

## 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.”

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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 the 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 the 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.

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“Coming back here is a risk,” Timos said.

“Our situation is desperate,” Zato said.

Jin 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?”