magic coursing through them. After ranking up it grew stronger from every stance of poison on the target and Jason could layer quite a number of poisons. Necrotoxin, leech toxin, the ruination of the blood from his dagger and the umbral snake venom from his new armour, all stackable and piling up under the effects of inexorable doom. The result, amplified by the vampiric vulnerability to blood magic, made the first monster wither and die, its empty husk falling to the ground.

Even his transcendent damage finisher was not as strong against the vampiric monsters. While he waited for the cooldown, he threw out more spells, turning his attention to Sophie's side of the platform. Still an iron-ranker, she was fearlessly punching above her weight, but while she had not been in as much danger as Stash, hers was the side closest to being pushed in. Jason continued throwing out spells on her side, in between using feast of blood as a finisher on Stash's.

Jason glanced over the rest of the field. Humphrey was holding the most steady. Neil's growth spell had worn off, but Humphrey remained a powerhouse, stronger and tougher than any other member of the team. Jason asked Neil about Humphrey's mana consumption.

"He's doing great," Neil said. "Very controlled; we've barely had to top him off."

Despite the deadly, blood-soaked porcupine, monsters were starting to accumulate on the golem's side. Jason was about to intervene when the golem erupted from its chrysalis. This time, it had taken the form of three plain, crystal blocks, each seeming comical and harmless as they stood on three legs apiece. It became less funny as they waddled into place to form a wall, each proving to possess the same spike power as the chrysalis form. Soon, all three were bristling with bloody spines.

Jason turned his attention back to Stash, firing off another feast of blood spell before bestowing a third stack of blessings on the familiar. Many of the toughest enemies were now cleared off and Stash and the griffins could handle the rest for the moment.

Jason returned to Sophie's side, where she fought, uncomplaining, even as her injuries and the pressure upon her mounted. Jason stepped forward and held up his hand to unleash his strongest trump card, the power that was unequivocally his strongest against the vampire monsters. Blood seeped out of his palm and then leeches started erupting from his hand. He swept his arm like a water cannon at a riot, scattering his swarm familiar over the crowd of monsters.

Colin was a vampire-devouring machine and that whole side of the battle collapsed like wilting flowers. Jason had considered unleashing Colin from the start, but had decided that holding him for when he was needed most would be the most effective use. The monsters had largely recovered from the team's initial big hits and were ramping up the pressure, so it seemed like the moment was right to deploy his strongest weapon.

"I'll cover you," Jason said after draining Sophie's afflictions again. "Take a rest."

While the front-liners had been bearing the brunt of the attacks, Clive and Belinda had been dishing out the damage, like Jason. Using her specious sorcerer power, Belinda gained the ability to use wands and staves like Clive. Even though she could take advantage of his battle platform ritual and he had also put enhancement rituals on her weapons, she was still a pale comparison. He was a rank higher, as were his legendary items.

Both Belinda and Clive had been using their rune trap powers on cooldown. It was a little costly on mana, but so long as they otherwise stuck to their weapons it was sustainable. The value of the spells, even Belinda's iron-rank version, was incredible. The monsters were too packed together to move out of the way, pushing each other into maximising the effectiveness of the small explosive area.

Sophie resumed her position and Jason once again dove into the mess of monsters, roaming about, laying afflictions. Through the voice chat, Clive warned them of a new threat.

“Flying monsters,” he announced. “I think they’re night shrikes.”

The team looked up the approaching creatures, winging their way over the jungle canopy and into their air above their clearing. Night shrikes were another monster they had encountered before. Their bodies were the size of a small, slender person, something between a bat and a hook-billed bird. They were bronze-rank, but very much on the weak side, physically. Their advantages lay in their flight and their special power, which they combined to make hit and run attacks with their sharp beaks.

Floating above the team, Onslow turned his head to the new enemy, but Clive directed him to stay focused on the ground monsters.

“Jason will handle them,” Clive told his familiar.

As monster ranks increased, so did the likelihood of monsters with exotic powers. In the case of the night shrike, they had the ability to plunge an area into magical darkness that even drained the magic from glow stones, although none were out for this daylight battle. The shrikes would then strike using the darkness as their weapon, as their own senses were unimpeded by it.

As anticipated, the shrikes blanketed the platform in complete darkness, turning bright day into deeper than night. What the flying monsters would quickly discover, as had those of their kind who came before, was that they were not the most dangerous thing in the dark.

Jason was no more impeded by the absence of light than the shrikes. Stars lit up on his cloak, shedding light that penetrated the magical power of the shrikes. The motes of light floated off his cloak, leaving it void black, as they floated up and around the platform. They concentrated on the platform itself, giving the team all the light they needed to keep fighting.

Around the platform, the motes of light were softer and spread out, giving just enough illumination to turn the black void of darkness into shadowy gloom. By turning the monsters’ realm of absolute darkness into a realm of shadows, Jason made their kingdom his own.

In a zone of ubiquitous shadow, Jason could teleport around as he wished. He shadow-jumped behind one of the shrikes, wrapping his legs around its, under its wings, and one arm around its neck. The weight reducing power of his cloak stopped them from immediately plunging out of the sky, but the creature’s flight was drastically impeded and they started arcing sharply down. Jason ignored their predicament, ramming his dagger into the monster multiple times before jumping again.

Jason proved a horrifying nemesis to the shrikes, jumping from one to the other and sending them crashing into their monster brethren below. Some were already dead when they hit the ground, the rest soon after from the hard landing and Jason's afflictions.

The shrikes scattered, wings beating heavily as they climbed skyward. It didn't matter. The cover of darkness was vanishing in patches as the shrikes died in rapid succession, restoring the bright sunlight to dominance. When the final shrike died in the air, Jason found himself floating alone in the sky.

Using the new gliding power of his cloak, Jason drifted his way over the team. Cloak fluttering around him, he alighted gently amongst them.

"Alright," Neil acknowledged. "You might kind of make this look good."

"What do you think?" Humphrey asked Neil, refocusing his attention. "Is it time?"

"There's a lot of Jason's sin affliction around now," Neil said. "Yeah, I think it's time. Everyone dump your mana."

The team started unleashing every high cost ability they had, rapidly draining their mana pools much as they had at the beginning of the battle. Colin gathered up during that time, strips of bloody cloth snaking through the battlefield to collect leeches like fly paper and drag them into a central mass that wrapped up into its humanoid form.

"Here we go," Neil said, and activated his power, sending the team, plus their summons and familiars into a dimensional space.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- Special ability (dimension, recovery, disease).
 - Cost: Extreme mana.
 - Cooldown: 6 hours.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (01%).

 - Effect (iron): Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death] on everything in the area.

 - Effect (bronze): Allies undergo extreme mana replenishment while in the dimensional space.

 - [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

The team emerged from the dimensional space with their mana replenished. The jungle around them had been withered by Neil's power and most of the monsters were dead. Only a handful lingered past what was now the jungle line, having been outside the power's range.

They were about to move on them when eight figures emerged from the jungle. Unlike the monsters, these were all human. They stepped forward slowly, with none of the rush that the monsters had.

"That's them," Humphrey said, face turned steely. "Time to do what we came here for."

Chapter 240

The Boss Comes to Town

Humphrey swung his arms inward, brutally clapping his hands into either side of the cultist vampire's head. It relinquished its bite on Neil's neck, rearing back to let out an alien screech from its inhuman mouth. His jaw unhinged in macabre mockery of the formerly human anatomy. The mouth no longer had teeth, just bare gums and a pair of hairy barbs, growing awkwardly out from the roof of the mouth. They bristled, wet with saliva and Neil's blood.

Humphrey, gripped the vampire by the hair and smashed its head into the stone platform until the body stopped squirming. It was the last of the bizarrely warped adventurers turned inhuman minion.

"I think I got a big dose of that blood curse," Neil said, sounding woozy. He cast a spell on himself.

"Imbue with life."

Clear green light glow around his hand, then shot into his neck.

Ability: [Life Bolt] (Renewal)

- Spell (healing)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (11%).

- Effect (iron): Delivers life energy through a projectile, giving a small burst of instantaneous healing. Damages certain targets that are inimical to life force, such as most forms of undead.

- Effect (bronze): Bestows a mild, ongoing healing effect.

It was Neil's bread and butter healing spell, which could also be used as a weapon against most forms of undead. He had never actually used it for that, with undead being rare in Greenstone because of the life energy flowing down the Mistrun River. Vampires were no better, with the blood magic flooding their bodies that produced a warped facsimile of life. They were the one form of undead for whom, healing magic was fully effective.

"Give me a second and I'll clear that curse, Neil," Jason said. "I'm a little tied up, right now."

He was stuck to the platform by a blanket of sticky webbing. Gordon was cutting him loose with his four force beams.

“My new armour is definitely a step up,” Jason said as he waited. “That resistance to adhesive effects on the old one would have been handy, though.”

“It was,” Sophie said. She was still using iron-rank armour made primarily, as Jason’s had been, of trap weaver leather. “They were spraying that webbing everywhere, like giant nets. I couldn’t dodge it all.”

“Clive,” Belinda said. “You told us they would be easier to fight after being turned into vampires.”

“And he was right,” Humphrey said. “A few strange spider powers are no compensation for a full suite of bronze-rank abilities.”

“Their transformation was more extreme than I anticipated,” Clive acknowledged. “From what I’ve read about blood weavers, they almost always leave intelligent victims largely intact. They recognise that a high-intelligence minion is worth more than another physically powerful blood puppet.”

“I’m not sure high-intelligence was an issue,” Neil said. “They joined a cult and agreed to come here.”

“Fair point,” Clive conceded. “Blood weavers can put essence users through a stronger transformation, as we saw here, but it destroys the mind. You saw the animalistic way they fought.”

After creepily staring at them from the jungle line, the vampire cultists had recklessly hurled themselves into the team. Their reckless attacks led to the team putting them down in short order, although not before they penetrated the team’s backline. Clive had displayed some unexpectedly solid staff fighting, combining strikes and blocks with blasts of magic. Belinda had used an escape ability but Neil had been latched onto.

Gordon finished cutting Jason free and he immediately started purging the team of afflictions, starting with Neil.

“That was some good work with the staff,” Sophie told Clive. “You’ve been practising with Humphrey?”

“I have,” Clive said. “He told me that I needed to train for the fight I don’t want, along with the one I do. It would appear he was right.”

“Is it just me,” Jason asked, “or was that a bit anti-climactic, after all this time. We came here after the cultists and they turn out to be just more monsters. I mean, after the whole vampire monster army thing, they were just a few more vampires.”

“They seemed more than threatening enough to me,” Neil said, then hit himself with another life bolt spell.

“I’m sorry they got past me,” Sophie apologised to Neil.

“As am I,” Humphrey said. “I don’t think anyone expected that suicide rush. Jason was right, I think. After all the build up, the cultists didn’t amount to much.”

“We need to find where they were staying,” Clive said. “My guess would be somewhere in the centre of the city, past the thickest jungle. That’s probably where the blood weaver found them.”

“So that’s where we’ll probably find it,” Belinda said.

“It could be,” Clive said. “I think it might have run, though. I suspect it realised that we’re strong enough to kill it and threw minions at us to buy time. It probably chose a handful that were strong and mobile and abandoned the area with them while we were chewing through the fodder.”

“We’ll take a break,” Humphrey said. “Then we’ll loot the monsters, burn the cultists and get on to the middle of the city. We’ll find where the cultists were staying before the blood weaver came along and then, what they were up to.”

“That was a huge haul,” Neil said. “Three blood essences and a dark essence. If we find a mouth essence somewhere, we can recreate Jason’s combination.”

They were discussing the loot as they made their way through the still-deserted jungle. Every monster for a wide area had either been taken over by the blood weaver and killed by the team or fled to avoid that fate. They were doubling up on Shade’s three mantis beetle forms, which excelled at cutting a path through the thick scrub. Humphrey with Jason, Neil with Clive and Sophie with Belinda.

“That’s not very mature, Neil,” Jason said. “You shouldn’t make fun of people like that. It’s why people like me more than you.”

“No, that’s because you always bring sandwiches,” Sophie said.

“Sandwiches,” Jason said haughtily, “are the garnish on a prime slab of perfectly pan-seared rakish charm.”

“Getting that myriad essence was the big winner,” Clive said. “A legendary essence, and one of the better ones. We could buy the materials to rank every familiar on the team to silver and still have money left over.”

“I’ll be happy to get mine to bronze,” Belinda said. “I’d also like to get closer to them. How do you do it, Jason? You get along so well with your familiars, but mine are so alien.”

“Colin and Gordon aren’t exactly everyday folk, either,” Jason said.

"Then what's the secret?" Belinda asked.

"They're just people," Jason said. "Treat them that way. Yes, they're a little odd to our sensibilities, but if it can think, it's a person. That's the same, whether you're talking about a familiar or a god. Even a monster, although that's a tragic one. Imagine coming into being knowing that you have a terminal condition, and your options are get killed by an adventurer or go insane, kill a bunch of people yourself and die."

"Gods aren't people," Humphrey said.

"That's a bit rude," Jason said. "You'll have to atone for that one."

"Gods are above people," Humphrey said.

"There is no above people, Humphrey. There's just people. Give them enough power and they get a bit weird, but still people."

"You seem very confident for someone who didn't believe in gods a year ago," Humphrey said.

"But I believed in people. It just turns out that some of them are magic. Like us."

"You do realise that people have different stations in life, right?" Neil asked. "A king is not the same as a pauper."

"Of course not," Jason said. "The king inherits a hat and a chair, where the pauper's lucky to get the hat. Better hat, though. What kind of idiot thinks a metal hat with no top is a great idea. The same guy who thinks monarchy makes sense, I guess."

"How can you possibly think that gods are just people?" Neil asked. "You think you can just stand before a god and start mouthing off? I've been in the presence of gods. Just being near them was like standing under a waterfall."

"From what I've heard, he did exactly that," Clive said. "I talked to a lot of people after the last excursion into this astral space. A lot of them were talking about the gods showing up and the lunatic talking to them like they were random people off the street."

"They are random people," Jason said. "A bit showy, but nice enough. They like to make something of a spectacle of themselves, though."

The group all turned to stare at Jason. Humphrey had to crane his neck from where he was sitting in front of Jason on the mantis beetle to do it.

"What?" Jason asked.

They passed through the rest of the thick jungle without being accosted by monsters. If any were around, they were apparently smart enough to stay well clear of the ones responsible for getting rid of the rest. The shattered and scattered ruins, buried in jungle,

gave way to fully intact buildings in startlingly short order. The line of demarcation was so stark that it reminded Jason of the Vane estate, where the lush gardens met the desert.

The team made a direct path for the very centre of the city and the large square containing the Order of the Reaper's trial tower. As they moved through the buildings, they started to notice fragments of unusual magic.

"Everyone else is sensing that, right?" Belinda asked.

"Yes."

"Yep."

"Yeah."

"I am."

"Gods damned magic," Sophie muttered. "No."

The team arrested their progress to investigate. The magic was weak enough that it was a curiosity, rather than a threat. It was chaotic, patchy and feeble. They found a fragment of sheared steel, jammed into a brick wall by some tremendous force. Clive took out some tools and began examining it.

"I should look at more," he said as he finished up. At his direction, the team sought out locations from which the strange, scattered magic was emanating. One was a cushion that had somehow buried itself in a wall as forcefully as the metal shard had. Another was a round indentation containing a dark, crystalline powder. After examining the powder for some time, Clive rubbed some between his fingers.

"This is a ground-down awakening stone," he said.

"I didn't realise you could do that," Humphrey said.

"You can't," Clive said. "Every attempt to alter the form an awakening stone has either done nothing or triggered it into returning to a raw magic state. Rainbow smoke."

"This is the result of the Reaper's power," Shade said. "I can sense it because it is the same as my own power."

"You know what happened here?" Clive asked.

"I suspect these fragments are the remnants of the tower's treasure stores. I have previously postulated that the dimensional spaces in which those stores were kept would collapse once the trials came to an end and the power controlling them was withdrawn. My guess would be a mana implosion affected by the protective measures put in place by the order triggered an unexpectedly destructive reaction. There is likely less treasure to find than I originally intimated."

"I think he's right," Clive said. "The traces of astral magic on everything I've looked at are chaotic and unengineered. These fragments don't do anything except throw off some

residual magic. It speaks more to uncontrolled phenomena, like a dimensional explosion.”

“Is this residual magic a threat to us?” Humphrey asked. “It’s weak here, but will there be more dangerous patches?”

“It’s a conglomeration of random dimensional energies,” Clive said, “blasted into a chaotic mess and mixed with the power of a being who could, if it wanted, use that power to assassinate the universe. So... maybe.”

“I think we should give Clive some space,” Jason said. “Leave him to figure things out without having to answer any questions.”

Clive flashed Jason a grateful look as Jason waved the rest of the team away.

“This will be the final ascension ceremony,” Zato told Dougall. “The last of your essence abilities will be gone, but you will cross the threshold of silver-rank today. You can anticipate being filled with something new and far greater.”

“Thank you, Master Zato,” Dougall said. “I know I came to the cult under slightly different circumstances than most, but I am profoundly grateful.”

They were walking through the grounds of the ruined Vane estate, entering what had once been a small wood but now was nothing but dead and withered trees. They reached a space where five equidistant trees stood at the points of a pentagram, part of a magical diagram laid out between them with bricks. The trees could barely be called that anymore, stripped of their branches and bark and sculpted into wooden obelisks. Runes ran down their sides, alternately made from hammered-in steel or engraved directly into the wood and stained the rusty colour of dried blood.

“This is the place,” Zato said. Timos had been waiting for them, head hidden within a voluminous ritual robe. He held out robes for Zato and Dougall. Zato gave Dougall an encouraging smile as they slipped them on.

The ritual took place with Dougall in the middle of the circle, Zato and Timos on opposite sides. On the robes of all three men, magical sigils lit up with power. There was a gathering of energy as the pair conducted an extended chant. Soon, Dougall felt a power rising up from within. The power surged through him, cleansing and changing. He crossed the threshold into silver and impurities started seeping through his pores, leaving him covered in filth. He was panting and tired, but grinning fiercely as he revelled in the sense of power.

Timos stepped forward with a bottle of crystal wash, ignoring the smell. Dougall stripped off the robes and ruined clothes before cleaning himself off, the filth on his skin

and the fallen-out hair sloughing away. Afterwards, Timos lead him to where he had fresh clothes folded neatly in a bag.

As Dougall changed, he revelled in the sensation of his new power. He could no longer sense his essences, but compared to the power he could feel it was no loss. He could even feel more potential power, hidden deep within his soul. It was laying untapped, right next to the... star seed.

He was gripped by a sudden sense of dread; the realisation that the power inside him did not belong to him a all.

As if it were germinating, he felt power swell out from the star seed. It kept coming and coming; an alien might flooding out of his own soul to fill the channels of power that months of ritual treatments had installed in his body. He went cold with fear and an absolute certainty that his soul was no longer his own.

Dougall's last free thought was rage at Zato for his betrayal. He opened his mouth to yell but was choked off as the new power initiated a new, sweeping change. Flesh rippled, but not with organic fluidity. It was like his flesh was comprised of tiny, tiny blocks, undergoing some kind of shift. The strange rippling swept his whole body before settling again, leave no lingering indication of a body anything but organic.

His body went limp, standing like a puppet hanging loose from a string. Dougall stood up straight, his expression was blank, his eyes plain, grey orbs. He looked at the clothes half put-on and finished dressing. Zato and Timos kneeled to the ground, heads bowed, as Dougall finished and looked over his body.

"Lord Builder," Zato greeted, not looking up.

"This vessel is adequate," the Builder, now occupying Dougall's body said. "If I use more than silver-rank power it will break down immediately, but the vessel was prepared efficiently. With care, it will last some time.

"The next vessel is already at a late stage of preparation, Lord Builder," Zato said.

"I know," the Builder said. "I am in your soul. There is nothing you can hide from me."

"No, Lord Builder."

The Builder walked over to where Zato was kneeling, head down.

"There have been a cavalcade of failures here," the builder said. "You made the correct choice in continuing the work, but you made it out of fear. Fear of the consequences of failure."

"We did, Lord Builder," Zato admitted.

The Builder was silent for a long time. Zato could see from his feet that he hadn't moved. Timos couldn't see him at all, not daring to raise his eyes.

“Your motivations are acceptable,” the Builder said finally. “The consequences of failure are there to spur desirable behaviour, after all, which is what they have done. Stand, both of you.”

The cultists stood, but kept their eyes lowered.

“I know all that has transpired,” the Builder said. “I am impressed with how the pair of you have handled dire circumstances placed upon you by the failures of others. Continuing the work instead of drawing back and regrouping was the right choice. Preparing a vessel that I might direct you now, instead of waiting for a success to buffer the failures here was likewise a correct choice. The intrusion of this astral space is more crucial than you realise.”

“Lord Builder?”

“You had not yet been made privy to the true purpose of the astral space we are about to claim. It is one of a small number on this world that are more important than the others. The original intention was for a clockwork king to lead this expedition. In the wake of the failed summoning, the leadership here made a sequence of costly mistakes. This included raising our profile to the point that I was no longer able to move significant resources here without alerting the natives to the importance of the task now ahead of you.”

“We will do what we can with what we have, Lord Builder,” Zato said.

“As you have been doing. I am satisfied that you have both risen to the stations thrust upon you by the inadequacies of those the led before you.”

“Thank you, Lord Builder,” both men said.

“This astral space was something taken from me in the past,” the builder said. “The time has come to reclaim it. There are tools within that will greatly assist our work on this world.”

“What would you have us do, Lord Builder?” Zato asked.

“For now, continue as you have been. First, we enter the astral space. Then we prepare to bring my world engineers here. Your remaining ritualists are mediocre, but under my direction they will be sufficient. Opening those gates will be wildly destructive, but you knew this.”

“Yes, Lord Builder,” Zato said. “I was told that claiming the astral space would be unusually destructive, but not why.”

“It is hard to interrogate our people, but not impossible,” the Builder said. “For this reason, the secret was restricted to the leadership. You will understand the full purpose soon enough.”

“Thank you, Lord Builder. As you obviously know, the Rejector is already in the astral space. Once we are there, I will see to it that the Rejector is found and killed, should he still be alive on our arrival.”

“No,” the Builder said. “The Rejector and I have unfinished business. You will bring him to me alive.”

Chapter 241

It's Very Complicated and You All Need to Go Away

The five storey mass of webbing was stretched between two buildings, completely blocking the street.

"I think I've spotted the blood weaver's nest," Neil said.

"Good eyes," Sophie said. "Maybe you should be the one scouting."

"It's a gift," Neil said.

"Has anyone else noticed Neil starting to take on some of Jason's more immodest traits?" Humphrey asked, leaving everyone laughing but for an affronted Jason and an aghast Neil.

"You really think our friendly neighbourhood spider monster's done a runner?" Jason asked Clive.

"This place is desolate, now," Clive said. "It could be baiting us in again, but into what? If it had something that could take us down, it wouldn't have wasted its army. The creature itself is silver rank, but the main source of its power is the minions it creates. It's fairly fast and fairly strong. It can use webs, obviously, and heals rapidly, especially if it has minions to feed on. Actually fighting it, though? Worlds apart from the elemental tyrant we saw in the waterfall village."

"The danger of blood weavers is their minions and the fact that failing to take one down means joining them," Humphrey said. "We've dealt with the main threat already."

"Exactly," Clive said. "Once the minions are dealt with, a decent bronze rank team should have little problem. The things you have to watch for are the healing and the webs. For the webs, you just have to be careful. For the healing, you need to stop it from feeding and be able to pile on enough damage."

"If that thing is in there," Humphrey said, "we'll be ready. Neil, you're our first line of defence against the webs; hold your shields for anyone with a web coming their way. As for putting on damage and taking off healing, Jason will be doing both. The rest of us are there to give them an easier job, and cut loose anyone who does get webbed up."

"Are we actually going in there?" Belinda asked.

"We are," Humphrey said.

"Won't it be all sticky?" Sophie asked.

"No," Clive said. "Spider monsters who make webs like this can produce two kinds of silk. One is a tool and a weapon. It's sticky and dangerous, but only lasts a short time. Remember the remnants we first found in the jungle. It had degraded relatively quickly,

which is no way to make a home. The other stuff is stronger and most resistant to the elements. It's also hard to build structures from a sticky substance. A nest like this is literally woven from silk. It's why many monsters who make nests like this are called weavers."

The nest turned out to be a network of tunnels that were quite wide, to accommodate the blood weaver itself, which was quite large. It meant the team didn't feel constricted as they worked their way up through the spiral tunnels that ascended throughout. The tunnels led them to chambers, some of which were unclear as to purpose, while others were unpleasantly obvious. The blood weaver's grisly larder was the most unpleasant sight Jason had encountered since the cannibal kitchen that was his introduction to the horrors his new world could hold.

The team searched the entire place, finding neither monster nor treasure. When they had thorough explored the nest they moved from its highest reaches to the roof of one of the buildings to which it was anchored.

"I suppose this means we always need to keep an eye out," Belinda said. "Not that we weren't already."

"Yes," Clive agreed. "It's silver rank, and a stealth-type monster, so it can hide its aura from us. Makes it hard to see it coming. That said, Monsters don't tend to be vengeful, the way people are. They don't have pride to injure. Most likely, the blood weaver will find some far corner of the city and set itself up all over again. It's smart enough to prepare for if we find it again, and also smart enough to not seek us out."

"So what do we do about it?" Neil asked. "Do we hunt it, before it establishes itself again?"

"We didn't come here to kill a blood weaver," Humphrey said. "It was the obstacle, not the objective."

"The blood weaver can prepare all it likes," Jason said. "Time is not on its side. Monsters don't grow stronger, so the most it can do is collect another set of minions, while we're all shooting up like rockets in this place."

"What are rockets?" Sophie asked.

"They're things that go up," Jason said. "Really, really up. You can send people to the moon with them."

"I heard about diamond rankers who teleported to the moons," Clive said. "No idea if its true. How could people get to the moon in your world if they don't have magic?"

"With rockets," Jason said.

"How do they work?" Clive asked.

“Well, you now how when there’s an explosion, stuff flies way?”

“Of course,” Clive said.

“It’s basically that, but you need to be very careful.”

“It’s sounds like you don’t really understand how it works,” Neil said.

“I don’t know much,” Jason admitted. “Also, I’m pretty sure most of what I do know is wrong. Also, this may fall under stuff Knowledge doesn’t want me talking about. When I take a bribe, I stay bribed. That’s how integrity works.”

“That’s not how integrity works!” Humphrey said, the team laughing at his exasperation. The team had felt the confrontation with the silver rank monster and her army of vampire monsters looming over them as they frenetically trained. Now the fighting was done, at least for now, the tension was draining away like a sluice gate had been opened.

“What now?” Sophie asked.

“The cultist camp,” Clive said firmly.

“Our best bet now is that they were set up here, in the middle of the city, when the blood weaver either spawned or wandered in. Whatever tools they used for whatever they did should be there.”

“The most intact buildings were directly around the central square,” Humphrey said. “Unless the destruction of the tower significantly damaged them, that would be my guess for where they chose to try and wait out whatever the Builder’s plans for this place are.”

“I just hope the purpose for the magic going up isn’t to wake up those giant golems,” Neil said.

“I think we can all get on board with that,” Humphrey said. “The first thing we’ll do is head to the old tower and survey the destruction. We can reassess from there.”

“What about these magic fragments we’ve been seeing?” Neil asked.

“Everything I’ve been able to determine supports Shade’s postulation,” Clive said. “I think they’re just fragments of destroyed treasure. I wouldn’t go eating them, but they shouldn’t pose us any threat.”

“I’m not sure I want to rely on ‘shouldn’t,’” Neil said.

Moving to the very middle of the city, it became clear that the Order of the Reaper’s testing tower had self-destructed in extremely violent fashion. Huge chunks of rubble were laying in the street under the impact marks of the walls they had crashed into. When they reached the square itself, the wide tower had been replaced with a crater.

The buildings around the square looked like they had been shelled. The intact facades the team remembered were riddled with holes, many having collapsed in their entirety, exposing the interiors.

“Probably not in there,” Neil said.

On top of the destruction, the treasure fragments radiating magic were so thick as to be overlapping. It still presented no discernable threat, but was wearying to magic senses, like strobing rainbow lights.

Leaving the buildings closest to the centre behind, the team went looking for those that had retained their integrity and weren't painted in distracting magical shards. They had to be thorough and didn't want to risk splitting up, so it took a day and a half of rigorous searching before they found where the cultists had been holed up. It was two streets back from the central square, conveniently marked by residual webs from what was presumably the battle where the cultists had fallen prey to the blood weaver.

The cultists had made a relatively comfortable home for themselves, with chairs, beds, even rugs. There was a large and well-stocked bookshelf, although Clive snorted derisively on browsing through it.

“I think these guys shared your taste in literature, Soph,” Belinda said, also perusing the tomes. “It looks like there's a lot of 'glistening thighs' books here.”

“Glistening thighs?” Neil asked.

“You know,” Belinda said. “Lots of heaving bosoms and men who don't care what anyone thinks about them yet still have their chests immaculately waxed.”

“That's quite enough,” Sophie said, looking embarrassed.

“She's even been thinking about writing her own.”

“I have not!”

“It's about a woman born into poor circumstances pursued by dastardly men for her beauty, until she's rescued by a dashing man who leads her on a life of adventure.”

“She is completely make this up,” Sophie insisted.

“Jason, do you wax your chest?”

“Shut up, Lindy!”

“I don't wax it,” Jason said. “If I did, I'd use a Jory depilatory cream, not wax. I only ranked-up the other day, though, so I'm mostly hairless right now, anyway.”

“We really need to stop talking about this,” Sophie said.

“You shouldn't be ashamed of what you like to read,” Jason said. “So long as you enjoy it, that's what matters.”

Sophie put her face in her hands and let out a sobbing groan.

Clive found what he was looking for in the basement of the building. The team had initially gone straight to the upper floor where the blood weaver seemed to have burst in, before searching the rest of the building more methodically.

“They must have brought in this with that specialty dimensional bag we found upstairs,” Clive said.

Iron rank dimensional bags had a per-item volume limit slightly smaller than that of an iron-rank personal space power. To store the huge metal plate they had found set into the floor would have required a specialty bag designed to hold that item and that item alone. It was a massive, heavy plate of solid brass. Set into it was an excruciatingly complex magical diagram in silver, along with runes and sigils made of gemstones in a variety of vibrant colours.

The walls of the basement also had magical circles set into them, these ones carved directly from the brick and filled with some kind of blue-tinted plaster. These were much cruder efforts than the delicate, elegant workmanship of the plate.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“I don’t know,” Clive said, lightly, reverently brushing his fingers over it.

“Should you be touching it?” Jason asked. To his magical senses, the plate was even more sophisticated than its appearance suggested.

“It won’t affect us,” Clive said. “This is some kind of astral magic. Whatever it’s doing is working directly with the astral, not affecting the physical realm at all. You could do a dance on top of it and it wouldn’t care.”

“These magic diagrams on the walls are from simple masking rituals,” Belinda said.

“You’re right,” Jason said. “This looks exactly like I would have done when all I had was some skill book knowledge. I’m willing to bet that one of the cultists was loaded up with enough skill book knowledge to set up that big plate to do its thing and throw up some rituals to hide the plate’s magic.”

“To keep passing monsters from coming to investigate,” Belinda said.

“Exactly,” Jason said. “Does that sound right, Clive?”

“Hmn?”

Clive looked up, distracted. “What?”

“Does that sound right?” Jason repeated.

“No idea,” Clive said. “This is going to take me a while to figure out. Jason, take out those books on astral magic that Knowledge gave you, then you should all just go upstairs and settle in. It’s very complicated and you all need to go away. I’ll probably call you and

Belinda down, Jason, to help me go through the books when I have a better idea of what we're dealing with. You've both got at least some training, so I should be able to get some use out of you."

"You make us sound like a Christmas present from an inattentive aunt," Jason said.

"What's Christmas?" Clive asked.

"Never mind," Jason said. He took a bookcase from his inventory, which he had purchased to store everything Knowledge had given him.

"Just make sure you don't forget to eat again," Jason told Clive.

"Did Clive come up to sleep?" Humphrey asked in the morning. The cloud house was set up on the roof of the building, where it had taken the form of an extra storey. It blended right in, even to the point of incorporating the stairwell that led up to the roof as the point of ingress.

"No," Belinda. "Didn't you go check on him in the night, Jason?"

"He shooed me away," Jason said. "I'm going to check on him again, now."

"We should all go down," Humphrey said.

"Definitely not," Jason said. He made his way downstairs, where Clive had set up a table covered in open books and three chalkboards on standing frames.

"Clive..."

"Go away!"

A dishevelled Clive came up into the cloud house and stared around at the team, wild-eyed.

"You and you," he said pointing at Jason and Belinda. "Read this."

He shoved a piece of paper into Belinda's hand it was smeared with chalk dust, but the pencilled writing was as neat as Clive was messy. Jason stood next to Belinda and she held it out so they could read it together. Of the team, they were the only other ones who had studied magical theory. Neil had studied some practical healing rituals but that was the extent of it.

"Well?" Clive asked Belinda and Jason.

"Well, what?" Jason asked.

"Did you understand it?" Clive demanded.

"I did," Belinda said.

"Yeah," Jason agreed.

"Explain it to me," Clive said.

“Mate, if you can’t understand it, I think we might have been very wrong about us understanding it.”

“No!” Clive said and let out a frustrated growl. “Of course I understand it. I wrote it! I need to make sure you understand it.”

“It’s about astral resonance,” Belinda said.

“The idea is to set up a means of remote matching,” Jason added.

“Yes!” Clive said triumphantly. “You two, come with me. I need you to help me go through the books.”

“What you need,” Jason said, “is to get some sleep. You’re looking a bit manic, there, mate.”

“What? No. Shut up! Just come with me.”

“Clive,” Jason said. “Do you remember what you told me about ritual magic? To do it right, not do it fast?”

“Clearly, I wasn’t thinking straight. You can just do it right and fast, now come on.”

“Clive,” Humphrey said firmly. “You are going to get some sleep if I have to knock you out.”

“That’s not really sleep,” Clive said. “Being unconscious is a different-”

“Then you’d best quietly take yourself to bed, then,” Humphrey said. “Because asleep or unconscious, you’re about to get laid out.”

Clive snarled like an animal.

“Fine,” he conceded, then turned back to Belinda and Jason. “You two, get working on those books. Anything that pertains to what’s on that paper I gave you, make a note of book and page, then keep going.”

Clive looked around.

“Where are the bedrooms?”

Neil pointed, not wanting to say anything to aggressive, sleep-addled Clive.

“Not that I’m going to get any sleep,” Clive muttered angrily as he walked off. “My mind racing in a thousand directions. I’ll just be laying there, accomplishing nothing but a magnificent waste of time.”

Moments after settling into the soft embrace of a cloud bed, he was asleep.

Chapter 242

Strong Foundations

By the time the team had spent almost a week in the camp of the former cultists, Belinda and Jason were assisting Clive almost full time in the basement, in the room with the large magical plate set into the floor. They were digging through the texts that Knowledge had given to Jason, finding anything that might be of value to Clive. They slowly gained a better idea of what it was they were looking at and how it might be useful.

"It's clear that the goddess foresaw what we would need and prepared accordingly," Clive said. "Without all this, we would have no chance of figuring out what was happening."

"And how is that going, exactly?" Jason asked. "I'll admit that I've learned more than I thought possible about astral magic in the last week, but what you're looking at is way past my comprehension level."

"It's past mine," Clive said. "We're talking about principles of astral magic that go beyond anything we've managed to uncover in this world. It's like everything I learned prior to accessing these books was stone tools and I've just discovered how to make steel."

"How long until you figure it out, then?" Belinda asked.

"Oh, I think I had it yesterday," Clive said. "I'm just trying to make sure I'm not missing something and completely wrong. Given how many new ideas I'm working with, I could have easily made a simple mistake that put my entire conception way off."

"You figured it out yesterday and didn't tell us?" Jason asked.

"I wasn't going to put forward any ideas until I was confident in them. It's been my experience that making tentative proclamations is more trouble than it's worth. People have a habit of believe the thing they like over the thing supported by the evidence, so I don't like to make statements I'm not confident in."

"That's fair," Jason said.

"There is one thing I'm certain about," Clive said. "Landemere Vane made this plate." Jason looked down at the large plate in the floor.

"You're sure?" he asked. "That means he was working on this before any of us knew this astral space even existed."

"I'm sure," Clive said. "Ritual magic is more than cold, studious calculation. There's an artistry to it, and everyone has their own style. Even you two. Belinda's magic is bold and inventive. Yours is clever, but overcomplicated. Landemere had his own style too."

"And you knew it well enough to recognise now?" Jason asked. "Also, what do you mean, overcomplicated?"

Clive chuckled.

“Jason, it’s like you don’t trust simple solutions.”

“That sounds about right,” Belinda said.

“I do recognise Landemere’s style,” Clive said. “He and I were the astral magic specialists at Greenstone’s Magic Society. He was very reclusive, and secretive about his work. For reasons that have now become rather obvious. When he required assistance, though, I was always the one he turned to. From what little I saw of his work, I could tell it was incredibly advanced, and more than once I urged him to share it with the academic community.”

“I bet he loved that idea,” Jason said.

“He wasn’t receptive, no,” Clive said. “Of course, now I understand that he wasn’t as brilliantly innovative as I thought. He was good, don’t get me wrong, but he was working with what the Builder cult gave him, clearly.”

“It also means that he had this thing finished before I killed him,” Jason said. “That was months before Emir arrived here in Greenstone, let alone revealed the astral space. It means that the Builder cult knew about the astral space and the fact that someone was getting ready to open it up.”

“All they needed was for Emir to collect the pieces of the key and open it up,” Clive said. “For all we know, the person who commissioned him in the first place could be a Builder cultist.”

“That’s a scary thought,” Jason said. “A diamond-rank Builder cultist, having us all dance in the palm of his hand. I don’t think that’s what’s happening, though.”

“Why not?” Belinda asked.

“If the Builder cult had us over that much of a barrel,” Jason said, “they wouldn’t have suffered so many setbacks. They would have been much more on top of things.”

The team were gathered together in the lounge room of the cloud house. Everyone was sitting, except for Clive.

“It’s a beacon,” Clive said. “The cultists who came into this astral space with the rest of us didn’t need to do much more than bring it in here and set it up. That much only took the most basic knowledge of ritual magic. All they needed was someone with basic skills to perform a series of activation rituals. Very simple, just once every few days for about a month until the beacon locked itself into place, dimensionally speaking. After that, all the heavy magic takes places on our world.”

“To do what, exactly?” Humphrey asked.

“To create a tunnel. Or a bridge, whatever you want to call it. The point is that it connects our world to this astral space, bypassing the already established entrance.”

“That also means bypassing its restrictions,” Belinda added. “Including the upper limit on rank.”

“You’re saying more cultists are coming?” Neil said

“Yes,” Clive said. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“When?” Sophie asked.

“At least a month until the tunnel is complete,” Clive said. “It could be two months or more, but definitely less than three. Now that I know what I’m looking for, I used the knowledge in Jason’s books to improvise some tests, but the results are as imprecise as that suggests.”

“Can we leave before it opens?” Neil asked. “Find a way to get the regular portals back open and bring in reinforcements?”

“This tunnel they’re building is responsible for the changes in the magical density,” Clive said. “It’s affecting the dimensional membrane between this astral space and the deep astral. On the bright side, it means that it won’t keep escalating until the astral space breaks down. Less fortunate is the fact that we can’t use the regular portals until the ambient magic here reaches a new stable point. My best guess is that won’t be until some time after this tunnel has opened and closed again and the magic has had time to settle. At that point I can probably reconfigure the portals to the new level of magic and make them operable again.”

“Probably?” Neil asked.

“If you have a more reliable way out of here, speak up,” Clive told him.

“What if we destroy the plate?” Sophie asked. “Would that stop them from getting here?”

“Sadly not,” Clive said. “The beacon’s job was done before we ever arrived. Once they had it’s dimensional location on the other side, they would have been able to start working. They will have been at this for months already.”

“So, to summarise,” Jason said, “after a month or two, during which we will continue to be trapped here, an unknown force of unknown strength but very well-known hostility will be arriving in this astral space.”

“Wonderful,” Neil said. “Which makes our options what, exactly?”

“Obviously, we need to stop what they’re up to,” Clive said. “That may be detaching the astral space from our world or it may concern these giant golems, the world engineers. It may be both.”

“We don’t know what forces will be coming through against us,” Jason said.

“Hopefully, it will only be the remnants of the Builder’s forces from Greenstone. Just before we left, Elspeth Arella informed me of something the interrogators got from the cultists we were finally able to capture.”

“That you were able to capture, you mean,” Sophie said.

“Which is why they were willing to keep me looped in at all,” Jason said. “According to the captured cultists, the local cult leadership was all but eradicated by the attack on their main outpost on that island. The one Rufus and his parents went after. From the information we have, only a couple of mid-tier leaders came through alive to take over. They may have as few as a single silver-ranker left.”

“That’s good,” Humphrey said. “One silver we might have a chance against. If a gold comes through, we’re done.”

“So, what do we do?” Neil asked. “Set traps?”

“Actually, that’s not a terrible idea,” Clive said. “We have time, and we can be confident that they’ll be checking in on those golems. I could set up some traps in those hidden doors.”

“Until then, we train,” Humphrey said. “Even here, we can’t hit silver rank in that time frame. What we can do is get everyone not just to bronze, but consolidated at our new rank. We need to eke out every bit of strength we can muster for what’s to come.”

“That won’t just be a goal,” Clive said. “That will be a necessity. From what I can tell, the magical density will be increasing at an escalating rate as the tunnel draws closer to completion. Even if we never see the trap weaver again, we’ll be meeting silver-rank monsters sooner, rather than later.”

The team left the lair of the dead cultists behind and went back to the task of training. They returned to the frenetic pace of when they were preparing for the confrontation with the blood weaver’s brood, once again unsure of what kind of numbers they would be facing.

A sense of ominous danger loomed over them as they battled time and the fear that their struggles were hopeless. What came through the tunnel when it opened could very well be too much for them to handle, however strong they became. Even the most optimistic conjecture left them as a small insurgent operation against a force that had been preparing to arrive longer than any of them had been adventurers.

The result was that Humphrey never felt a need to push the team. As if a wolf were snapping at their heels, the team pushed ever forward, their only guide the soul compass

leading them from one flesh abomination to the next. Their aggressive schedule found at least one and sometimes two or even three in day. It neatly led them through the city and into the waiting embrace of monster after monster.

Their lives became a war waged on the monsters of the astral space. It was a desperate race against an enemy that, for all they knew, would be impossible to overcome whatever they did. Every passing day moved them closer to the cult's arrival, but every encounter moved them closer to ready. Every member of the team was honed like a knife, not just in ability but in attitude. There were no complaints as each day blended together, training, hunting, resting, over and over. The team burned with a fire to get stronger and they pushed themselves to their limits. Humphrey finally had to enforce a rest day at the end of each week to stop the team from burning out.

They encountered the first silver-rank monsters they actually fought. A pair of jungle cats with no heads, but large mouths on their bellies. Although physically weaker than some top-end bronze monsters, their speed was a danger. Even Sophie wasn't able to keep up, still at iron rank, and she suffered a number of dangerous injuries. Belinda was almost killed outright, only Neil's powerful healing bringing her back from the brink.

Ability: [Grand Renewal] (Renewal)

- Spell (healing, ritual)
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 1 hour.

- Current rank: Bronze 1 (14%).

- Effect (iron): Conduct a powerful healing ritual that cleanses all afflictions. This ability takes the place of the ritual's material components.

- Effect (bronze): The ritual circle is magically drawn, allowing the ritual to be more quickly enacted and in less ideal conditions.

Neil was able to draw out a ritual circle much like Clive was, although the glowing ritual lines were green and it was only for the one, specific, ritual. That ritual, however, was extremely potent. Importantly, it did not require the normally costly resources of non-essence ritual healing.

A monster surge lasted weeks and was famously a time for active adventurers to advance their abilities by leaps and bounds. Not only did the team experience this phenomenon for longer than even the lengthiest monster surge, but they were not caught

up defending vulnerable population centres. They had nothing to do but strike out, pushing themselves harder and harder, like an adventurer surge visited upon the monsters.

Sophie inevitably reached bronze rank. Her abilities continued to follow a theme of not being flashy individually, instead requiring skill and judgement to draw out their true potential. They were largely improvements and iterations on the iron-rank effects.

Belinda also reached bronze, enhancing her eclectic collection of powers. Unlike Sophie, she had a number of powers whose bronze-rank effects would have a significant impact on the way she operated and, true to form, were useful in support of the team. Her pit of the Reaper ability would no longer cause allies to fall in, meaning that the team's most vulnerable members could stand on top of it while anyone seeking to attack them would fall right in.

Her various powers to replicate different kinds of adventurers also gained important advancement. Her agility power, instant adept, gained magical movement effects such as wall-running and water-walking. Her warrior-replicating power, counterfeit combatant, now gave her access to some simple special attacks. Her specious sorcerer power no longer just gave her the power to wield wands and staves, but also cast some simple spells. While the power was active, she would have access to a force bolt spell and the same life bolt spell that Neil could use.

The team did not just spend their time mindlessly hunting down and killing monsters. Training was also a crucial part of their preparations, delving into things that had been put aside when the blood weaver's army had still been ahead of them. One of the most important aspects of that training was adjusting to their new bronze-rank attributes.

While they had all seen their abilities increase as their attributes moved up through iron-rank, there was a jump in capability as their abilities crossed the threshold of mortal potential and moved into bronze.

Their new strength levels were fairly easy to adapt to, although someone already strong like Humphrey had an easier time than someone like Belinda. The real adjustment was the speed attribute, which governed agility, flexibility, dexterity, coordination and proprioception. The two attributes combined to give the whole team a level of athleticism that was staggering, and would take time to learn to its full potential.

Training to make the most of their new potential brought some much-needed levity to the dour days of regimented training and ceaseless violence. They all had the agility of acrobats and Neil became obsessed with standing back-flips. The whole team took to parkour training with a new verve. Their capabilities meant not just new levels of agility, but also the power to jump further and endure longer drops than ever before.

Sophie took the lead in that training, assisted by Jason. He finally pulled out the bronze-rank skill books for his Way of the Reaper combat system they had won on their last trip to the astral space. They included movement techniques for speed, stealth and the acrobatic traversal of terrain. Sophie learned from the same books the long way. They were enchanted with magical projections to act as guides, although those guides were of distinctly secondary value to Shade. The familiar was well-versed in Order of the Reaper techniques, serving as guide to both Jason and Sophie.

“Miss Wexler, I am certain that at its height, the order of the Reaper would have placed immense value on you as a recruit,” he told her.

“What about me?” Jason asked.

“They may have accepted you as well, Mr Asano.”

Jason had long wondered about the higher-ranks of his martial art, which were skills rather than essence abilities. He knew theoretically that it was the techniques requiring more than human capability, but it was only getting to learn them that he truly understood. It wasn't just the strength of the power attribute and the agility of the speed attribute. There was a situational awareness that came with the spirit attribute that added a dimension to fighting that simply wasn't possible under the limits of mortal senses.

As he watched Humphrey and Sophie spar, he realised that their combat had an almost choreographed feel. They thought faster, had a better sense of their opponents and their surroundings, their spatial sense much sharper. Combat was less fumbling, more precise. Mistakes were punished but so was hesitation.

None of the bronze-rank techniques were reinventing the wheel, replacing existing methods wholesale. The large majority were contextual, for fighting in various circumstances and environments only made possible by bronze-rank attributes.

It was the movement techniques that underwent the more fundamental change. It felt awkward at first, breaking old habits that were ingrained over a lifetime. He and Sophie pushed the team through practise techniques designed to break those habits until new ones took hold.

The comprehensive movement techniques of the Way of the Reaper included techniques that incorporated many common movement abilities. Jason was amused to discover a long distance running technique similar to one he developed himself early in his career, using the weight-reducing power of his cloak. Magical vehicles and access to Shade's mount forms had caused him to largely leave the method behind, but the Reaper technique allowed him to refine it, should he have need of it again.

It was only after working to make use of their new attributes that the team truly understood how transformative bronze rank really was. It wasn't just about the increase in power, but in learning to use it to full effect. It was during this training that Jason realised just how much the bronze-rankers he had seen in the past had squandered their potential.

He thought he had understood why Rufus, Gary and Farrah had looked down on Greenstone's adventurers, having seen for himself how much stronger they were than the bronze-rankers around them. It was only on reaching bronze-rank himself, though, that he fully comprehended the difference. Their training had built a foundation over his iron-rank career that now, at bronze-rank, allowed him to build something truly grand upon it.

Assuming the team somehow managed to overcome the cultists and find a way out of the astral space, he would have to thank Rufus and Gary properly, only now understanding just what a great service they had done for him. As for Farrah, the most he could do was raise a quiet glass to the sky in her memory, one night as he stood alone on the roof of his cloud house.

Chapter 243

A Valiant Death

“I could feel the power he was throwing off like heat,” Thadwick said, full of enthusiasm. “I want that power.”

“And you will have it,” Zato said. “Dougall began the treatments earlier than you, so his power came into its fullness earlier.”

Dougall’s new presence within the cultist enclave had not gone unnoticed. Although he remained in seclusion, all had felt the power radiating off him like heat. They felt the instinctive drive for veneration coming from the star seeds within their souls, and saw the respect with which Timos and Zato treated him. Those who had asked about him, however, had been met with nothing but stony silence.

“Why only us two?” Thadwick asked. “Why not give this power to everyone?”

“Because not everyone is worthy,” Zato said. “Only those of noble blood have the right to the most noble of power. Sadly, our leadership was largely lost. Dougall, like you came to us from the nobility, and is therefore a treasure to us. Like you.”

“I thought I heard someone say he was a servant.”

“No, he had servants,” Zato said. “Like many of the high blood, those around him grew jealous of his inherent superiority and sought to bring him down. We, of course, took him in, knowing that even a drop of noble blood is worth more than all the blood in the bodies of we commoners.”

“The high blood,” Thadwick repeated. “I haven’t heard that term in a while. It isn’t acceptable anymore. My great uncle used to talk like that, until mother shushed him up. We didn’t used to have to treat the rabble like they’re equals. I think my mother actually believes that dross. It always disgusted me about her.”

“You will find no such problems here.”

“Timos didn’t seem too reverent.”

“Which is why I have moved you to my side. You stand above him and, in time, will stand above me. The day will soon come when your voice will be our law. The commands coming from your mouth will be our purpose.”

“Good,” Thadwick said. “I was always told that I was born to a great birthright, only to be denied at every turn. I’m glad to finally find people who understand my value.”

“Thadwick,” Zato said with a smile. “If nothing else, I can assure you that everything you deserve is coming your way.”

A cultist came up to them.

“Leader,” the man said. “The church has started to arrive. Should I send people to meet them?”

“Not until the archbishop appears,” Zato said. “Then, come notify me.”

The church of Purity’s members were arriving at the Vane estate through a portal, in lots. There were fifty eight in total; mostly iron-rank, leavened with a solid contingent of bronze and a sole silver ranker, in the person of the archbishop. It took three portals to bring them all through, with the archbishop arriving last.

It had been hard times for the church members chased out of Greenstone. Only those with at least a full set of essences had been considered worth saving; the rest were abandoned to the investigations of the Adventure Society. They were too ignorant to do any damage, in any case.

The archbishop, Nicolas Hendren, looked extremely disgruntled to have been summoned, although he did, with reluctance, appear. His people were milling about, unsure of what do. The cultists emerged from the cult’s subterranean complex, impassively warding off anyone who approached the no-longer hidden entrance. They refused to interact with the gathered clergy unresponsive to any questions sent their way.

Only once Hendren himself arrived did the cult make an approach. Timos appeared from underground, accompanied by another man hidden completely within hooded robes. Hendren frowned, both at the absence of the leader, Zato, and his inability to sense the aura of the hooded figure. If the cult had reinforced their numbers with a gold-ranker, his ability to direct the course of events would be significantly hampered.

They walked away from the lower-ranked cultists and clergy, Timos with the hooded figure and Hendren with Anisa Lasalle.

“Timos,” Hendren greeted brusquely. He noted the subordinate stance Timos took, relative to the hooded figure. Anisa was standing near Hendren in much the same posture. The figure said nothing as Timos reciprocated the greeting.

“Archbishop. Given our limited space, your people will be required to camp above ground, as I believe you have already been made aware of. Naturally, we have set aside a place for you, personally, in one of our more comfortable chambers, below.”

Timos turned a snide gaze on Anisa.

“Will the priestess be sharing your chamber,” he asked, “or remaining up here to keep your men occupied.”

Anisa’s face curled up into a snarl, but she stilled at a pacifying gesture from Hendren.

“Really, Timos?” Hendren asked. “I would hardly think this is time for such pettiness between allies about to share an undertaking.”

“Some allies are more enthusiastic than others,” Timos said. “Of course, I did not mean to imply anything salacious. I apologise if my unwitting remarks caused your minds to naturally follow an unwelcome path.”

“Just have your people show mine where to set up camp,” Hendren said. “Then there are things in need of discussion, but not with you.”

Hendren turned to the hooded figure.

“Are you the new leader, here?” he asked.

“He’s the leader everywhere,” Timos said. “You will speak to him only when spoken to.”

“This is a poor way to treat allies,” Hendren said.

“You have been poor allies,” came a voice from the hooded figure. The voice was soft and carried no aura, yet somehow slammed into Hendren like a runaway brick cart. He immediately understood who – what – was within the robes.

“Most of our people are unaware of the Lord’s presence,” Timos said. “If you or your priestess are responsible for changing that, the repercussions will be severe.”

“We understand,” Hendren said. “Don’t we, Anisa?”

He was suddenly and fully aware that any influence he had would need to be persuasive, rather than authoritative, which was not where Anisa excelled.

“Yes, Archbishop,” Anisa said, reluctant but obediently following her superior’s lead.

“Priestess, work with the cult’s people to see our own set up. I shall go below to discuss the next step with our allies.”

“Are you certain I shouldn’t go with you?” she asked.

“Quite certain,” Hendren said. “Take command of our people here. Keep them in line and make sure no one starts trouble with our allies.”

He gave her a pointed look.

“Words can hurt us here, Priestess. Be careful that they don’t.”

Timos gave Anisa a smarmy smile, but after the archbishop’s warning it was met with stony indifference. She went off to organise their people without giving Timos a second glance.

Timos led Hendren into the complex below, the hooded figure of the Builder silently accompanying them. Hendren noted that in addition to making no sound, the figure left no footprints in the sandy dirt that had taken over the estate grounds.

“How long until the path opens?” Hendren said as they made their way underground, down the stone steps.

“Days,” Timos said. “Two weeks, at the outside.”

Iron-rank monsters had become infrequent in the overgrown city. When they did appear it was either in great numbers or alongside more powerful variations of their kind. In the first instance, the team didn't even bother to fight them, sending them fleeing with a burst of aura suppression. Only the most mindlessly aggressive were foolish enough to attack, with catastrophic results.

Sophie's wind blade power alone was a disaster to weak, amassed enemies. Its strength wasn't great but it had bronze-rank power behind it. Additionally, the new effect it had gained for ranking up was that the blades grew wider as they travelled, allowing Sophie to cut down weaker enemies in clusters.

Bronze-rank monsters were becoming a decreasing challenge as they team grew their power and honed their skills. It was the increasing frequency of silver-rank monsters that let them push themselves to new heights.

Taking on a silver-rank monster at bronze was not so easy as facing a bronze-rank monster at iron. Each rank represented a larger leap in power than the last, making rank-jumping a trickier proposition with each level of advancement. Silver-rank monsters were easier to handle than even a mediocre silver-rank essence user, but that was not the same as being easy.

Only Humphrey, Jason and, Sophie were able to take on weaker, solitary silver-ranks alone. Even then, they didn't try until they had consolidated their power. Only with a full grasp of their bronze-rank abilities and after advancing them into the lower-mid point of bronze did they even attempt it.

Even then, it was only weak solitary monsters that any of them confronted alone. Such fights were uncommon, as even the silver-rank monsters were appearing in packs. It was generally the most dangerous that appeared alone.

The team was tearing through the city at an ever-accelerated pace, even as the monstrous opposition grew stronger. The flesh abominations no longer posed the threat they had in the past. Once the team was at bronze-rank, the abomination's ability to adapt was no longer the equal of a full suite of essence powers. Belinda especially, with her versatile powers, could adapt to an abomination faster than it could adapt to her.

With their strategies tried and tested over innumerable confrontations the abominations were no longer even worth using for practice. The team went full-force to

down them as quickly as possible and move on. They started clearing two, three, even four in a day, releasing hundreds of the tormented souls trapped within. The team knew they were coming close to the end of their self-imposed task as it took longer and longer to find the abominations by following the soul compass.

Eventually, the compass led them into what they realised was the new territory of the blood weaver. Once more they found the residual webbing and the empty shells of converted monsters.

“The blood weaver will be having a harder time,” Clive said. “The monsters are growing too strong. It won’t be able to overpower and turn them.”

“Maybe,” Humphrey said. “It may have thrown weaker monsters at stronger ones in waves, then turned those stronger monsters.”

“Even if that is the case,” Clive said, “It won’t have been able to do that more than a handful of times.”

“A handful is enough,” Humphrey said. “A few silver-rank monsters is our limit, even as a team. Our abilities are growing, but if we become arrogant or complacent, we can easily die here.”

When the confrontation with the blood weaver came, there were no so many silver-rank monsters as they feared. The nasty surprise was that the blood weaver had managed to capture and turn three of the flesh abominations. Vampiric power combined in dangerous ways with the nature of the flesh monsters, to various effect.

The first unpleasant surprise was that something about the nature of the abominations and their new vampiric state made them less vulnerable to Jason’s blood powers, instead of more, like the other vampiric monsters. The powers still took hold, but at a reduced strength. Fortunately, they still had increased effect against the other vampiric minions.

The other aspect of the vampire abominations was that they could warp themselves to produce an array of different drain attacks. Mana, health and stamina were all drained away by barbed flesh whips, needle claws and eerie, disjointed limbs covered in toothy maws.

By the time they carved their way through to the blood weaver, the team was spent enough that even the relatively weak creature still posed a threat. In the end, though, they were resting atop a building that served as an anchor for the new nest, the weaver and its minions all dead.

Jason hadn't even bothered to pull out the cloud house, the team sprawling onto the tiled rooftop, exhausted. Neil had only half-healed the team back up before he was too wrung out to finish the job.

"That was bad," Belinda said. "Top Five worst fight, easy."

"Top three," Neil said.

"I don't know about top three," Clive said. "I mean, the vortex elementals were number one, right?"

"Definitely," Jason agreed. "The mirror fungus was definitely top three."

"I'd say the stutter hawks, too," Humphrey chimed in. "That's the top three."

"Nope," Neil said. "You didn't have to heal and replenish the team through all those drain attacks. The vampire abominations were worse than the stutter hawks."

"Actually, yeah," Clive said. "I'll accept that. Top three."

"We really shouldn't just be laying here," Humphrey said. "A monster could jump on us while we're not defending ourselves."

"At this point the monster can have me," Sophie said. "I'm getting some rest even if it's the cold rest of the grave. Do you know how hard it is to get tired with my powers? This is the first time I've been genuinely tired since we left Greenstone."

"You want someone to get up, then get up," Neil said to Humphrey.

"Alright, I will," Humphrey said, then didn't so much as twitch. "Am I up?"

"No," Belinda said.

"Well, I tried," Humphrey said. "At least I'll be able to say I died valiantly."

"I'm bleeding on the roof," Belinda said.

"If the landlord complains, I'll lie for you," Jason said.

"That's very decent of you," Belinda said.

Eventually the team did pick themselves up before something climbed up the side of the building to eat them and Neil finished healing the team back up. They decamped to another location and Jason set up the cloud house. Humphrey became everyone's hero by volunteering first watch, while everyone else except Clive went to bed. Clive made his way onto the roof where he conducted the latest in his ongoing tests to gauge the integrity of the dimensional membrane dividing the astral space from the true astral.

"Well?" Humphrey asked as Clive came back down.

"It could be any day, now," Clive said. "not long from now, we're going to be up to our armpits in cultists."

Chapter 244

Ambitions

Over the last week, the ambient magic in the astral had taken on a strange cadence. Like ripples on still water at the footfalls of a great beast, the very space around them was agitated. It grew stronger day by day, until even Sophie could sense it, and she had no magical senses at all.

The monsters were apparently affected, being driven to unusual behaviour. Some hunkered down in the deepest holes they could find. Others gathered into large packs of disparate creatures that would ordinarily be at each other's throats.

When the team found these groups in the early stages of their formation, before their numbers swelled, they would swoop in and wipe them out. As days passed, though, they found themselves avoiding the groups altogether. The numbers had simply grown too large to take on; whole armies of bronze and silver-rank monsters, dwarfing anything the blood weaver had accumulated.

Another reason that team had holed-up in the cloud house was that the changes to the ambient magic started to affect their powers. Sometimes they wouldn't work, other times their effects were unpredictable, mixing up allies and enemies. Fortunately, the vampiric flesh abominations the blood weaver had turned were some of the last. The team knew they had cleared the last one when the soul compass span aimlessly around.

"The strange affect on our powers will pass once the tunnel opens and the dimensional membrane becomes becomes stable," Clive said. "That, or the whole astral space will collapse and we'll be annihilated. Definitely one of the two."

"I don't suppose you'd care to lay odds?" Jason asked.

"I have no idea," Clive said. "My understanding is incomplete, at best. I wasn't going to say anything, but I never figured out how they intend to stabilise the tunnel at this end."

"Uh," Belinda said, "wouldn't that mean that it would essentially shred the dimensional membrane, flood the astral space with magic and it'll do that collapsing thing you mentioned."

"Yes," Clive confirmed.

"And you can't figure out why that won't happen?" Jason asked.

"That's right," Clive said. "But I'm stumbling in the dark, here. We're talking about magic that I barely understand and I've only seen parts of what they're doing."

"That's comforting," Neil said. "As far as you can tell we're all going to die, but you know so little that you might be wrong."

“Pretty much,” Clive said.

“I think I have some cake left,” Jason said, opening his inventory. “If I’m going to be obliterated into astral nothingness again, I’m doing it with cake.”

“What do you mean again?” Neil asked.

Jason was sitting on the roof of the cloud house, talking into a recording crystal.

“So, I’m pretty sure that this whole place won’t just blow up. If it does, you’ll never get to see this, so I’ll make a confident assertion and either come off as right or you’ll never know, so I’m a winner each way.”

He turned the crystal around to point at the sky. There was a large patch that shimmered, sometimes showing a whole different sky. Stars at night, dark clouds, a strange purple.

“We can see the tunnel now, so Clive thinks it’s a matter of hours.”

He sighed, turning the crystal back on him.

“I hope we’re ready for whatever comes through. The last time people went up against the cultists on a large scale, I lost a friend. And that was when the opposing forces were fairly matched. I don’t even know how much I’ll be able to contribute. If they have a bunch of construct creatures, I may not be a lot of help.”

Jason tilted his head like he was listening for something.

“Well, time to go. There probably won’t be another one of these until it’s all over, one way or another.”

He stowed away the recording crystal.

“I’m all done, Belinda,” he called out and Belinda made her way up the stairs on the outside of the house.

“How did you know it was me?” she asked.

“Aura.”

She shook her head. “I need to work on my aura retraction,” she said.

“What’s up?” he asked, waving a hand to make a cloud chair rise up for her to sit on.

“You recording another message for home?” she asked, deflecting his question as she sat in the soft seat.

“I was,” he said.

“Do you think you’ll ever get to show them to your family?”

“I hope so,” he said. “I have fences to mend, there. I have no idea how I’m going to explain any of this. I’m not even sure that my powers will work. My world is magically barren.”

Belinda let out a tired breath, looking up at the sky.

"This is going to be quite something, isn't it?" she asked. "Whether that thing kills us all, or spews out a bunch of evil pricks, this is the last bit of quiet we'll get before things get very busy and very dangerous."

"Yep," Jason agreed.

"It might be a last chance to maybe settle some things that have maybe been hanging over us for a while," Belinda said. "Personal stuff, between members of the team."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Jason said.

"Oh, come on. You know she likes you."

"I know," Jason said. "Which leads me to the question of why you're the one up here."

"She's not exactly good at making herself vulnerable," Belinda said. "She doesn't know what to do."

"I think it's best left alone," Jason said. "Even if we put aside the tangle of issues around how we met, which we can't, it isn't... I don't..."

He sighed.

"Sophie's good at cutting through the nonsense to get to the point. That's something people like me need in their lives. And she's gorgeous, obviously, but that's where the attraction ends for me. I want her in my life and in my team. Neither of us make easy friends, I don't think, but we both make good ones. That's what I want. All I want."

"Ah, crap," Belinda said.

"Yeah," Jason said. "That about covers it."

"What do we do?"

"Nothing," Jason said. "She has to decide for herself what course she's going to take."

"And if that course leads straight to you?" Belinda asked.

"Then she and I will have an awkward conversation and we'll go from there. Frankly, she needs to find herself as an adventurer before she starts adding complications, anyway. Not the running around, hunting monsters part of being an adventurer. She's a natural at that."

"Yes she is," Belinda agreed.

"I mean the place in society that being an adventurer brings. The power and privilege. The money. That's where she's going to need you."

"I'm not just her sidekick, you know."

"I know."

“I have my own hopes and ambitions. I don’t want to just spend my life following her around.”

“I never thought you did,” Jason said. “But you’re the one having this conversation, when it really should be her.”

“She’s just not good at certain things,” Belinda said. “She doesn’t handle them well. I don’t want her to run off, or kick the snot out of you or something.”

“I appreciate that,” Jason said. “So, where do you see yourself landing, down the line? Assuming we survive to escape this mess.”

“I’m liking this adventuring job,” Belinda said. “Not so much the hunting down monsters, but roaming around, tackling interesting problems. I guess I want to end up somewhere between Clive and Emir. Well-studied, but not bound up in the Magic Society, the way Clive is. Taking interesting jobs for large quantities of money, but going out there myself, getting my hands dirty. I don’t want to be a spider in the middle of a web, like Emir.”

“A life of excitement, travel and adventure,” Jason said. “That sounds exactly like the direction the team should be going. Maybe you should be in charge.”

“That works for me,” Belinda said. “I can have Sophie follow me around and clean up my messes for once.”

The sky distortion was directly over the centre of the city. The team had chosen to wait out events from atop a building at the outskirts of the central region, on one of the last intact buildings before the thick ring of jungle took over. Jason had set the cloud house up on the roof. Unlike many other aspects of magic, the cloud flask seemed unaffected by the changes in ambient magic. Clive explained that they had only seen a fragment of the true artistry behind its construction.

When the ground started shaking like an earthquake, they all made their way outside.

“Should we get down off this building?” Neil asked. “It feels like the building is going to collapse.”

“Lets go up on the cloud house roof” Jason said. “I’m pretty sure it will slow-fall us down if the building gets earth quaked out from under us.”

“Pretty sure?” Neil asked.

The team made their way up onto the roof of the cloud house, itself on the roof of a tall building, giving them a good vantage.

At the very centre of the city was the crater that was once the Order of the Reaper’s trial tower. They couldn’t see the ground level there due to the intervening buildings, but

they heard a cacophonous shattering of earth and stone, then a huge cloud of dust and dirt rose up, spreading over the city. Sophie's toxin-purging aura creating a field of clean air around the team as the cloud washed around and past them.

After a few moments, the cloud settled enough for the team to once again see out over the city. In the space over the crater was a giant stone ring, floating horizontally in the air. It was thick and some hundred metres across, slowly ascending through the air in the direction of the sky anomaly.

"I don't remember seeing that," Sophie said. "It feels like we would have noticed something that large."

"It must have been buried," Humphrey said. "That cloud was kicked off when it pushed itself out."

"Any ideas, Clive?"

"All I can offer are guesses," Clive said. "I'm assuming some manner of terminus point for the tunnel, to stop it from annihilating the astral space."

"That's good news," Neil said. "We'll survive long enough to get wiped out by a cultist army."

"Maybe it will stabilise the magic," Clive said. "Open up the portals and give us a chance to escape."

"Escape isn't an option," Humphrey said. "Unless the limit on iron-rank entry has been changed, we're the only ones with the strength to stop the cult. Bringing in more iron-rankers would be animals to the slaughterhouse. The monsters would get them before the cultists."

"Assuming we do have the strength," Belinda said.

"I am assuming that," Humphrey said. "It's the only chance we have of stopping whatever it is they're doing, which we very much want to do."

The team watched the ring slowly rise into the air.

"I believe it is called a ring gate," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. "I've heard of them, but never seen one in operation. As Mr Standish surmised, it is likely the anchor point of the physical reality bridge spanning across the astral between this space and your world."

"An artificial astral space aperture," Clive said.

"Yes."

"You didn't feel like mentioning this before?" Neil asked.

"My knowledge in this area is limited," Shade said. "Even now, I postulate."

The ring continued its ponderous rise into the sky.

“How long has that thing been there, hidden under the ground?” Sophie wondered.

“During my return here, it has become clear that many things were kept from me when I was made administrator of this place,” Shade said. “We have gone places I did not know existed, and were apparently barred to the vessel I inhabited at that time.”

“They didn’t want you to know,” Jason said.

“I believe that to be the case,” Shade said. “It seems to have an age and purpose that goes well beyond the training ground it served as during my tenure here. The Order of the Reaper, and my previous summoner, clearly hid that history and purpose from me.”

“Should we, I don’t know, get ready to attack?” Neil asked. “Catch them as they arrive?”

“No,” Humphrey said. “We have to assume that we’ll be outnumbered and that the enemy will have at least some silver rankers amongst them. We have to make every move with careful deliberation.”

“Insurgency rules,” Jason said. “Guerrilla tactics. Find vulnerable points, soften them up. Create a chance to strike critical points.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “We’ve been tramping over this place for the last five months. We know it better than they do, and we use that.”

“The first thing we need is information,” Clive said.

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “We need to see what come through that ring.”

“It is in the sky,” Sophie said. “Maybe they’ll all just fall down and die.”

“That would be nice,” Humphrey said. “Somehow, I don’t think it’s going to be that easy.”

In the sky of the astral space, the ring finally came into contact with the shimmering anomaly. Immediately, the anomaly began to shrink down, pouring into the space within the ring like water going down a drain. The anomaly concentrated, what was originally an occasionally shifting skyscape becoming a roiling mass in indiscernible power within the ring.

Then, the roiling stopped. A wave of magic flooded over the city like the blast wave of an explosion as the space inside the ring became the still, dark blue of the sky before sunset. Watching from far below, reeling from the magical blast, Jason and his team watched as a figure that seemed incredibly tiny at that distance fall out of the ring. Shrouded in blue light, it drifted slowly toward the ground.

More figures emerged, dropping through the ring and falling to the ground in rapid succession. The team counted dozens, and it was more than just people. There were large

boxes, likewise slowly falling under the power of the blue light, all descending toward the ground at the heart of the city.

“That’s a lot,” Neil said.

“Yep,” Jason agreed.

“Can we handle all that?”

“We will,” Humphrey said.

“So, what now?” Sophie asked. “We need more information, right?”

“We do,” Jason said. “I think I’ll start by taking a look at what they’re up to.”

Chapter 245

Faith and Glory

The power of the ring gate let the cultists drift down from the sky in safety, but they descended into trouble. The cultists drew more than a little attention on their way down, the blue light slowing their fall making them stand out both visibly and magically. The result was a slavering pack of monsters awaiting them on the ground.

The centre of the city had not been monster free for some time. The blood weaver was long gone and even if it hadn't been, the increasing magical density produced monsters with easily power enough to rival it. The magical saturation that had them manifesting thick and fast meant that the centre of the city was now just as infested as the rest.

That meant that the cultists descending first would need to fight out a safe zone for those that followed, but the monsters awaiting them were well beyond their expectations, both in number and power.

The bronze-rankers were able to hold their own against the gaggle of monsters moving in on their location. They were lucky in that no silver-rank monsters had yet appeared. The bronze-rankers were not able to carve out a space for those that followed, however, leaving their fellows to drop right into the jaws of battle. Meanwhile, more monsters poured in, hungry for the prey being dropped from heaven.

The iron-rankers that started arriving were quickly falling prey to the powerful monsters, the bronze-rankers too busy to protect them. Rather than a landing zone, all they had managed to create was a battle zone.

It was the arrival of the Builder's hooded figure that overturned the situation. Spears made of elaborately-carved stone erupted from the ground in clusters, impaling monsters as many as a dozen times. Grand walls, thick and high, rose up in a circle to box out the more widely spread monsters and isolating the closest ones. The bronze-rankers fell on the monsters that survived the spears, quickly establishing the landing zone they had failed to create alone.

The walls were not the solid stone of crude stone-shaping powers but brick and mortar, complete with battlements, observation towers and metal gates in each of the four directions. The result was larger and more elaborate than any silver-rank essence user could conjure up.

There was a command tent at the heart of the fortified camp. It was magically shielded against prying eyes and ears and contained a round table with four chairs. There two occupants, Zato was sitting and the Builder standing.

“Establishing this base camp has overtaxed this vessel,” the Builder told Zato. “It is beginning to break down.”

Evidence of the breakdown was readily apparent. The body of Dougall that the Builder was inhabiting had fiercely bloodshot eyes, sunken flesh and gaunt, pallid skin. Hair had fallen out in ugly clumps.

“The new vessel is ready to be inhabited,” Zato said. “We are working on a third, just as a contingency.”

“It should not be necessary, but I applaud your preparedness,” the Builder said. “So long as I do not use the kind of power that built these walls again, the next vessel should comfortably see us through our task, here. Since this one is close to being spent, I will make some more buildings, establish a true fort instead of these tents.”

“There is one problem with the next vessel,” Zato said.

“It has realised that it will be a hollowed-out puppet.”

“Yes,” Zato said.

“Not a concern,” the Builder said. “Unlike the previous transferral, I am here to participate in person. Resistance will not pose any impediment to the process. This vessel still has a few days before it becomes unusable, so prepare accordingly.”

“Yes, Lord Builder.”

“Make sure to kill this vessel once I am done with it. It will be little more than a walking hunger once I have left it. I do not need to explain why having an energy vampire roaming around would be a poor idea, even if it would quickly starve.”

“I’ll see to it, Lord Builder.”

Timos arrived at the tent, along with the archbishop, Nicolas Hendren. After announcing them from the outside, Timos lead Hendren inside before leaving again.

“Please sit,” Zato said, getting up.

Hendren sat and looked at the Builder. It was his first time seeing the vessel without it being hidden beneath a hood.

“Are you alright?” Hendren asked.

“This vessel channelled to much of my power establishing this camp,” the Builder said. “I will be taking another soon.”

“The Mercer boy?” Hendren asked. “Is that what he was yelling and screaming over?”

“It is.”

“The boy is an idiot,” Hendren said. “His mother spent every scrap of influence she had to make sure he would not have his star seed purged until we had a safe method, then he runs right back to you? An imbecile.”

“Your role in that affair is worthy of praise,” the Builder told Hendren. “My people made a rash choice in implanting star seeds as a distraction. It gave those who would fight us too much information. Placing yourself in the middle and slowing the process of removing those seeds to a crawl was the bold move of an effective ally. Your side and mine have both made mistakes, but individually, you have my respect.”

“The respect of an ally is a valuable thing,” Hendren said diplomatically, then turned to Zato. “May I inquire as to why you asked me to specifically exclude Priestess Lasalle from this meeting?”

“The priestess is a woman of zeal,” Zato said. “The strength of her faith is a testament to your god. That kind of dedication can be inflexible, however, when circumstances dictate compromise. As a gesture of goodwill, I have likewise excluded my own second from this meeting.”

Hendren gave a reluctant nod.

“Anisa is unflinchingly dedicated but, as you say, she can be reluctant to adapt. She gets caught up in the way she feels things should be, instead of accepting them the way that they are.”

“Circumstances here are not as they should be,” Zato said. “The unanticipated change to the magical density will require a number of hard decisions.”

“The monsters are certainly too strong for our iron-rank people,” Hendren said. “Do you know what caused it?”

“Our original astral magic specialist was lost some time ago,” Zato said.

“Landemere Vane,” Hendren said. “It seems Jason Asano was always destined to plague this enterprise.”

A flash of rage crossed the face of the Builder’s vessel, accompanied by a burst of aura that was brief, yet enough to leave the other two swaying unsteadily in their seats. The sounds of the camp outside were stilled to silence as the aura passed over it. The two men waited to see if the Builder would speak, but he said nothing.

“The specifics are irrelevant,” Zato eventually continued. “It seems that our other ritualists made an error in the tunnel formation. Sadly, it was all set in motion months before the Lord Builder was on hand to guide us. They were unable to grasp an element of the design Vane left behind, so they improvised, substituting in another aspect of dimensional magic. That alteration had no effects apparent from the other side, but we are

working with potent dimensional forces. A tiny change became a dangerous fluctuation by the time the bridge was affecting the astral space.”

“You didn’t realise?” Hendren asked, turning to the Builder.

“The senses of this vessel are limited,” the Builder said. “As for this realm, I can only see into physical realities through a vessel or those who carry my seed. That includes a borderline physical space, such as this one.”

“What happened, exactly?”

“The dimensional membrane of this world was disrupted, causing a rapid alteration in the magical density,” the Builder said. “The ring gate has stabilised the tunnel and the plan continues, but the strength of the monsters represent an unanticipated obstacle that will need to be accounted for.”

“The practical result,” Zato said, “is that our people are too weak to carry out the plan. Your people, too. Iron-rankers cannot be sent out under these conditions, even with bronze-rank supervision. There are silver-rank monsters out there, and not just a few. Do you trust your bronze-rankers to handle a pack of silvers? That takes elite and experienced essence users.”

“Adventurers,” Hendren said.

“Yes,” Zato agreed. “I know your clergy had some Adventure Society members, as does our number, but none full time. Neither of us have the people to handle this in the numbers we need. Especially given that the strength of the monsters is not the only reason to be concerned about them.”

“The changes in the ambient magic has agitated the monsters,” the Builder said. “It had altered their behaviour to a degree we don’t yet know. They may settle as the ambient magic does the same but there are no certainties. As it stands, the groups out there are more dangerous than normal monster packs.”

“What about construct creatures?” Hendren asked.

“They will be an integral part of our response,” Zato said. “We still retain a supply of clockwork cores that we will be using to build up a force of constructs. The weakness of constructs is that they need direction. They can supplement the strength of our people, but not replace it. We need more people who can operate independently in this monster environment. We cannot send teams out on tasks if they all need our strongest people to protect them.”

“I’m not sure what you want from me,” Hendren said. “I can’t just bump all my people up to bronze rank.”

“I can,” the Builder said.

“Excuse me?” Hendren asked.

“I can remake your iron-rankers into bronze-rankers.”

“How is that possible? Why haven’t you done it to your own people?”

“Because my followers are the price,” the Builder said. “I can sacrifice an iron-rank follower with a star seed to create a special kind of clockwork core. It can be used to raise another iron-ranker to bronze. I will sacrifice my iron-rank follower to make yours powerful enough to contribute.”

“No,” Hendren said flatly. “We are the church of Purity, in case you have forgotten. We are not going to taint ourselves in the name of short-term power.”

“No?” the Builder asked. “What do you think this pact between myself and your god is? Your deity knows that its objectives cannot be met alone. Without a power from beyond your world, the other gods would stop any attempt to enact your god’s grand agenda.”

“I do not presume to know my god’s purpose,” Hendren said. “My role is to serve. To obey.”

“You don’t even know what your god is after?” Zato asked incredulously.

“The truth is hidden from us, that we cannot despoil our god’s plans, should we be compromised,” Hendren said. “We do not need to know our god’s design. We have faith. We are willing to put aside our base, mortal perspectives and surrender ourselves to a higher power. One that knows better than us. That is better than us.”

“Surely it had occurred to you that my intrusion on this world is, itself, a form of impurity,” the Builder said. “Yet your god participates. Why? Because there will come a time when my agenda is done and I will be gone. It is then that your god will have a chance to undertake a great purge in a world reeling from the damage I have left in my wake. To cleanse the filth and make a world that is clean. While the power structures that would resist you are fighting me, your church will be preparing to move in when I am gone and they are at their most vulnerable.”

“So you say,” Hendren said. “I would not presume to know the intentions of my god.”

“And, in this place, you cannot ask,” the Builder said. “This realm is outside your world, therefore beyond your god’s authority. He has no eye to see, no voice to speak. No hand to move. You are his highest agent, here, Nicolas Hendren. What did your god advise you, before you came here?”

“To do what is necessary,” Hendren said.

“Your god understands the reality,” the Builder said. “That compromise today means purity tomorrow. Yes, there will be sacrifices. These people of yours, once we empower

them, their purpose and destiny will be fixed. They will serve, as necessary, and then you will purge them, once the work is done.”

“I cannot ask this of my people,” Hendren said.

“Faith is about surrendering to a higher power,” Zato said. “Your words, archbishop. Does Purity’s clergy serve only when they want to, or when they are called? What greater honour is there than sacrifice in the service of your god?”

“Making the sacrifice of your people is a burden you will have to bear,” Zato said, “for it is not a sacrifice in which you will share. You will have to remember them. Honour them. Let them be your symbol. Your martyrs. What you do here will show your god that you can be more. A greater servant making the decisions that a leader must make. It is your chance to prove yourself worthy of taking a larger role in the service of your god.”

Hendren frown, looking down at the table in front of him. The absence of his god’s voice troubled him, but it also made him the highest moral authority in the realm in which he found himself. In a way, that made his decisions right for the simple reason that he made them, as was the case with his god.

“Very well,” Hendren said, then looked up from the table to meet the ruined eyes of the Builder’s vessel. “I will need time to bring Lasalle around. She will need to be convinced, to create a unified front.”

“Of course,” Zato said. “We have our own preparations to make. Our own sacrifices to prepare.”

Anisa, as it turned out, was far less of a concern than Hendren had feared.

“We must not be short-sighted,” she said, in response to his explanation. “No sacrifice is too great in service of the god. Even amongst our clergy, few are truly worthy, truly pure. Only those like you and I must be completely vouchsafed. For the rest, sacrifice in furtherance of our god’s agenda is a greater glory than they deserve or have any right to expect.”

Thadwick sat forlornly in a cage, arms hugged around his legs. With the arrival of the cult in the astral space, he had finally felt the full power of ‘Dougall’ on display. He finally came to realise that the power he had been offered would never be his to control, that he was nothing but a cup to be filled and held in the hand of another.

The power inside him that had brought him to bronze-rank, at the cost of his essence powers, had felt so grand, so potent. Now it felt alien; a threat he could not escape because it was already inside of him.

Head bowed, Thadwick did not see the shadowy figure of Shade step through the bars. What he did recognise was the hated voice that emerged from Shade's body.

"Hello, Thadwick. It's been a while."

Chapter 246

Thadwick

Shade's passage through the cultist camp had been easier than anticipated. The camp was divided into three sections; the tents, which was his access point, was the largest section. It was where the bulk of both the iron-rankers were gathered. The crude buildings made with a stone-shaping power were areas he tried to avoid, as one of the bronze-rankers there might have been sharp enough to spot Shade. The very few buildings that looked like they were put together by a skilled craftsman he completely avoided.

The last thing he wanted was to run into a silver-ranker or, if Clive's guess was right, even the Builder itself. Clive knew more than most about great astral beings, even venerating one himself. That was how he knew that it was possible for them to occupy a human vessel, although the process was far from ethical.

Even listening to just around the iron-rankers of the camp, using Shade's body hidden in the shadows. Jason quickly confirmed Clive's suspicions, then extracted his perception from Shade. His actual body was on the ground floor of a large, intact building.

"It's like you said," Jason told Clive. "The Builder had taken a mortal vessel."

"I knew those were more than even a silver-ranker could stone-shape," Neil said.

"What's next?" Sophie asked.

"I'm going back there," Jason said.

"That's a mistake," Clive said. "If the Builder really is there, even in a mortal vessel, it's likely to find you sooner, rather than later. It may even be able to trace you through the familiar bond."

"So you mentioned earlier," Jason said. "I'd actually like to talk to you about that, Clive."

Thadwick's cage was by the wall, moulded by a stone-shaping power from the brick underfoot. The process to prepare him to be the Builder's next vessel had given him strength in the upper reaches of bronze, so the bars were thick and reinforced with containment magic. Thadwick's essence powers were gone, so he had no collar.

The cage had been placed out of the way, behind a pile of damaged storage crates. The circumstances in which the cultists had arrived had been as savage on their supplies as it had on their members. The worthless and broken goods had been tossed aside in a

pile and Thadwick with them. Thadwick was sitting, head down, legs pulled up with his arms around them. Shade's incorporeal body slipped right through the bars, into a crouch.

"Hello, Thadwick," Jason greeted through his familiar. "It's been a while."

On hearing Jason's hated voice, Thadwick lifted his head. His hand snaked out to grab the shadowy figure by the throat, but passed straight through it.

"I'm not really here, Thadwick. I'm speaking through one of my familiar's projected bodies. Even if you could kill it, it would only cost me some mana to replace."

"You survived, then," Thadwick said bitterly. "We weren't sure if you would be able to stay alive in this place."

"I don't think anyone doubted it but you, Thadwick. This place has its dangers, but not so many that a good team of adventurers can't handle it. Neil says hello, by the way."

"I don't want to hear from that traitor."

"Wow," Jason said. "Your aura has changed more than mine, to the point I wasn't sure it was really you. But calling someone a traitor after you kicked him out of your team so you could sign up with an evil cult? That's you all over."

"And smugly looking down on others is you," Thadwick spat back.

"That's fair," Jason said. "We're both so far from that day we met in the marshalling yard, yet our flaws remain the same. That being said, I had something of a revelation in the time since we last met."

"And what's that?" Thadwick asked sceptically.

"That you and I are more similar than either of us would like."

"I am nothing like you!"

"Say it all you like, but it doesn't change anything. It's not like I can claim any credit for the differences that led you to be stuck in this cage, while I'm free to come and go. I just had the good fortune of having people who reined me in before I turned into you."

"You think you're so much better than me, don't you, Asano?"

Jason smiled sadly, shaking his head.

"Thadwick, everyone is better than you. You are literally the worst. You didn't just betray your family and the Adventure Society, although you most certainly did. These people you've thrown in with, they're the enemy of the whole world and everyone in it. You betrayed your entire world. You're worse than people who beat their children or rob and kill the elderly. You're worse than the cultists you've joined. They might follow some twisted, power-hungry ideology, but at least they act out of passion. They didn't just look at someone else causing death and destruction on a global scale and join in out of pique because the world didn't give them what they felt they were entitled to."

“You think you understand me?”

“Yes, Thadwick. Not to kick a man when he’s down, but you’re a bit simple.”

Thadwick lashed out again, his hand once more swiping harmlessly through Shade’s shadow body.

“Also, a little slow on the uptake,” Jason added.

“Screw you, Asano. You’ll never get out of this astral space alive.”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “If I die, though, I die as myself. While my familiar was poking around, I pieced together how you ended up in this cage. The Builder’s really here in person? Walking around inside some poor sap?”

“He is,” Thadwick said, the disdain in his voice pushed out by dread. “He used too much power building this camp and all but burned out his current vessel. The next poor sap is me.”

Thadwick’s eyes lit up with a spark of hope as his gaze on Jason’s familiar body grew intent.

“You can get me out!” Thadwick said. “I can help you. I’ve seen things. I know things. Things that can help you.”

“You’re probably right,” Jason said, “ but I can’t help you. This familiar’s body can’t break you out, or get you over the wall. I can’t even offer to put you out of your misery before the Builder takes you. All this body can do is drain mana.”

“You could come yourself, with your team. The things I know are worth the risk.”

“I’m not going to walk my team blind into a fortified position full of powerful enemies,” Jason said. “If nothing else, I don’t trust you. We could easily find the bad guys waiting for us because you warned them in hope of a reprieve.”

“I wouldn’t do that!”

“Yes, Thadwick, you would. If anything, it would be more of a surprise if you didn’t betray us.”

“I could start yelling, you know,” Thadwick said. “Let everyone know that you’re here in the camp.”

“They already know,” Jason said. “Oddly, they’ve been waiting for us to finish our conversation. I guess whatever they did to you dulled your senses. Or perhaps it’s just the old Thadwick obliviousness. You never did pay much attention to anything that wasn’t yourself.”

“I’m looking forward to hearing about your death,” Thadwick said.

“Even if it comes, Thadwick, you won’t be the one hearing about it. Very soon, someone else is going to be in possession of your ears.”

Thadwick's face paled at the thought. He bowed his head, looking down instead of at Jason.

"How is my family?" Thadwick asked softly.

"Your betrayal wasn't exactly good for them," Jason said. "It would have been worse if your mother hadn't picked up the city like a rug and shaken most of the cultists out. She was trying to rescue you, before everyone realised you went willingly. She was still trying after, for that matter. She took longer than the rest to believe it, though, your mum. I'm pretty sure she still thinks it was some implanted impulse that made you go back."

"Maybe it was," Thadwick said to the floor, his voice beaten and hollow. "It was the power. I could feel it, in the memories from the first time I had the seed. I still don't really remember the first time. You don't keep control, if they have to force it on you. I only had flashes, but I remembered the feeling of power. That was clear. The power I'd always been promised, but never seemed to receive."

He looked up, staring at Jason through Shade's body.

"That was the lie, wasn't it? The lure."

"Yes," Jason said softly.

"Please," Thadwick begged. "Please get me out of here."

"I'm sorry, Thadwick. Strangely, I really am. But you've dug a hole so deep that all you can do is wait for the sides to fall in. Anyone who jumps in will just get buried along with you."

"Please..."

The familiar body moved out of the cage and stood upright.

"Goodbye, Thadwick. The next time I see you, I don't think it will be you in there."

Shade walked out into the open, not bothering to hide as behind him, Thadwick started screaming his name, cursing him to the heavens. Zato was waiting nearby, cultists from around the camp looking over.

"You're the leader?" Jason asked.

"Zato," he introduced himself.

"Jason Asano. Thank you for being patient."

"We have both treated Thadwick poorly. Not undeservedly, but he still came to Builder willingly, in the end. I will not begrudge him a last conversation with the closest he can get to a friend, even if it is an enemy."

"I'm not sure if that was a kindness or not," Jason said.

Zato looked in the direction of the cage, where Thadwick was still screaming.

"Would you be willing to move to a more discreet location to talk?"

“Certainly,” Jason said. “I thank you for the civilised welcome.”

Zato led Jason across the camp, in the direction of the few small buildings that were truly well-constructed. There were cultists and constructs all over. Purity clergy as well, although Jason didn’t spot Hendren or Anisa. He quietly hoped he knew exactly where they were.

“Did the Builder knock these ones out personally?” Jason asked, gesturing to the better-made buildings they were headed towards.

“He did,” Zato said. “I’m taking you to our command residence.”

“Command residence,” Jason said. “I like that. It has a feel of dignity. I’d like to thank you for the civil welcome,” Jason said. “Thadwick’s an old, well, not friend, but... I can at least tell his mother that he had someone to talk to at the end.”

“We can hardly bring any harm to your familiar’s projected body, so why be barbarians about it? There’s nothing in the camp we need to hide from you. All you will find here is that you do not have the strength or the numbers to handle us.”

“It is intimidating,” Jason agreed, eyeing a large construct. It was similar to a beetle, with a hard body and six legs. The rather confronting difference was the neck, which was long, flexible and segmented, ending in what looked like a rhino’s head, but with a bladed fin instead of a horn. Jason could feel the faint aura of the construct, which was silver rank.

“Is that a construct version of a real creature?”

“Construct cores are variations on monster cores,” Zato said. “They create more powerful versions of ordinary monsters.”

Zato led them to what looked like a stone cottage and went inside, holding the door for Jason to follow. Inside was a surprisingly comfortable sitting room, replete with arm chairs, a couch and a nice rug on the floor.

“Not your cloud house, I’m sure,” Zato said, “but not bad, in a pinch. Please, sit.”

“Not much point,” Jason said. “My familiar is intangible, so I’d have to fake it. It’s very nice, though. It could maybe use some house plants.”

“The Lord Builder doesn’t care for them.”

“It’s his house, I guess.”

“Yes it is,” the Builder said, walking into the room. He emitted no trace of aura that Jason could sense.

Jason looked at the Builder, He was wearing plain robes with the hood pushed back, revealing a cadaverous face. Even so, it seemed familiar.

“Who’s the poor bloke you’re inside now?” Jason asked. “He looks kind of familiar, but I can’t place it. Probably because it looks like you’re going Weekend at Bernie’s on the poor guy.”

“Weekend at Bernie’s?” Zato asked. “I’m not sure I follow.”

“Asano likes to makes references people from this world will not understand,” the Builder said. “The purpose is to put them off balance. Pay it no mind.”

“You took possession of my brain for a little while,” Jason said. “It makes sense that you know all my tricks. You and the goddess of Knowledge should get together and play Mario Kart. Do gods and great astral beings socialise? I suppose you must, since Purity seems to fit neatly into your pocket.”

“He also likes to talk continuously, derailing the conversation,” the Builder said. “He moves it into his own pace that he might control it. The inside of his mind is an interminable place.”

“Don’t go spilling all the beans,” Jason said. “Forget about my head, though. What about this guy you’re inside of right now?”

“This vessel has encountered you before,” the Builder said. “While he was a servant at the Vane estate, he captured you. Twice.”

“Wait, he’s the shovel guy? Jason asked. “What was his name? I want to say... Dougie?”

“Dougall,” the Builder said.

“No, I’m pretty sure it was Dougie.”

“It was Dougall.”

“You might want to have another rummage around that head, mate. The bloke should know his own name.”

“You are attempting to aggravate me,” the Builder said.

“Mate, I’m doing that just by walking around. I’m a living monument to your failure. Why would I bother to try and tick you off even more?”

“Because you find it fun.”

Jason laughed. “You really were inside my head, weren’t you?”

“And now you are inside one of the Reaper’s brood,” the Builder said. “Why would one of the Reaper’s shadows stoop to involving itself in mortal affairs?”

“An oddly hypocritical criticism, coming from you,” Shade said. “I was ever my own being and am free to do as I wish.”

“You should have chosen a better summoner,” the Builder said. “This one will be dead, soon.”

“Perhaps,” Shade said. “He’s died before.”

“You seem confident,” Jason said to the Builder. “You think I can’t beat you?”

“We have the numbers and we have the power,” the Builder said. “Overcoming us is impossible for you.”

“So was kicking your interdimensional arse out of my body, yet here we are,” Jason said. “I’ve beaten you before and I’ll beat you again. I did say I’d have pants, next time, but my legs aren’t here, so this doesn’t count.”

“The reason I invited you,” Zato interjected, “was to discuss the possibility of mutually acceptable resolution.”

Zato had stepped back on the arrival of the Builder, but stepped forward when proceedings continued to remain contentious.

“You want a truce?” Jason asked.

“No one doubts that you can cause us some trouble,” Zato said. “It is equally evident, however, that you cannot, ultimately, stop us. Therefore, we suggest a compromise.”

“You can’t seriously think that we’d go for that?” Jason asked.

“This astral space, as I’m sure you are aware,” Zato said, “is quite unusual. The connection it has to the larger world is artificially supported. That means that we don’t need to destructively rip it away, as we have with other astral spaces. The controlled unravelling of the astral bindings will let it drift away without causing any harm.”

“So,” Jason said. “What you’re proposing is that we just let you have this one?”

“In return, we shall open a portal back to the world. We get the astral space, you and your team get out alive and we can go right back to fighting over the next thing. We can even throw in Thadwick, if you want him.”

“He’s not much of a sweetener,” Jason said. “I can’t make that decision. “I’ll have to consult with my team.”

“Of course,” Zato said.

“Just so you know,” Jason said, “I’ll be voting to turn you down. And I do have my persuasive moments.”

“I would also like for you to decline,” the Builder said. “I would rather put you to death here, but Zato has convinced me of the merits of this proposal.”

“He does seem pretty on top of things,” Jason said. “Not what I look for in an enemy, to be honest. I actually kind of like him. I don’t suppose you want to join team Hopelessly Outmatched, Zato?”

“No, thank you.”

“I don’t blame you, mate. Is Zato your first name or last name?”

“It’s my only name.”

“Oh, a mononym,” Jason said brightly. “Like Cher. Have your boss tell you about the music video for If I could Turn back Time. That could be a good look for you. Bold, but I think you could swing it.”

Jason looked at the Builder’s expression.

“Ooh, I think he’d getting grouchy,” Jason said. “I’d best make myself scarce before he changes his mind on the whole deal.”

“Best that you do,” the Builder warned.

“I’m just going to have Shade dissolve his body here,” Jason said. “Wouldn’t want you following me home.”

“Please give my proposal consideration, Mr Asano,” Zato said. “I would rather come out of this with a respected enemy than a vanquished foe.”

Shade’s body faded into nothingness.

“Do you think he believed me?” Zato asked.

“No,” the Builder said, “but it doesn’t matter. Our people are almost upon them.”

Jason opened his eyes and turned to Shade.

“How long?” Jason asked.

“They are less than two minutes out.”

Shade had two of his bodies stationed between their location and the Builder camp.

Jason tossed his aura senses over the dummy auras Clive had set up. They were subtle and impressively close to the originals. Given that the enemies hadn’t sensed their current auras, they should be completely indistinguishable from the reality.

Jason started running. He had been looking and speaking through Shade from the bottom of a large, intact building; exactly the kind of building that would make a good encampment. He extricated himself from the building and looked up, spotting one of Shade’s bodies on the roof of the adjacent building.

He quickly teleported through a chain of Shade’s bodies to where the team was waiting on a rooftop, several buildings away. That brought him to the rest of the team, several buildings away and inside an aura suppression ritual circle Clive had set up.

“Well?” Neil asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “Clive was right. The Builder was able to track me through the link to Shade’s body.”

The contingent was a mix of clergy and cultist, made up of the fastest-moving people they'd been able to muster. They poured into the building, eager to find and cut down Asano before he fled, hopefully catching the rest of his team in the process. They arrived in the bowels of the building, pulling up short when they reached the complex ritual circle that was the source of the auras they had locked on to.

"What is this?" a priestess demanded, as Timos, the leader of the cultists' contingent went wide-eyed.

"We need to get out!"

Even as he yelled, their magical senses picked up previously dormant power coming to life around the building.

The team reached the adjacent rooftop just in time to see the end of the building's collapse. They were swamped by a dust cloud, Sophie's aura once again keeping the team's air clear.

They dropped down to ground level, Jason sharing his slow fall power with Belinda and Neil. With Sophie's aura continuously clearing the air around them, they went to check on the unstable rubble.

"That's it, isn't it?" Belinda asked. "That has to have killed them, right?"

"Depends on who they sent," Humphrey said.

They were only just beginning their examination when they heard the rubble shifting in the cloud of dust ahead of them. Slowly, something pushed its way up and out, broken chunks of masonry tumbling away as it rose up from the debris. Through the haze, they saw a dome of magical force ascend from the shattered remnants of the building. Inside were three figures, who spotted them, in turn.

Jason had never seen Timos before and didn't recognise him. The other two he did: Anisa and her archbishop, Nicolas Hendren.

Chapter 247

The True Danger

Archbishop Hendren had apparently put his barrier up in time to completely shield the three, who were barely even dirty after having had a building dropped on them. The dome flickered out of existence; anyone with magic senses could detect that huge amounts of mana had been poured into it. This was of limited help to the team, as one of the many problems in facing a silver-ranker was that they had no shortage of mana to spend.

Anisa's aura, like Sophie's, cleared the air around her, the archbishop and Timos. As they stepped forward and the two auras overlapped, suddenly the air between them was cleared.

"Clever," Hendren said. "Luring us into a trap. We were rushing to catch you before you left the area and weren't as cautious as we should have been."

"You didn't have to survive to tell us that," Jason said. "Your immediate death would have been compliment enough."

"Cleverness will only get you so far," Hendren said. "It will always falter in the face of true power."

"That's just what clever people have tricked you into thinking," Jason said. "Because they're, you know, clever."

"Don't spare him words," Anisa said. "He deserves only death."

"Anisa, if deserve had anything to do with what we get in life," Jason said, "A meteor would have landed on your head years ago. You've had it out for me from the day we met and I'm thinking it's time you and I put this thing to bed, one way or another. You and me, purification versus affliction. Are you willing to pit the power of your god against the darkness in the heart of man? The man being me. Or the darkness is me; I shouldn't have used a metaphor. Me stab-stab, you heal-heal. What do you say?"

"I will take pleasure in shutting that mouth for good," she said.

Jason leapt forward, Anisa's gaze focused on him as orbs of light manifested around he body. Then, beside her, when Hendren called out a warning.

"Behind you!"

Hendren's silver-rank senses had noticed the approach of Stash in the form of a rodent climbing over the rubble. Even as Hendren yelled, Stash was taking the form of one of the monsters they had encountered during their time in the astral space. His new form had the body of a rhino and the legs of a mountain goat, but no neck or head at all. The

front of his body was taken up entirely by a mouth ringed with teeth, with a pair of barbed, prehensile tongues.

Monster-Stash lunged at Anisa but Hendron shoved her out of the way, stepping into the space she occupied. Despite being much smaller and lighter than Sash's monstrous form, Stash was sent tumbling away with a loud, slapping backhand.

Anisa, meanwhile, had tumbled herself from where Hendren had shoved her out of the path. Sprawled on the uneven rubble, she looked up at the enemy to find not Jason, but Humphrey, propelled through the air with the power of a special attack.

The rapid-fire sequence of events happened over just a moment. It was a testament to the team's relentless practise. Week after week, day after day and hour after hour of fighting monsters together had turned them into a well-oiled machine. The improvised tactic had begun with Jason calling out Anisa.

The team knew that he was a poor match-up for the Purity priestess and his call for a singular confrontation was a signal to do the exact opposite. If he was drawing attention to himself instead of vanishing to seek out opportunities, it meant he was looking to create a distraction. While he was normally the dagger in the dark, Jason also liked to play waving right hand as the left hand struck.

The left hand, this case, was Humphrey. Humphrey directed Stash through their familiar bond, knowing that he would be detected and the silver-ranker would be quick enough to react, but have little time to make that reaction. Even if the archbishop had a quick-shield power like Neil's, Humphrey was betting on an instinctive reaction to push Anisa out of the way. Humphrey bet on that and was already moving, lunging for the spot he expected the priestess to be, rather than where she was at the moment he launched his special attack.

Ability: [Flying Leap] (Wing)

- Special attack (combination, movement)
 - Cost: Low stamina.
 - Cooldown: 10 seconds.

 - Current rank: Bronze 4 (19%).

 - Effect (iron): Swift and powerful leap with some limited air control that can be combined with normal or special melee attacks. Physical damage from these attacks is increased.

 - Effect (bronze): All damage from melee special attacks combined with this ability is increased, regardless of damage type.
-

Humphrey grew larger as he sailed through the air, courtesy of Neil's Giant's Might spell. He also brought his heavy sword down in an overhead smash as he leapt, his most powerful, Unstoppable Force attack. Enhanced by the leaping power, it fell on Anisa like divine judgement. Neil, lightning quick with his spells, managed a second spell before the attack landed, using Bolster to further enhance the attack.

Anisa quickly threw up a shield, even as her three orbs moved to intercept Humphrey's sword. There was a sound like shattering glass as they crumbled, one after another. With the triple enhancement of Neil's spells and Humphrey's combined special attacks, the Unstoppable Force power lived up to its name.

Bronze and silver ranks represented very different stages of advancement for an essence user. Silver was like a whole new world, where what was a danger to ordinary people were no longer a factor. Bronze rank was the first step beyond normal, mortal potential, but only a small one. Only at silver rank would Anisa have been able to survive having Humphrey's sword bury itself in her body.

Anisa had been something of a perfect weapon against Jason's powers, with abilities to inhibit his death by a thousand cuts style, both in protecting herself and cleansing afflictions. Jason had guessed as much long ago, which is why he had immediately signalled for his team to make the move.

Humphrey was the opposite of what she was best at, his potent, singular attacks relying not on repetition or sinister after-effects. The single, overwhelming attack was as dangerous to her as she was to Jason, which is why Humphrey was kicking her corpse off his sword just moments into the fight.

The archbishop snarled in rage, throwing a hand out that blasted Humphrey, even enlarged by Neil's spell, tumbling back. Jason, forgotten in the wake of Humphrey's attention grabbing assault, had positioned himself to strike at the distracted archbishop. Despite his rage, however, Hendren's reflexes were quick and he hadn't abandoned his attentiveness when surrounded by enemies.

Jason's dagger barely drew blood, while the backhand retaliation was far more powerful. Neil was once again on the ball, a shield appearing around Jason to negate the attack, buying Jason the moment he needed to back off.

Timos, through all this, read the situation and reacted immediately, in the exact opposite way to the archbishop. Rather than lunge into the attack, he activated two separate movement powers in quick succession as he fled, followed by a chameleon power that made his departing form hard to spot. Jason quickly cast a spell in his direction as a parting shot.

Ability: [Castigate] (Sin)

- Spell (curse, holy, tracking)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 4 (06%).

- Effect (iron): Burns a painful brand into the target, inflicting slight transcendent damage and the [Sin] and [Mark of Sin] conditions. The brand cannot be healed so long as the target retains any instances of [Sin].

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts or refreshes the duration [Weight of Sin]. You gain the [Marshal of Judgement] boon.

- [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

- [Mark of Sin] (affliction, holy): Prevents aura retraction. Cannot be cleansed while target retains any instances of [Sin] or [Legacy of Sin].

- [Weight of Sin] (affliction, holy): Target suffers transcendent damage when subjected to a holy boon, recovery, healing or cleansing effect.

- [Marshal of Judgement] (boon, tracking, holy): Know the distance and direction of anyone bearing a [Mark of Sin] placed by you. This effect lasts as long as any mark is still in place and cannot be negated.

Unless Timos had an ability like Jason's to escape tracking effects, Jason would know where Timos was, roughly, until the cultist found a way to remove the afflictions. Most of Jason's afflictions had a lengthy duration, but Sin would never drop off until it was cleansed, meaning that Mark of Sin and Marshal of Judgement would likewise remain in effect perpetually. Timos showed no intention of doubling back, however, as Jason sensed him moving directly away from them at speed.

Jason and his team had seized the initiative with their powerful opening gambit, taking a dangerous enemy off the board. No fight against a silver-rank essence user could be that simple, however. Even alone, the threat Hendren represented was only marginally diminished by the loss of his bronze-rank companions. He had always been the true danger.

The team had also gone through a number of their more powerful abilities with their opening moves. Having them on cooldown and not immediately available again moved the momentum in Hendren's favour. He had used his near-indestructible dome ability, but was otherwise fully loaded with powers.

The furious archbishop conjured a staff into his hands, a wooden staff covered in runes. As Sophie moved in before he went after one of her less-resilient team members, he demonstrated that he was fully capable of using it to the full extent. He unleashed a dizzying array of spinning attacks, Sophie wildly moving to intercept them with her arms, legs and fists.

The air was full of dust from the freshly-demolished building, aside from the bubble of clean air created by Sophie's aura. The rubble underfoot made for unsteady footing, but neither Sophie nor the archbishop seemed troubled, dancing around one another as if they were on solid ground. Humphrey could not match the feat, so waited the few seconds for his leap attack to become available before once more hurling himself into the fray.

While it wasn't his Unstoppable Force attack, it was still startling to see the power of two of Humphrey's special attacks completely arrested by nothing more than an ordinary staff block, the silver-ranker not even staggered as his staff continued to spin dangerously as it went after both Sophie and Humphrey together.

Hendren was close to an exact rank above the bulk of the team, in the low-to-mid range of silver. He had no abilities that enhanced his speed or strength, but his silver-rank attributes still made him faster than Sophie and stronger than Humphrey. The margins weren't so large, but embodied in a single person, the result was easily the most formidable foe the team had ever encountered.

Hendren's martial skills, while highly trained, were not the match of Humphrey or Sophie, being more on the level of Jason. They were still more than dangerous when combined with his silver-rank strength and speed and a barrage of special attacks.

As a human, the archbishop had plenty of special attacks available. They mostly seemed to be of the moderate power, short cooldown variety, which allowed him to chain them into well-practiced sequences. He could extend the length of his staff, create a storm of illusionary jabs that still inflicted damage or seamlessly integrate magical blasts from his staff, even while using it as a melee weapon. As he executed attack after attack, hammering at Sophie and Humphrey, he was also able to adroitly navigate the uncertain footing.

While Hendren was no match for Danielle Geller or Thalia Mercer, he still towered above the kind of trashy silver-ranker that languished in Greenstone instead of seeking greater heights in the wider world. If Sophie and Humphrey were all he had to deal with, then he would have finished the fight already.

Humphrey and Neil both had their summons ready nearby and had called them in once the fighting started. Despite the continually worsening odds, the archbishop continued to fight off all comers with what looked like disheartening ease.

Clive's staff blasts were much less effective than normal as Hendren had the same Crystallise Mana power as Neil, Humphrey and Clive himself. The extremely common power, at silver rank, left five crystals floating around Hendren that not only intercepted magical projectiles but reflected them back. This sent Clive's staff blasts back in his own direction, where his own three crystals absorbed the attacks.

Clive fought cross-legged on the bag of Onslow, the floating tortoise offering him some easy manoeuvrability on the rough terrain of the ruined building. He didn't have Onslow use his powers, which were better for picking off small fry.

Belinda didn't even bother with weapons, concentrating on the support role. Her echo spirit familiar was helping Humphrey make illusionary duplicate attacks, which partially compensated for his speed deficit against the archbishop, as well as his lesser ability to navigate the dangerously unstable footing.

The force-bolts of lantern familiar, Shimmer, proved more dangerous to her than the enemy, given Hendren's defences. She could have used it to help Clive overwhelm those defences to get his staff-blasts through, but the reflected damage was an extra threat they couldn't afford. Instead, she used it to project shields to protect her and Clive from the occasional blast of Hendren's own staff, sent in their direction. That left Neil free to concentrate on keeping Sophie and Humphrey in fighting shape.

Stash had shifted form again and taken the shape of a needle scorpion, with tough armour and the ability to shoot spines from its tail at a distance. Gordon was also attacking from a distance with beams.

In spite of the ranged attackers, it was Sophie and Humphrey that held the archbishop's attention the most. Ultimately, their bronze-rank power could not inflict any critical wounds against his incredible, silver-rank resilience. Only Humphrey had proven a genuine threat, with his powerful attacks and ability to ignore the resistance Hendren otherwise enjoyed against lower-ranked attacks. The threat of Humphrey and mobility of Sophie were the only things preventing Hendren from running rampant over the battlefield.

Sophie's attacks, while only minimal in damage, did punch through the silver-ranker's defences. It was her physical intervention that was the greater impediment, however. Just through positioning she was constantly setting up Humphrey to make attacks, heightening the threat he posed.

Blocking an overhead blow from Hendren's staff drove Humphrey to one knee, despite getting his sword up in time to block it. Hendren followed up with a kick to the chest that sent Humphrey tumbling back, although he didn't go far across the rubble.

Sophie could almost match his speed and could certainly match his skill. Her damage was limited, however, and her special abilities were being countered. Hendren was an experienced fighter, and it showed. He seemed to know which abilities he could ignore, which, required blocking and which required an active counter from an ability of his own.

When Sophie tried to blast him off his feet with her wind power, for example, he planted his staff and used an immovability power. Sophie's ability then did nothing more than ruffle the priest's combat robes.

Humphrey and the archbishop met weapon to weapon, dodging attacks and hitting back hard, Hendren making full use of his superior speed to force openings and follow up with special attacks. Even with his potent armour, it was only the steady stream of shields and healing from Neil that kept Humphrey in the fight.

Jason was keeping Colin inside him, concerned that the priest of Purity may well have had an answer to Colin's swarm state. If the silver-ranker had some kind of area power it could rapidly pulverise the leeches, so Jason kept Colin at the ready. Once more of the priest's bigger powers had been teased out and put on cooldown, he had Colin for a trump card if necessary. At the moment, he was more interested in the extra healing that Colin would provide him.

Jason was acutely aware of how dangerous the enemy was. Jason was not as resilient as Humphrey and Sophie. One good hit from a silver-rank special attack could kill him outright. His normal methods of sneaking around, using Shade's bodies to stage blindside attacks would be far less effective against silver-rank senses.

His only margin for error was however much he could stack up the protective power of his amulet by laying on afflictions, but there was only so many he could land with spells alone. A scroll of system messages reflected the stark reality of fighting a Purity priest using afflictions.

-
- [Umbral Snake Venom] has been cleansed from [Nicolas Hendren].
 - [Necrotoxin] has been cleansed from [Nicolas Hendren].
 - [Leech Toxin] has been cleansed from [Nicolas Hendren].
-

Hendren constantly and passively cleansed himself, meaning that Jason would need to bring his dagger into play to overwhelm that power. Unless he could get a good base of afflictions that his Inexorable Doom spell could then build upon, Hendren's cleansing

power would wipe even that spell away. He was hesitant about jumping into the fray, as even with the reach of his shadow arms, the danger the archbishop posed was a daunting proposition.

The only bright spot was that the one hit Jason had landed early was the Punish special attack. It had delivered the Price of Absolution ability, which Hendren's ability was apparently unable to cleanse. The effect itself was minor, inflicting a small amount of transcendent damage whenever a Sin affliction was cleansed from the target. The damage was negligible to the silver ranker, but the important part was that the affliction stuck. It indicated that Hendren's cleansing powers might not be able to remove holy afflictions.

While Jason was being largely ineffectual, Clive charged up and unleashed his most powerful spell, Wrath of the Magister. It was further boosted by Neil's Bolster spell, which enhanced a single ability use. Clive was confident that it had the potency to really hurt even a silver-ranker.

Clive unleashed the spell and the rainbow light poured from his hands, but Hendren held up his own hand in a stopping motion and a magic circle appeared in the air in front of it. The rainbow light of Clive's spell deflected off the magical shield, Hendren redirecting it at Humphrey instead.

Clive couldn't abort the spell without suffering a backlash he definitely wouldn't survive. He was forced to go through with it, but the rest of the team did not let him down. Their hard-won experience shone through as they reacted instantly to the unexpected reversal. Jason's shadow hand snaked out and slapped Humphrey on the back, passing over all the charges he had accumulated on his amulet. Neil threw up a shield and a second, wall like shield appeared between Humphrey and the spell, courtesy of Belinda's familiar.

Despite the best protection they could offer, Clive's power created a void in Humphrey's chest. The shield's siphoned off enough power that the void was smaller than normal, but still ripped a hole in Humphrey's armour and torso that would have killed an iron ranker outright. Even a sturdy bronze-ranker like Humphrey collapsed immediately to the ground, hovering on the brink of death.

The pressure was suddenly off Hendren, but instead of pressing Sophie or the team, he took the chance to start dismantling the mess of summons that had been hounding him. The dragon tooth warriors were battered apart in short order and he went to work on the golem, which was swiftly pushed into its chrysalis state. As much as she wanted to protect that source of pressure on Hendren, Sophie stood by as he tore through their support. She

was not going to give him an opening to finish the job on the stricken Humphrey until her teammate was back on his feet.

Hendren threw her a sneer, fully aware of her intentions. After demolishing the summons, he used the freedom of not being attacked to cast a spell. A large mass of disruptive-force blasted at Gordon, massively damaging the incorporeal entity. The floating cloak of its body tore like tissue paper and Jason immediately drew his familiar back into himself.

In a move that left the team in shock, Hendren then demonstrated that not every special attack at his command a low-cooldown power with commensurately moderate damage. He raised up his staff and the runes etched into it started to brightly glow. He hammered the end down on the chrysalis state of the golem which, to date, had proven impervious to any form of attack. Not only was it damaged, but cracks spread throughout, glowing with the same light as the runes on the staff. The glow grew brighter and the cracks kept spreading until the chrysalis and the golem inside exploded, raining crystal over the battlefield before dissolving into stinking, rainbow smoke.

Chapter 248

Forsaken Place

Humphrey lay on the ground, barely conscious, his life spilling from the savage wound in his chest. The rest of the team's circumstances were not much more promising, with the summons destroyed and the seemingly indestructible enemy too dangerous to even approach. Jason's afflictions, the means by which they had overcome so many strong enemies, were falling off as fast as he could put them on, even the ones being applied retributively by Jason's aura. The team's most powerful magic attack had been turned back on them, leaving them in the precarious position they now found themselves.

Hendren had seized the chance to alleviate the pressure on him by destroying the summons and sending Jason's familiar into a state not much better than what Humphrey was in. The only blessing was the brief reprieve the team received in turn as the silver-ranker's attacks were not aimed at them. Neil, not needing to be primed to throw a shield out at zero notice, had time to cast his big, long-cooldown healing spell.

Fountain of Renewal combined powerful, healing and mana recovery effects that covered the whole the team, at the cost of a cooldown measured in hours. Despite that potency, however, the spell did not save Humphrey's life. That was accomplished by a power of Humphrey's own.

Ability: [Immortality] (Might)

- Special ability (healing, recovery)
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (16%).

- Effect (iron): Instantly restore a large portion of health, mana and stamina. Amount restored is based on how depleted health, mana and stamina are when the ability is activated.

- Effect (bronze): Gain ongoing health, mana and stamina recovery effects. The strength of these effects is based on how depleted health, mana and stamina are when the ability is activated.

It was the power Humphrey had gotten from the legendary awakening stone of rebirth, his share of the reward from Emir for success in their first journey to the astral space. The effects were miraculous, healing light blazing from under Humphrey's skin, all through his body. At iron rank, the light would fade after the initial healing, but at bronze

rank, the light merely dimmed. Humphrey pushed himself to his feet, the crater in his chest reduced to a gaping wound.

The wound continued to heal from the potent healing effects stacked on Humphrey; the lingering effect of his Immortality power and the effect of Neil's spell. Fountain of Renewal actually conjured a fountain in their air, spraying illusory water than carried very real rejuvenating power. There was also the effect of the amulet shield that Jason had passed over. When consumed, the instances of protection became an ongoing healing effect.

Humphrey reconjured his armour that had a large hole in the front and the sword which had vanished when he dropped it as he fell. Humphrey then went after Hendren like a man possessed.

It was not fury; his mother had trained him too long and too hard to let rage take over. It was a controlled intensity, driven by his passion but not consumed by it. Every bit of strength and skill Humphrey could muster he unloaded onto the archbishop, who was startled to find himself pushed back by an enemy he had thought finished. Hendren had dealt with most of the summons, yet to him, it was as if his foes had doubled in number, not halved.

Jason took the chance to get in some sneaky hits, Hendren letting them go as he withstood Humphrey's barrage. With no immediate harm, Hendren trusted his ongoing cleansing powers to continue handling the afflictions. Jason was happy for him to think that, finally having enough of an affliction buffer to lock in some spells that would stick.

Humphrey's resurgence was a powerful swing in the fight, but it could not solve the ultimate issue that they could not land definitive damage on their opponent. Humphrey's surge could not last forever and inexorably, the archbishop retook the momentum.

Without the summons at his back, Hendren was better able to focus on Sophie and Humphrey, battering them such that Neil's shields and healing, even with Belinda's support, was being slowly, yet inevitably overtaken. If not for the overlapping mana recovery effects the team enjoyed, Neil's contribution would have already run out.

The team still managed to hold on. Hendren realised that even though he had pushed back the assault of Humphrey, the thief girl, Wexler, was becoming harder and harder to deal with. A traditional guardian-type was most effective against a multitude of lesser attackers, whose myriad strikes couldn't breach their defences. She thrived against a single attackers, evading powerful attacks that a traditional defence-focused adventurer could not endure.

Hendren had found her hard to deal with from the start, always exactly where he didn't want her to be. Even though he was faster than her, she clearly knew how to make better use of her speed, which left him feeling slower. He could only periodically land hits with the aid of his special attacks, and even then, she had some ability that accumulated defensive power over time and expended it in protective force when she was finally hit.

Without the additional trouble of the summons, he had been free to make several attempts to focus her down, but every time he did she became even more elusive. She would suddenly speed up, his magical senses detecting space itself warping as her reflexes briefly eclipsed his own.

Even some of his special attacks had fallen short. He had tried to pin her down with an attack that duplicated his staff and attacked multiple times, faster than he even his silver-rank perception could follow. She had turned into a blur that impossibly dodged or blocked every attack.

Now, when he felt he should be pushing the enemy past the point of resistance, she was harder to deal with than ever. Her attacks were growing stronger; not just the impact but the magical damage that came with every strike. His own attacks were harming her less and less, while attacking anyone but her triggered retribution damage that passed right through his defences.

For Sophie's part, she had never felt more powerful. Never had they encountered an enemy that could hold up so imperviously to everything the team could throw at him. The result was that an ability that had limited impact on fights in the past became increasingly important.

Ability: [Karmic Warrior] (Balance)

- Special Ability (healing, recovery)
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (20%).

- Effect (iron): Gain an instance of [Agent of Karma] when subjected to damage or any harmful effect, even if the damage and/or effect was wholly negated.

- Effect (bronze): Gain an instance of [Good Karma] when healing others, cleansing others or suffering damage. Enemies that attack or take offensive actions against you are inflicted with [Bad Karma]. So long as any enemy has an instance of [Bad Karma], you have [Karmic Sacrifice].

- [Agent of Karma] (boon, holy): Bonus to the [Power] and [Spirit] attributes. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Bad Karma] (affliction, retributive, holy): Suffer a small amount of retributive, transcendent damage when making an attack or other offensive action against anyone without the [Karmic Sacrifice] boon. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Good Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): Bonus to [Recovery]. Damage from enemies with [Bad Karma] is reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Karmic Sacrifice] (boon, holy, heal-over-time): Gain an ongoing healing effect, with strength determined by the amount of [Good Karma] you have accrued. This effect immediately ends if there are no enemies suffering from [Bad Karma].
-

Every attack that landed made her all the stronger. She eventually realised that the archbishop had caught onto this and was no longer trying to finish her off with special attacks, simply trying to manage her as he went harder at Humphrey.

Hendren's perception power let him sense the boons and afflictions, so he sensed the holy power gathering on the thief girl each time he landed a hit. Frustratingly, his ongoing cleansing powers could not eliminate holy effects. He only had one power that could, but he was saving it for when Asano made his inevitable move.

The thief girl was moving from a nuisance to a powerhouse, but it was still within the realm of bronze rank. She was not yet enough of a problem that Hendren had to take drastic action. For all that her damage was increasing, plus the retribution damage that went right through his defences, it was not yet on a scale that threatened his silver-rank fortitude. His ongoing health recovery was still enough to compensate, which meant that, for the moment, he could afford to leave her be.

Hendren had been paying attention to Asano throughout the fight, despite the affliction specialist accomplishing no more than a few futile spells, the afflictions quickly falling away. During Humphrey's push, Asano had managed to get a few afflictions in place with melee attacks, using those stretching shadow arms to attack from relative safety.

As the fight progressed, it became clear to Hendren that the afflictions Asano had put in place were multiplying themselves faster than his passive ability was clearing them off. He realised that Asano and Sophie were the primary threats, the type that never tired and grew stronger and stronger, the longer a fight went on.

Hendren felt the magic in the afflictions on himself activate when Asano used a spell, sending death energy through his body and rotting at his flesh. Hendren knew then that it was time to reset the board and put paid to the power Asano and the thief girl were building up.

The team was blasted back as Hendren used a new special attack. He set his staff floating in the air in front of his outstretched palm, spinning in a rapid blur and blasting out wind akin to Sophie's Wind Wave power. It inflicted no damage but knocked the whole team back as Hendren swept his arms around, the windmilling staff moving with it. Only the heavy Onslow was unmoved, who turned a slow, disgruntled head around as Clive tumbled off his shell.

Hendren used the moment he bought to cast a spell, holding an arm up where a sphere of clean, white light started shining. It erupted out in a blinding flash, washing over everyone. For a short but critical moment, the team were unable to see.

"You think afflictions can take down a priest of Purity?" Hendren called out as the team recovered.

-
- All of your affliction on [Nicolas Hendren] have been cleansed by an effect that ignores all cleanse prevention.
 - All of your boons and the boons on your items have been negated by an effect that ignores dispel prevention.
-

The dazzle faded and the team's vision returned to find that Hendren had made a move on Neil while the team couldn't see. This had been trumped by Belinda, who had anticipated Hendren making a big move, casting her own spell as he had cast his.

Ability: [Unexpected Allies] (Charlatan)

- Special Ability (dimension, teleport, illusion)
 - Cost: Very high mana.
 - Cooldown: 10 minutes.

 - Current rank: Bronze 1 (67%).

 - Effect (iron): You and your allies take on the illusionary form of nearby enemies, but your allies can still recognise one another. All allies and enemies in the area are randomly switch-teleported.

 - Effect (bronze): Create illusions of your allies.
-

Hendren had seen a lot of powers in his career, but Belinda's unusual suite of abilities was filled with rarities. As well as being a delight to Clive, it let her affect battles in ways their enemies didn't anticipate.

Every member of the team had been altered by illusion to look exactly like Hendren himself, while illusionary doubles of the team had been brought into being, then switch-teleported with the real thing. Hendren's attack when the team was blinded killed off nothing but an illusion.

The team was out of formation, scattered randomly by Belinda's power. It left them all out of position but Hendren had no way of telling one team member from another until they acted and broke the illusion. Unsurprisingly, this started with Sophie and Humphrey, who lunged at Hendren. Closer than either of them, one of the illusionary archbishops started chanting out one of Neil's healing spells and Hendren made a rushing attack to interrupt.

'Neil' avoided the attack by vanishing into his own shadow, appearing nearby and slashing at the archbishop with a dagger held in a shadow arm as a cloak of stars appeared around him. He disappeared into another of Shade's bodies right before Hendren annihilated it with a staff attack shrouded in disruptive force.

Sophie and Humphrey were on Hendren then, as Jason fired off spells as quickly as he could coherently chant the incantations. As he did, he received a warning from Shade, who still had two bodies positioned between their current location and the Builder's walled fort.

"Shade just told me reinforcements are on the way," Jason told the others through voice chat. "We have to get this done, so I'm going aggressive. Neil, I'm going to need those shields. Belinda, help him keep them coming, because I'm going to need it. First, though, I'm going to need the good stuff."

"Are you sure?" Neil asked.

"I don't have time not to be," Jason said.

"Alright," Neil said. "Here goes."

Neil chanted a spell and Jason felt a power flood through him like a supercharged spirit coin.

Ability: [Hero's Moment] (Growth)

- Spell (boon, holy, recovery)
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (87%).

- **Effect (iron):** Bestow a powerful boon on an ally, increasing all attributes and resistances by a significant amount. They receive damage reduction, their maximum mana and stamina are increased and they gain ongoing mana and stamina recovery. They ignore the effects of rank-disparity. When this effect ends, they are temporarily debilitated, suffering the inverse of all previous effects.
 - **Effect (bronze):** Affected ally's essence abilities have increased effect.
-

Neil then used his Bolster spell, which Jason used to conjure a new and more powerful dagger. The bolstered version would make the afflictions it bestowed more potent than normal.

Hendren's silver-rank senses were allowed him to pay attention to the whole field of battle. He had figured out which of his enemies was which, and which were illusions. He spotted the healer throwing spell's on Asano and knew a push was coming. It galled him that bronze-rankers had driven him this hard and knew he needed to put an end to proceedings.

He made another dash at the healer, but it was a feint as he immediately stopped and used a special attack on the empty space in front of him. The thief girl fell for the bait, moving into place right as the attack activated. Light shone up from the ground, trapping her in place.

It would normally only hold someone for a short moment, but a silver-rank power on a bronze-rank enemy gave him more time to spare. He turned on Humphrey, charging into support and again used his spinning-staff wind blast to send Humphrey flying.

He turned back to the thief girl, who had been discovering that movement powers were suppressed in the silver-rank trapping field. He raised up his staff, the runes glowing brightly, the way it had when he shattered the golem chrysalis into fragments. He brought it down on the thief girl as the light field faded away.

Sophie caught the descending staff in one hand, leaving the archbishop in disbelieving shock. She gave him a savage grin as she slapped a palm right into his chest. Red light glowed under her hand, the same light that had spread through the golem and destroyed it. The light spread through the archbishop's chest and then exploded, leaving him with a wound much like Clive had left on Humphrey.

Hendren was a silver-ranker, however, not a bronze. His body was closer to the amorphous flesh Clive had once described to the team, and his fortitude was far higher. Even with a gaping cavity where a normal person's heart and a good chunk of their lungs

would be, Hendren little more than paused before resuming the fight with Sophie. He hadn't even dropped his staff.

His body started glowing with internal light as he activated a powerful self-healing ability. Humphrey arriving back to press the fight once more.

Jason also joined the melee, with both himself and his dagger rippling with power. He was faster, stronger and tougher than ever before. Around him were three of Shade's bodies; all that were still present. Of the seven total bodies, two were still off scouting, one had self-destructed in the enemy camp and one had been destroyed by Hendren.

Jason had a very different form of aggression to Humphrey or Sophie. In the early days of his training, he had naïve ideas about being the perfect counter-striker, deceptive and cunning. As his understanding of fighting developed and he gain new powers, he had gained a better understanding of what was possible and what worked best for him.

He had kept the deceptive and manipulative parts, using his cloak, his shadow arms and the bodies of Shade to play with perception and distance, toying with his enemies. He even used aura manipulation to project false positions.

The goal was to provide opportunities that, for other fighters, were worthless. When all he needed was there merest wound, his idea of a successful attack was, to other fighters, a failed strike. It was an unusual margin for success that allowed him to use trickery that for most fighters would be wasteful play-acting.

Jason used every trick in his repertoire against the silver-rank priest. Even empowered by Neil's incredible spell, he was not the equal in speed or strength of the archbishop. He did prove, however, that he was a match in skill after all.

Again and again, Jason made nothing but a grazing slash, but that was all he was after. his empowered dagger revealed the lack of protectiveness combat robes suffered in return for flexibility and lightness. As someone who used them himself, it was something he was very much aware of, using that knowledge to know how far he had to push. All the while, Sophie and Humphrey pushed the archbishop as well.

That was not to say that Hendren did not hammer blows on all three in return, especially focusing on Jason. For a short while, though, Neil was assisted by Belinda in burning through cooldowns to repeat shields on Jason. His afflictions stacking up also quickly added stacks to his amulet. Even piling on, however, they could not outlast a silver-rank essence user. Hendren continued relentlessly, the healing light closing the wound on his chest even as the others flagged. Jason took a couple of big hits, hurting him even though the layers of protection.

“It’s time for the second coming of Humphrey,” Jason said through voice chat. In response, Belinda cast a spell on Neil.

Ability: [Blessing of Relentlessness] (Adept)

- Spell (boon, magic, recovery)
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (94%).

- Effect (iron): Reset all cooldowns of a single ally of bronze-rank or below.

- Effect (bronze): Affected ally gains a powerful, ongoing mana and stamina recovery effect.

It was the big sister to her ability to reset one affliction, giving one ally a once-per-day full power reset. The advantage of letting someone with their own once-per-day power use it back-to-back was obvious.

Neil repeated his Hero’s Moment spell, this time on Humphrey. As when he recovered from Clive’s spell, Humphrey pushed hard into Hendren, surging forward in an aggressive attack. Neil’s potent boon, normally usable only once per day, raised his strength to a level even above his silver-rank opponent.

Neil followed up with his Giant’s Might spell for good measure, turning Humphrey into a towering hulk that could for the brief while the spells lasted, overpower his enemy with pure strength. With both Jason and Humphrey under the effect of the spell, though there was a danger looming at the end of the spell’s duration.

Neil’s Hero’s Moment spell was a Cinderella magic, and when it wore off, Jason and Humphrey would turn back into pumpkins. The spell’s end would bring with it debilitating effects as potent as the boosts the pair currently enjoyed.

Jason went wild with his dagger piling on afflictions, before leaving Humphrey to bundle up the priest while Jason backed off to cast spells. He locked in his full affliction sequence, under a heavy block of dagger-inflicted maledictions, then cast Punition, which inflicted damage for every affliction he was suffering. Finally, the familiar traces of black rot from Jason’s power became visible on the enemy.

Hendren slammed his staff into the ground, sending out a blast wave that knocked even the giant, empowered Humphrey away, let alone the rest of the team. Further, he left the staff standing vertically in place, blasting out force waves that continued pushing them away. Unaffected himself, Hendren started chanting out a spell.

A bolt of dark blue magic erupted from Belinda's outstretched hand, still laying on the ground where the wave of force had sent her falling. It ignored the pulsing waves of force and struck Hendren mid-incantation. Belinda's aura was flush with the power of the silver-rank spirit coin she had just taken to make sure her attack was not resisted.

Ability: [Power Thief] (Magic)

- Special attack (boon, affliction, magic)
- Cost: very high mana.
- Cooldown: 5 minutes.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (21%).

- Effect (iron): Make a magical ranged attack. You become able to use a random active-use ability of the target, who cannot use that ability until you have done so. It can be an essence ability or the inherent ability of a magic creature, but functions at your rank, not the rank of the target. You may not use the ability more than once. This ability cannot be used again until the copied ability is used. If not used within 24 hours, the copied ability is lost, restoring the target's ability to use it.

- Effect (bronze): You can choose a specific ability of the target. If the target does not have that ability, a random ability is stolen instead.

One thing that Belinda had learned about this particular power was that when choosing a specific ability, she wasn't restricted to just designating abilities she knew the target possessed. She was able to designate as the targeted ability one that the enemy was in the process of using. Her instant-use special attack was faster than the somewhat lengthy spell Hendren had bought the time to cast with his force wave power, and his spell was cut off as she stole it for herself.

She collapsed as the power of the spirit coin drained out of her. She would be able to make no more contribution to the fight, while Jason and Humphrey were close to being the same. They could both feel Neil's spell reaching the limit of its duration, while they were still held back by the waves emitting from the staff.

"You think that's enough?" Hendren screamed wildly, spitting mania. "You think it can ever be enough? There is no stain that true Purity cannot burn out!"

Hendren started casting yet another cleansing spell, but Jason used one that was faster.

"Feed me your sins."

The priest's life-force became visible, filled with a distressing amount of taint for a priest of Purity. Jason's Feast of Absolution spell took it all. Jason's passive Sin Eater

power gave him an immediate burst of mana and stamina, along with a pile of the Integrity boon, granting ongoing health, stamina and mana recovery.

More importantly, Feast of Absolution left, in the wake of the dark and sinister afflictions, the transcendent light of holy afflictions. They filled up his life force, then lit up Hendren from the inside when his life force once again retracted out of sight.

Hendren fought through the pain and finished his own cleansing spell which, to his shock, did nothing.

“Holy?” he asked as he dropped to one knee. “How can it be holy? How can you... you, of all people...?”

It was as if the shock of being ravaged by holy afflictions was more debilitating than the ravaging itself. Hendren dropped completely to his knees, throwing back his head. He did not even seem to notice the transcendent damage burning him from the inside out

“Lord!” he cried to the sky. “Why can you not speak to me in this forsaken place? Why did you send me here?”

“In case you hadn’t noticed,” Jason called out to him, “your lord is bit of a prick.”

He chanted out his spell to finish the job.

“Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death.”

Hendren didn’t acknowledge Jason or his words, dissolving into nothing under transcendent light, face still gazing at the sky.

Chapter 249

Being What he Needs to Be

Jason could barely stand in the wake of Neil's spell wearing off, but he determinedly pushed himself to his feet.

"We need to move with alacrity," Shade said. "The cult's forces approach."

Jason nodded, pausing only to spare what was left of Anisa a brief glance. He was again reminded that most of the people he had first met on arriving in this world were dead. Most of the Vane family, their servants, Farrah and now Anisa. For all the wonders his new home offered, it took its price in horrors, and Jason was unsure if he had become one of them.

"Shade, grab her dimensional bag and mount up."

The possessions of the archbishop had automatically been looted by Jason's power when his execute ability completely annihilated him. Looting powers could extricate goods from personal dimensional spaces, although Jason didn't stop to check what he had taken.

The team left the ruined building behind. Shade had taken the form of some large lizards, well-suited to navigating the terrain. Sophie and Clive had already helped Belinda onto the back of Onslow. Having taken a spirit coin, she was in worse shape than Jason and Humphrey. Jason and Neil rode Shade out, Humphrey rode Stash, while Sophie easily kept pace on foot. They didn't stop for hours, making sure to get well clear of the site of their battle.

Once they were confident there was no one trailing them, rest became the next order of business. Jason pulled out the cloud house inside a building they found with an internal space large enough to contain it. It was a church, although not to a god any of them recognised. Any lingering divine aura the building might have once hosted had long ago faded away.

Sophie took watch, keeping an eye out for cultists scouts. Humphrey, Jason and Belinda retreated into the house to recuperate, as neither spirit coin usage nor Neil's spell could be rushed through recovery using magic. They quickly fell asleep in the comforting embrace of cloud chairs while Neil kept an eye on their conditions.

Before collapsing, Jason had divested himself of everything his looting power had plucked from the archbishop's personal storage space. Clive went over it, along with the contents of Anisa's dimensional bag.

There was a very large number of potions and a startling amount of money. Hendren, it seemed, had taken a large chunk of the church of Purity's coffers with him on

'sabbatical.' Those things he put aside, in favour of a good-sized collection of documents and a very full bookcase.

"It's mostly correspondence from higher-ups in the church," Clive said to Neil, going through the documents. He had taken a quick peruse of all the items and was now taking a closer look at the documents.

"Anything useful?" Neil asked.

"I'm not sure how much of it will be of use to us," Clive said. "The Adventure Society will definitely want to get their hands on these, though. There is correspondence here with explicit statements about the agreement between the church and the cult."

"Anything about why the church of Purity would throw in with these people?" Neil asked.

"Not at a glance," Clive said. "It'll take me a while to go through it all properly. It does seem that the ones siding with the cult are only a fraction of the church, though."

"That makes sense," Neil said. "If the whole church knew, there's no way they could have kept it a secret."

"There also seems to have been a concern that a lot of the church members would not be accepting of the arrangement."

"You mean they thought priests who literally worship Purity wouldn't be accommodating to a cult that fills people's bodies and souls with evil magic junk? That was probably a good assessment."

"I have to think that most of Purity's worshippers aren't secretly evil," Clive said.

"I suspect Jason would disagree."

"Well, Jason has his biases," Clive said. "He comes from a world where the gods apparently don't show themselves at all and let the people wage wars over the truth. Then he comes here, and the first clergyperson he meets is that priestess we just killed. She wasn't exactly a good ambassador for the virtues of faith."

"Then it turns out an ostensibly good church is in league with an evil cult," Neil said. "I can see why he might end up wary of the whole thing."

"Even the Purity church members who are in on it clearly don't like the people they're allied with," Clive said, gesturing absently with a sheet of paper. "This is a letter to Hendren, more or less telling him to put up with it and do what he's told. While the faction working with the cult certainly believe they have their god on their side, they seem very unhappy with the alliance. It seems the cult had to pressure the church into coming along on this expedition at all."

“I would have been happy for them to stay at home,” Neil. “I imagine they would be too, now their leader’s been dissolved into nothing.”

Neil glanced warily over at the sleeping Jason.

“Does Asano ever scare you at all?” he asked quietly. “Most of the time he seems ridiculous, but sometimes he really, really doesn’t. When he just walked into that town and killed all those bandits. The way he looked at them, like they were nothing.”

“Jason is good at being what he needs to be, in order to do what he needs to do,” Clive said, likewise speaking softly. “Sometimes, what he needs to do is kill a lot of people. And yes; seeing what he becomes to do that does scare me a little.”

“Hopefully, it scares the Builder, too. From the Builder’s perspective, pulling in the church for this must seem like a waste, now. He brought along an extra silver-ranker who didn’t accomplish anything but die.”

“Their rush to put us down cost them one of their most powerful people,” Clive said. “Whatever else, we can be certain that the Builder isn’t happy.”

“This has worked out very well,” the Builder said. “Losing Hendren’s power is a blow, obviously, but he was a reluctant ally at best.”

“You want to step up the kind of procedure we use on his people,” Zato said.

“Precisely,” the Builder agreed. “Now that the church’s leadership here is dead, there is little concern about any survivors reporting to their god when we are done here. We no longer have to take half-measures in converting the clergymen, to protect Hendren’s sensibilities.”

“There are other bronze-rankers in their number,” Zato said.

“None who held a leadership position like Lasalle. That they died together helps us more than either of them surviving. None of the remaining clergy will be able to pull the rest together and effectively resist our intentions. Take them into custody and prepare the iron-rankers for immediate conversion.”

“What do we do with their bronze-rankers?” Zato asked. “We can’t convert them with clockwork cores we get from sacrificing our iron-rankers.”

“That is a question,” the Builder said. “The failure to summon the clockwork king and the cores it could produce truly was the beginning of things going wrong with your operations. If your former superiors had the ability to adapt to circumstances you have demonstrated, we would be in a better position right now. You have demonstrated a talent for making the most of what you are given. What do you suggest?”

Zato rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“We could prepare them for use as additional vessels, but that would take too long. Maybe...”

Zato’s gaze lingered on the ruined body of the Builder’s withered husk of a body.

“You’re about to abandon that vessel,” Zato said. “You have instructed me to see it destroyed, but perhaps we can put it to a better use.”

“Explain,” the Builder said.

“We feed it the bronze-rank clergymen. Fatten it up, then send it after the Rejector and his people. An energy vampire gets little from feeding on monsters and will go hunting for richer meals. It may well be able to sniff out the souls of our enemies. We can make it our hunting hound, flushing them into the open, or even killing them outright. It might not work, but what does it cost us to try? A spent vessel and some priests we would probably have to execute anyway.”

“Your proposal has merit,” the Builder said. “An energy vampire will have no interest in our people. The soul and body modifications you have undergone make you unpalatable to them. If we are going to convert all the clergy or feed them to the vampire directly, then it will have no more interest in us.”

The Builder nodded, dry skin flaking of its face at the gesture.

“Very well,” the Builder said. “Seize the clergy, prepare the iron-rankers for conversion and collar the bronze-rankers. Prepare a binding circle to hold the vessel once I am done with it and we shall conduct the vessel exchange. Afterward, we can begin the conversions.”

“The more thorough conversions than we originally intended will add to the time required,” Zato said. “It will better prepare us for the next step, however. We have to assume that once we start sending teams out, the Rejector will try and intervene.”

“Let him,” the Builder said. “His rejection of the star seed may have inured him to further implantation, but his companions enjoy no such immunity. I will take them, one by one, and he will watch. Once that is done, they will be the ones to kill him.”

“How many potions can one person carry?” Belinda asked, looking at them all stacked up. “We didn’t bring in this many for six people over a series of months.”

“These are iron, bronze and silver-rank,” Jason said. “This is probably the supply for his whole contingent.”

The team was going through what they had taken from the Archbishop. His most important gear had been on his body and destroyed along with it, but looting his personal storage space had still yielded a slew of valuables. Since they were already going over

loot, it seemed like a good chance to tally their collected loot from months of monster hunting, which they added to the pile.

They had a lot of materials that would be valuable for crafting. At an earlier stage they had purged their stocks of the iron-rank materials to make room for bronze and silver. They also had what had become a huge stockpile of monster cores, on top of the essences and awakening stones picked up along the way.

Fully-functioning magic items were produced by Neil and Jason's looting powers far less frequently than materials. The rarity of such items was mostly low, although the silver-rank monsters they fought had produced a few items that were more impressive. They were all silver-rank, so not yet of any use to the team. One item in particular stood out amongst the others.

Item: [Orb of Ascension (Silver)] (silver rank, legendary)

An orb containing the most precious power of all: potential (consumable, magic core).

- **Effect:** A single epic or legendary quality bronze-rank item gains the ability to be increased in rank through a ritual of ascension. Additional material requirements vary based on the effected item.

A few of the bronze-rank items had been claimed by the team. Jason had replaced his iron-rank boots with a pair of black boots taken from an insectoid monster called a night hopper. The new boots were higher rank but lower rarity than his existing boots, lacking the whip-blade function that Jason had used only occasionally, but always effectively.

As they moved onto bronze and silver-rank monsters, the iron-rank boots had become increasingly battered. Without the self-repair function of his main armour, they had become so ragged that he feared they would be too damaged and lose the enchantment.

The new boots also lacked self-repair, but were very sturdy, even for a bronze-rank item. Most importantly, they replicated the most important functions of his old boots. The jumping power was even stronger than on his old boots, which had become a critical part of how he moved around. Added to his heightened, bronze-rank attributes, the new boots gave him more of exactly what he wanted. It was the final trait that was the true reason he made the switch, and without it, he would never have picked the new footwear. They colour-coordinated with his armour.

Belinda had done the best out of the entire team, largely because she could use such a wide array of gear. Her various abilities that replicated different roles each needed their

own gear set to have full effect. This was especially true given that she would never match up to a true specialised with her stop-gap powers.

She had purchased a variety of bare-bones equipment sets before they left, picked out with the aid of Gary's expert eye. She had sacrificed everything else at the altar of cost-effectiveness, giving her what Jason described as a 'quest reward hodge-podge' look. This was only exacerbated as she added items looted from their opponents, but the results had been worth the effort. She might look a bit unprofessional in her eclectic outfits, but her ability to be exactly what the team needed was stronger than ever.

The Builder's walled encampment was filled with screams.

"You did an impressive job arranging for so many to be converted at once with the available space," the Builder said.

"Thank you, Lord," Timos said. "I know that you like efficiency. I managed to create enough stations that all of our ritualists can be work simultaneously. It's grisly, but hardly the first place we've painted with blood."

"Things are moving quickly because this is their field of expertise," Zato said. "Our problems have all come from their needing to take on the astral magic duties after Landemere Vane was killed."

"That was a grave disappointment," Timos said. "I'd been cultivating him for years. I was quite pleased with how he'd turned out."

"There is more astral magic to be done," the Builder said. "Now I am here to direct things personally, however. All that is required is that they follow direction."

"That much I can assure you they are capable of," Zato said. "I made quite certain of that."

"The next obstacle is that the altered state of the ambient magic," the Builder said. "Naturally, I have the knowledge to compensate in activating the gates, but this vessel isn't powerful enough to open portals and transport our people around the astral space."

"Once the conversions are complete, we will be able to put together teams strong enough to navigate the dangers outside the walls. The need to physically travel to each location instead of just portalling is logistically more involved, but ultimately all it will cost us is time and a few casualties to monsters."

"And the Rejector," Timos added. "His team are coordinated and fearless. I escaped immediately and it was still enough time to see that. They are also powerful enough to deal with Hendren. Only the best bronze-rank teams could have done that."

Timos was still shaken by his encounter with Jason's team. Jason's spell that landed as Timos was fleeing had burned a symbol into Timos' face that the Builder had identified as the word 'sin,' from a symbolic language older than their world. The builder had to remove the curses before the light but prominent mark would heal.

"We will lose people to the Rejector," the Builder said, "but we hold the advantage. We still have the strength and we still have the numbers, while they do not have the luxury of staying hidden. They will be forced to climb out of their hole if they intend to understand what we are doing, let alone attempt to stop us."

Chapter 250

A Significantly More Dangerous Entity

The Builder was now wearing Thadwick's face, but those that knew him would spot the difference immediately. There was a very different beast inside Thadwick's body and the change was startling. It began from the eyes, hard and unyielding. This was a gaze that knew its domain was everything it landed upon. Person, place, or object, all that it saw, it owned.

It was a far cry from the insecure haughtiness of the body's former owner and his constant need for validation. Uncertain arrogance had been replaced with world-shaking confidence, transforming his entire demeanour. From facial expression to posture, Thadwick's body exuded the domineering presence that had ever been his unrealised intention.

The Builder walked alongside Zato and Timos as they inspected their new weapons, lined up like soldiers on parade. The former clergy stood with blank expressions, their personalities wiped clean. The souls inside were screaming, but only the Builder could hear them. He was no more moved by their suffering than was the brick under their feet.

Their clothes, torn and bloody from the involuntary procedure, had been replaced with plain garments. Around a third of them had grey-coloured clothes, the rest had brown. Their original clothes were gone, but their skin was still coated with the rust of dried blood. The cultists hadn't bothered to wash them off following the gruesome conversion process.

To ordinary senses, the converted seemed normal, aside from the empty, blank expressions. To magic and aura senses, they were anything but normal. There was no longer any trace of essence power within their auras, all burned as fuel for the magic intricately engraved all across their skeletons with the fine precision of circuitry. So stark was the power coursing over and through their bones that magical senses could clearly feel it, radiating through their flesh. The magic felt alien, unnatural and artificial, surging around their bodies and through the clockwork core implanted in their hearts. The cores were a modified variant of the cores used to create constructs, and were regulating the magic of the converted.

To aura sense, the converted projected a uniform, blank and sterile, bronze-rank aura, coming from what had once been iron-rank essence users. It was stronger from the brown-garbed individuals than those in the grey, but in both cases the auras being generated were firm and unfluctuating. Most disturbing was that the auras were identical amongst all those standing in line. The unique signature that was an intrinsic trait of all

auras was unsettlingly absent. There was no trace of their individuality or the suffering they were experiencing in deepest depths of their souls.

The procedure of emplacing the engravings had been painstaking and gruesome, carving them onto the skeleton directly and by hand. Flesh was peeled back and the engravings made, bone by bone, before the flesh was returned. Only the massively accelerated healing bestowed by the procedure made it possible for the subject to survive. Even then, moving on to the deeper bones that required more extreme procedures to access was a delicate balance.

It began with the least invasive areas, moving onto the more critical areas as more of the procedure was completed. By the time the ritualists were going for the hips, pelvis and spine, they had already walked a precarious balancing act to keep the subject alive at all. Paralysis magic was key in preventing any disruptive movement or screaming.

“Many of them had divine essences,” Timos said. “That power was not consumed by the process but returned to their god, so those ones are somewhat weaker. I’ve given the weaker ones grey garments and the stronger ones brown, to easily identify each group. My concern is that Purity will know the reason for this sudden return of power.”

“The god’s eyes do not extend to this place,” the Builder assured him. “All Purity will know is that his people died in rapid succession. There are dangers in this place that are plausible enough explanation. He will suspect, but not risk the alliance by pushing the issue. Show me the difference between the stronger and the lesser.”

Timos nodded at a pair of cultists standing by, who stepped forward. They moved up to two of the converted, one brown-garbed and one in grey. Each cultist drew a long knife and sliced open the throat of the converted in front of them, blood spraying from the wounds. The converted showed no reaction, and the gaping slashes quickly closed, with that of the brown-wearing converted happening faster than the other. It only took seconds for the savagely slashed throats to completely heal over, marked only by the blood that had spilled out.

“Adequate,” the Builder said. “Did we lose any in the conversion process?”

“We did not,” Timos said. “The ritualists were fastidious in their work.”

“Good. Having a vessel present gives me the ability to control them directly, but I cannot share their perceptions the way I can with those carrying star seeds. Begin organising them into teams with our people and the constructs. We begin the next stage in the morning. Now, show me my previous vessel.”

The team, now fully recovered, were discussing their next move.

“We need more information,” Humphrey said. “Did you get anything from what we took from Hendren, Clive?”

“No. In so far as I can tell, Hendren thought that this was just another astral space the Builder was trying to steal. There’s nothing about those giant golems or what the Builder might want with them.”

“When I was scouting their camp using Shade’s body, they looked to be gearing up to set out from their walled-off fort,” Jason said. “Whatever they’re doing, they can’t do it from where they are.”

“They probably need to go to the towers around the city, right?” Belinda said. “They have to be doing something with those world engineer things. Are they going to wake them up?”

“If they are,” Clive said. “I have to wonder what does the Builder gets out of that. Right now, they’re locked away in this astral space?”

“They’re diamond-rank,” Neil said. “For all we know, they’re powerful enough to leave this astral space using their own abilities.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Clive said. “You could well be right. The little I’ve learned about diamond rank has a recurring theme of the old rules no longer applying.”

“Maybe he isn’t looking to wake them up,” Belinda said. “Those towers are the anchor points tethering this astral space to our world, right? The portals linking it to our world are integrated right into them. What if their real purpose is some kind of delivery system. Rather than wake them up, he’s trying to move them into our world?”

“Whether they’re moving on their own steam or getting a push along, a dozen, diamond-ranked super-golems is not what we want floating about,” Jason said. “We may not know what they do, but with a name like world engineers, I think we really need to stop them from doing it.”

“Then what’s our next move?” Sophie asked.

“I hate to be passive, given what’s potentially at stake,” Jason said. “I don’t think we can just stage an attack on their fort, though. They have another silver-ranker, a small army of priests and cultists and however many of those construct creatures they’ve built. They also have the Builder itself. Do we have any idea how much power it has, or what it can do with that power? And by we, I mean Clive.”

“I don’t know,” Clive said. “Those walls it built are an impressive edifice, but you said it’s vessel looked more dead than alive. Most likely, that strained the vessel it’s occupying. You said you were sensing silver-rank magic from it?”

“Yes, although I couldn’t sense it at all until it was standing right in front of me. It seemed like silver-rank magic holding the body together, but I have no idea if that’s its limit.”

“Most likely,” Clive said. “A more powerful vessel would require a more powerful sacrifice and they don’t have a silver-ranker they can just toss away for that.”

“I think we can all agree that a pre-emptive attack would be ill-advised,” Humphrey said. “You’re counselling patience?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “We watch and we wait. When they make a move we look for a chance to dig out what they’re doing. Once we know what they’re up to and, hopefully, how, we can start figuring out how to stop it.”

“Does that mean we start hanging around the outside of the fort, waiting for them to come out?” Neil asked.

“I’ve already sent Shade to do exactly that,” Jason said. “He’ll be keeping a good distance, because we can’t be sure how sensitive the Builder’s senses are, but he’ll spot it if they make any big moves.”

Zato, Timos and the Builder walked past the array of construct creatures, most of which had been completed. Under normal circumstances, creating such creatures was a laborious and magic-intensive process. Access to clockwork cores made their construction cheap and relatively easy, for those with the expertise to use them. For the cult ritualists who specialised in their use, it was simplicity itself.

Clockwork core constructs were a cheap and dirty version of regular construct creatures. Those crafted through the usual process were a superior product, but the requirements in materials, time and facilities were considerable. The ability to quickly produce large numbers of constructs in the field, with no need for specialist workshops made clockwork core constructs more valuable than those that were, rank for rank, more powerful.

The only drawback to this approach was securing a supply of the clockwork cores. Without a clockwork king to produce more, the cultists were running increasingly short. The battles in the desert astral space and on their island base had cost them a vast number of the constructs, both destroyed outright and abandoned in the need to go to ground.

The constructs they were assembling now were consuming the last of their cores. Even the Builder itself was unable to produce new ones with its current vessel, which was not strong enough to endure the power it would take to create more.

Zato led the others past the constructs to where the Builder's previous vessel was in a cage made of magically-shaped stone. The cage was surrounded by an active magic circle, glowing with purple light. The vessel was visibly healthier than it had while possessed by the Builder, and while it was far from looking flush with life, it no longer had the appearance of a weeks-old corpse.

The reason for its recovery was not just the absence of the Builder's power eating it away from the inside but also the dead bronze-rank priests piled up in the cage. It had fed on them all for the sustenance it needed to survive. Feeding, however, had not let it move beyond the animalistic instincts it had been left with on the Builder's departure for a new shell. The intelligence of the man it had once been was nowhere in evidence. Crouched in the cage, it stared at them, warily.

"What exactly does it feed on?" Timos asked. "My understanding is that the soul is inviolable. I cannot imagine this feral creature having the skill of you, Lord, at forcing people to yield that barrier.

"While it is commonly accredited as feeding on the soul, that is not what energy vampires do," the Builder explained. "They are also, strictly speaking, not vampires. They are more akin to ghouls; wretched things that know nothing but hunger. They do attack the soul, which disrupts the magical matrix that governs the physical body, and they feed on this disturbed magic."

"It can't truly feed on souls, then," Timos said.

"It could, if given the chance. When such a creature does find a way to feed on a soul, that power is transformative. The ghoul truly does become a form of vampire; a significantly more dangerous entity. Such chances are rare, however."

"And it won't go after monsters," Timos said.

"No," the Builder confirmed. "It requires a true soul to trigger a reaction that disrupts the body's flow of magic. The false souls of monsters barely react to such attacks, making them poor sustenance."

"So it won't go after the monsters," Zato said, "but what of the twisted flesh creatures that inhabit this astral space? Are their souls damaged enough for the ghoul to ignore them?"

"There were hundreds of them, according to our agents in the Adventure Society," Timos said. "One of the last reports before our people had to withdraw from their positions was that the Rejector intended to wipe the flesh creatures out."

“They have likely thinned out the numbers in their time here,” Zato said. “I can’t imagine they eliminated them all, under the conditions here, but hopefully there are few enough left that it isn’t an issue and the ghoul seeks out the Rejector.”

“Souls that have been significantly altered create an unusual reaction in the body’s magic, which taints it to such ghouls,” the Builder said. “It is the same reason it might attack you, but cannot feed off of you. The alterations I have made to your soul make you poisonous to it. The flesh creatures are similar and it will not go after them.”

“The ghoul should go right for the Rejector, then, once it catches wind of him,” Zato said.

“Yes. The flesh creatures will not be concern,” the Builder said. “What will be a concern to us are the vorger that created the flesh creatures in the first place. They would not be so foolish as to come anywhere near me, but once our teams move out, the vorger will move in on them.”

“I’ll make sure that each team contains people capable of handling incorporeal pests,” Timos said.

“Good,” Zato said. “Lord, do you wish to release this energy ghoul now?”

“Yes,” the Builder said.

“I shall have our ritualists securely remove it from the fort.”

“No need,” the Builder said. “I shall deal with it myself.”

The Builder strode through the magic circle, which flickered and dimmed as it passed over it. Nearing the cage, the magically-moulded bars started to run like mud, quickly thinning to an almost watery consistency and splashing onto the brickwork, where it immediately hardened again.

The ghoul leapt at the Builder, who snatched it out of the air with one hand, claspng its fingers around the ghoul’s neck. The ghoul collapsed in his grip, falling limp like a rag. The Builder then carried it to the nearest gate in the wall, which opened at his approach. The builder tossed out the ghoul, which regained its senses in the air, twisting into an animalistic catfall. It looked back, fearfully, before scrambling away, still of all fours.

The Builder raised a hand and dust started rising up from the ground, swirling together into a small but solid shape. It was a crystal eyeball with spider legs that, immediately on being completed, scurried off after the ghoul.

Chapter 251

Losing the Battle to Win the War

Jason dashed forward, his sword flicking out.

“Faster,” Sophie said, catching every strike with her hand as she moved backwards, easily matching the pace of Jason’s advance.

“You don’t need to hit hard,” she said. “If you’re going to fight the constructs effectively, it’s about building up the power on your sword as quickly as possible.”

Fending off Jason’s attacks while moving backwards at speed was apparently not strenuous enough to make her incapable of carrying on conversation. They had chosen rough terrain on purpose, with undergrowth, vines and plants growing up through displaced brickwork. Sophie navigated it easily, without even looking around.

Her perception power, the only one on the team yet to provide magical senses, gave her an advanced form of spatial awareness. Each member of the team experienced a similar gain in spatial awareness, just from their senses advancing to bronze, but hers was an order of magnitude greater. It was the difference navigating a well-known room in the dark and moving through it with the lights on.

More than just navigating whatever space she happened to occupy, Sophie’s senses made her far better at reading the attacks of enemies. She could track the movements of everyone around her, intercepting attacks she could feel, even if she couldn’t see them.

Jason had experienced a surge in his combat skills between his bronze-rank attributes and the new Way of the Reaper techniques that made the most of them. For Sophie, though, reaching bronze-rank was putting wings on a tiger. Like Humphrey, her combat skills were the platform on which her entire power set was balanced, and being stronger faster and more aware of her surroundings were acting as force multipliers to her capabilities.

For Jason’s power set, by comparison, strategic movement was more critical than combat technique. Being in the right place at the right time was the most important factor in making the most of his abilities and the balance of his training reflected that. Since many of those powers would be ineffective against the cult’s constructs, however, he would be reliant on his sword. For that reason, Humphrey and Sophie were taking turns helping him hone his swordsmanship.

As with most things, Jason’s approach to swordsmanship was slightly off-kilter to most people. As with his knife-fighting style, quantity of hits was more important than quality. He didn’t need powerful strikes but frequent ones, to build up the power on his

sword. He did actually need to land hits, not just harmless taps, but even the least effective blow would get the job done, so long as it was effective at all.

With the bronze-rank advancement, the sword would not just build up charges with each hit. It would also leave behind ongoing damage effects, bringing it more into line with Jason's normal style, although not as effectively as his normal powers. While that meant diminished capability, Jason was quietly relieved that his entire worth couldn't be replicated by a single, albeit impressive, magic item.

"Mr Asano," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. Jason and Sophie brought their practise to a stop.

"There's been some activity?" Jason asked.

"It would seem that the Builder has moved to its new vessel," Shade said. "Unexpectedly, it did not kill of the previous one, but threw it out of the fortress immediately."

Jason and Sophie had been practising just outside the church building containing the cloud house. As Shade talked, they made their way back inside to meet with the team.

"The Builder's vessel survived having the Builder in it?" Jason asked.

"It's a little more complicated than that," Shade said.

"Well, wait on an explanation until we meet up with the team," Jason said. It was not long before the team were gathered in the lounge room of the cloud house.

"What are we dealing with?" Humphrey asked.

"The Builder's previous vessel," Shade said. "The Builder's new one, the former Mr Mercer, cast it out of the fortified camp in person."

"What kind of state is it in?" Jason asked. "I didn't think it would survive."

"It won't have, strictly speaking," Clive explained. "It'll be an energy ghoul, now; an undead thing only kept animate by residual magic. Little, if any of the original mind will be intact."

"It was acting in a very animalistic manner," Shade said.

"The magic sustaining it won't last long," Clive said. "It will need more to avoid going from undead to just plain dead."

"What kind of magic?" Belinda asked.

"The kind flowing through all of us," Clive said. "We've discussed in the past about how the bodies of anyone, iron-rank or higher, move closer and closer to a generic magical substance that it shapes as need. The magic involved in that process is governed by the soul. An energy ghoul feeds by disrupting that magic with a soul attack, then consuming it."

“Why did the Builder throw this thing out, instead of just putting it down?” Jason asked. “Won’t it be a threat to their people?”

“The cultists all have souls poisoned by their star seeds,” Clive said. “The Purity church people will be vulnerable to it, however.”

“Which the cult may not care about, now the leader of the church contingent is dead,” Humphrey said. “The Builder may not care about what they have to contribute, now they aren’t providing a silver-ranker.”

“I believe that we can surmise the church’s contribution,” Shade said. “The former vessel was in an improved condition, compared to when Mr Asano and myself met with the Builder.”

“He’s been feeding the church people to it?” Jason asked. “That’s a bad ally to have.”

“A great astral being is one of the few that do not need fear a god’s retribution,” Clive said. “The gods of our world can’t see into this astral space, because it isn’t part of our world. So long as none of Purity’s people come back alive, the Builder can just blame all the deaths on us.”

“I’m happy to do my part,” Sophie said. “I’ll kill them all with a smile on my face.”

“Sophie!” Belinda scolded. “Since when do you smile?”

The team stifled laughs at Sophie’s affronted expression.

“Let’s keep on topic,” Humphrey said, despite the poor job he was doing of schooling amusement from his own face. “How dangerous is this thing?”

“Was it a silver-rank aura?” Clive asked Shade.

“Yes,” Shade said. “Its aura is unstable, but quite violent.”

“And that’s the real threat,” Clive said. “The physical danger it poses is relatively small, akin to an ordinary, silver-rank monster. No additional powers, not even claws. Just the silver-rank attributes.”

“Relatively small,” Jason said. “You haven’t gone toe-to-toe with a silver-rank monster. Just the attributes is plenty dangerous enough.”

“But not something beyond your ability to handle alone,” Clive said, “which is the important thing. If it can suppress our auras, it will launch a soul attack. We’ve seen the results of that courtesy of you, Jason. We can most likely withstand it, but you’re the only one of us likely to hold up well enough to remain combat effective. The rest will have to focus on maintaining our aura integrity.”

“That puts it all on Jason,” Humphrey said. “Are you up for that?”

“I’ll have to be,” Jason said. “I still don’t understand what the Builder is looking to accomplish in feeding this thing up and sending it off. What does he get from doing that?”

“An energy ghoulish is incredibly sensitive to the life and soul magic. It also ignores monsters, because it can't feed on them effectively.”

“He wants to use it to find us,” Sophie said.

“That seems likely,” Clive said. “It's not a bad idea, either. It probably won't even take that long to find us. It's movements will be erratic until it catches our trail. Not an actual trail, but a sense of our magic. Once it does, it'll make a beeline, right for us.”

“I have one of my bodies following it,” Shade said. “It is making a straight line, but not in our direction.”

“I think Mr Standish may be incorrect in counting the soul attack as the largest danger the energy ghoulish presents,” Shade said. “Following the ghoulish is a small scouting construct created by the Builder. The moment we engage with the ghoulish, the Builder will know.”

“It seems that you were right, Clive,” Humphrey said. “The Builder is using this thing to flush us out.”

“It makes sense,” Neil said. “If you have it laying about, why not throw it at us? It's kind of wasting a soul-sucking monster, otherwise.”

“It's not an actual monster,” Clive said. “And it doesn't actually 'suck souls.' It would if it could, but souls are inviolable. You can't just crack them like a breakfast egg. No one is going to open themselves up to an energy ghoulish, which is for the best, given the result.”

“The result of what?” Humphrey asked.

“Well, if it actually managed to consume a soul, it would transform into a soul vampire. Much more powerful, much more dangerous. We don't have to worry about that, though.”

“Why not?” Neil asked.

“I told you; souls are inviolable,” Clive said. “It's not like there's an unattended soul just laying about for it to eat. Why are you all staring at me?”

“An unattended soul,” Neil said.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “Where would it possibly find one of those?”

“About eight kilometres away,” Jason said.

“What?” Clive asked.

“The one wrapped around the sword, remember?” Neil asked and Clive's eyes went wide and he leapt out of his chair.

“Oh, that's bad” he said. “That's really, really bad. We can't let that happen. Especially not a soul that powerful.”

He started pacing back and forth.

“Maybe its fine,” Clive said. “Maybe whatever’s been done to that soul will make in intolerable to the ghoul. It’ll just ignore it.”

“Right now, the ghoul is moving in almost a straight line in the direction of the location you are discussing,” Shade said. “So long as you leave in the next several minutes, you will be able to comfortably intercept the ghoul.”

“Why didn’t you say that before?” Clive asked Shade wildly.

“I largely avoid embroiling myself in the affairs of the great astral beings,” Shade said. “My affiliation with the Reaper tends to cause complications. As such, I am unfamiliar with the specifics around taking mortal vessels and their subsequent condition.”

“Then we need to move,” Humphrey said. “I can only imagine that letting the ghoul consume that soul is trouble enough, let alone unleashing the sword it imprisons.”

“Double the trouble,” Jason said.

“Are we sure this whole thing isn’t a trap?” Sophie asked. “Does the Builder know about the sword and is baiting us into trying to stop the ghoul?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Clive said. “We have to stop it even if we know for certain it’s a trap. A soul that powerful might even let the ghoul rise up to a gold-rank soul vampire. If that happens, I don’t see us leaving this place alive, let alone stopping the Builder.”

The Builder, Zato and Timos were preparing to exit the walled fortress with an assembled group of cultists, constructs and converted Purity priests.

“You have a concern, Timos?” the Builder asked.

“I don’t feel it’s appropriate to say, Lord Builder.”

“Speak, Timos.”

“It’s just... that face,” Timos said. “I spent more time than I would care to, holding Thadwick Mercer’s leash. It’s still a little odd seeing his face without his unique mix of vacuousness, insecurity and disdain.”

“I always find that obtaining the memories of a vessel to be interesting,” the Builder said. “Very few things are difficult to a transcendent being, but obtaining a mortal perspective is one of them. It makes predicting mortal behaviour difficult. So often you make choices that objectively work against your own interests or are even self-destructive.”

“If that’s what you’re looking for, I don’t think you could have found a better vessel,” Timos said. “Thadwick Mercer was a disaster of self-sabotage.”

“Indeed,” the Builder said. “I was hoping for some insight into the Rejector, but this vessel was so self-deluded that I don’t entirely trust the memories.”

The Builder tilted its head, as if listening to something.

“The ghoul is moving with speed and purpose,” it said. “It has been attracted to something.”

“The Rejector’s team,” Timos said. “Perhaps they were nearby, scouting the fortress.”

“I’ll take some of our forces and capture them,” Zato said.

“No,” the Builder said. “Rushing to the attack is what cost us Hendren, but there is no benefit in losing you. Send a force of converted and constructs under the command of one of the bronze-rankers.”

“I’ll arrange it, Lord, but I am uncertain they will find success against a group that already defeated a silver-ranker.”

“They will not,” the Builder said. “That is not the purpose of sending them. The mobility of being a small group is their key advantage against us. Rushing out to attack each time we catch wind of them only plays to that strength. One of our advantages in numbers and it is time to make use of them.”

“Please enlighten me, Lord,” Zato said.

“I will send observers with this force. We shall see how the Rejector and his team fights them, that we might develop countermeasures for future encounters. All it will cost us is a small portion of our superior numbers.”

“Planting the seeds of victory in the soil of defeat. My Lord is wise and long-sighted.”

“Don’t be a sycophant, Zato. I am not a god, in need of fawning worshippers.”

“Apologies, Lord Builder.”

Since the leap in Jason’s aura power after his encounter with the Builder’s star seed, Jason had been engaging the team in anti-suppression training. He couldn’t raise the strength of their aura, but they could train to make the most of the strength they had. By keeping their aura projection uniform and resolute, they would present no weakness for the ghoul’s aura to pounce on and collapse their auras entirely, leaving them exposed to its feeding ability.

This paid off when they encountered the ghoul, who immediately let out a soul-piercing shriek to go with its soul-suppressing aura. Aside from Jason, the team were all staggered, but not debilitated. Jason himself plunged forward, undaunted.

The encounter happened in amongst tightly-packed buildings, the jungle overgrowth turning narrow streets into cramped canyons. Vines covered the walls and trees on the rooftops formed a canopy that stretched over the streets and cast everything in shadow.

The ghoul was a ragged, wretched thing, its clothes torn and bloody. Even though it was more intact than when Jason had seen it as the builder's vessel, he saw even less of the man he remembered.

Dougall had been the one to capture him, in what felt like a lifetime ago back at the Vane Estate. It had only been a just a few months more than a year ago, but Jason was literally and figuratively transformed. He had been scared and confused, halfway to madness and not entirely certain he wasn't the whole way there. Scrambling to survive, let alone understand what was happening to him, the repeated hits to the head with a shovel did not help.

The man who had been holding that shovel had undergone an even greater transformation than Jason, although not for the better. A less than pleasant man in life, undeath had rendered him into an even more unpleasant monstrosity.

The ghoul was silver-rank, but without the power to penetrate Jason's aura, it was no more threat than its silver-rank attributes, themselves on the lower end of the scale. It fought unthinkingly and without skill, while the environment was a playground for Jason's abilities. His affliction powers were able to shine against the creature's silver-rank fortitude, hardy enough to withstand far more punishment than any bronze-ranker. The escalating nature of Jason's afflictions proved their worth as they inevitably overwhelmed the ghoul.

With the enclosed space and the team concentrating on fending off the ghoul's aura, they had not detected the presence of the builder's forces until they were almost upon them. Even as Jason's execute was annihilating the ghoul, the team heard the approach of the clunky stone constructs.

Chapter 252

War of Adaptation

The enemy force only had a few cultists, being mostly made up of constructs and the converted. They hadn't even engaged Jason's team before being thrown into confusion as Belinda used her Unexpected Allies spell. The team were masked in illusions that made them appear as members of the enemy force. Illusionary doubles of their true form appeared as allies and enemies alike were switch-teleported around the area by Belinda's spell.

The enemy constructs were unthinking automatons and the converted former clergy weren't much better. Neither handled the confusing shift in the battlefield well. When the team attacked them under the disguise of illusion, they retaliated against what appeared to be members of their own force.

The illusionary disguises weren't very good and most of the team was easy to pick out. Humphrey, for example, had taken the form of one of the blank-faced converted, but was still wielding his huge dragon sword. The mindless enemy, however, was easily deceived. Once they thought their own forces were attacking them, things got very messy, very fast.

The cultists commanding the forces worked to get things back under control as their forces started fighting one another. It helped that the illusions did not last long and their enemies once again became clear. Jason and his team had used that window of confusion to maximum effect.

The team was well-practised in handling the chaos of Belinda's power and had used the moment of confusion to set themselves up for the fight against an enemy in disarray. The priority was getting the team's backline out of harm's way, Sophie and Humphrey immediately moving to clear paths for Clive and Neil to escape the fray. Belinda activated her Counterfeit Champion power, equipped some hefty equipment and started extracting herself.

After the random switch-teleport by Belinda, Jason had found himself in the midst of constructs. They ranged from larger than him to much larger than him, in a myriad of monstrous forms. Rather than wasting the precious moments of enemy confusion looking for more fleshy opponents, he drew his sword and put his recent training into practise. Shade's bodies spread out between them, giving Jason plenty of flexibility for shadow teleports and he made the most of them. He moved amongst the constructs like a ghost, his sword dancing to make rapid-fire hits in staccato rhythm.

With the aid of Sophie and Humphrey, Clive and Neil extricated themselves from the scrum, heading for the reliable presence of Onslow, who had been unconvincingly disguised as one of the larger constructs. Neil's Burst Shield proved especially effective in getting them clear.

Ability: [Burst Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (healing, recovery)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (87%).

- Effect (Iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and explodes out, knocking-back nearby enemies and inflicting concussive damage. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.

- Effect (Bronze): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the blast.

- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage.

The enemy started getting back into order, the converted pooling into one group and the constructs into another, with the few ordinary cultists at the back. Sophie moved against the concentration of converted, the blank-faced former clergy all fighting back in eerily identical manner. They had the same strength, the same speed, the same technique, all used in the same way. They fought with the same, emotionless expression.

The converted were fast and skilled, moving in a manner that was rigid, yet swift and efficient. They didn't have weapons but their bones were hard as steel, their knuckles, knees and elbows making effective bludgeons. They used those weapons startlingly well for clergy, all fighting with the same expertise and identical technique.

The converted had the technique of a someone who had learned it from a skill book without ever attempting to make those techniques their own. The skill was undoubtedly present but they fought without creativity or initiative. They were slaves to the patterns, with neither innovation nor imagination on display. It did not take long for Sophie to see through the patterns and start exploiting them.

If they weren't up against Sophie, the efficient, robotic movements of the converted might have seemed like a precision machine. Instead, they came across as the crude prototype of her finished product. Even compared to their programmed, uniform efficiency, Sophie was faster, cleaner and even more economical of motion. Every motion was

smooth, not so much as a gesture wasted as every action flowed into the next. She danced through her opponents as if the whole fight had been choreographed but she was the only one who knew.

Sophie moved swiftly, holding the attention of as many of the converted as she could while they attempted to overrun her. What they lacked in imagination they made for in sheer numbers. Their fortitude, and regenerative power meant that she couldn't take any of them out completely, forced to perpetually hold them off as they kept coming in a relentless tide.

Even with her skill, Sophie could not have handled the numbers without support. Clive and Neil threw spells on her, with Neil's Burst Shield spell regularly clearing space and buying her critical breathing room.

Having seen Neil and Clive regroup at the rear and join up with Belinda, Humphrey went for the cultists commanding the force. There were only three bronze-rankers, mediocre cultists that were no match for Humphrey even three on one. They were sent staggering by his fire breath before quickly falling to his sword.

Ability: [Fire Breath] (Dragon)

- **Special attack**
- **Cost: Very high mana.**
- **Cooldown: 50 seconds.**

- **Current rank: Bronze 3 (65%).**
- **Effect (Iron): Breath a stream of fire that last several seconds.**
- **Effect (Bronze): Anyone damaged by the flames suffers ongoing fire damage.**

Frowning at the suspicious ease with which they were taken down, he surveyed the battlefield, looking for what he was missing. He spotted a number of strange glass eyes, held off the ground on spider legs, watching the fight. When he went after them, they skittered away before he could close the distance. In the jungle confines, there was plenty of space to hide, and though he could sense their magic, he didn't have time to go digging them out.

"Humphrey," Jason said through voice chat. "I could use an assist."

Jason was oddly thriving amongst the constructs. They were large and tough, hulking stone forms in the shape of various, strange monsters. The constructs were milling about like a bunch of people trying to stomp out a scurrying bug, but their intimidating and bulky forms didn't help them pin down the shadowy figure flittering in their midst. Jason was ever

on the move, his sword ringing out on the stone in a rat-a-tat pattern. His sword had built up enough power that chunks of stone were flying off with every strike.

Although Jason's efforts were going well, that did not make them easy. The biggest problem was the lone silver-rank construct amongst the otherwise bronze-ranker group. It was faster than the others and tough enough that Jason's sword was yet to pick up enough power to damage it effectively. Unlike Jason himself, his sword did not have the ability to overcome silver-rank resistances.

Although no smarter than the others, it remained a constant threat that Jason had to continuously work around. If he had been fighting it alone he could have handled it, but on top of the others it was pressuring his ability to remain evasive.

The intercession of Humphrey changed that significantly. Like taking a sledgehammer to a condemned building, he laid into it with workmanlike special attacks, breaking it apart in huge chunks.

"You want to go help Sophie and leave this lot to me?" Humphrey asked as the silver-rank construct collapsed.

"I could use the practise," Jason said. "You go."

In the midst of the converted, Sophie was ramping up. They had been slowly overwhelming her from the beginning, their numbers and near-indestructibility made it like trying to fight back the tide. Even Sophie's skill was not enough to go unscathed against so many attackers, but she was realising that taking a few hits was not so bad, as long as she wasn't staggered and pinned-down. With every hit, her Karmic Warrior ability increased her power, allowing her to hold up all the better.

Humphrey joined in but even his destructive power was hard-pressed to take down the converted. Their flesh wasn't as tough as the stone constructs, but their bones were harder than metal. It turned out, as Humphrey started tearing them apart with special, that metal was indeed laced through their skeletons in thick wires. Worse, those wires could even snake out to reconnect, pulling dismembered body parts back together as their rapid healing knitted the flesh back into place.

The converted only presented a limited danger individually, but they were too dangerous to ignore and their ability to rapidly recover from what should have been catastrophically lethal injury meant that they just kept coming. Only by entirely pulverising the bulk of their bodies with his special attacks could even Humphrey put an end to them, but he had special attacks to spare.

Without the cultists guiding them, the team entered a mop-up phase as they cleared the battlefield.

“I wouldn’t call this easy, exactly,” Jason said, once they were done, “but did anyone find this suspiciously lacking in challenge?”

“I believe the purpose is to test us,” Shade said. “Rather than any of his more capable people, this group was accompanied by the Builder’s observer constructs.”

“You mean those spider eye things?” Humphrey asked. “I spotted those but couldn’t catch any of them.”

“These things?” Sophie asked, holding one up by the leg. “They seem harmless, so they’re probably just for watching us.”

The main body was an, oversized, crystal eye, around half the size of a fist. Legs came out from the sides like those of a spider, made of a smoky quartz stone. Jason moved closer, peering into it.

“You in there, mate?” Jason asked. “You and I weren’t exactly being honest with one another, the last time we met. You were stalling to try and find me; I was baiting your henchpeople into a trap. I’m not saying I won, but you’re down a silver-ranker and I’m up a nice personal grooming set he had on him. Keeps the beard nice and trim, you know.”

“Jason, what are you doing?” Sophie asked.

“I’m talking to my mate Bill,” Jason said. “Just keep holding up the thing. Sorry about that, Bill. That’s the problem when you lease your slaves. The moment the lease runs out, they get all mouthy.”

“Hey!”

“Shush, you. Anyway, Bill, I’m not completely on board with this whole ‘probing attacks’ scenario. I’ve made a career out of taking on the kind of self-destructive idiots whose bad choices are more of a danger to themselves than I ever was. That’s the kind of enemy that’s in my wheelhouse, so if you could go ahead and make a rash decision that sows the seeds of your own downfall, that’d really help me out.”

“Jason...” Humphrey said.

“Sorry, Bill; they’re playing me off. Got to go, but you keep an eye out. Rumour is that there’s some lunatic super-god running around causing trouble. I’ve heard he’s kind of a prick.”

Sophie shook her head, then swung the observer drone into the ground, shattering the crystal eye.

“Can’t have them following us around,” she said. “We need to catch and destroy them all before we can make ourselves scarce.”

Around half of the Builder's combat forces had been led in an excursion outside walled fortress. The remainder staying behind with the support personnel. Leading the excursion was the Builder himself, along with Timos and Zato.

Zato looked on with concern as the Builder suddenly stopped. The vessel's face never showed emotion, so he was startled to see a very human expression of anger cross it.

"Lord Builder?"

"Notebook," the Builder demanded and Zato took one from his dimensional satchel. The Builder ran a finger over the pages, which stained themselves with text as he did. After filling most of the book, he handed it to Timos.

"Once we return to the fort, have the ritualists create new constructs with these parameters," the Builder said. "It will be more difficult, but it is hardly a taxing task. There are also changes listed that can be made to the existing constructs. Not as effective as those purpose-built, but an improvement, nonetheless."

"Of course, Lord Builder. I hesitate to mention it, but the ritualists have pointed out to me in the past that the supply of clockwork cores is almost exhausted."

"If they wish to complain about my allocation of resources, tell them that they may seek me out directly," the Builder said.

"I believe that will settle the matter definitely, Lord Builder."

"Adaptations for the Rejector's team?" Zato asked.

"Yes," the Builder said. "Even having some sense of their capabilities, they made surprisingly short work of our forces. They have weaknesses, however, that are ripe for exploitation."

"They will inevitably give us the chance," Zato said.

"Yes," the Builder said. "For the moment, we put them aside. They are a distraction from our true objective."

The excursion moved to the very centre of the city, not far from the walls of their fort. Circumstances had forced them into erecting the wall on the spot that had arrived, otherwise the Builder would have already led them to the city's true heart. The crater that had once been the site of the Order of the Reaper's tower left the Builder unfazed.

"The time has come," the Builder said, "for the Rejector to see just who he has challenged and to whom this place truly belongs."

The Builder held out his arms, making a rising gesture. The ground beneath tier feet stated to shake.

“Why would the Builder just throw people away like that?” Neil asked.

The team were back in the cloud house, discussing the fight they just had.

“Because we beat Hendren,” Humphrey said. “He’s assessing us. Looking for weaknesses. He presumably has some means of making his forces stronger. Probably through the constructs, since they can make those.”

“The converted will adapt as well,” Shade said.

“The converted?” Sophie asked. “You mean those weird people with the blank faces that refused to die?”

“Yes,” Shade said. “They are one of the Builder’s signatures.”

“They’re an atrocity,” Clive said. “I could see the magic running through them. Magic carved right onto their bones.”

“I’ve heard of that,” Jason said. “Isn’t that how they permanently suppress someone’s powers? Turn their own skeleton into a suppression collar?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “A practise I don’t particularly approve of, and this is the same thing on a much deeper and more comprehensive scale. There’s nothing of the original person left. They’re just a platform for the Builder’s power and will.”

“An excellent description,” Shade said. “Those we encountered today were fresh. Over time, they will change, adapt new abilities.”

“Abilities tailored to fight us,” Neil said.

“Yes,” Shade said. “Normally they adapt somewhat randomly, but with the Builder’s vessel present to guide the changes, you can expect them to be better equipped to fight us the next time.”

“It was hard enough this time,” Sophie said. “Those things will get stronger?”

“We’ve seen enemies that adapt before,” Humphrey said. “We killed those flesh abominations by the hundreds, in spite of their adaptations. If the Builder wants to adjust to us, we adjust faster. That’s our strength and we’re going to show him that in a war of adaptation, we’re going to win.”

“Easy enough to say,” Neil said.

“We start by picking our roles. Jason did a surprisingly good job against the constructs but they are only going to get stronger.”

“Surprisingly?” Jason asked, his voice filled with exaggerated affront.

“I’m well-suited to the constructs,” Humphrey continued, “so that will be my job. Those converted are tough and heal fast, like the flesh abominations. So, as with the flesh abominations, Jason will be our trump card there. I’m willing to bet they can’t out-heal your

afflictions. Sophie will do what she does best, which is judging where she needs to be in the moment and being there.”

“That’s going to be the key,” Jason said. “Even if the Builder can reconfigure his constructs between fights and evolve his creepy thugs, we can adapt in moments.”

“Exactly right,” Humphrey said. “Belinda, you’re our most versatile player, so we’re going to rely on you. Clive, you’re in charge of taking out the big threats, or at least hitting them hard enough to take pause. Neil, you’ll do what you always do. Keep us alive.”

Humphrey looked around the room.

“We’ve been tested, again and again in this place. Every time, we’ve grown stronger. The Builder might think this place belongs to him, but it belongs to us. This is our crucible and it has given us the strength to beat him. We can handle anything he can throw at us, whatever that might be.”

Just as he finished speaking, the ground started to shake violently enough that they could feel it through the soft cushioning of the cloud house.

Chapter 253

The Hero of This Story

“Should we be getting out?” Sophie asked as the cloud house continued to shake.

“What if the church collapses on top of the cloud house?”

The cloud house was still hidden in the huge internal space of a cathedral.

“At most, it would be the roof falling on us,” Clive said. “That’s not enough to breach the cloud house, especially now it’s been upgraded to bronze-rank.”

“Yep,” Jason said. “We go out there and the first thing that happens is we fall on the ground. The second thing that happens is the ground falls on us.”

The shaking continued for more than a minute before settling down. The team opened the door to find it blocked by debris, but Jason just concentrated and a new door opened elsewhere on the wall. They made their way outside, finding the church half-collapsed. The nearby buildings had likewise suffered extensive damage, already weakened by age and the intrusive jungle growth.

Jason pulled out his cloud flask, into which the cloud house started returning.

“What do you think it was?” Neil asked, looking around. “Oh, I’ve spotted it.”

The others followed his pointed arm with their gaze, seeing the giant tower reaching into the sky. It looked to be in the centre of the city, taller than any building Jason had seen since leaving his own world. He estimated it to be somewhere between twenty-five and thirty storeys tall, made of the same stone as the rest of the city but untouched by jungle growth. There were windows around the outside but they couldn’t see inside at their current distance.

“Was that thing underground, or did the Builder just make it?” Belinda wondered aloud.

“If he did,” Clive said, “then he must have burned that vessel to a cinder. That tower would take far more power to create than knocking up some walls.”

“I think that might not be all,” Jason said.

Jason had received a system message right as the rumbling had come to an end.

➤ [Mapped areas of your current region are out of date. Visit affected areas to update details.](#)

Jason pulled up his map. The whole city had been revealed over their months in the astral space, but now a series of areas were once more occluded. Worrying, but

unsurprising, were their locations. Along with the former site of the Order of the Reaper's tower, was the towers around the city's edge and the golem hidden within.

"Something has changed at the towers around the city as well," Jason said and told the others about the changes to his map. As it was a separate ability to his party interface, he was unable to share it with the team except for Belinda. She could mimic it by shapeshifting into Jason's form.

"What do we do now?" Sophie asked. "Do we go and scout this new tower?"

"The cult forces will almost certainly be gathered there," Humphrey said. "I'm hesitant to make that move without a plan or objective."

"Why don't we take a look at the towers around the city?" Belinda suggested. "If the cult is going to them, they either need to split their forces or go through them one at a time."

"Meaning that we either run into a group we can handle, or don't run into them at all," Humphrey said. "I like it. I just hope that whatever we find there can finally let us figure out what the Builder is doing."

"That seems likely," Clive said. "Anything to do with those world engineer golems in the towers has to be on a grandiose scale."

"I think that qualifies," Neil said, glancing up at the tower looming over the city centre. "You don't suppose that there's an even bigger golem inside that tower?"

"It'd be an awfully skinny golem," Jason said.

"I really doubt the Builder just stone-shaped that tower into being," Clive said. "I think it's magical infrastructure that's been hidden this whole time."

"That's not even a surprise, at this point," Sophie said. "Add it to the absurd list of secrets in this place."

"If I can take a look at some of that infrastructure," Clive continued, "then maybe we can figure out how to top it."

"Something this large and this involved has to have a bunch of potential failure points," Jason said.

"Exactly," Clive said.

"Well then," Humphrey said. "Let's go looking for them."

It was a relatively short journey from the original walled fort to the new tower the Builder had caused to rise up from the crater at the heart of the city. Buried deep below where the Reaper's tower had stood for centuries, the new tower proclaimed the new dominant force in the astral space.

The remainder of the Builder's forces and resources were moving from the fort to the tower, where they were occupying the bottom floors. There had space enough for all of their people, especially with the teams that had already been sent off in the direction of the towers around the edges of the city. It also had defences enough that it would take a concerted effort by powerful monsters to threaten it.

"Do you think the Rejector will come here?" Zato asked. He and Timos were on the third floor of the tower looking out a window. It was the highest floor the cultists were occupying. Even they were unsure of what was contained above, having been forbidden from going higher by the Builder.

"It's hard to know," Timos said. He had been one of the cult's ringleaders in Greenstone and knew more about what had gone on there than most of the cult. He had been present for the Rejector's rise to prominence, although he only knew so much. By the time the Rejector's true fame came about, Timos had been driven from the city by Thalia Mercer and her obsessive purge.

"Asano is famously hard to predict," Timos said. "The things I've heard are strange and contradictory. Coming here would be foolish but he's made foolish choices before."

"I don't think he will," Zato said. "The Lord Builder believes that he will attempt to sabotage the towers."

"Is that even possible?" Timos asked.

"The Lord Builder told me that he has taken steps to ensure that the Rejector makes the attempt. Once he encounters one of our teams at a tower, though, the new adapted response teams will move to the adjacent towers to intercept them when they move to complete what they think is sabotage."

"They're completed already?"

"The ritualist team have been doing well since we moved them from astral magic work to their actual area of expertise," Zato said. "They have not only finished the new constructs but modified the old ones as well. As for the converted, the Builder made those changes personally."

Before the team reached the closest of the city's exterior towers, they stopped to let Jason and Sophie scout ahead. What they found was that the tower remained intact, with no discernable changes. Like all the towers, it abutted right against the water that ringed the city, but now there was a new feature.

A second tower was now present, around a dozen metres directly off shore from the first. It was a mirror of the existing tower, aside from a lack of the portal archway on the

top. In its place was some kind of plinth. They couldn't make out details, but they could see a magical glow shining from it.

A stone pathway had also arisen to form a bridge from the base of the original tower to the new one, leading to stairs spiralling up, around the outside. These had already been used by the two cultists they could see atop the tower. They had a single construct with them and a handful of converted. It was a small force, barely enough to make their way through a city infested with monsters now travelling in herds.

"Why so few?" Sophie wondered as she and Jason watched from a nearby rooftop.

"They have numbers, but they aren't infinite," Jason said. "If Shade is right, most of their force are those converted, now. They would have sacrificed all their iron-rankers to make them because iron-rankers are no good here."

"You think the Builder just sent a few to minimise his losses, wherever we turned up?"

"Or it's a trap," Jason said. "Shade is scouting around for any hidden reinforcements."

The team carefully joined them as Shade continued to look for any cultists lurking about and they started discussing how to strike.

"We don't want to show off our strongest tactics," Humphrey said. "Everything the Builder sees now will be less effective when it comes to the big fight."

"There's going to be a big fight?" Neil asked. "I don't suppose we could avoid that."

"The Builder will know the vulnerabilities of what he's doing," Clive said. "He wants to drag us into a fight against his superior forces, so he'll make sure they're between us and whatever we need to get to."

"We need to hide our greater strengths," Humphrey said, "while making enough of a splash that it doesn't look like we're holding back."

"Something flashy," Neil said. "I think I might have an idea."

There were two cultists on the new tower, along with the construct and the converted that were their protection. One of the two was looking over a notebook while the other was looking through a crate she had taken from a dimensional bag.

"I really hope the Rejector doesn't come here," the man going through the crate said. "That guy scares the crap out of me."

"I don't see why so many of us are so worried about that guy," the woman with the notebook said. "He's just some adventurer who got lucky."

"No," he said. "I felt that soul projection that was blasted over the city in Greenstone. That terrified me. It was like my star seed was scared of his aura."

“That’s nonsense.,” she replied. “That’s like saying the Lord Builder is scared of him. He’s just angry that the Rejector defied him. Beings that powerful aren’t used to not getting their way.”

“You should be careful with your words about the Builder.”

“He doesn’t mind the truth. He’s not some god with fragile sensibilities. And don’t worry about the Rejector. The Builder will bring him to heel. In the end, the Rejector is just another bronze-ranker. Like us.”

He shook his head. “We know better than anyone the power of the Builder. What kind of person do you have to be to even try and stand up to that, let alone win?”

“He didn’t win. He endured.”

“Against the Builder, that is winning. The Rejector may be a lot of things, but like us is not one of them.”

“Why don’t you go throw in with him then, if he’s so impressive.”

“I’ve chosen to follow the Builder. Power and victory, no regrets. I know he’ll deal with the Rejector sooner, rather than later. I’m just saying I don’t want to run into the Rejector before that happens.”

She notebook felt a surge of magic and looked up just in time to see her fellow cultist vanish. In his place was a man in dark robes.

“G’day,” the man said with a grin and plucked the notebook from the startled cultist’s hands. “I might be able to resist the Builder, but I couldn’t resist an entry line like that.”

The converted and the construct turned on Jason immediately but a bubble shield appeared around him. A stone claw landed on the shield and it immediately exploded with force. The cultist, the converted and the construct were all blasted off the sides of the tower.

On a nearby rooftop, the cultist who had been switch-teleported away by Clive suddenly found himself surrounded. He didn’t have enough time to look around in surprise before Humphrey’s sword came down.

“Let’s get down there,” Humphrey said to Sophie. “That fall won’t have killed them.”

“I get the construct, you get the converted?” Sophie asked. “The construct I can at least chip away at.”

“That works for me,” Humphrey said and they both ran to the edge of the rooftop and leapt off.

Jason was reading through the confiscated notebook when the others joined him atop the new tower. He was looking between the book and the plinth in the centre, which was

covered in glowing runes. It had the look of a control panel, like the one used to operate a mirage chamber.

“What do you have there?” Clive asked.

“Some kind of instruction manual,” Jason said. “There’s a simple, direct list of what order to push stuff in for someone who really doesn’t know what they’re doing, but there’s more about the functionality if you go deeper in. With all the magic study I’ve been doing, I can actually understand it.”

“That’s good,” Clive said. “I always told you that understanding theory was important.”

“When you’re right, you’re right,” Jason said. “This tower we’re standing on seems to be an activation tower for the other one. If we ignore the instructions at the front and don’t do that, I think I’ve spotted a way we can actually sabotage the tower, instead.”

“Great,” Clive said. “I’d best give it a look over.”

“Do you not trust me?” Jason asked, mock hurt.

“Trust is relative,” Clive said. “A ritual for digging a hole, I’m happy to trust you got it right. When massive death and destruction is on the line, I think it’s worth double checking.”

“That seems fair,” Jason said.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Clive said, “if saving the day comes down to rakish insouciance, I’ll bow to your expertise. We just have different areas of specialty.”

“You’re saying that your thing is useful and practical magic that’s incredibly useful to adventurers and mine is dashing good looks and frivolous charm?”

“That wasn’t what I…”

“I’m completely okay with that,” Jason said, slapping the notebook into Clive’s hand.

“If you’re going to be reading, read fast,” Humphrey said. “We have no idea how long it will take for the Builder to send people here.”

“I know the Builder can see through his followers,” Belinda said, “but how well?”

“It can’t be perfectly,” Jason said. “Otherwise he wouldn’t be using those things.”

He nodded his head at a broken eye spider construct.

“I found that thing hiding behind the plinth, which his why it didn’t get blasted off the side. Had to squash it myself.”

He picked up the small construct.

-
- [Spyder \(destroyed\).](#)
 - [Drone \(iron rank\).](#)
-

“Spyders are cooler where I come from.”

Walking over to the edge of the building, he dropped it off the side. Clive started looking through the book and Belinda started rifling through the dimensional bag they had taken from the cultist they had teleported into their midst. She pulled out a crate holding six identical magic devices.

“Are these mana lamps?” she asked.

“They are,” Clive said, glancing up from the notebook for only a moment.

“Those are for artificially raising magical density, to use high-end rituals in areas of low-end magic,” Jason said. “Carlos used them with that soul projection ritual.”

“What would they need those for?” Belinda asked. “They’re the ones who raised the magic density here.”

“I’m not sure they intended to,” Clive said, not looking up. “I think the damage to the dimensional membrane was unintentional.”

“There’s a whole bunch of them in here,” Belinda said, pulling out two more crates. “They must be intending to do some heavy rituals.”

“They look high end,” Clive said, despite not appearing to look up. “Good mana lamps are expensive, so we should take them.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Belinda said, putting one of the crates in her dimensional space. Humphrey did the same and Jason took the last one for his own inventory.

“It looks like you were right about the potential for sabotage, Jason,” Clive said, but he didn’t sound happy.

“You seem grouchy that I got it right,” Jason.

“It’s not that,” Clive said, still frowning at the book in his hand. “Something about this is niggling at me and I can’t figure out what.”

“Well, the notebook looks new,” Jason said. “The Builder might have even knocked it out himself. He seems like the one who knows how this place works, after all. I have to imagine he has a somewhat alien mind, which might be coming across in the way he organised the book.”

“Huh,” Clive said, turning the book over in his hands. “It does look like it was freshly made. He might have been the one to make it.”

He opened the book again and started rapidly skimming. “Oh, you sneaky... yes, the Builder wrote this. It’s a trap.”

“A trap?” Jason asked.

“The way this is written,” Clive said. “The sabotage you mentioned. It’s hidden, but only just enough that someone with a reasonable amount of magical knowledge could tease it out. It’s bait. The Builder wrote this specifically for Jason and his level of

knowledge. The sabotage seems like it would work, but I think it would just put on bit of a magic reaction that didn't really do anything."

"Why?" Humphrey asked.

"Because the 'sabotage,' would need to be done at every tower," Clive said.

"I see," Humphrey said. "The Builder's reinforcements aren't coming here. He's probably split them and sent them to the closest towers to ambush us."

"But why set a trap for Jason?" Neil asked. "Didn't he know Clive would figure it out?"

"No," Jason said. "The builder is an existence on a scale we can even comprehend. An entity like that doesn't learn about a mortal until it has to. Unless you give it a reason, the rest of you are just the Rejector's team. That why I went blabbering into that spyder thing yesterday."

"What do you mean?" Sophie asked.

"I can't stop the Builder and save the day," Jason said. "I don't have the skills or the knowledge. Clive is the hero of this story. He's our secret weapon. The Builder is focused on me because I'm the one that defied him, so my job is to keep that focus and keep our secret weapon secret."

"I'm the hero?" Clive asked. "I don't feel like the hero."

"See? You're getting it already," Jason said. "Claiming that you're not the hero is classic hero behaviour. You could stand to get that voice a bit more gravelly, though."

"You don't really think you can provoke the Builder with a few taunts, do you?" Neil asked Jason. "The Builder isn't some crime boss or pervy bureaucrat you can aggravate with your regular nonsense."

"Of course not. It doesn't matter what he thinks about me, just that it's me he's thinking about. I'm the guy that defied the will of the great Builder. We need him to keep thinking of the rest of you as the silhouettes in the background, because that's how you're going to beat him."

"Speaking of which," Humphrey said. "The sabotage is a trap, but is there anything in that book that will help up stop the Builder, or is that whole thing a lie."

"The book seems authentic," Clive said. "It pretty much has to be or it would be too easy to give the game away. It's just organised in such a fashion as to subtly lead people below a certain knowledge threshold to a specific conclusion."

"I got suckered, you mean," Jason said.

"Describe it how you like," Clive said, "but yes. I'll need more time with this book if I'm going to find something useful."

Chapter 254

Good News, Bad News

“This whole system originally belonged to the Builder,” Clive said. “There’s a good chance he has at least some sense of what is happening with it. Probably only to a limited degree, though. Otherwise he wouldn’t need to send out teams to activate these towers.”

“Meaning we should set off the phoney sabotage,” Jason said.

“Exactly meaning that,” Clive said. “If the Builder thinks we’re going for it, he’ll concentrate his forces everywhere except here because he thinks we’re going for another tower.”

“If we do that,” Humphrey said, “will it prevent your ability to figure out what’s going on?”

“No,” Clive said. “The sabotage is designed to pulse out some impressive but harmless waves of magic, after which this tower will go dark long enough for us to move on. It will restart itself in fairly short order.”

“Are you sure this sabotage thing isn’t a trap?” Jason asked. “It won’t just blow the top off the tower, will it?”

“Probably not,” Clive said.

“Probably?”

“The rest of us won’t be up here when you set it off, just in case,” Clive said. “I’m sure it’s fine, though.”

“Why am I the one doing it?” Jason asked.

“Uh... authenticity?” Clive suggested. “It’ll be a more accurate representation of someone of your skill level making the mistake.”

“Are you saying I’m so crap that you can’t even fake being this bad?” Jason asked.

“No,” Clive said. “I’m just handing you the notebook...”

He passed it back to Jason.

“...and leaving diplomatically.”

Neil let out a loud laugh, slapping Jason on the back as he followed Clive in the direction of the stairs.

“Clive’s judgement is pretty good with the magic stuff,” Belinda said, leaving with the rest of the team. Sophie flashed him an apologetic smile as she walked away with the others.

“I’m definitely sleeping with his hypothetical wife again,” Jason muttered to himself. He opened the notebook and made his way to the plinth on the centre of the tower. It was

covered in glowing runes, like the mirage chamber control panel belonging the Humphrey's family.

He took his time, taking his own notes while he prepared to follow what he had originally assessed to be a sabotage method. Now that he knew better, he started to notice the ways the notebook was directing him, along with the flaws in his original understanding.

With the fake sequence recorded in his own notebook he started touching his fingers lightly to the sigils. Their glowing lights brightened and dimmed, sometimes changing colours. Slowly but surely, the runes started going out and not coming back on.

As the final one faded out, he was unsure if he had done it right for a moment as there was no reaction. Then his magical senses picked it up something from the tower below him. It was a slow growth of power, building and gathering into a much more powerful force. Just as it seemed ready to burst, it violently unravelled, lashing at his magical senses as he felt an impressive destructive chain reaction being released.

The magic collapsed in a way that felt like a permanent end to whatever functionality it once possessed. Even knowing that it was only a wave of magic projecting a false magical impression, it was so jarringly effective that he began to have doubts.

None of it was harmful but Jason's whole body tingled from the electric sensation. He was still recovering when the team returned.

"That felt incredibly real," Neil said. "If I didn't know better, I'd have sworn the magic in this tower had just been ruined."

"We should go," Humphrey said. "We'll find somewhere to hole up nearby so Clive can examine the towers at need, but we'd best not be here if the Builder sends more people."

"That's fine," Clive said. "I'd like to take some more time with the notebook. It's far from a complete breakdown of the tower's magic but it falls right into line with what we've seen of the Builder's astral magic. That's why I'm hoping the books Knowledge gave Jason will help fill in the gaps now we have a starting point."

"We don't have time for a research project, Clive," Humphrey said. "We have hours before the Builder knows we aren't following the plan, not days. Every moment we lose is stealing away our initiative."

"Do you seriously expect me to figure out how ancient magic from outside our universe works and how to use it to stop the machinations of a great astral being, all in a matter of hours?"

"Are you saying you can't do it?" Humphrey asked.

“No,” Clive said. “I’m just making sure that you’re suitably impressed when I accomplish the absurd task you’ve set before me.”

“I think he’s let that hero thing go to his head,” Neil said.

While Clive pored over books from Jason’s inventory and the notebook they took from the cultists, Sophie and Jason scouted the area. Shade did the same, as did Stash, in the forms of various lizards and jungle birds. They were looking for any trace of cultists or the Builder’s spyders.

Clive eventually pulled Jason off scout duty, roping him and Belinda into a renewed investigation into the towers, as they were the ones with enough knowledge to be useful. Clive was inside the tower with the world engineer while Belinda was on top, keeping a close eye on the portal gate. Through Jason’s voice chat, Clive directed him to use the control plinth on the new offshore tower.

“Alright, Lindy,” Clive said after several hours work. “Watch out, because this should get a reaction. You might want to back off a few steps. Jason, you can start the next sequence.”

Jason waited for Belinda to back off, then started working the controls in the sequence Clive fed him. It was lengthy but eventually they got a result. For the first time since falling dormant after their arrival, the portal arch filled with dark energy. It lit up with stars like Jason’s cloak, which grew brighter and brighter before erupting out of the portal with a sizzling sound. Belinda was already well clear, but took a few extra steps back anyway. After the brief, pyrotechnic burst, the portal settled back down and was once again filled with only the darkness.

“Did we open the portal?” Belinda asked, looking at it. “Can we go home, maybe get some reinforcements?”

“It looks like a normal open portal?” Clive asked, still inside the tower.

“Just like Jason’s portal ability,” Belinda said. “Although his doesn’t shoot of a bunch of sparks first.”

“Under no circumstances should you attempt to go through,” Clive said. “We didn’t open a portal. This is a test to see if I could get the arch to interact with the dimensional membrane. If you tried going through it, you wouldn’t teleport anywhere. It would look like you disappeared because what little of your body that made it through would be in pieces too small to see with the naked eye.”

After a number of similar tests, they retreated to a nearby hiding spot. The team remained vigilant of their surroundings as Clive was absorbed in the huge number of notes

he had written, muttering to himself. His notes were scattered amongst Jason's books, sitting open and the cultist's notebook, which he had taken apart, page by page. The whole mess was a riot of magical diagrams and multi-lingual texts that only Clive himself was able to discern any kind of order in.

Clive stood up and paced around, then abruptly stopped, turning to stare at the mess he had made with a gaze that could have bored into the brick floor. His hands were behind his head, fingers interlocked as his brain turned over.

"It doesn't make sense," he said to himself. "It doesn't fit. Why doesn't it fit?"

"What doesn't fit?" Belinda asked. Her time as Clive's assistant had given her a decent sense of how to be a good sounding board for him.

"The portal gates," Clive said. "the gates are integrated into the whole system, but instead of serving the dormant world engineers, its like they're feeding on them."

"How so?" she asked.

"Alright," he said. "So, the portal arches are, at their core, a very escalated version of Jason's essence power. Using an essence power as a model for other kinds of magic is a common practise, given that essence abilities represent the most stable forms of magic. To operate these portals, they were tapping into the world engineers. Even dormant they were an incredible source of magic. Drawing that power from the golems was only ever going to make it harder to awaken them. There may even be some damage to them after using them like this for centuries. Why would the Builder create such a terrible, ill-fitted system? It's throwing off my whole understanding of how it all works together."

"That's easy," Belinda said. "The Builder didn't do it. The Order of the Reaper did. What do they care about the integrity of the Builder's constructs?"

Clive slapped his hands over his face, letting out a groan.

"I'm an idiot," he berated himself. "How could I overlook something that obvious?"

"You understand it now?" Jason asked.

"More than that," Clive said, flashing the kind of wild, predatory grin the team would expect from Jason. "I might have just had an idea that solves all our problems."

"All of them?" Jason asked.

"All of them," Clive confirmed. "Oh, gods, as soon as you look at it from the perspective of two groups working at odds, everything falls into place."

"Care to share your revelation?" Humphrey asked.

"On the way," Clive said. "We have to run more tests."

"Zato?"

“Yes, Lord Builder?”

“I’ve ordered the enhanced teams back here to the central tower. The rejector isn’t going to the other towers.”

“You said the sabotage was triggered on one of the towers,” Zato said.

“A stalling tactic,” the Builder said. “It is long past time they should have arrived at another tower, and now the tower they supposedly sabotaged is being used again. They are experimenting, but not getting far. All they’ve managed is to open a false portal that would have killed them if they stepped through.”

“We can only hope,” Zato said. “Should we send people after them?”

“No,” the Builder said. “They are going to come here.”

“Against the bulk of our forces and our defensive position? That would be foolish.”

“Yes” the Builder said. “The one thing Asano can be relied upon to do is the last thing he should. He thrives on the unanticipated surprise of the foolish move.”

“What does he hope to accomplish?”

“Presumably to destroy the central tower,” the Builder said. “It seems he has seen through the false sabotage, but there is no way he could comprehend the mechanisms for awakening the world engineers, even if he found them and determined that was the goal. I’ve seen inside his mind and know his level of understanding. It would not be enough to build a knowledge base that could decipher the functions of this place. He will likely conclude that if he can destroy the tower, he can bring it all to an end.”

“Can he?” Zato asked.

“No. The magic flowing through the tower would prevent even me from affecting it further without all but eradicating this vessel on the spot.”

“So we just wait for the rejector to come to us?”

“Yes. It is time to put an end to the mortal who thinks he can pit himself against a being beyond his meagre comprehension. He shall learn the price of challenging true power.”

Clive was sat, cross-legged on Onslow, who was floating back towards the towers. Belinda had used her ability to conjure simple objects to make him a small knee bench, which he was using to scribble down new sequences to test out on the towers. As he did, he was explaining what he had learned from the team.

“There’s a lot of good news,” Clive said. “Some bad too, but we’ll get to that. The first piece of good news is that these towers are all integrated into a single, linked system. There’s enough here in these notes provided by the builder that I can more or less

determine what they do and – this is the important thing – how. I cannot overstate the value of those books of Jason's. They have dimensional transgression theory that makes our most sophisticated astral magic look like cave drawings.”

“And what do these towers do?” Humphrey said. “We were already assuming that the point is to wake up the giant golems.”

“That's only part of it,” Clive said. Despite holding a conversation, he never looked up from the notes he continued to rapidly scrawl. “Do you all remember that this astral space is artificially attached to our world?”

“Sure,” Neil said.

“Well, I don't think it was just the connection to our world,” Clive said. “I think this entire astral space is artificial. It's a giant boarding vessel. Instead of delivering people onto ships, it delivers the Builder's most powerful weapons onto worlds. He loads it up with these world engineer things, clamps it onto the side of a world and then sends them in. But something happened, here, to change all that.”

“I think a lot of things happened here,” Neil said.

“Somehow,” Clive continued, “this place was taken out of the Builder's hands and placed in the Order of the Reaper's. They repurposed it various ways, but only one is relevant to us now. They repurposed the interdimensional mechanisms designed to launch the world engineers into a transport system, using a portal power as a template.”

“How does that affect us now?” Humphrey said.

“For one thing,” Clive said, “it's the reason the Builder had to send out teams instead of just directing the whole thing to operate. His teams are bypassing the Order of the Reaper's alteration to restore the original functionality of the towers and the Builder's ability to control the towers remotely.”

Clive was still scribbling away madly, even as his explanation became more excited.

“So that bought us the time try something,” Sophie said. “But now what do we try?”

“We reconfigure the whole system the Builder is activating,” Clive said. “Instead of moving it away from the order's modifications, we amplify it with the power coursing out from the central tower. I mentioned before that the Order's changes were potentially damaging to the golems? This process will be worse for them than ever, as in piles of scrap. It will also burn out the ability of the original system to send them to our world.”

“Which shuts down the Builder's plans entirely,” Humphrey said. “I like it.”

“You'll like this more,” Clive said. “All that power won't be going into the world engineers, but coming out of them. It will go back to what the Order of the Reaper had it doing, which was to power what the portal was for in the first place.”

“You mean...?” Neil asked, almost superstitious in voicing hope.

“I mean opening a portal home,” Clive said. “That much power should blast right through the interference caused by the damage to the dimensional membrane.”

“So, we shut down the golems, foiling the Builder and open a path home, all at the same time?” Belinda asked.

“I told you,” Clive said. “A solution to all our problems. There is a catch, however.”

“Which is?” Humphrey asked.

“The actual reconfiguring is actually quite simple,” Clive said. “As Jason noted, something operating on this scale has many potential failure points. It took weeks to configure the portal correctly and get us into the astral space. I brought enough materials to do something similar, if required, to get us back out. The damaged dimensional membrane rendered that moot, but I can use those materials to construct a fairly simple device to recalibrate the whole system in the way we need. I just need to use the towers here to calibrate the device itself.”

“That sounds good so far,” Humphrey said.

“The trick,” Clive said, “is that we have to take the device to the central tower to make it work. I’m pretty sure we’ll need to get it inside the tower, then run it up from the bottom to the top. We need to carry the device up through the interior of the building.”

“You mean actually, physically carry it? Jason asked.”

“Yes.”

“That’s it?” Jason asked. “Bottom to top? No rituals, no messing with the tower.”

“That’s the beauty of it,” Clive said. “The Builder has already done all the work. All we have to do is flip the process on its head, so instead of moving away from the order’s alterations, the system pushes back into them.”

“Great,” Sophie said. “All we have to deal with is a silver-ranker, the Builder itself and an army of constructs, cultists and weird messed-up people that won’t die.”

“I did say there would be bad news,” Clive said.

“How confident are you in this?” Humphrey asked Clive.

“I’m working from unreliable notebooks, magical theory I barely understand and crazy world-invading devices operating on a larger scale than any magic I’ve ever seen,” Clive said. “But it’s this or we sit back and watch the Builder do whatever he likes.”

“That’s pretty good, under the circumstances,” Jason said.

Humphrey nodded.

“You’ve done better than anyone could have asked,” he told Clive.

“Didn’t stop you from asking, though, did it?”

“That leaves the rest of us to come up with a plan on how to overcome impossible odds, where the enemy has the strength, the numbers, the defensive position and probably knows we’re coming, if not why.”

“I always figured that we would need to take the fight to them, sooner or later,” Jason said. “I’ve been thinking about how to do that for a while and I do have one idea.”

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“Well,” Jason said, “it’s audacious, crazy and something I learned from a video game, so very much me.”

“What’s a video game?” Neil asked.

“Never mind that,” Humphrey said. “What’s the idea?”

“We run a train on the Builder,” Jason said.

Chapter 255

Here We Are

“This a bad plan,” Sophie yelled at Jason as they ran side by side. He was pouring on every bit of speed he could muster, while she was running backwards and still had to ameliorate her speed to match his.

“This is a fantastic plan,” he yelled back.

The were moving down a wide boulevard, chosen for being one of the more open and least overgrown. It was still more jungle floor than flagstone road, but they had become expert at navigating the terrain of the astral space and it didn't slow them down.

Behind them, the sound of the stampeding monsters pursuing them was like an endless rumble of thunder as heavy feet and other appendages pounded into the ground.

“Back in my world, people do a thing like this for fun.”

“For fun? I everyone in your world as crazy as you?”

“Of course not. I'm special.”

Periodically, the monsters would make ranged attacks against the fleeing adventurers, from magic blasts to needle spines the size of a forearm. Sophie was keeping an eye out for such attacks and would blast them all away.

Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 6 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (91%).

- Effect (iron): Effect (Iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.

- Effect (bronze): Can affect magical projectiles and some magical area effects.

“Was I even necessary for this?” Jason asked.

“Of course you were,” Sophie said. “You're the only one who could annoy this many things enough to chase us this hard.”

Humphrey, Clive and Neil were hidden atop one of the buildings closest to the crater from which the central tower had arisen. The tower itself was in the deepest part of the

crater, yet still towered over every other edifice in the city. Laying flat on the rooftop, they watched the enemy encampment set up around the tower through magnification crystals.

The camp occupied the entirety of the crater. Walls had been raised up all around the crater's lip, some five metres high. The only glimpses they got of the inside was when the heavy stone gates were swung open to admit returning teams of cultists, constructs and converted.

The walls were the result of earth-shaping powers. These were crude affairs created by the cultists rather than the formidable walls the Builder had created around their previous fort. These fared poorly by comparison but were still five metres high and two thick. Anything less would have trouble holding up against silver-rank monsters.

The cultists had completely decamped from their original fort, to the dismay of the team. The fort would have been much harder to attack, but the objective was the tower, not the cultists around it. If the cultists had still occupied their original encampment, the team wouldn't need to deal with them.

Through their magnification crystals they had managed to get some sense of the interior, having set themselves up for the best view through one of the gates. The slope of the crater had been earth-shaped into a series of flat tiers, like exceptionally wide stairs. The cultists were set up on those tiers, leading down to the tower itself.

The tower was thrumming with magical energy, to the point of overpowering any magical senses. Even as far back as the building they were hiding on, their magical senses were washed out with the raw potency of it. It didn't present any danger, but even at range it was headache-inducing. They suspected that up close it would be hard to tolerate at all.

Periodically, groups of cultists would return to the camp, having made their way back to the city from the external towers. None of them were leaving, suggesting that the Builder was consolidating his forces.

"There she is," Humphrey said as another such group appeared. They were the usual mix of a couple of cultists, a few constructs and a contingent of the automaton-like converted. One of the gates in the wall opened to admit them, but only the observing team noticed one of the converted peel off to hug the exterior of the wall, beside the heavy stone gate.

"I still say this is a bad idea," Clive said. "She's so exposed. What if the Builder or the silver-ranker senses her through her shape-changing powers."

“We’re all taking risks,” Humphrey said. “She knows the dangers and she chose to go anyway. If we can lead the monsters into the camp instead of just around it, we have a much better chance of infiltrating the tower in the chaos.”

Hugging the wall of the cultist camp, the shape-changed Belinda took a steeling breath.

“How are those monsters coming along?” she asked through voice chat.

“Getting close,” Sophie’s voice came back. “You should start hearing them any moment.”

“I’ll get started then,” Belinda said, moving to the front of the gate and pulling a stick of chalk from her storage space.

“You can do this,” she assured herself as she started drawing out a ritual on the large stone door. “You definitely won’t be caught and flayed alive by an evil god-thing.”

She continued drawing, willing the gate not to open.

In the camp, Zato shook his head. The tower had increasingly been building up magical energy, to the point that was now bombarding the senses of everyone around it. The constructs and the blank-faced converted were not visibly affected, but his cultists were growing increasingly aggravated.

His cultists were being driven to the edge by the sensory bombardment. They were snapping at each other and he had already needed to intervene after a fight broke out. He couldn’t care less what they did to one another but it demonstrated an unacceptable lack of discipline. He refused to let them make him look bad in front of the Builder.

He tilted his head, listening as he heard what sounded like thunder. He looked up at the sky, the vibrant blue as empty of clouds as ever. The sound continued, even getting louder. The rest of the camp didn’t share his silver-rank perception and hadn’t heard anything yet, so no one around him was reacting.

He got up from his chair and quickly made his way up the tiers of the crater to the walls. There were stairs periodically placed around the insides and he took them two at a time to quickly reach the top.

He looked out at the surrounding area. The crater had been located at the centre of a huge square, surrounded by buildings damaged by the explosive detonation of the Order of the Reaper’s tower. Between the walls of the camp and those buildings was completely open space. He crested the wall just in time to see monsters start pouring out from between a pair of the buildings and into that open space. It was one of the gathered herds

of intermingled monsters that had been forming in the city, now running toward the camp in a frenzy

“What the...?”

He spotted two figures running ahead of the frenzied tide of monsters. His eyes easily made out the shadowy cloak drifting behind one of them as they ran.

“Rejector,” he muttered. He was about to shout the alarm when someone teleported right in front him. It was a large man with a large sword, stylised in the shape of a dragon wing. He took advantage of Zato’s startled pause, breathing fire over the cultists.

Humphrey spotted the man move onto the walls just as Jason and Sophie led the monsters into the square. Seconds mattered, so he made a snap decision, conjuring his sword and teleporting right in front of the man. Humphrey’s senses told him that this was the other silver-ranker but Humphrey didn’t hesitate. Immediately breathing fire, he unleashed his Unstoppable Force attack and sent the man tumbling backwards and over the edge of the wall.

Zato crashing to the ground was alarming, but no so much as it would be should he have actually called out the alarm. It gave the monsters precious time to chase Jason and Sophie closer to the gate, which meant less time for the camp to ready itself.

With Jason and Sophie on the approach and Humphrey already in the fray, Clive knew it was time to act. He called out Onslow, picked up the puppy Stash and climbed onto the familiar’s shell, Neil climbing up with him. The rune tortoise floated off the rooftop, drifting to the ground on a cushion of air. At ground level, Onslow’s speed picked up as he hovered over the ground, moving towards the camp with increasing haste.

The people in the camp barely had time to register the thundering sound of the monster herd before Belinda completed her ritual and the gate exploded inward. With the horde of monsters descending on her she used one of her abilities to join Clive and Neil atop Onslow’s shell.

Ability: [Bait and Switch] (Trap)

- Special Ability (dimension, illusion).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 1 (87%).

- **Effect (iron):** Effect (Iron): Teleport self or nearby ally to a nearby location. The subject is rendered invisible for a brief period, leaving behind a lifelike illusion. The illusion has no substance or aura.
 - **Effect (bronze):** Illusion explodes when approached by an enemy, inflicting disruptive-force damage.
-

“This is quite roomy,” she said as she appeared on Onslow, with Stash immediately hopping into her lap. Her own familiars she didn’t call out yet.

“He’s a good boy,” Clive said, giving Onslow an affectionate pat.

Even as fragment of the shattered gate were still falling to the ground, Jason and Sophie dashed through the gap with monsters on their heels. There was a blast as one of the monsters lunged at the illusion Belinda left behind. The rest of the monsters ignored it, continuing to chase Jason and Sophie unabated. Once through the gate, Jason and Sophie split left and right, but the camp contained more than enough to keep the monsters occupied.

The changes in magic to the astral space had given the monsters an affinity for one another, but a wild aggression toward anything not monstrous. It was akin to the berserk fury that overtook monsters at the end of their life cycle, but the monsters in the astral space were being affected far too early. As they poured into the camp, they found themselves with a cornucopia of things on which to unleash their unquenchable rage.

Zato got to his feet, ignoring the fact that he was on fire. Thadwick and Dougall had their essence powers consumed to prepare them to contain a sliver of the Builder’s power. Zato’s essence powers had likewise consumed as fuel for the Builders power, but in a fundamentally different way. Instead of a vessel, Zato had been transformed into a weapon.

Humphrey’s flames burned at Zato’s clothes and skin but he paid it no attention. Where his skin burned away, it uncovered a second skin of gleaming metal beneath. His hair burned away and the front of his eyes was seared away, revealing the crystal orbs that were his true eyes. He panned them around the camp, taking stock of the situation.

As he had been tossed to the ground, the gates had been blasted open and monsters had come spilling into the camp. They poured down the tiered steps of the encampment, attacking anything that moved and destroying anything that didn’t. Tents were torn up and the converted and constructs were triggered into action as they were attacked.

One of the monsters came Zato's way, leaping through the air at him. He grabbed it by the face, plucking it out of the air. He clapped down with his other hand, crushing its head and he dropped the corpse to the ground.

He looked down at his chest, the skin all burned away. There was a good-sized dent left behind from the blow that had sent him tumbling from the wall. He was surprised that the big bronze-ranker with big sword had been able to damage him that much. The metal rippled like water and the dent was smoothed out. He looked up at the spot on the wall he had been knocked down from, but couldn't spot the man who had sent him tumbling.

Humphrey hadn't been foolish enough to wait around for a silver-ranker to recover and had called up his dragon wings. He flew over the monsters still streaming into the camp and towards Onslow to rejoin the group. He was joined by Sophie who had run up the inside of the wall and leapt off, regrouping with the others.

"I'll get to one of the other gates and let you in," Jason told them through voice chat. "Make your way to the first gate to the left of where the monsters are coming in."

He started making his way through the camp, which had become a wild melee. Monsters clashed with the constructs and the converted. Some cultists were trying to organise their unthinking minions into some kind of order, while others scrambled in a futile attempt to find safety as monsters continued pouring in.

Jason noted that the converted and the constructs had both picked up new abilities. Some looked like those they had encountered before, but they were now able to separate into wholly separate segments, able to operate independently. The smaller constructs were better equipped to chase down smaller and faster enemies.

The constructs were dividing into two types. The majority were the original constructs, modified to separate. Once divided, their components parts were rather bizarre in form, having not been originally intended for the purpose. The newer constructs were purpose built, and while they were less physically sturdy than the originals, their divided parts were faster and more dangerous.

The converted had acquired grotesque new powers of their own. Some were fighting with huge, retractable blades coming out of their arms. Others were segmenting their limbs, which remained connected with wires and gave them a strange, flailing attacks.

Shade's bodies moved through the mess. It gave Jason pathways to shadow jump in the direction of the gate, although he did not go unmolested. He had to stop and deal with a persistent pair of monsters and then one of the converted. He quickly unleashed a storm of afflictions that rotted the flesh off its bones, but it kept fighting, even when it was little

more than a skeleton draped in scraps of black flesh. Jason's used his execute ability to finished the job.

Before he reached the gate he also took the time to dispose of a cultist that looked to be doing a decent job of directing the constructs. Jason wanted as much discord as possible to cover the team's activities, so he dealt with the industrious cultist before she could start getting things in order.

Finally reaching the gate, he found it unattended in the chaos. There was no mechanism, just a heavy bar, but his bronze-rank strength was enough to remove it and pull open one of the heavy stone doors.

"About time," Neil said as Jason found the team waiting outside. "You've obviously been lazing about in there."

"We need to get in that tower as quickly and quietly as we can," Humphrey said. "Put Onslow away, Clive. He stands out a bit much."

Onslow let out a sad squeaking noise that was oddly-high pitched for a creature so large, but dissolved into blue sparks that flew towards Clive, sinking through his clothes to take the form of a tattoo.

The team started making their way through the mess of combat, fighting their way through as a unit. They were slowly carving a path down the steps of the sloped encampment toward the tower when the Builder descended from the sky, although he did not land close to the team.

The Builder either didn't have a slow falling power or just didn't care, crashing into the ground like a boulder. The monster that had been between him and the ground was killed instantly. It looked as if the Builder had simply leapt from the tower's upper reaches.

As it stepped off the carcass, the Builder blasted out an aura. It was at the very peak of silver rank, powerful and terrible, like the weight of a building pressing down. Jason's aura had an echo of transcendence that only someone skilled and sensitive would recognise. The Builder's aura was thick with it and the effect was oppressive to the point of feeling like being at the bottom of the ocean.

The team, like all the monsters around them, had their auras suppressed, leaving them feeling vulnerable and exposed. Only Jason's held firm and the Builder turned its head on a swivel and the pair locked eyes.

For a single moment, the camp went still as everything was suppressed by the Builder's aura, the strongest he could produce with his current vessel. The sound of battle faded as the Builder's minions fell still and the monsters were cowed. In the strange, eerie

silence, Jason and the Builder looked at one another. Jason started walking forward, past the stilled minions and fearful monsters, holding the Builder's gaze.

The Builder was not a rancher, farmer, or anyone else who worked with cattle or other livestock. If he had been, he might have had some idea what happens when a very large number of very scared animals are held together in an enclosed space. The fear-induced stillness of the monsters only lasted for a strangely silent moment before the spell was broken.

Panic took over and chaos exploded over the camp like a bomb as the monsters went wild and screams of terror rent the air. The monsters tried to stampede but they had packed themselves into the camp and the walls now boxed them in. That didn't stop their mad scramble to escape, the crush turning the camp into a furious meat grinder. Even the previous melee seemed like a quiet church service in comparison.

The converted and constructs were once again triggered into combat mode but the monsters didn't even fight back in their desperation to escape the terrifying presence of the Builder. They were more dangerous in their panicked crush than they had been in berserker rage.

The team's aura training had included having their auras suppressed, so they weren't debilitated, although it left them extremely uneasy as they once more started fighting their way towards the tower. Sophie made to go after Jason but was yanked back by Humphrey.

"He has his job," Humphrey yelled at her over the din, "and we have ours."

The eye of the storm was the empty space around the Builder, the place the monsters were pushing into one another to avoid. Jason stepped into that space, the two looking at each other in a calm bizarre amidst the fury going on around it.

"Here we are." Jason said. "I'm just telling you now, so you don't say you weren't warned: This time I brought pants."

Chapter 256

Outmatched

The walls of the encampment had become a prison to the monsters driven to panic by the Builder's aura. They were stampeding with nowhere to stampede to, a wild crush that was catching up the cultists and the construct and converted that served them. It was somewhere between a juice press and a meat grinder.

The air was filled with the sounds of combat and terror. The monsters let out a menagerie of shrieks, cries and roars. Cultists were yelling, trying to direct the constructs and converted. The automaton servitors made no sounds themselves, but the sounds of their destruction at the claws of frenzied monsters added to the storm of noise.

There was one space of eerie calm. No matter how scared or driven to madness they were, no monster would draw close the Builder. In the eye of the storm, Two figures stood still, staring each other down.

The Builder was wearing Thadwick's face. Instead of the snide, entitled expression, there was now an incredible presence animating what were actually quite handsome features. Instead of arrogance, there was a confidence that transcended the mortal shape it was inhabiting. That shape was still intact, the Builder's power not yet taxing it to the point of breaking down.

The Builder cut a heroic figure, facing off against Jason's sinister, shadowy appearance. Over flowing, black combat robes was his cloak of night, a veil of darkness and starlight with the promise of mystery and power.

"You have an inflated sense of your own importance," the Builder said.

It spoke softly, yet its words carried perfectly to Jason, even over the cacophonous din around them.

"Yep," Jason agreed. He also spoke softly, having no doubt the Builder could hear him as well.

"You think all this will let you stop me?" the Builder asked.

"It would be a lot of trouble to go to if I didn't," Jason said.

"I'm not going to kill you," the Builder said. "You have caused me trouble enough that I will make an example of you. The next person looking to cross me will think twice when they learned what happened to you."

"Really?" Jason asked, his voice this with derision. "You try and use my soul as a hand puppet and you want revenge because I didn't let you? For a great astral being, that's very human."

“Do not try and bring me down to your level.”

“You’re already here, mate, but that’s not on me. I’m just some random, low-ranked bloke trying to make his way in the world. Or worlds, plural, I guess. You saw some idiot sling a soul your way, tried to snatch it up and it didn’t work out. You could have left it at that but you just couldn’t let it go. You brought yourself down to my level and here we are. Well, slightly above my level. Frankly, you could do with a nerf, just for fairness. For all your vast, cosmic power, at the end of the day you’re a sentient being, just like the rest of us. I guess pride is a hard vice to shake, operating at your level.”

“Do you think I don’t see through what you are doing?” the Builder said.

“Engaging in classic hero-villain banter. I won’t lie; this is something of a dream come true for me.”

“Whatever your companions are doing, they will not succeed. Zato will stop them.”

“That’s funny,” Jason said. “I believe in my friends too. We have that in common.”

“I adjusted Zato’s body modifications personally,” the Builder said. “Even after the consumption of his essences, he is stronger than he ever was as a mere essence user.”

“The team knocked off a silver-rank essence user already. They can deal with your little hand puppet.”

“You killed Hendren through the escalating power of your flesh-rotting abilities. I reforged Zato in such a way that those powers cannot harm him. Even if you were with them to help, your powers would be futile. But you are not with them. I will capture you and he will capture them. I will claim their souls and they will be the ones to kill you, slowly and painfully. I will record it all, that every being that serves me will see for themselves the fate of the great Rejector. You will be a useful recruiting tool.”

“Yet, ironically, the one acting like a huge tool is you.”

“Name calling is the best response you can muster?”

“You’ve been inside my brain,” Jason said. “So you know that it pretty much is, yeah. I’m being facetious, though. In all honesty, that was some solid villain monologuing. You should look into getting a weather machine.”

“You still believe you can win,” the Builder said. “This is not a matter of win or lose. It is a matter of how long it takes for my intentions to be realised.”

“How about a compromise?” Jason asked. “We could give you something else instead of huge strips peeled off the side of reality. How do you feel about delicious sandwiches?”

“You are tiresome,” the Builder said. “It is time to end this.”

Jason felt magic surge in the ground beneath him. He vanished into his shadow as two slabs made of the ground beneath him rose up to snap together like a bear trap. All they caught was the body of Shade left behind, which was unharmed.

“Just a tip,” Jason called out from within the monster scrum. “You shouldn’t warn that people you’re about to make a sneak attack.”

The Builder gestured in the direction Jason’s voice had come and a wave of stone spike rose up from the Builder’s feet and crashed into the monsters. Jason, in the meantime, emerged from the other direction and lunged at the Builder. A wall rose up in his face, blocking him off, before exploded over him, thousands of razor fragments storming over him over him like a hurricane in a gravel quarry. His cloak danced to life, a forest of dark tendrils zipping out to intercept the projectiles. Most of the fragments blew past him, while the rest fell harmlessly at his feet.

Jason dashed into melee. As it turned out, great astral beings had little use for martial arts skills, and the one’s the Builder inherited from Thadwick were significantly sub-par. Jason’s dagger flashed rapidly, scoring quick marks on the Builder’s flesh.

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- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] and Mark of [Price of Absolution] on [Builder’s Vessel].
 - Transcendent power within [Builder’s Vessel] has negated these effects.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.
 - [Price of Absolution] does not take effect.
-

“That’s not good.”

The Builder grabbed Jason by the face. Gordon appeared with a surge of Jason’s aura and beams of blue and orange energy blasted from his four orbs. They focused on the Builder’s arm and the Builder let go of Jason, who vanished into his shadow again. A dozen spikes burst out of the ground and floated between the Builder and Gordon. The air around them started shimmering and the spikes launched out, tearing large rents in Gordon’s incorporeal body. Gordon dissolved into a nebula and shot away into the crowd of monsters, where Jason has escaped to. Jason reabsorbed his familiar back into his aura.

Each of the combatants were making unpleasant discoveries as they fought. Jason was the worst off, with the realisation that he had no means to effectively harm the Builder. Even his strongest trump card, Colin, would be of no use when afflictions couldn’t take hold. The best he could hope for was that his sword would be effective, which was a slim chance against the most powerful enemy he had ever faced.

The Builder was discovering the limits of its vessel. Vessels were meant to be generals, not soldiers, and channelling even moderate amounts of power through them accelerated their degradation. This vessel in particular was weaker than it would normally tolerate but this was a pursuit it would undertake personally.

Jason's words had found their mark when he said the Builder's pride as a great astral being had been pricked. Even with the considerable luck and circumstance that made it possible for Jason to win the battle for his soul, the fact remained that he had won. Given the disparity in their power, it was an intolerable record for a being of near infinite power.

If Asano died by any means but the Builder's own design, he would achieve a kind of immortality as the Builder remembered the mortal who bested it for all eternity. This was not an outcome the great astral being was willing to tolerate.

Unable to effectively fight, Jason was forced to flee. Unable to let him go, the Builder was forced to give chase.

When the camp had been plunged into chaos, the rest of Jason's team started fighting their way through the madness. Like an icebreaker ship they were a solid wedge, smashing a path through hostile and inhospitable territory.

After the Builder's attempt to pacify the situation with its aura backfired so wildly, it had withdrawn it. This allowed the team's own auras to recover but the damage was done as far as the monsters were concerned. The crush would not abate until they died or escaped the walls.

The team had to fight past monsters, constructs and converted as they slowly made their way down the tiered levels of the camp. They didn't bother finishing off anything tough enough to survive a handful of attacks. Stopping to secure kills would only slow them down and nothing was following them in the crazed, shoulder to shoulder press.

As they closed in on the tower they found the monsters were pushing away from it, clearing something of a space as they jammed into one another to get away. The magic throbbing from the tower carried a similar feel to the Builder and the monsters were terrified of it.

The team spotted a large archway leading inside and made straight for it. As they did, a silvery metallic figure with crystal eyes stepped out. It radiated a silver rank aura, but not that of an essence user. It was strange and alien, like that of the Builder itself.

"I am Zato," it called out loudly over the noise. "If you submit now, things will go better for you. Either way, your souls will belong to the Builder, but if you join us willingly, you will keep your own mind. It is better to be a willing servant than a mindless slave."

“As much as we’d love the chance to turn into a shiny doorknob like you,” Sophie said, “we’re kind of busy, so we’re going to start the fight, now.”

True to her word, Sophie lunged forward, Humphrey close behind. Belinda moved to protect the team from any stray monsters, Stash doing the same as he took the form of a marsh hydra. Clive called out Onslow to join them and Neil chanced pouring a salt circle to call up his golem. With the support of the familiars and the summon, Belinda formed a wall to cover the team’s backs while they faced the danger in front of them.

Months of constant fighting in the astral space was a whetstone that had honed the team to a razor sharp edge. They each knew what the others would do before they went to do it, turning them from a team with strong synergies into a singular whole, moving and acting as one.

They had experienced what amounted to three monster surges back to back, struggling to keep up as the monsters grew more and more powerful. It had brought their skill, power and experience to the point where they were literally transformed from the people they had been at the beginning.

The result of all that growth in their power, skill and teamwork was that they barely managed to avoid immediate death as Zato counter-attacked.

Zato was not an unthinking construct, despite surrendering his organic body for shining metal. Nor was he a monster driven by instinct. He immediately broke through Sophie and Humphrey, bowling them out of the way in spite of Humphrey’s strength. Zato knew that the backline members were the key to breaking apart the team and charged at Neil like a silver rocket.

The attack landed on Neil, who exploded in a wave of force, blasting Zato back. Belinda’s perfectly-timed Bait and Switch ability had teleported Neil to safety, leaving an illusionary trap for Zato.

Ability: [Bait and Switch] (Trap)

- Special ability (dimension, illusion).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (09%).

- Effect (iron): Teleport self or nearby ally to a nearby location. The subject is rendered invisible for a brief period, leaving behind a lifelike illusion. The illusion has no substance or aura.

- **Effect (bronze):** The illusion explodes when approached by an enemy, inflicting disruptive-force damage.
-

With Zato's first attack blunted, Sophie and Humphrey moved back in, while the others repositioned defensively. Zato was barely staggered by the explosion, suffering little worse than the arresting of his momentum. His metal body was resistant to the disruptive-force released by the ability, which was more effective against magical defences. It was resonating-force damage that would be most effective against Zato's metal form. Humphrey knew this and swung in with Shield Breaker, his resonating-force special attack.

Zato's body was incredibly resilient, even against Humphrey's special attacks. They were just threatening enough that Zato was forced to engage, rather than ignore him. Even with his dragon armour, Humphrey would not hold up to Zato's sustained attacks. While he lacked Sophie's evasiveness, he had his own means of adding to his defensiveness.

Humphrey's attacks were hard to avoid and Humphrey himself was hard to hit, as there seemed to be four of him attacking at once with his huge dragon wing sword. One of the illusionary doubles was from Humphrey's own ability, Attack of the Mirage Dragon, which created a double each time he attacked. It didn't inflict any damage, but Humphrey could switch-teleport with it, making his true attack unpredictable.

The other two illusionary forms came from Belinda's familiar, Gemini. The living illusion could duplicate Humphrey's appearance, including his own illusionary double.

Zato proved to have far more capability than merely the strength and fortitude that came with his metal body. His silvery body flowed like quicksilver, reshaping itself to produce a versatile slate of combat abilities.

In close, he could produce spear-like protrusions from anywhere on his body, making unexpected attacks from unexpected angles. He also grew extra limbs, which he transformed into blades. At range, he could project metal spikes, which he threw past Sophie and Humphrey to target Neil, whose healing and shields were making up the difference between Zato and Humphrey's combat abilities.

Sophie focused on intercepting the projectiles as Humphrey held up Zato's forward movement. Zato then revealed that the spikes were far from his only trick. By plunging his hands into the ground he could make spikes spring up at range, then explode them into splinters. That attack savaged Neil appearing within his mana shield and exploding to send shrapnel digging into his body. Sophie and Humphrey redoubled their efforts to hold Zato's attention while Neil tossed back a healing potion and followed up with a life bolt spell on himself.

The one key advantage the team had was a curse levied on Zato by Belinda. It took multiple attempts to latch on past silver-rank resistances, the cooldown not triggering until it finally landed.

Ability: [Power Lock] (Magic)

- Special ability (curse).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (47%).

- Effect (iron): When the target uses an ability, a random other ability also goes on cooldown, as if it had been used. If the target has no other abilities, the cooldown on the ability used is doubled or, if the ability has no cooldown, it becomes unavailable for a brief period.

- Effect (bronze): The ability placed on cooldown consumes mana as if it had been used. If the ability had no mana cost, the target suffers disruptive-force damage commensurate with the strength of the ability.

Belinda's curse meant that Zato had to constantly change up his powers while waiting for others to become available. Many of his best abilities were locked out before he even had a chance to use them and his combination attacks were neutered as key steps were denied to him. It was a frustrating and effective impediment that was crucial to the team's survival, as even impaired he was on the constant verge of overwhelming the team.

While he was stuck using them almost at random, Zato had no shortage of powers to go through. Most were either some variation on shape-changing or firing metal projectiles. As the fight dragged on he threw balls that exploded into shrapnel, turned his arms into razor whips and his fingers into knives.

Sophie desperately intercepted the storms of projectiles thrown in the direction of their healer. As quick as the mercury Zato's body resembled, her flickering figure was a steadfast barrier for Neil.

Many of the ranged attacks Zato threw out were wide-area shrapnel attacks, from which Sophie suffered a beating. Weak, multitudinous attacks were what more traditional defenders were best at, while Sophie specialised in dodging or negating powerful, singular attacks. The peppering of attacks was precisely what she was worst at handling, which Zato quickly picked up on.

He started throwing more and more shrapnel attacks at Neil, knowing that she would surrender her vaunted evasiveness to body-block the shrapnel. She was able to blast

many of the attacks away with her Wind Wave, but Zato was both sneaky and prolific with his attacks. Neil was hard pressed to maintain shields and healing on both Sophie and Humphrey, but he smoothly churned out spell after spell, power after power, all with impeccable timing.

Sophie's damage was too negligible to be a real threat to Zato, relegating her to the frustrating but critical role of meat shield. The one advantage of the constant attacks she was subjected to was that her powers grew stronger as she suffered attacks.

Her Karmic warrior power stacked up instances of two holy boons with every attack. One increased her power and spirit attributes, while the other reduced damage from subsequent attack by the same person. As with the fight with Nicolas Hendren, she was stacking up enough instances to have a real impact. On top of the damage reduction, the holy boons also combined with another of her powers.

Ability: [Strong Soul] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (57%).

- Effect (iron): Disruptive-force damage dealt to you is reduced by a large amount; other damage dealt to you is reduced by a small amount. Resistance to dimensional or astral effects and energies is increased. You can physically interact with incorporeal entities.

- Effect (bronze): Increased curse, magic and unholy resistance. You cannot receive unholy boons. Each instance of a holy boon on you increases the damage reduction of this ability.

With each attack she received, Sophie's defences grew. The Agent of Karma boon made her tougher as it increased her power attribute and strengthened her magical abilities by enhancing the spirit attribute. This affected both the damage reduction from the Good Karma boon and the damage reduction from the Strong Soul power.

The layering bonuses didn't change Sophie's role as a meat-shield for projectiles, but it made her better able to weather the storm. She was still hopelessly outmatched, however. Beyond the simple disparity of silver-rank versus bronze-rank powers and physical abilities, she had to deal with the resistances of rank disparity that Humphrey's Hero's Drive power allowed him to ignore.

Humphrey had received the Giant's Might boon from Neil, adding weight to his special attacks that were the only real source of threat to their opponent. Zato was still stronger and tougher by a good margin, more so than the silver-rank essence user they had fought. If not for his superior skill and the support of his team, Humphrey wouldn't have been able to force Zato's attention as much as he did. Zato would have already broken through and ravaged their backline.

As resilience accumulated, Sophie was growing frustrated at her inability to have a real impact on the fight. As her power grew stronger as she soaked up more and more attacks, frustration became impatience. She knew she was a more than match for Zato's skill, and tired of passively intercepting attacks she dashed in, determined to make an impact.

Using her Eternal Moment power to massively accelerate, she unleashed a barrage of attacks. Her passive damage powers included resonating-force damage, which had been amplified by the boosts to her spirit attribute. With her fleeting, time-stopped moment, she unleashed a furious flurry of strikes, all of which took effect as she returned to the normal passage of time.

Zato's whole body rippled at the accumulated impact. He immediately retaliated by growing a half-dozen extra arms that ended in hammers, rather than fists. They swung in on Sophie, who could have dodged but didn't. Instead, she used her Moment of Oneness power to absorb the blows and then deliver all the damage back with an elegant palm strike that punched a large indentation in his torso.

Despite having a huge dent into his chest, Sophie saw Zato's grin and realised she had made a mistake. After baiting out her power to absorb a strong attack, Zato used one of his trump cards and his whole body exploded into a huge mass of shrapnel.

Humphrey was the most physically resilient of the team, but he was also very close and very large, courtesy of Neil's spell. His armour softened the blow, but more than a few chunks of shrapnel pierced right through it.

Sophie had her accumulated damage resistance, which was the only reason she survived. She was quick enough to shield her head with her arms, which were flayed along with the entire front of her body. Her accumulated damage reduction and light armour weren't even close to absorbing that level of damage and her armour was shredded to ribbons, along with most of the skin on the front of her body.

Clive, Neil and Belinda didn't suffer the attack as the shrapnel stopped in the air, forming a perfect sphere, then reversed course. The metal shard flew back together to reform Zato's body. It wasn't just a matter of returning him to the state he had been in,

however. Zato was unmarred and unharmed, having repaired not just the damage from Sophie but all the damage Humphrey had managed to build up.

Humphrey was severely injured and Sophie was a bloody wreck, barely standing upright. Their enemy was completely refreshed, his silver skin perfect and unmarred. Every bit of the damage they had done had been undone in a moment.

“You really should have submitted,” Zato told them imperiously. “Now you are going to suffer.”

Chapter 257

The Power of Friendship

Once again, the team's pinpoint timing salvaged a very poor situation from what would otherwise have been a total disaster. Sophie used the last of her strength to throw out a bloody fist, barely able to lift an arm from which half the muscle had been shredded. As she did, Neil's Bolster ability landed, enhancing the power the punch carried.

Ability: [Deny the Reaper] (Balance)

- Special Attack (counter-execute, healing).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (16%).

- Effect (iron): Target enemy suffers a small amount of transcendent damage and you are healed for a small amount. As a counter-execute effect, the damage and healing scale exponentially with your own level of injury.

- Effect (bronze): Provides a heal-over-time effect. Healing scales exponentially with your own level of injury at the time the ability was used.

With Sophie's bedraggled state, plus the boosts to her spirit attribute and the enhancement from Neil's spell, it was by far and away the most potent use of a power she had ever executed. The healing it provided was near-miraculous, knitting together muscle and regrowing skin between one breath and the next. Even with perfect circumstances, though, it was not enough healing to fully restore her condition. The ongoing heal component of the ability started going to work, aided by a life bolt spell from Neil.

Sophie's fist was buried in his chest and she yanked it out with an unpleasant wet sound. Her hand glistened with liquid silver, mixed with a little blood, although that could easily have been hers. Her body began emitting an amber glow.

"Gift evolution!" Clive exulted through voice chat. "I'd put money down on it being a rank-jumping power."

-
- Celestine racial ability [Astral Affinity] has evolved to [Boundary Breaker].

Ability: [Boundary Breaker]

- Transfigured from [Celestine] ability [Astral Affinity].
- Increased resistance to dimension effects and astral forces. Dimension abilities have increased effect and transcendent damage is increased.
- Ignore the enhanced resistances derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced resistance from being higher rank, not other sources of resistance.
- Ignore the enhanced aura suppression and aura suppression resistance derived from rank disparity. This only affects the enhanced effects from being higher rank, not the inherently superior strength of higher-rank auras.

The rest of the team sent their congratulations, even as they kept fighting, but Sophie herself was conflicted. She had received what she needed most of all, but not from a triumph but a costly mistake.

“It’s not about the reward you earned,” Humphrey told her. “It’s about the lesson you learned.”

Much of the wisdom Humphrey had to offer were saying that had been drilled into him by his mother. This statement very much had the cadence of that, which mollified Sophie somewhat. She had come to respect Danielle a lot when Danielle helped her get a handle on some of her powers that were similar to Danielle’s own.

Humphrey found himself in an odd position in the wake of Zato’s explosive power, where he was both too damaged and not damaged enough. He needed healing to get back into a state ready to fight Zato, as a half-recovered state would quickly be punished. He did have his Immortality power but he was not so damaged that he wanted to use it. Even after her self heal, though, Neil was focusing his healing on Sophie. Humphrey knew it was the right choice, given that Sophie could inherently suffer fewer hits than he could himself.

He made a decision and pulled a potion vial from his belt and downed the contents. It was a silver-rank health tonic they had taken from Nicolas Hendren, the over-ranked potion giving Humphrey an overcharged burst of healing. The price was that the magic would linger, meaning that the fight would be done one way or another before he could use another potion. It was the best compromise he could think of, not fully healing him, but letting him recover enough to keep up the fight while keeping Immortality in his pocket.

As for Zato, he had suffered the first true blow of the fight that inflicted real, lasting damage. His last attack had completely healed him from the slow build-up of damage he had sustained from the team's earlier attacks. The transcendent damage from Sophie's counter-execute, though, went through him like his body was made of water. It didn't care about his rank or the metal that had replaced his flesh. Not even the power the Builder had gifted him with could withstand that power.

The odd pause following Sophie's strike was ended by Clive. He hadn't made a large impact on the fight, throwing out a few buff spells before drawing out ritual circles as fast as he could, which turned out to be pretty damn fast. He'd always been a strong ritualist, but months of throwing out combat rituals had honed his skills to a fine point. In this case, his circles empowered his weapons and reconfigured their damage from disruptive to resonating force. Having finished his preparations, the twin blast from his wand and staff was the starter's gun for the next phase of the fight.

Jason was playing mouse to the Builder's cat. The frenzy of stampeding monsters fighting with cultists and constructs made it hard for the Builder to easily sense him. The vessel's senses had been enhanced beyond what Thadwick had possessed but to an entity of the Builder's power, even diamond-rank senses would have felt like blindness.

A seemingly incongruous aspect of auras was that the more powerful they were, the harder they were to detect if their owner didn't want them to be. The feeble aura of an iron ranker was easy to pick out, while the potent aura of a gold-rank soul was easily hidden. The key was control, with a stronger soul able to exert more control over the strength radiating out of it. This was assuming that a person had an aura power, therefore meeting the minimum requirements to exert that control. As Farrah had once warned Jason, a powerful soul with no means to control it was unruly to the point of being dangerous.

Jason's expertise with aura control was quite possibly the area in which he excelled the most, which was combined with an aura strength realms beyond the ordinary. It was a strength born of his close call with the elemental tyrant, his meeting with the gods and, more than anything else, his soul battle the Builder itself. The result was an aura strength more akin to a silver-ranker than a bronze.

Jason's expert control and formidable aura power combined with the ability Gordon granted of making his soul even harder to detect. The result was that even the enhanced silver-rank senses the Builder's vessel produced had a hard time picking out Jason's presence.

Hidden amongst the teeming monsters, Jason was not just a mouse, but a mouse with an invisibility cloak in a pile of other mice. Unfortunately, the Builder was a cat with a flamethrower. It had begun the chase with little understanding of its vessel's limitations but it was a very quick study. It had gone from crude attacks to destructive waves of rippling earth spikes that maximised power and area with as little strain on the vessel as possible.

There was an inevitable cost to repeatedly channelling power, the strain on the vessel beginning to show as it grew increasingly pale. It was an acceptable rate of decay, given that the Builder's design was already in motion. So long as Asano and his companions were kept from interfering, the situation would resolve itself without further intervention from his vessel.

The Builder's powers all involved manipulating the physical material around it. Simply reshaping it had the least cost, thus the spike waves that were a simple reshaping on the stone underfoot. Imbuing materials with additional power, was more costly. This ranged from imbuing it with disruptive-force to harm incorporeal entities to animating the material, like a short-lived construct creature. The effect that levied the greatest cost to the builder's form was transmuting one material into another, such as stone into steel.

The Builder was sweeping whole swathes of the battlefield in spike waves, even as its senses probed for Jason. It didn't care what got in its way, be that monster, construct or converted. Even the Builder's own cultists were mowed down ruthlessly as wedge-shaped chunks were cut out of the stampeding crush with every wave of impaling spikes.

The Builder was single-minded and methodical in its pursuit of Jason, but Jason nonetheless took the effort to provoke it. Having one of Shade's bodies move close enough to speak through allowed him to constantly harass the great astral being.

"Do you have a name outside of just 'the Builder?' It doesn't come across as imposing as you seem to think. It just makes you sound like an intergalactic brickie. Actually, I take it back; that sounds kind of awesome. Invaders from beyond the stars is done to death. A guy from beyond the stars who knocks up an outdoor dunny while unrepentantly flashing bum crack? That's a fresh idea. You might want to write this down, mate. I'm giving you gold, here."

"I will be giving you unimaginable torment soon enough."

"Oh, nice. Solid villain line; good job on the banter. You've already tried shaving chunks of my soul off like lemon zest, though, so I'm pretty sure I can imagine it. Having my friends kill me though? That's a prick move. I'm pretty sure my friends are going to beat your friends, though."

"I am beyond your mortal imagining. I have no friends."

“Well that’s just sad. Not because of the loneliness thing, although that too. You just admitted defeat.”

“There is no defeat. My will is inexorable.”

“Mate, this is the climactic battle and I’m the only one rocking the power of friendship. You’ve got no chance. You better knock out a back-story flashback toot-sweet or it’ll be a total walkover.”

As demonstrated when it sent Nicolas Hendren after the team, the Builder had some ability to track Jason’s location through the bond to his familiar. For this reason it tolerated Shade’s presence without eradicating the familiar’s body. Jason knew this as well as the Builder, but kept Shade nearby anyway. While he knew there was no goading the Builder any more than he already had, he needed the Builder to have at least some idea of his location. It allowed him to lead the Builder and his destructive power away from the team.

Despite Sophie’s heavy blow on Zato and a timely gift evolution to give her a greater impact on the fight, it had not been the turnaround moment that the team needed. While her attacks were more effective, she still needed to spend most of her time dealing with the projectiles Zato continuously hurled at Neil. Her power upgrade meant that she was able to deal with the attacks without taking the same level of damage but it was still eating into time she would rather use to pile on damage.

Belinda assisted Sophie in this regard, splitting her attention between keeping monsters off their backline and playing meat shield for Neil against Zato projectile attacks. She had activated her warrior-form power, Counterfeit Combatant, and was sporting heavy armour and a large shield, along with a long-handled war hammer.

No matter how much damage they inflicted, Zato was the immovable object to their apparently stoppable force. Aside from the one gaping wound in his chest, which did not seem to impair his combat ability, even Humphrey’s powerful attacks achieved little more than superficial dents. The more they attacked, the more their enemy seemed dishearteningly indestructible.

Clive had entered the fray, blasting away with his ritual-enhanced weapons. While the results were visible, they were as minimal as everything else and Zato insultingly disregarded Clive’s threat, continuing to hammer of Humphrey and Sophie while trying to land a decisive strike on Neil.

The team was not without their own gains, with Neil’s perception power giving them a slight edge. Its ability to see vulnerabilities was something he normally used for assessing the team’s injuries, but it also spotted one of Zato’s few vulnerabilities.

“Parts of his body become fluid when he uses a shape changing power,” Neil alerted the others through voice chat. The ability to communicate without being overheard or needing to yell over other noises was a critical element of facilitating teamwork. “If you can time a disruptive-force attack instead of a resonating one in just the right moment, you’ll do some extra damage.”

In spite of the team refining their attacks, the power gap remained. Even with Sophie’s growing might, Zato was too strong, too tough and boasted too many forms of attack. Even with the team’s focus on keeping Neil safe, Zato’s attacks would still sometimes get through and land some damage on the healer.

The team retained more injuries as Zato’s damage started outpacing Neil’s healing. The team’s key cooldown powers were used at critical moments, not to swing the battle in their favour but to keep it from getting away from them entirely. Humphrey’s Immortality, Belinda’s full cooldown reset. Their last trump card was Neil’s Hero’s Moment power, but it would cripple whoever it was used on when the power ended. Until they would get within striking range of finishing the job, it was a power that was off-limits.

Despair started to set in as they looked down the barrel of what seemed like Zato’s inevitable victory. They could not deal enough damage, the gap normally filled by Jason, but it was clear his powers would not work against Zato’s silver body. In any case, Jason had his own overwhelming enemy to face.

“You really thought you could derail the Builder’s design?” Zato taunted. He sensed that victory was close and tried to push to his enemies’ morale to the breaking point. “We have been planning this longer than any of you have been alive. You thought to stop the efforts of years with your meagre abilities and pathetic ideals? You think that you possess the power to undo all that we have wrought? You won’t just fail here. You won’t die. Your souls will be taken. You will each become weapons against everything you love and all you sought to protect.”

Humphrey’s weariness and the seeming futility of his efforts had eaten away at his spirit. He rallied his determination but Zato’s words stirred up fear of become exactly what Zato said, a weapon against his own people. Exhausted, he watched, sword hanging limply from his hands as Zato and Sophie engaged in a wild struggle. As her power grew over time she had been taking on more of Humphrey’s frontline role. Humphrey told himself to move, to lift up his sword and keep going, but his arms wouldn’t move.

Just as he was on the verge of giving up, his mother, Danielle, appeared out of nowhere and slapped him hard across the face. He stumbled, startled as she glared at him in fury.

“What is your name?” she demanded, her voice hammering down with righteous anger.

He looked at her in confusion, then his eyes went wide. His shoulders firmed as he stood up straight, resolve returning to his posture. He had not recovered stamina or mana. He had not been healed. His Immortality was long gone, used and used again when Belinda reset it. He had received no fresh boons, gained no extra power. All that changed was his resolve.

Humphrey head swung on a pivot, from his mother to Zato, who ignored him while trying to overwhelm Sophie while Humphrey was flagging. Humphrey’s gaze locked onto the enemy as his mother turned back into Belinda and returned to where the familiars were holding the line against the monsters.

Humphrey hefted his dragon sword in one hand and hurled it, spinning end over to end to clang off Zato’s head before dissolving into nothing. The attack did not harm Zato but it got his attention and he wheeled on Humphrey.

Zato knew that his victory was imminent. He knew that the adventurers were no match for his power. They were a spent force; an arrow at the end of its flight. Their situation was hopeless, their defeat certain. But for a single, fleeting moment, passing as quickly as it came, something he saw in Humphrey’s eyes sent a chill to the very core of his soul.

“My name,” Humphrey announced, stepping forward one slow step at a time, “is Humphrey Francis Eugene Geller. My family have been adventurers for sixteen generations. We aren’t alchemists or weaponsmiths on the side. We aren’t ritualists or scholars. For hundreds of years we have done one thing, and one thing only: protect our world from people like you. You say that we aren’t ready? That we can’t match your years of preparation? We’ve been preparing for you for sixteen generations, and do you know what we’ve been building to for all that time?”

Humphrey raised his arm to point at Zato and a sword appeared in his hand. Not the heavy, powerful dragon sword, but the light razor wing sword, aimed right at his enemy.

“We’ve been building,” Humphrey said, “to me.”

Amber light flooded out of Humphrey as he stood, sword levelled at Zato. The team and Zato both stood stock-still.

“Gift evolution?” Neil wondered through the voice chat. “Humphrey had all his gift evolutions. Is it even possible for that to happen again?”

“No,” Clive said, his voice dazed as he looked on. “But I don’t think he cares.”

The amber light shining out of Humphrey turned blood crimson.

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- Human racial ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon] has evolved to [Hero's Sacrifice].
 - You have evolved an already evolved ability, breaching the limitations of your soul's potential. You will experience a brief surge of enhanced power, followed by a significant backlash.

Ability: [Hero's Sacrifice]

- Transfigured from evolved ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon].
 - Previous effects of racial ability [Attack of the Mirage Dragon] have been lost.
 - Sacrifice your health to enhance the power of your special attacks.
-

"I'll use Hero's Moment," Neil said through the voice chat. It allowed the team to communicate silently as no one moved in the strange stillness. Humphrey and Zato stood facing one another, eyes locked.

"If you're going to going to crap out soon anyway..." Neil said.

"No," Humphrey responded firmly. "Red tights."

"No!" Sophie exclaimed. "I can't just leave you here alone! You'll all be dead by the time..."

"It's the only way," Humphrey cut her off. "We'll hold until you get back."

"But..."

"RUN!" Humphrey roared out loud and the spell was broken. He and Zato lunged at each other, Zato sprouting four extra arms, each ending in razor-sharp axe blades. He lashed out with the full speed of his silver rank attributes and the enhanced strength of his metal body.

Humphrey's skill had been a match for Zato's the entire fight. Just as he had said, he was trained from birth for the life of an adventurer. Sixteen generations of knowledge and experience had been poured into him, the Geller family a foundry for the strongest steel. Martial techniques, combat philosophies and insights formed by centuries of adventurers, refined and distilled into the latest generation of a grand tradition.

From the beginning, Humphrey had been pitting his lesser strength against Zato's greater, caught up in the idea of needing as much power as he could muster. Once he accepted that he could never muster enough power, the tenor of their combat entirely transformed.

Six blades came at Humphrey. He parried four and dodged two with a grace that he had spent the whole fight surrendering in the name of strength. He didn't have Zato's speed but his technique and economy of motion more than compensated, his razor wing

sword moving in an elegant dance. Not only did he evade the attacks, but he immediately retaliated, raking his sword across Zato's body.

Blood seeped from Humphrey's eyes as he used his new Hero's Sacrifice gift, but for all Humphrey's grand declarations, Zato had not grown any weaker. Humphrey's sword was lighter and less powerful than his dragon sword, barely slicing a shallow line across his enemy.

"That's it?" Zato mocked. "All that big talk, light shining out like you're some mighty hero, and that's all you can muster? You'll have to do a lot better than that!"

"I'm working on it," Humphrey shot back, his sword continuing to snake over Zato.

Ability: [Relentless Assault] (Might)

- Special Attack (counter-execute, healing).
- Cost: Low stamina, increasing with each attack.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 2 (16%).

- Effect (iron): Each use of this attack in quick succession increases the damage of this attack. Damage is of the same type caused by a normal attack.

- Effect (bronze): After a threshold of successive attacks is reached, escalating resonating-force damage is dealt with each attack.

In the brief moment that Zato and Humphrey had been clashing, Sophie stood ready to run as Neil used his bolster spell on Belinda, enhancing her next power. Belinda then used her Mirror Magic ability to copy the spell, using the bolstered version of Neil's own Bolster spell back on him.

Neil was unable to use Bolster on himself, but Belinda's power to mimic spells not only let him do so, but made it doubly effective with the Bolster enhancing itself. He then used the double-strength Bolster to cast a massively empowered Hero's Moment spell, which he used not on Humphrey, but on Sophie. It was what she had been waiting for and she erupted away from the team, flooded with a terrifying power. She fled the site of the battle, vanishing into the ongoing monster brawl around them.

Humphrey continued to clash with Zato, lashing out again and again. Blood ran from his eyes, nose and ears as he chained his Relentless Assault attacks. He could taste the blood, copper in his mouth as he enhanced every attack with his new power. The escalating cost of the special attack increasingly sapped his stamina as Hero's Sacrifice sapped his health.

He ignored both as he continued his flowing stream of attacks, cutting away at Zato, not with a hammer but with a scalpel. Despite this, his attacks still had limited effect and would continue to do so until he reached his special attack's resonating-fierce threshold.

Despite Humphrey's skill, the damage was not a one-way street. His own attacks were hurting himself as much as they were Zato, yet he did not relent to use his new power. Zato was raining his own attacks down on Humphrey, who was coming off worse from the exchange. It was only a continuous stream of healing and shields from Neil that allowed him to struggle on.

Humphrey's fluid expertise and rapid strikes reached the resonating force threshold of his special attack in fairly short order. The harsh reality, though, was that even with his new ability and the surge of power that came from awakening it was simply not enough. Zato's body remained all but impervious, even as the special attack escalated to potent levels. Zato was taking dents, but nothing he couldn't shrug off.

Zato realised that he had been dragged into Humphrey's pace, suddenly remembering that he was the one with the power. He was the one with the advantage. Sophie was gone and Humphrey's attacks were all show, with no genuine threat behind them. With that realisation, Zato turned his attention once more to the healer. Once Neil was dealt with, the fight was as good as over.

Zato left Humphrey behind and dashed at Neil, only to be struck with a reality of his own; Humphrey was part of a team. Clive's Juxtaposition spell swapped Neil and Humphrey's positions, leaving Zato once again facing off against Humphrey, whose special attack sequence continued unabated.

While the team's big-ticket powers had been spent, they still had a variety of tricks up their sleeve that could buy them precious moments, whether for Humphrey's attack to grow stronger or for Sophie to come back.

Chapter 258

A War of Stolen Moments

Sophie was dashing through the camp like a spectre, swift, ghostly and untouchable. She ended up running along the inside of the wall and onto the top, sprinting along it to reach her maximum speed. With a double-enhanced Hero's Moment empowered every speed ability she had, even she felt like her breakneck speed was wild and precarious. She did not relent on the pace, whatever she felt, as speed was the only objective.

Ability: [Avatar of Speed] (Swift)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 3 (86%).

- Effect (iron): Your movement abilities have increased effect and reduced stamina and mana cost.

- Effect (bronze): Periodically gain instances of [Momentum] while moving at speed. The greater the speed, the faster instances are accrued.

With every moment, more and more stacks of Momentum were gathered. She kept moving, determined to drain every drop out of the Hero's Moment spell.

"How are you holding up?" she asked through voice chat.

"Quite well, thank... argh!" Jason's voice came through.

"Good to know, but I think she meant us," Clive said. "We're doing the flasher move you came up with."

"The what?" Jason asked.

"The guy with the red tights," Clive said.

"The Flash, not the flasher," Jason said. "Also, they're not tights."

"They sounded like tights, the way you described them," Neil chimed in.

"I think we're all a little busy for this conversation!" Belinda yelled.

Jason had given up taunting with Shade. The Builder had thinned out the monsters and even his own forces as he scoured the camp for Jason. It was becoming increasingly hard to both stay ahead of the Builder and clear of the team, with more than a couple of near misses as the Builder came close to snatching him up.

He had been injured several times and had been using the monsters as a source of life drain, randomly laying out afflictions as he went. That was becoming harder and harder as the Builder continued to thin out the herd.

The close calls were getting closer with every passing moment. Frustrated that the greatest contribution he could make was running away, he desperately willed the team to success.

The tyranny of rank was an inescapable reality. For all that Humphrey's morale was renewed and reinvigorated, his body was not. He had reached the point that little more than will alone kept him moving. His body was ravaged by Zato's attacks and his own ability in equal parts. The team's bag of tricks was running low and Humphrey's stamina had reached its limit. His attacks had finally started doing real damage, but while his spirit was willing, his body was spent. He stumbled, faltering, breaking the chain of attacks he had almost miraculously maintained through nothing but muscle memory and willpower.

Zato had taken some real hits and a magic tattoo appeared on his body, shining brightly before dimming. Belinda recognised it as the upgraded version of her own magic tattoo that reset the cooldown of an ability. Hers had disappeared with her ascension to bronze rank and she was chilled as she saw it appear on Zato. She knew what power he wanted to use again.

Every member of the team had a gold spirit coin to use in absolutely clutch moments. Steeling herself, Belinda slipped it into her mouth to ensure the special attack that followed would work.

Ability: [Power Thief] (Magic)

- Special attack (boon, affliction, magic)
 - Cost: Very high mana.
 - Cooldown: 5 minutes.

 - Current rank: Bronze 3 (32%).

 - Effect (iron): Make a magical ranged attack. You become able to use a random active-use ability of the target, who cannot use that ability until you have done so. It can be an essence ability or the inherent ability of a magic creature, but functions at your rank, not the rank of the target. You may not use the ability more than once. This ability cannot be used again until the copied ability is used. If not used within 24 hours, the copied ability is lost, restoring the target's ability to use it.

 - Effect (bronze): You can choose a specific ability of the target. If the target does not have that ability, a random ability is stolen instead.
-

Zato roared with fury as a light flashed from Belinda's hand, striking Zato and zipping back to her in an instant. He had just used one of his biggest trump cards, making the explode-and-heal power that damaged Sophie so badly available once more, only to feel it snatched away.

Zato lunged at Belinda, still under the effects of her Counterfeit Combatant power, clad in armour and holding a long-handled war hammer. In his fury, Zato didn't notice the gold-rank aura emitting from Belinda, who met his charge with the hammer, with gold-rank strength behind it.

The blow staved in Zato's head, yet even that wasn't enough to do more than stagger the metal man. Belinda, by contrast, felt the coin's power drain away and collapsed under the weight of her own armour.

Humphrey was too exhausted to move and with Belinda sharing his fate through the use of her spirit coin, Clive and Neil were suddenly left vulnerable. Zato looked grotesque with the huge dent deforming his head, but he was only staggered for a short time. In spite of his hideous disfiguration, he fought on.

While Zato recovered, Onslow and Stash moved from the edge of the fight where they had been on monster shepherding duties, placing themselves between Zato and the last members of their team both present and standing.

Zato began to move on the valiant familiars but he didn't get to make his attack as Sophie returned to the battlefield in a blur of motion. The Hero's Moment spell was on the verge of ending, and she stuffed a gold spirit coin in her mouth as she arrived in front of Zato.

Between Neil's double-enhanced spell and the gold coin, only her temporarily gold-rank power attribute was enough to hold her body together with the absurd power coursing through it. She ignored the pain, slapping her palm into Zato's chest. All the Momentum she had built up over the duration of Neil's spell was triggered, the power multiplied again and again and again by the empowering effects layered onto her. The resulting attack had so much power that simply unleashing it made the air crash like thunder.

-
- **[Momentum] (boon, magic, stacking):** When making an attack, all instances are consumed to inflict resonating-force damage. Multiple instances can be accumulated and instances are lost quickly while not moving.
-

The seemingly indestructible Zato exploded into a rain of liquefied metal.

➤ You have defeated [Zato].

Jason grinned, but he knew that his true contribution started now. His team had done their part and all they needed was time. It was up to Jason to buy them that time.

He gave up hiding and appeared before the Builder, who was staring at the tower with a rare display of emotion on the vessel's face. It wasn't rage but affront. The great astral being was less confused by the success of the lowly mortals than it was by their temerity in stand in its path. Jason did so literally, planting his feet on the ground between the Builder and the tower.

"What did I tell you?" Jason said. "The power of friendship."

"Your friends will be the ones to kill you, still."

"You get your shot first, mate," Jason said. "Your opponent is right here."

"You cannot harm me."

"Should be an easy one for you, then."

"Pleasure is a mortal concept," the Builder mused. "Even in these vessels I have only felt it for no more than a few fleeting moments across a span of time longer than your species has existed. I think I will take pleasure in watching you suffer."

"I do aim to please," Jason said, drawing his sword. "Shall we?"

Shade's bodies spread out from Jason to surround the Builder, although Jason kept one in reserve. The Builder could easily damage incorporeal creatures and, assuming he got out alive, he would need one of Shade's bodies to reconstitute the rest.

Jason, the Builder and all the remaining monsters felt the shift in the tower's magic, starting from the base. With that, the Builder lost interest in Jason and started striding in the direction of the tower.

As they moved into the mid-range of bronze, the team had broken through the limitations that were part of human, or human-adjacent existence. They could run faster than any Olympic sprinter, with stamina that would make a marathon runner shudder.

Sophie and Belinda were slumped on top of Onslow's shell as the familiar zoomed up the ramp on a cushion of air. Belinda was barely conscious, while Sophie was barely alive. Neil's magical intervention had been the only thing that had prevented her body from giving out after the power she had sent coursing through it.

Humphrey was in no better a state. His new power had brought with it a surge of strength, but as that passed, the lingering soul damage had left him debilitated. He was

slung over the back of Stash in the shape of a heidel, desperately clinging to consciousness as he sought to see the task to completion.

Neil was running, along with the dragon-tooth warriors Humphrey had managed to summon before collapsing entirely. His own summon was too slow to keep up and had been left at the bottom to block anyone who tried to follow them up.

Clive also sat atop Onslow, carefully maintaining a ritual circle around the crystal cube floating in front of him. It was a device he had cobbled together from materials originally intended to open a path back home, a plan rendered moot by the changes to the astral space's ambient magic. He had repurposed the materials to create a device that would invert the towers magic. It was a process Jason has insisted on referring to as 'reversing the polarity.'

The function of the device was straightforward enough. They simply had to take it from the bottom of the tower to the top. If that were all there was to it, Clive could have simply handed it off to Sophie and let her run up the outside of the tower. The trick was that Clive's cobbled-together device was made from improvised components and worked in accordance with theories he was only just beginning to understand.

In order to keep it operational, Clive needed to keep it encircled in a magical diagram that he needed to alter in real time as they moved the device. It was a ludicrous feat only possible because of Clive's power that let him draw ritual circles in the air, combined with his incredible skills as a ritualist. Even then, only months of drawing out rituals in combat had honed his reflexes enough to keep up. It took every ounce of his concentration as they made the way up the spiralling ramp inside the tower.

"The Builder has to be coming, right?" Belinda asked. Her coin-hangover left her feeling fearfully vulnerable.

"All we can do is trust Jason," Humphrey said.

Jason Asano was a lot of things. Mouthy to people he really shouldn't be was certainly one of them, as the Builder had long discovered. The Builder was now discovering that for all the things Jason was, one thing that he was not was easy to ignore.

The strongest of the Builder's minions had, against all odds, fallen. It was finally forced to act personally to see its intentions fulfilled and had intended to leave the matter of Jason for later. While it might derive satisfaction from what it intended for the Rejector, its intentions for the world Asano struggled to protect took precedence.

The Builder didn't give a lot of thought to the vessels he occupied. Knowledge of the mortal form was something beneath it. It used and discarded the vessels as needed,

without regard for them. If it had ever thoroughly explored their memories, it might have known that there was such a thing as Achilles tendons.

The Builder's vessel was not as physically resilient as Zato's metal body, by any means. If the Builder could have eschewed a fleshy vessel then it would have. No artificial construct was sophisticated enough to contain its power, however. Only the magical matrix that operated the body of an essence user was sufficient, after appropriate modification.

A vessel might be far more sturdy than an ordinary body, but it still adhered to basic, physiological truths. One of them was that without certain muscles, it was a lot harder to stand up.

It taxed the body very little to repair the kind of small injuries that Jason was capable of inflicting. Those brief moments of delay, however, were more valuable than gold for the team rushing up the tower.

The Builder was striding away from Jason, ignoring him for the moment in the belief that Jason was unable to substantially damage its vessel, which was true. What Jason could do could do was educate the Builder on the critical areas where a small wound could cause specific, debilitating problems. Even if immediately healed, they stole away more of the precious moments.

Jason did not undertake this task alone. Colin's afflictions, as Jason suspected, were no more effective than his own. What Colin could do was teach the Builder that eyes did not respond positively to rings of pointy teeth.

Jason was only stealing moments, but he and the Builder both knew that moments counted. Recognising that ignoring Jason was hurting it, the Builder attacked. Crippling would be ideal but killing was acceptable. Asano's immediate fate was unimportant compared to the Builder's other goals, so long as that fate was decided by the Builder itself.

Pinning Jason down was easier said than done. The Builder was still limited by the physical integrity of its vessel and could only levy silver-rank attacks.

Although he was no longer running, Jason remained elusive, using Shade's bodies to jump around, avoiding the attacks the Builder made by reshaping the ground beneath him. Shade was likewise on the move, avoiding the force-wreathed projectiles the builder flung his way, providing Jason with an ever-shifting series of shadow-jump portals.

Now that he was forced into open combat, Jason knew that, for all his mobility, he would not be able to keep up the fight for long. Luckily, he didn't need to. The magic of the tower was an obnoxious presence to anyone with magical senses and the change that started at the bottom and was rapidly ascending was obvious.

The Builder was faced with a conundrum. It could wield a single burst of gold-rank power, but that would tax its vessel to breaking point. It was forced to decide between using that burst to put an instant end to Jason or save it for the rest of his team.

Ultimately, stopping the team was the imperative. The tower's magic made it clear that they were entering its upper reaches and the Builder needed to move swiftly. It shot up into the air on a rising column of stone and earth that carried up toward the open windows running up the outside of the tower. The column was a compromise that consumed the vessel faster than the Builder wanted, but left it with vitality enough for one burst of gold-rank power.

Again Jason proved himself an annoyance not so easily cast aside. He called out Gordon, still ragged from the Builder's earlier attack. Gordon's two resonating-force orbs shot out as Jason's direction, colliding as they met the column and exploding, cutting the column off.

The column collapsed and the Builder fell with it, although walked out of the resultant cloud of dirt and dust unharmed. Anger showed on its increasingly withered face, but was quickly schooled away. It looked up at the tower where the shift in magic was nearing the upper reaches. The Rejector's companions needed to be stopped, forcing the builder's hand. Its vessel started to wither in front of Jason as it invoked a gold rank power while reaching a hand toward the tower, which it clenched into a fist..

The tower was literally coming to life to impede the team. Stone flowed like water into crude, humanoid shapes; animated creatures that attacked the team even before they finished forming. They were no stronger than Humphrey's dragon-tooth warriors, but the team was already at the end of their tether with most of the team unable to fight. Stash left Humphrey to Neil as it took on a hydra form, barely able to fit on the ramp. They fought through the animated stone, but their progress was massively slowed.

Slowing the team gave the Builder time to crush the scurrying bug that was Jason. Gordon had been called back for safety, a choice proven well-made as the Builder abandoned any idea of maintaining its vessel, burning through its vitality with a storm of disruptive-force-empowered projectiles. As Shade's bodies were cut down one by one, the Builder started making something. The materials were conjured up from the ground, like everything else, but this was smaller, taking form more slowly and carefully. Stone was transmuted into metal and magic was imbued into the device.

Finally, Jason ran out of moments to steal. As Shade's bodies were cut down, Jason's mobility was cut down with them. Despite its increasingly decrepit state, the

Builder's vessel was still fast and powerful, dashing forward and grabbing Jason by the face. With its other hand it slapped the suppression collar it had made around his neck. The vessel continued to rapidly wither as another column rose up, carrying the Builder and his new pet towards the tower.

The team were achingly close to the end of the ramp, leading up to the flat roof of the tower.

-
- Party leader [Jason Asano] has had his magical abilities suppressed.
 - Ability [Party Interface] has been negated.
 - Your party has been disbanded.
-

There were large, open windows placed regularly up the tower's length and the Builder stepped through one of them, blocking their path. It dragged Jason with it, holding his collar like a dog.

"You have done far better than I anticipated," the Builder told them. It was a withered husk, now, its voice inhuman and raspy. Even so, the team knew they would not be getting past it.

The Builder's eyes rested on the cube, floating in front of Clive.

"While I am not one to offer enemies second chances," the Builder said, "the brute-force enslavement of your souls would be a waste of good material. I offer you another chance to come willingly, which you should accept. Your souls will be mine either way."

Jason crawled pitifully in the direction of his friends, who looked on with miserable expressions. The Builder let him slink away. If Asano wanted a last moment of companionship before those companions were turned against him, he would just suffer all the more. Jason was not looking for companionship, however. He was looking for a run up.

Very few things truly surprised an entity as old as the Builder. Jason's aura pushing back the suppressive force of the collar was one of them. The collar's power was strong and Jason was only able to successfully push it back for a few scant seconds, but Jason's entire battle had been a war of stolen moments. It was time enough to retrieve a gold spirit coin from his inventory, which he slipped it into his mouth. Immediately he leapt up, exploding forward with gold-rank strength and speed.

The Builder was able to react, even against gold-rank reflexes, causing a wall of spikes to rise up between them. Jason ploughed right into it with his gold-rank power, impaling himself a dozen times but still breaking through with momentum to spare. Just as

he had smashed into the spiked wall, he smashed into the Builder, sending them both tumbling out through the window.

Still leaning on Clive for support, Humphrey had been ready to react from the moment he saw Jason acting submissively.

“GO!” he shouted, jolting the team into a final race against time. They raced the final stretch to top of the ramp, feeling the last of the tower’s magic turn as they stumbled onto the roof.

“That’s it,” Clive said. “The world engineers are done, as is the magic to let them penetrate our world.”

“The Job’s done, even if we die here,” Humphrey said.

“How about we don’t,” Clive said, dropping down off Onslow, then looked darkly toward the edge of the tower. “Not any more of us, anyway.”

Before leaving the tower at the edge of the city, they had removed the portal arch from the top and stowed it in Clive’s inventory. He pulled it back out and started drawing a ritual circle around it. If he was right, all the portals had opened, leading back to their own world. All he had to do was reconnect this one to the magical systems already in place and their path home would open.

Neil looked toward the edge of the tower.

“What about Jason?”

Humphrey’s face was filled with anguish, but also determination.

“He wouldn’t want us getting ourselves killed to bring back a corpse,” he said. “We open the gate and we go.”

Sprawled atop Onslow, Belinda gave the unconscious Sophie a worried glance, but said nothing.

Jason tried to yell something pithy about pants as he and the Builder tumbled through the air, but there was a stone spike through his neck. Everything was a blur as he spun around, and then it all went black.

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- You have died.
 - All equipment has been returned to your inventory.
 - [World-Phoenix Token] has been consumed.
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