

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?"

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- 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.
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"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.
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"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.

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- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/38.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/37.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/36.
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“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.
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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.
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“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.

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- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Rat Gorger].
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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.

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- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Rat Gorger].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Rat Gorger].
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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.

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- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Rat Gorger].
 - Special attack [Leech bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Rat Gorger].
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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.”

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- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Rat Gorger].
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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."