

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.

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- 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."

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- 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.

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- 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.

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- 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.”