

Chapter 226

Greenhouse Flowers

As they anticipated, they reached all twelve towers without encountering the cultists.

“Shouldn’t the pillars be central to what they’re trying to achieve?” Jason asked as they team stood atop the final tower. “Whether it’s trying to sever the connection to the world, or do something with the giant golems inside them, the towers should be key, right?”

“Yes,” Clive said. “Between their absence here and whatever they’re doing to raise the magical density, I find myself extremely concerned. Before we even came in here, we knew that none of the people on our potential cultist list had the kind of astral magic expertise that would be required to truly accomplish anything. There was always the question of how they were going to sever this astral space, but now it seems that there is more to the cult’s scheme than we realised.”

Before they had left, the backgrounds of the suspected cultists had been thoroughly investigated. They were all local, from lower-tier aristocracy or wealthy non-aristocrat families. Because the families involved didn’t have the political clout to stop it, the Adventure Society had scoured the homes and investigated the relations of the suspects for any and all information they could find. Most of the families had no indication of cult activity, while others had already been exposed as cult sympathisers during the purge.

“Our biggest point of confusion was that the people we’re after simply don’t have the skill set to accomplish the cult’s goals, as we understand them,” Clive continued. “Our best guess was that they brought something with them, some manner of artefact or device that could do what they needed. Now, it seems that our ignorance of their objectives was even greater than we thought. We don’t know if they still want to claim the astral space, awaken these constructs or if it’s something to do with the changes to the ambient magic.”

“Are we sure we shouldn’t try destroying one of those constructs?” Neil asked.

“Very,” Clive said. “We wouldn’t be able to, anyway. Even Humphrey and Jason, who can overlook rank disparity in certain regards, wouldn’t be able to damage them. All they would accomplish would be to trigger any defence mechanisms that might be in place. That’s not even considering that the golems might, in some way, be essential to the core function of the towers, which is to stabilise this astral space.”

“The astral space is going to become unstable anyway, though, isn’t it?” Jason asked. “Won’t an unnaturally high level of magical density eventually make the dimensional wall break down?”

“That’s right,” Clive said. “If something is pushing through magic that’s too high-grade for the dimensional wall to endure, it will eventually break down. It’ll take quite a while, by which I mean a decade or longer, but if whatever is causing the change isn’t stopped, it will happen eventually. Even if it is stopped, if that happens too late, the damage will be done.”

“What would the effects of that be?” Humphrey asked.

“If the dimensional wall between the physical reality of this astral space breaks down,” Clive said, “then astral forces will pour in like a tide and wash everything away. This astral space will no longer exist.”

“What would the repercussions of that be for our world?” Humphrey asked.

“Actually, that would be fine for our world,” Clive said, “The astral space would be washed off the side of our world like washing dirt off your arm.”

“That’s not what the Builder wants, though,” Jason said. “He wants to take astral spaces, not destroy them. Especially, I would think, when they’re loaded up with his property.”

“Hopefully the cultists have some answers,” Humphrey said. “If they aren’t in the centre of the city, we’ll just have to start following the soul compass, clearing out the flesh abominations as we find them. Eventually it will lead us to the cultists.”

The team turned their monster-filled trek toward the interior of the city. For the first time, they experienced a rapid shift in the direction the soul compass was pointing. It signalled their proximity to what, unsurprisingly, turned out to be a flesh abomination. The abominations outnumbered the cultists by more than fifty to one and the cultists were almost certainly together. The abominations were solitary by nature, aggressively lashing out at any living thing they encountered. That left them scattered all around the city, compared to whatever rock the cultists were hiding under.

Given that fighting the abominations was one of their explicit goals in returning to the astral space, they had given some consideration to how to do so. The abominations had two advantages, being their ability to adapt and the power of an upper-tier bronze-rank monster. The weaknesses the team sought to exploit was a lack of intelligence and the fact that while it could adapt, it always remained a creature of living flesh.

The first weakness they hoped to exploit by ‘confusing’ the monster’s adaptations, alternating modes of attack to soak up time as it changed back and forth. To do this, the plan was to have Sophie and Humphrey repeatedly switch off against the monster, forcing it to adapt alternately to her speed and then to his power. The hope was that doing so would prevent a singular adaptation it could use to effectively fight the team.

The purpose in stalling out the fight was to exploit the abomination's second weakness, the inability to overcome Jason's afflictions. They knew from fighting one previously that it would adapt to prevent itself from losing combat effectiveness, but that eventually there would be a threshold beyond which it could no longer sustain itself.

The abomination was lairing in an old church, although not one of any god the team recognised. What little remained of the iconography was wholly unfamiliar, and they had little time to examine it before the abomination sensed their presence. They waited outside where they could take advantage of the open space and have the bulk of the team at a safe remove. It was a large, blobby mass of pink and yellow flesh, ambling out onto the street on four stubby legs.

The abomination's inactive state was its weakest, when it was slow and soft, which Jason took full advantage of. He opened with spells and then followed with special attacks, using his shadow arm to keep his distance. He laid on his afflictions with practised efficiency as the abomination was already changing its form in response.

As Jason danced around it, casting spells and reaching out with special attacks, the abomination grew tentacles, all over its round body, that ended in vicious claws. The result looked like a Lovecraftian echidna, the flexible limbs lashing too try and catch Jason wherever he went.

By the time the creature truly got going, Jason's job was done and he cleanly teleported away. Communicating through voice chat, Humphrey teleported in, directly taking his place. The quick and flexible limbs, useful for pinning down the elusive Jason, lacked the strength to dig through Humphrey's armour as he launched himself forward, burying his sword in the abomination's side.

The creature reacted by growing thick, chitinous plates that would protect it, while the many limbs consolidated into fewer larger, more powerful ones. These were also covered in chitin; resembling long, sharp, preying mantis arms. The completion of its adaptation signalled Humphrey's departure, as he teleported out again. In his place, Sophie rushed in like a storm to face the now sluggish, heavily-plated creature.

The creature swung its powerful limbs at her. They weren't slow, but it took more than not slow to catch Sophie. She deftly avoided them as she attacked the plated body with fists and feet. Her attacks were not as powerful as Humphrey's, but the resonating-force power her abilities added to her unarmed strikes was able to penetrate the heavy armour.

It seemed like everything would go perfectly to plan as Sophie and Humphrey switched off in rapid succession, forcing the monstrosity into continuous adaptation. It became evident it would not be quite so easy as it first seemed, however, as the

abomination's adaptations became more and more refined. Slowly it transmogrified into a lean, insect-like creature with strong plates but agile limbs, hard to catch and hard to hurt.

It had two, whip-like tendrils with segmented shards of razor-sharp chitin. They thrashed and danced, strong enough to hurt Humphrey, yet swift and unpredictable enough to catch Sophie. Neil threw out shields and healing from a safe distance but the fight was slowly turning against them. The longer the fight went on, the closer the abomination came to finding the perfect combination of traits.

The fight seemed of the verge of flipping against them as the abomination continued to morph itself into the perfect weapon. Sophie and Humphrey were desperately fighting together, as Clive and Belinda added their support. They had been holding off for the most dangerous moment, not wanting the abomination to have adapted when they came in at a critical point.

Clive opened up with his powerful attack spell, then unleashed it a second and third time with Belinda's help. Before she then copied it to use herself. Clive's spell was slow and difficult to use, but one of the advantages as it could attack in multiple ways.

Ability: [Wrath of the Magister] (Magic)

- Spell (fire, magic, curse, poison, wounding, ice, dimension)
 - Cost: Moderate mana plus additional mana per effect.
 - Cooldown: 1 minute.

 - Current rank: Iron 9 (61%).

 - Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to alter the target's reality, using any combination of the available colour effects. This cannot be used in conjunction with the other variant of this spell, which requires an alternate incantation.

 - Effect (iron): Lock a prismatic beam onto an enemy. Expend additional mana to unmake reality in a localised area, creating an annihilating void sphere inside the target. This effect requires magic to be channelled into the target at an extreme mana cost until sufficient mana has been channelled to trigger the effect.

 - [Red] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly increased (frost burn if combined with blue).
 - [Yellow] (high mana): Target's abilities have increased mana cost.
 - [Pink] (moderate mana): Target's resistances are reduced.
 - [Green] (moderate mana): Target's blood is poisonous to itself.
 - [Purple] (very high mana): Expending mana harms the target.
 - [Orange] (very high mana): Target suffers increased damage from all sources.
 - [Blue] (high mana): Target's temperature is significantly decreased (frost burn if combined with red).
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Clive had various abilities that gave him a larger mana pool than most adventurers of his rank. Knowing that he would only be casting a few spells, he went all out. His first casting of the spell reduced the abomination's resistances, made its own blood poisonous and made it take more damage from all sources. The second spell combined heat and cold into a potent frost burn effect, stronger than either individually. His third spell used the void sphere variation to devastating effect, Belinda following up immediately with a second one.

The overwhelming barrage of magic pushed the abomination over the edge. The chitin was scored and cracked from the frost burn, while chunks were missing altogether, the annihilation sphere carving them out like scoops of ice cream. No longer able to hold back the afflictions, the creature collapsed on the ground, dark filth spilling out like a rotten egg that had been cracked open.

The team had seen some graphic things in their time, but the miserable, rotting demise of the flesh creature was especially hard to watch. The stench that struck them after was even worse, a near match for the rainbow smoke of a monster dissolving.

"It's hard to imagine that thing used to be a person," Neil said.

"It's about as bad an end as I can imagine," Clive said. "A prison of rage and madness built from your own twisted body. The only escape you can hope for is the release of death, yet you cannot die until someone brings about your violent demise."

"It's good that we're doing this," Sophie said. "I've had my share of bad situations, but nothing like this. I'm glad we can help them."

The rest of the team nodded their sombre agreement.

"Thank you," Shade said. "Most of these abominations have been suffering for centuries."

"One down, a few hundred to go," Humphrey said. "We have a lot of work ahead of us."

The island city was a roughly circular forty kilometres across. If not for the streets being overrun by monster-filled jungle, it would be a matter of hours to reach the centre. During the trials, the teams had all taken their time, testing themselves against the environment and seeking out treasure, knowing they had the time to do so. Jason and his team took a more direct approach, but were careful.

They could have taken hours if they pushed it, or teleported directly in. Clive, Jason and Humphrey each could have taken them into the building they had rested in while awaiting the final stage of the trials, which would have been a relatively safe place to

arrive. While hidden from the eyes of any cultists present, though, there would be no hiding the ostentatious magic of a portal opening from their magical senses. Given that the cultists were bronze-rank now, they would have as many people with enhanced magic senses as Jason and his team.

Their time in the astral space was increasingly an ordeal. Every day had been an endless slog of monsters, from the numerous to the powerful, and the team was rapidly becoming exhausted. One evening, as the team rested in the cloud house, Jason and Humphrey were sitting together on the roof.

“At some stage, we’ll need to stop for a rest day,” Humphrey said.

“Just hide out in the cloud house and recover?” Jason asked.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “This ongoing pressure is good for our advancement, but I don’t want to go past the point it stops driving us forward and starts dragging us down.”

“I don’t think we’re there yet,” Jason said. “These monsters are either bronze-rank or a crowd of iron-ranks, so it’s been driving the team to rely on each other more. If we’re ever going to have the kind of teamwork that Valdis’ team has, we need that.”

“I don’t want to come into a conflict with the cultists when the team is blunted from overuse,” Humphrey said. “I want to meet them while we’re a freshly-sharpened knife. Does that mean refreshed from a well earned rest, though, or in a strong rhythm, on the back of a series of successful monster fights?”

“Ask Neil,” Jason said. “He’s our healer and he does his job well. He pays more attention to the condition of the team than anyone.”

Humphrey nodded.

“You’re right,” he said. “One of the last pieces of advice my mother gave me before we left was to rely on the team. She said I shouldn’t fall into the trap of trying to do everything myself. I suppose that isn’t just restricted to combat, is it?”

“No,” Jason said. “It’s a trap we could both easily fall into. I’ve learned the hard way that I’m not always as clever and insightful as I think I am.”

He let out a sigh, heavy with regret.

“I’ve been thinking about Thadwick a lot,” Jason said. “I’ve come to realise that he and I are very similar.”

“Really?” Humphrey asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “We share the same flaws. Arrogance, vanity, being self-impressed and having a need to show off. The real difference between us is that I’ve had people to slap some sense into me, where the people around him just reinforced the idea that he was special. His mother was off adventuring for most of his life and his father was

grooming him as heir. His head was filled with how great and important he was going to be, without tempering it with humility. He never had the sense of responsibility your mother drilled into you, or the friends that pull me back into line when I go too far off the rails.”

“I suppose I can see it,” Humphrey said. “Perhaps Thadwick saw it too. Maybe that’s why he was so fixated on you.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “I eventually realised that the reason I took such a dislike to Thadwick is that but for sycophancy, there goes I.”

“Things have worked out for you a lot better than they have for Thadwick,” Humphrey said.

“Thadwick is what we call a greenhouse flower, in my world,” Jason said. “Outside of the specific environment in which he was raised, he withers. He was never taught to withstand rough weather.”

“I had some of that, too,” Humphrey said. “I think my mother regrets how much she shielded me from.”

“I’m the same,” Jason said. “My homeland is much safer than this world. My family has money, not like yours, but enough to live better lives than most. For you and I, though, there was always someone who recognised that we would have to make our own way, sooner or later. They prepared us for that. For Thadwick, his parents always intended to make his way for him, and he paid the price of that.”

“You still feel sorry for him, after all that he’s done?” Humphrey said. “Trying to kill you, running off to the Builder cult?”

“I do,” Jason said.

“Do you think there’s a path to redemption for him?”

“No,” Jason said. “He’s gone too far, done too much. His choices have hurt too many. There’s no way back for him, now.”

Chapter 227

A Man Transformed

The team congratulated Jason as another of his abilities reached bronze rank during his evening meditation. As they were all perpetually using the party interface, they had shared the notification.

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- Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has gained a new effect.
 - Ability [Blade of Doom] (Doom) has gained the [Curse], [Disease] and [Poison] subtypes.

Ability: [Blade of Doom] (Doom)

- Conjunction (unholy, curse, disease, poison).
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): Conjures [Ruin, the Blade of Tribulation]. Attacks made with Ruin will inflict an instance of [Vulnerable] and refresh any wounding effects on the target. Wounding effects refreshed by Ruin require more healing than normal to negate. Ruin is an unholy object.
 - Effect (bronze): Ruin inflicts one instance each of [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit].
 - [Vulnerable] (affliction, unholy, stacking): All resistances are reduced. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to cleanse instances of [Resistant] on a 1:1 basis.
 - [Ruin of the Blood] (damage-over-time, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Ruin of the Flesh] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
 - [Ruin of the Spirit] (damage-over-time, curse, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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“That’s a strong boost to your short-term damage output,” Clive said. “It’s not the same as a direct damage power, but for weaker enemies, a quick handful of damaging afflictions will let you spread a lot of misery in not a lot of time.”

“That will help you a lot against groups,” Humphrey agreed. “That’s always been an issue for you because it took more time than it was worth to layer afflictions. Now you can put, what? Four damage afflictions with a simple cut from your dagger?”

“It’s probably for the best you’re not evil,” Neil said. “You’re not evil, right?”

“No, I’m not evil,” Jason said.

“Because you seem evil. With your powers.”

“Well, I’m not.”

“That’s good to know,” Neil said. “Thankfully, someone evil wouldn’t lie about that. Oh, wait...”

“You realise who is at the top of my list if I really am evil, right?” Jason asked.

“The guy who bought out the cheesemonger on Maple Street and replaced it with a building supply store?” Neil suggested

“Oh yeah. I hate that guy.”

Clive was standing atop a broken spire as monsters swarmed towards it like a river. They were akin to apes, but leaner and with longer legs. They approached the tower on which he stood with a quick, semi-quadrupedal lope.

Clive was standing on what had once been the interior of a tower-top, now exposed on all sides with the walls and roof long gone. Under his feet, the floor glowed with a ritual circles drawn by his power in lines of golden light. It was the result of the bronze-rank variant of his strong attack spell.

Ability: [Wrath of the Magister] (Magic)

- Spell/ritual (fire, magic, curse, poison, wounding, ice, dimension)
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: Varies.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (bronze): Create a ritual circle in which the magical attacks of spells, staves and wands have increased effect. This effect has a very high mana cost and a one hour cooldown.

Rather than enhancing what was already a potent and versatile attack spell, the bronze-rank variant offered another means to enhance combat effectiveness. Clive was

wielding one of his two legendary set weapons, the wand and the staff, in each hand. At the end of each were more ritual circles, floating in the air like magical barrel attachments.

Ability: [Tools of the Magister] (Magic)

- Special ability/ritual.
 - Cost: Varies.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Utilise specialty magic tools, vehicles and weapons.

 - Effect (bronze): Use a ritual circle to enhance the magical attack of a staff or wand. This variant requires high mana.
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Clive unleashed bolts from his staff that hurtled into the approaching monsters. He wasn't even really aiming as he essentially hip-fired the staff, gripping it in one hand and tucked into his armpit. Whether the bolts hit the ground or a monster, the results were explosive, throwing out splinters of wood and stone from the overgrown environment, or chunks of aggressively disincorporated monster.

In his other hand, his wand emitted a continuous beam that he worked back and forth through the monsters with little more accuracy than the staff. Normally the wand required continual focus to be deadly, but the enhanced beam sliced through the monsters in a sweeping line, lopping off limbs or killing outright.

Through a far-seeing crystal, Jason and the rest of the team watched on. To Jason's eyes, Clive had turned the broken spire into a sci-fi beam tower from an RTS. The monsters were undeterred by their losses, however, and continued their zerg rush at Clive's position.

"I can see why he had you bait them now," Jason said to Sophie. She was freshly returned from lured the monsters in Clive's direction.

"He's making a mess, but he's rather imprecise," Humphrey observed. "They'll start climbing that tower any moment."

"I imagine that's what his backup is for," Belinda said.

Just as Humphrey said, the monsters reached the tower and started to climb, for which the ape-like creatures were well-suited. As they did, a large, round figure floated slowly through the air from behind the tower.

Clive's familiar, Onslow, drifted ponderously into view, suspended in the sky on a cushion of shimmering air. Now bronze rank, he was roughly the size and shape of a Volkswagen Beetle, with more runes engraved into his shell than ever before.

The rune tortoise started blasting the creatures climbing up with elemental attacks, sourced from the runes on his shell. An explosive bolt of flame blasted several off at once, while a bolt of lightning chained from one to another to another, sending them screaming off the side. A dark, heavy cloud rose up from Onslow's shell, growing larger than the tortoise itself, and started peppering the side of the tower with water bullets. They weren't very lethal, even to the iron-rank monsters, but did serve to dislodge them, while also leaving the stone of the tower wet and harder to climb.

Clive continued blasting away at the main force of the monsters, which was rapidly thinning out, as Onslow continued to pick off the stragglers. There was a brief pause as Onslow floated up to Clive, who used his own mana to recharge the runes on Onslow's shell before the pair returned to action.

Even though most of their number were cut down before even reaching the tower, the monsters continued, unabated. The team, watching from a distance, had been poised to jump in at any time. When Clive told them he wanted to face the horde alone, they were wary but accepting. Now they just looked on in amazement at the pyrotechnic display as the monsters charged into a futile death.

"Well, damn," Sophie said.

"Won't all this get a lot of attention?" Neil asked.

"Probably," Humphrey said. "Anything with even a modicum of sense will take one look at this and run in the other direction, though."

In amongst the several dozen iron rank monsters were two larger, bronze-rank variants. Clive seemed to ignore them as they reached the spire and started rapidly climbing. Onslow didn't react either, other than to float further away from the tower. As the first one reached the top, Clive used his switch-teleport power.

Ability: [Juxtapose] (Balance)

- Special ability.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Swap the location of two allies and/or enemies. You must be able to see both subjects of the spell. If an ally resists or otherwise prevents the effect, this ability is negated but the cooldown is reduced to 30 seconds.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by this ability take additional damage from all sources for a brief period.

The monster vanished, with Onslow appearing in its place. Now in the air where Onslow had been, the monster fell, wildly flailing its limbs. It landed hard, right on one of Clive's invisible rune traps. The trap triggered, sending the monster, or at least the parts that used to be a monster, back into the air and scattering them over the battlefield. A few moments later, smaller explosions rang out where the larger chunks of monster had fallen.

Ability: [Rune Trap] (Rune)

- Spell.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Create an explosive rune that will disappear after a short period. The rune can be set to trigger by proximity, caster trigger, or both.

- Effect (bronze): Enemies affected by the rune trap will be the source of a secondary explosion after a brief period.

The second monster crested the tower and launched a huge fist at Clive. The air around the ape-like creature's fist shimmered, much like the cushion holding up Onslow. The fist crashed in on Clive like a hammer, striking the shield around Clive which briefly became visible as it sucked up Clive's mana to withstand the blow.

Clive shoved his wand between his teeth and his now empty hand turned mirror-silver. The air around it shimmered, just as the monster's had, and he rammed his fist into the hairy monster's torso. Despite the lanky man punching a monster at least three times

his weight, the monster went sailing off the spire. Clive quickly aimed and blasted out a shot from his staff, hitting the monster in mid air.

The red of life force emerged from Clive's body, a tendril snaking out and into the rune circle that was floating at the edge of his staff. The golden lines of the ritual circle transformed into an angry, bloody crimson.

Ability: [Blood Magic] (Balance)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Consume an amount of your own life force to replenish your mana.

- Effect (bronze): Consume an amount of your life force to enhance the effect of an active ritual.

The next blast that emerged from the staff was much larger than those that had come before. The energy bolt hit the monster at the same time the monster hit the ground, from which it did not get up.

By this point, the iron rank monsters were a scattered remnant of the original horde, but the wildly aggressive creatures kept rampaging forward in the face of inevitable destruction. When the last of them were dead, Clive hopped lightly onto Onslow's shell, sitting cross-legged as the tortoise floated back to the team. The familiar's new flight ability was much faster when hovering close to the ground, so Onslow dropped low and floated just over the bodies of the dead monsters as they made their return to the team.

Clive arrived at the ruined building where the team had been watching from hiding. He lightly slid down Onslow's shell, wand held casually in one hand and staff slung over one shoulder.

"You know," he told the waiting team, "I'm starting to think I might not be too bad at this."

The night before they expected to reach the centre of the city, the team was doing their evening meditation. Jason was leading Neil, Sophie, Belinda and Humphrey in the Dance of the Sword Fairy, a meditation technique that incorporated dance-like physical movements using a sword as a focus. It was something that Rufus had taught to him and had proven one of the more successful techniques for Sophie.

Clive was outside, having made preparations for his anticipated ascension to bronze. He had set aside a space for the messy transition, picking a spot inside some ruins near the cloud house. He had stripped down to his underwear and placed fresh clothes where he could reach them later. Close to hand was one of Jason's precious few bottles of undiluted crystal wash.

Clive was settled into some soft moss, meditating.

"No, Onslow, don't eat the moss. That's my seat."

Clive called Onslow back into the tattoo on his torso before resuming meditation.

When he crossed the final threshold, the rest of the team knew immediately.

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- Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Vengeance Mirror] (Karmic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Replicate the last spell or special attack used on you by an enemy. Mana cost is determined by the ability replicated. You may still use this ability if the triggering effect was negated by your abilities but not if it was negated by the abilities of an ally. The replicated power functions at the rank of this ability, not the rank of the enemy that originally used it.
- Effect (bronze): Use the replicated ability a second time.

That was just the beginning of a strenuous series of changes.

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- All [Karmic Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 0].
 - Linked attribute [Power] has increased from [Iron 9] to [Bronze 0].
 - Progress to bronze rank: 100% (4/4 essences complete).

Amber light started shining from within Clive's body as he felt pressure build up inside him like a balloon inflated toward the point of bursting. The team rushed outside but didn't intrude on his secluded area in the ruins, instead standing back and watching the amber light shine from within.

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- All your attributes have reached bronze rank.
 - You have reached bronze rank.
 - You have gained resistance to iron-rank and lower damage sources and effects.
 - The potency of your aura has increased.
 - Your aura senses have improved.
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- Progress to silver rank: 00%.
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“Oh, this feels amazing,” Clive said through voice chat. “I’m just waiting for the... oh, there it is.”

The sounds coming from Clive’s secluded spot were bad, but nothing compared to the smell. The coughing, spluttering vomit noises were matched by a stench they had all experienced before on reaching iron rank, when their bodies had purged and renewed all the biomass it would immediately replace.

“I wish I hadn’t just got my spirit attribute to bronze,” Neil winced, holding his nose. “The improved senses are not appreciated right now.”

“You should take this as a training opportunity,” Humphrey said. “There are monsters that will use stench against you, so you should adjust now.”

“Tell me that again when you’re smelling this with a bronze-rank sense of smell and maybe I’ll listen.”

The noises stopped and all they could hear was heavy, exhausted breathing.

“You still conscious in there, mate?” Jason called out.

“Yes,” Clive said wearily. He used voice chat again, rather than expend the effort to yell out. “Give me a moment to clean up. I suspect that once I’ve gotten away from the smell, I’m going to be very hungry.”

“No worries,” Jason said. “I’m just going to move the cloud house upwind a bit, and then I’ll set out a feast for a king. A small king; we only had so much space.”

Clive arrived at the slightly relocated cloud house, crystal wash clean and with a fresh set of clothes. He was a man literally transformed; the awkward, lanky frame and hapless, bookish features were gone. In their place was a tall and lean figure with an easy grace to his step and effortlessly appealing facial features.

“You’re the scientist no one listens to at the start of a disaster movie,” Jason said. “Except now you’re at the end of the movie, when you’ve lost your glasses, your hair is attractively tousled, you’ve found the heroism within and realised your unrealistically attractive lab assistant was pining for you the whole time.”

“I’m not even going to try and follow that,” Clive said. “I’ll just assume it’s a compliment and say thank you.”

“Also, I’m not pining,” Belinda said. “I did like the unrealistically attractive part, though. You should try finding a man you like when Sophie’s standing next to you. Thank the gods Jory has depth of character.”

“Are you suggesting people are only interested in my looks?” Sophie asked.

“Of course I’m saying that,” Belinda said. “You’re like a treasure chest full of swords with no handles. It looks enticing, but rummaging about inside is going to get you hurt.”

“Thank you,” Sophie said brightly.

“That was not a compliment!”

“How is that not a compliment?” Sophie asked. “Who doesn’t want to be full of swords?”

“Can we just move on to the food?” Clive asked.

Chapter 228

The Worst Possible Option

With a fully-fledged bronze ranker in their number, the team felt more secure as they made their way to the city's interior. They progressed more swiftly than any of them had during the Reaper trials, for two main reasons. The first was confidence. Rather than scattered across the city and forced into makeshift teams, they had allies they knew and could rely on. Even a powerful ally like Valdis was no substitute for a true comrade when life and death were on the line.

The second reason was that they weren't scouring the place for treasures, although treasures they still found. In spite of the people that had flooded the astral space during the trials, the team still stumbled over a small fortune in awakening stones, essences and other goods. In an old training hall they found an adept essence and a whole rack of bronze-rank magic weapons. None were exceptional, but they were valuable, nevertheless. In a library they found a knowledge essence, plus some skill books whose magic had kept them intact despite the hot, humid air. The normal books had long ago rotted away, making the skill books easy to pick out.

The central region of the city had been clearly demarked into two areas during the trials. The very core of the city was its most intact region, with the jungle prevented from reclaiming it by means unknown. In direct opposition to this, the area that ringed the centremost region was the most heavily reclaimed by jungle, as if all the growth not happening at the centre was somehow piling up around it. The buildings there were little more than rubble, and much of the ruins had been entirely engulfed by jungle.

This ring of thick overgrowth had been the location of the giant carnivorous plant that occupied a staggering amount of space underground. It had been almost entirely annihilated through the efforts of Jason and a large force of adventurers. Only a few dead remnants of the plant monster had remained after it had been annihilated by the transcendent damage of Jason's execute power. His afflictions had never escalated to such a grand scale before, and he considered it unlikely that they ever would again. Creatures the size of a small city weren't easy to come by, and he'd rather avoid fighting any more.

The team paused as they reached the ring of thick jungle.

"You don't suppose it's grown back, do you?" Neil asked.

"It has not," Shade said, his voice coming from Jason's shadow. "Whatever opinion one might have of Mr Casino's abilities, a lack of thoroughness in their lethality is not a

criticism likely to be levelled against them. I can assure you that the blood root vine was quite thoroughly destroyed.”

“We need to be careful, going through this section of jungle,” Humphrey said. “The jungle looks thicker than where I crossed over. From the looks of it, we’ll have to cut our way through in places. It’ll make for slow going and scouting won’t be easy.”

“There’s little point watching from above,” Sophie said. “That canopy is too thick. I could track you by your auras but I don’t know how useful that would be.”

“I don’t think the risk of showing our auras off like that is worth it. We should keep our auras as retracted as we can,” Humphrey said. “We should all stay close until we’re through.”

“Should we look for a place where the growth isn’t so heavy?” Sophie asked. “This is definitely thicker than where we through last time.”

“The growth of this area seems to have rapidly expanded in the absence of the blood root vine,” Shade said. “At the time of the trials, none of the city had jungle this dense. It stands to reason that the rest of the central ring would have experienced similar growth during our absence.”

“Should we reconsider teleporting through?” Neil asked.

“It’s not the worst idea in the world,” Jason said. “Now that I’m looking at this jungle, I don’t fancy hacking our way through. Not when the local monsters are stronger than ever, and you can bet that any manifesting in there will make better use of the environment than we do.”

Humphrey looked into the dense foliage as he considered.

“What does everyone else think?” he asked.

“I’m a city girl,” Belinda said. “If we can skip trudging through all that, then I’m for it.”

“It’s a simple question of risk assessment,” Clive said. “Is going through monster-infested jungle more dangerous than teleporting into what is potentially the very midst of the cultists? Given that we should be able to teleport into an area of relative safety, I would say teleporting is the superior option.”

“And if they sense the magic of us all teleporting in?” Sophie asked.

“Then we fight,” Humphrey said. “We’re going there for that fight, in any case. That said, I would rather initiate it on our own terms.”

“Looks like we have a consensus,” Clive said. “I’ll open a portal to the roof of the building we stayed in before the final trials.”

Clive held out a hand and a circle of runes appeared, alternating blue and gold. Normally they would then fill with shimmering air and a blurred image of the destination, but instead the runes simply blinked out, like someone had pulled the plug on them.

“That’s odd,” Clive said.

“Could portals be somehow impeded here?” Belinda asked.

“That should not be the case,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “That being said, this space has undergone many changes in the months since my tenure here. We have made a number of disconcerting revelations of which I was unaware, so my knowledge of this realm is not as reliable as I believed. If there is some manner of impedance on portals, I believe your power, Mr Asano, has the best chance of retaining functionality. It is the basis for the portals incorporated into this place, after all.”

Jason tried his portal ability, but had no more success than Clive. The obsidian arch appeared, but the shadow gate did not fill with the darkness, instead retreating without activating. Humphrey tried to teleport them, but likewise achieved nothing.

“My short range teleport works fine,” Humphrey said, vanishing and reappearing close by to prove his point. “Jason you haven’t had any issues shadow-jumping, right?”

“It’s been working just fine,” Jason said.

“These results suggest one of three possibilities,” Clive said. “One, as Belinda posited, is some manner of environmental interference. We know that the portals to leave this astral space are currently non-functional. My best guess is that it’s related to the changes in the ambient magic and may be affecting our portal abilities in the same way.”

“That makes sense,” Humphrey said.

“The other possibilities,” Clive continued, “are the usual reasons that portal abilities fail. As we all know, a portal destination must be somewhere the person with the portal ability has visited in the past. They must also be able to clearly visualise that space, however. If the space is too generic to be memorable, or if time and failing memory warp the recollection, it won’t work.”

“That’s why big cities have portal stations,” Humphrey said. “They make them memorable, visually striking places so that they are easy to remember from only a single visit.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “When I was finding way points across the desert to portal to for when I travelled to Sky Scar Lake, I had to find landmarks that stood out. I don’t think I could portal to a random patch of desert, just because I happened to have passed through one time.”

“I remember that place quite well, though,” Humphrey said. “I remember the view from the rooftop very vividly. The square full of adventurers, the huge trial tower.”

“Which brings us to the third possibility the portals failed,” Clive said. “If the destination has significantly changed, then the visualisation will be wrong and the portal will fail. It’s not enough to redecorate a room, but if you demolish the building the room is in?”

“Shade, you said the tower has most likely been destroyed already,” Jason said.

“That is correct,” Shade answered. “The dimensional spaces within will likely have collapsed, to destructive effect.”

“It could be that the destruction was widespread enough that our building was badly damaged,” Humphrey said.

“It’s only a few kilometres, right?” Belinda said. “Sophie, couldn’t you air-jump your way up high enough to check?”

“Does it really matter what causing it?” Sophie asked. “Whether the magic has gone weird or the building was knocked down, we can’t do anything about either.”

“You’re right,” Humphrey agreed. “Whatever the reason, portals can’t get us where we want to go. We can do some testing later, but for now, we have to make our way through this jungle. Shade, can we rely on you to do the scouting for us?”

“Of course, Mr Geller. It would be my pleasure to contribute.”

The rough terrain was the result of more than just thick jungle. The ground was wildly uneven, from overgrown piles of rubble to areas where the ground had collapsed into deep holes. The team followed the path of least resistance as best they could, relying on Jason’s map to keep them headed in roughly the right direction. Sometimes it was just too rough, forcing Humphrey to hack their way through the undergrowth with his sword.

“These holes look relatively recent,” Clive observed. “I suspect there may be significant spaces beneath the ground that were previously filled by the plant creature. Jason annihilating it entirely with transcendent damage may have left the ground here unstable.”

“The going definitely wasn’t this rough during the trials,” Humphrey said. “It was definitely easier to find a path through.”

“When we were looking for a way to get past the plant monster,” Jason said, “Jory told me that the plants in this astral space have adapted to feed on the heavy magic saturation. Maybe the plant monster was soaking most of that up and now it’s gone. It could be that the remaining plant life has been gorging, leading to the explosion in growth.”

"I'm more concerned about the monsters," Sophie said.

"What monsters?" Neil asked. "We haven't seen one since we entered this thick patch of jungle."

"Exactly," Sophie said. "The only other time we've gone this long without a monster coming at us is when we've stopped for the night."

"It has been a while," Humphrey agreed. "I would have expected at least some kind of snake monster by now, in terrain like this."

"Maybe we're just lucky," Neil said.

"Or maybe the local monsters know something we don't," Sophie said.

Most of the team were city folk. Jason had grown up in a small beach town, while Neil, Belinda and Sophie were all city folk. Humphrey had mostly grown up in the delta, but the carefully landscaped Geller Estate was hardly the open wilds.

While they had all spent time adventuring in the delta, it was the academic Clive who turned out to be the most comfortable in the terrain. He had grown up in the proper delta, on the family eel farm. He was the surest of foot and the most observant of their surroundings.

Clive was also the most educated about the potential threats, with a knowledge of monsters second only to the Magic Society records he had spent so much time cataloguing. This allowed him to spot something that the others overlooked, and he stopped to examine it.

"What did you find?" Humphrey asked as Clive peered intently at some white residue on a large, green leaf. Clive looked around, spotting more of it.

"Not sure," Clive said. "Some kind of secretion, probably from a monster. This is old, so it's hard to be sure. If you look close, there are some lingering traces of magic."

Most of the team had magical senses, so they joined Clive in peering at the residue.

"I can barely sense it," Neil said. "You have no idea what this could be?"

"I have hundreds of ideas of what this could be," Clive said. "I need more information to shave them down before I'd be comfortable making any kind of guess."

The team continued onward, still not encountering any monsters but occasionally spotting more of the residue. They found some that was fresher, dangling from a tree branch like string. The residual magic on it was stronger and Jason rubbed the substance between his thumb and forefinger.

"Should you be touching that?" Belinda asked. "I'm pretty sure the first rule of dealing with mysterious magical stuff is not to touch it."

"I thought I felt something in the magic," Jason said. "Blood magic."

"And that made you want to touch it?" Neil asked.

"I'm definitely getting a feel of blood magic off of this," Jason said. "Not essence magic, like mine, though. Some kind of monster power."

Humphrey spotted Clive's frown.

"What is it?" Humphrey asked him.

"It's still early to speculate," Clive said.

"Something just popped into your head," Humphrey said. "We trust your instincts."

Clive gave another, reluctant frown.

"This residue," he said. "Does it look like old spider web to anyone else?"

"Could be," Humphrey said.

"This residual magic had lasted long enough that we're likely looking at something silver rank," Clive said. "If we combine that with blood magic and webs, then something does come to mind. Something I would rather be wrong about."

"Which is?" Neil asked.

"Have any of you heard of a blood weaver?"

Humphrey let out a low breath, while the others shook their heads.

"What's a blood weaver?" Jason asked.

"A spider monster, as you might surmise from the webs. It's silver rank, and more intelligent than most lower rank monsters. It's still more animal cunning than real intellect, but it is very much capable of planning and long-term thinking."

"That's not what it's famous for, though," Humphrey said. "After it feeds on a normal animal or monster, it can turn them into a deathless servant. Zombies, but there is something worse."

"Why is it always something worse?" Neil asked. "Why can't it ever be something better. Like cake."

"Oh, I could go a nice fluffy sponge cake," Jason said.

"Did you bring one?" Neil asked hopefully.

"Yes, but you can't have it until you rank up."

"Do try and keep on topic, boys," Belinda chided.

"Sorry," Neil and Jason said together.

"As I was saying," Humphrey said, "A blood weaver can turn regular people and animals into undead, shambling husks. Nothing too dangerous. A monster or essence user, though, it can turn into a vampire. A blood puppet to go out and collect more victims for the blood weaver to consume."

“So, you’re saying these cultists might be vampires, now?” Neil said.

“It’s only a possibility,” Clive said. “Given the environment, current magical density and the blood magic in the webs, though, it all fits.”

“Can we even fight the cultists if they’re vampires on top of everything else?” Neil asked.

“Actually, they would be easier to fight,” Clive said. “Individually, anyway. They have vampiric powers, but they can no longer access their essence abilities. They still have those abilities, because the soul is still in there, but they can’t use them without the body they no longer control. The body will still be effected by passive powers, but the controlled body can’t use any active abilities because it can’t control the soul, which is essentially trapped.”

“I know what that feels like,” Jason said darkly.

“What about the tracking stones?” Belinda asked. “If the cultists were turned into undead, would their stones still show them as alive?”

“I’m not sure,” Clive said. “It’s possible, since they do still have their souls. Or I could be wrong about all of this, there’s no blood weavers and the cultists are off playing cards somewhere.”

“Can you think of something worse it could be rather than a blood weaver?” Neil asked.

“Not off the top of my head,” Clive said.

“Then that’s probably what we’re dealing with,” Neil said. “It always turns out to be the worst possible option.”

“I can think of something worse,” Jason said and the team all looked at him. “They could have called it a vampider.”

The team continued on, the white residue becoming more and more evident. It quickly became clear that it was definitively remnant webs and they found a clearing where the trees were draped with webbing like curtains. There were old web sacs, the size of people and larger, that had been burst open from the inside. There was dried blood caked inside them, that still reeked.

“An old nest,” Clive said. “It’s definitely a blood weaver.”

Chapter 229

Brave Little Tailor

Clive stood up from where he had been crouching to examine one of the empty web sacks. The clearing turned out to only be the beginning, with empty web sacks hanging from trees or fallen to the ground, extending well back into the jungle. Clive had gone over them all, carefully examining the interior of each one.

“Unless there are some other people here that we weren’t aware of,” Clive said, “I would say that all of our cultists were snatched up by the blood weaver. The web sacks pack their victim in, nice and snug, and there are thirteen of these things that look like human moulds inside. Looks like she either ate the five that died completely and turned the rest, or the process has a failure rate.”

“So now we know for certain that we have to hunt this thing,” Sophie said. “How do we find it?”

“We don’t,” Clive said. “We’ve all seen what a silver rank monster can do. I doubt we could take the monster down if we caught it by itself, let alone with what I hope is only a small army of vampiric monsters. The weaver’s minions are something of a hive mind, controlled by the monster itself. Once we start fighting any of them, we’re fighting all of them. We can’t beat them all and the blood weaver on top.”

“We don’t know how long we have to stop whatever the cult is up to,” Belinda said. “As much as I like the backing off idea, don’t we have to go after it now, if it will take us to the cultists?”

“At this point, I don’t know how much the cultists have to offer us,” Clive said. “I doubt we’ll ever find them in a state where we can question them. Maybe if we kill the blood weaver they’ll regain some sense of self and be able to talk to us. More likely, we’ll have to try and find some clue from their corpses.”

“The cultists were a dangerous enough proposition when they were a bundle of cut-rate adventurers,” Neil said. “Now they have a silver-rank monster behind them? We’ve all seen what a silver-rank monster can do.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “We can’t stop anything if we’re the blood puppets of some giant spider. Clive, where do we have to get to before we can take that thing down?”

“At the very least, Jason has to hit bronze rank,” Clive said. “The blood weaver is silver-rank tough, heals fast and can heal even faster by feeding on its own minions. Jason’s escalating damage is our only means of getting through that, even once we hit bronze.”

“Can’t he do that now?” Sophie asked. “He has an ability to get past higher-rank resistances, right?”

“That is a silver rank monster,” Clive said, “and not some lumbering giant he can outpace. At iron-rank he’s too slow, too weak and too frail. He’ll die before he can lock those afflictions in. And that is just considering the monster itself. The rest of us need to hold off the vampiric monster army long enough for Jason to get the job done. Given the magical density, we have to assume there will be a ready supply of bronze-rank monsters for that, and the cultists certainly will be. Maybe there’ll only be as many of them as there are web sacs around here, but from the state of this webbing, I think this is an older nest. I’m willing to bet that there’s more, and that’s a bet we’re gambling our lives with.”

“So you’re saying we need to run for the hills,” Jason said.

“We have the best training environment any of us will ever experience,” Clive said. “Every adventurer rises up during a monster surge and we have one that never ends, all to ourselves. We have to use it. I say we stop chasing the trail of the cultists and focus solely on getting as strong as we can, as quick as we can.”

“I completely agree,” Humphrey said. “I know that stopping the cult was hammered into us as the first priority once we got here, but now that path leads somewhere that we aren’t ready to go yet. I propose we walk right back out of here and start following the soul compass to abomination after abomination, taking on anything that gets in our path.”

“That isn’t also silver rank,” Neil amended.

“That isn’t also silver rank,” Humphrey agreed. “We stick to the training regimen, maximise our advancement. I’ll reach bronze before Jason, and Neil probably will as well. That’s our threshold to return. Sophie and Belinda will take longer than the rest of us, which is time we may not have. We don’t know that we have enough as is.”

Humphrey gave Belinda and Sophie a sympathetic look.

“It means that when we do go after the blood weaver, you will be the most vulnerable.”

“Speak for yourself,” Sophie said. “I’ll hold my own.”

“I’m pretty sure he meant me,” Belinda said. “I’ll stick with Clive and Neil. Boosting bronze-rankers will give me the chance to carry my own weight.”

“Wait,” Neil said. “Did we just make the sensible decision and not charge into the hopeless fight? Go team!”

After trying to portal past the jungle, the team had also tried portals to other locations and had confirmed that portal abilities wouldn’t work at all. This forced them to extract from

the thick ring of jungle by tracking back the way they had come. It quickly became evident that their presence had already been noticed.

“There are monsters approaching from multiple sides,” Shade warned from Jason’s shadow as his other two bodies scouted the jungle around them. “Judging from their physical appearance, disparate nature and cohesive movement, I believe them to be the blood weaver’s vampiric puppets.”

The team had developed their teamwork enough that they had no need to discuss tactics as they moved into a defensive formation. In the tight confines of the dense jungle, Humphrey and Sophie stood guard over Neil, Belinda and Clive as Jason vanished into the darkness.

Onslow emerged and Clive vaulted lightly onto his back. Even at the very start of bronze rank, Clive’s power and speed attributes gave him the strength of a huge powerlifter and the agility of a tiny gymnast. Belinda also called on her familiars, the silver lantern floating above her and the living illusion, a flickering replica of herself that shimmered into existence at her side.

“Why only move on us now?” Neil wondered.

“They were waiting for us to go deeper into the blood weaver’s territory,” Clive said. “Now, we’re trying to leave.”

“We didn’t sense them at all.”

“Many spider-type monsters can use networks of webbing to track their prey over a wide territory,” Humphrey said.

“Clive didn’t mention that before,” Neil said.

“Clive didn’t know,” Clive said testily. “Maybe if adventurers were less dismissive about sharing information with the Magic Society then there’d be fewer gaps in our knowledge.”

“Focus,” Humphrey said. “Jason should be starting right about...”

An alien shriek echoed through the jungle. They sensed the approaching auras before they saw the monsters. It was a disparate group, bronze and iron-ranks mixed together, but the same thread ran through each of the different auras. It felt like a blood-soaked wire leash, held in the grip of an unseen master.

“I definitely don’t want that in my aura,” Sophie said.

Monsters came pouring out of the jungle, varieties they had encountered before in the city, but changed. Eyes were bloodshot, skin was pale and tauged over ropy muscle. There were snakes with barbs lining their backs, two-headed cats and colourful, spike-

spitting frogs. Almost half their number were the ape-like creatures Clive had fought, but even more feral. Their was a crazed hunger about them as they rushed at the team.

Humphrey and Sophie leapt into action. Sophie was a veritable blur, deflecting flying spikes and crippling ape monsters one after the other. It was almost like they were standing still as fists and feet, elbows, knees and palm strikes were rained down on joints, throats and eyes. Despite the onslaught, her face was calm, her movements as clinical and precise as they were fast. She fought with the clean efficiency of a machine, with no waste, no hesitation and no mercy.

A two-headed cat leapt high over the other monsters, sailing through the air towards her. She threw out a hand and a blast of wind sent it hurtling back into the jungle.

Ability: [Wind Wave] (Wind)

- Special Ability (movement).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 6 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 6 (41%).

- Effect (iron): Produce a powerful blast of air that can push away enemies and physical projectiles. Can be used to launch into the air or move rapidly while already airborne.

A barbed snake jumped at her from a low angle and she snatched it out of the air, one hand on each of its upper and lower jaws. She reeled her hands apart and the snake's head with it, not even pausing as she continued to square off with the ape creatures.

One of the bronze-rank apes emerged, faster and stronger than the others. It barrelled through its fellows as it charged at Sophie. She activated an ability and time slowed to a stop around her.

Ability: [Eternal Moment] (Swift)

- Special Ability.
 - Cost: Extreme mana-per-second and stamina-per-second.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 5 (91%).

 - Effect (iron): Operate at a highly accelerated speed for one second of actual time, which is extended in subjective time.
-

Sophie's massive acceleration power only gave her a fleeting moment of near-frozen time to act. She waved her arms rapidly back and forth in front of her, each sweep producing an arced blade of wind that froze the moment it was separated from her body.

Ability: [Wind Blade] (Wind)

- Special attack.
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 8 (88%).

 - Effect (iron): Create a cutting projectile of air.
-

The frozen time ended after the briefest interval, but Sophie's quick movements had primed a wall of wind blades. The instant the power ended, they were all unleashed on the monster charging at her, shredding the hulking ape into a bloody mess. Its charge became a stagger and she kicked it square in the chest, bloodying her boot. It fell over backwards and didn't move again.

Although she was incredibly quick on her feet, Sophie was holding her ground, not moving far as she fended off attackers. Humphrey, in the meantime, was the sword to her shield, charging forward to take the fight to the enemy. He conjured up his enormous sword, stylised in the form of a dragon's wing, that was immediately wreathed in flames.

Ability: [Dragon Wing Sword] (Wing)

- Conjuration (fire).
 - Cost: High mana.
 - Cooldown: 1 minute.

 - Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

 - Effect (iron): Conjures a huge sword in the shape of a dragon's wing. Special attacks with the movement subtype performed with this weapon inflict additional damage.

 - Effect (bronze): Normal and special attacks made with this weapon inflict fire damage and inflict the [Burning] condition.

 - [Burning] (affliction, damage-over-time, elemental): Inflicts ongoing fire damage.
-

The fire damage hardly seemed relevant as the sword brushed away enemies like fallen leaves.

Ability: [Unstoppable Force] (Might)

- Special attack.
- Cost: High mana, extreme stamina.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Melee attack with massive momentum, dealing large amounts of additional resonating-force and disruptive-force damage. Requires a heavy weapon.

- Effect (bronze): For each enemy struck the cooldown of this ability and the cost of the next use of this ability are reduced.

Three of the ape monsters and a two-headed cat all but exploded, their bodies not even slowing the horizontal sweep of the enormous sword. Humphrey paid no mind to self-protection as he arrived amidst the monsters like a lobbed grenade. He was far from without protection, however, starting with the dragon scale armour he conjured directly onto his body.

Ability: [Dragon Armour] (Dragon)

- Conjuration.
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Conjures a suit of dragon scale armour that confers strong physical protection and increases resistance to fire damage and effects.

- Effect (bronze): Armour confers increased resistance to non-physical damage and further increased resistance to fire damage and effects.

As Humphrey laid into the enemy, an illusory image fought beside him, harmless but distracting, making his attacks hard to anticipate. Just when the monsters thought they had the real Humphrey pegged, it would turn out to be his illusionary double. This was Belinda's familiar, Gemini, who could not only mimic allies, but switch-teleport with them. It used a mental connection with the mimicked ally to do so, like a more instinctual version of Jason's voice chat. It was an oddly intimate connection that allowed the ally to trigger the power.

The power of Belinda's familiar was quite similar to one of Humphrey's own.

Ability: [Attack of the Mirage Dragon]

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

With every special attack, he not only created another, short-lived double, but Gemini did the same, leaving four of Humphrey running around for the monsters to try and pin down. Only Humphrey's allies were able to see the hazy blur that signalled which ones were illusions.

Dashing into the swarm of attackers had opened him up to their attacks and some inevitably went for Humphrey's true body. Many were intercepted by well-timed but short-lived bubble shields, courtesy of Neil.

Ability: [Absorbing Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution, drain).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and generates mana-over-time with a strength that scales with the amount of damage negated. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.

- Effect (bronze): Drains health and mana from the attacker and bestows it upon the recipient of the shield.

Neil's absorbing shield simultaneously protected Humphrey and replenished his health and mana, allowing him to keep fighting at full strength. In addition to the drain effect, one of Neil's evolved racial gifts was incredibly valuable.

Ability: [Life Guard]

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

If too many enemies were crowding on Humphrey, Neil would deploy his other bubble shield power.

Ability: [Burst Shield] (Shield)

- Special ability (recovery, retribution).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Create a short-lived shield that negates an incoming attack and explodes out, knocking-back nearby enemies and inflicting concussive damage. High-damage attacks of silver-rank or higher may not be entirely negated.

- Effect (bronze): Inflicts [Vibrant Echo] on anyone damaged by the blast.

- [Vibrant Echo] (affliction, damage-over-time, magic): Inflicts ongoing resonating-force damage.

While Humphrey and Sophie were both fighting multiple monsters, just the pair of them was not enough to cover every angle of approach. Monsters that tried to snake into the gaps were met by elemental attacks from Onslow and bolts of force from Belinda's lantern familiar, Shimmer. Belinda used her spurious sorcerer ability, granting her the power to use a wand from which she was blasting bolts of fire.

Clive's weapons were still stowed in his storage space as he sat atop Onslow, chanting out an extremely lengthy spell. When he was done, a huge red and gold eye appeared in the sky like a celestial body. It had the look of a fiery nebula, resembling an angry version of the eye in the torso of Jason's familiar, Gordon.

Ability: [Eye of Karma] (Karmic)

- Spell (zone, retribution).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (04%).

- Effect (iron): Creates a wide-area zone. Within the zone, all damage inflicted by enemies or by effects generated by enemies cause disruptive-force damage to be inflicted on the enemy that was the source of the damage.

- Effect (bronze): Whenever damage triggers the zone effect, the damaged ally gains an instance of [Good Karma] and the enemy gains an instance of [Bad Karma].

- [Good Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): Damage from enemies with [Bad Karma] is reduced; this does not reduce the retributive damage suffered by enemies with [Bad Karma]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

- [Bad Karma] (affliction, holy, retribution, stacking): A portion of damage you deal to enemies with [Good Karma] is also suffered by you as transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, to a maximum of 100% damage return.

The team was spending mana like water, knowing that mana recovery was one of their greatest strengths. Clive, Neil and Sophie all had powers that would replenish the mana of team mates within their overlapping auras, with Clive and Neil also having spells to replenish team mana.

After completing the zone spell, Clive pulled out his weapons and started blasting away. They were not as effective without the time to set up ritual enhancements, but were still potent weapons. He also started replenishing Onslow's powers.

The monsters attacking Humphrey and Sophie were now harming themselves as a result of the zone spell, but the sheer number of enemies threatened to overrun the team. From Clive's quick count, there were at least thirty, not counting however many Jason was off fighting in the jungle.

In spite of the team's efforts, however, the monsters still threatened to overwhelm them. Belinda started chanting her own long spell, and just as it seemed like the team would be overrun, the battlefield shifted.

Ability: [Unexpected Allies] (Charlatan)

- Spell (illusion, dimension, teleport).

- Cost: Extreme mana.
 - Cooldown: 1 hour.

 - Current rank: Iron 4 (16%).

 - Effect (iron): You and your allies take on illusory forms of nearby enemies, but your allies can still recognise one another. All allies and enemies in the area are randomly switch-teleported.
-

Just as the team's formation was about to be broken up by the press of opponents, Belinda's spell detonated it. The team was randomly teleported, as were the monsters. The teleport was short and relatively gentle, barely fazing those members of the team sensitive to it. The monsters were thrown into confusion by their sudden displacement and the seeming disappearance of their enemies. Unable to see through the illusory shrouds now covering the team, they milled about in confusion.

Belinda's power was the keystone of one of the team's tactics for engaging larger groups, which Jason dubbed the 'Brave Little Tailor' strategy. They made judicious attacks that prompted the monsters to attack one another, their discord briefly disrupting the thread of control in their aura. On top of the monsters harming one another, Clive's zone spell inflicted even more damage.

The controlling force quickly reasserted itself, but the sudden chaos had given the team time to gather together. Jason had notified them that all the surviving monsters had gathered close and he emerged from the shadows. It was just in time to vanish with the team as Neil used an ability.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- Special ability (dimension).
 - Cost: Extreme mana.
 - Cooldown: 6 hours.

 - Current rank: Iron 8 (64%).

 - Effect (iron): Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death] on everything in the area.

 - [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

When the team re-emerged from the dimensional space a few short moments later, the landscape had been transformed into a horrifying Tartarus. The death energy of Neil's

Reaper power had riven the jungle around them, leaving dead and rotting monsters amongst blackened and withered jungle. The undergrowth was black mulch underfoot, while the wood of the trees had rotted and split, sending them tumbling to the ground.

A few bronze-rank monsters had survived, but they were hurt and no longer had numbers on their side. The team made short work of them.

“Was anyone bitten in all of that?” Clive asked. “Vampire bites can have some unpleasant effects.”

“Their teeth only found my armour,” Humphrey said.

“I took a few claws and a spike or two, but no bites,” Sophie said.

Jason used his affliction absorbing power on Sophie, cleansing the poison of the spitter-frog spines.

“My blood powers were quite effective,” Jason said. “Turns out vampires are a bit susceptible to blood magic.”

“We can have the post-fight discussion later,” Humphrey said. “For now, we put as much distance between us and that spider as we can.”

Chapter 230

Terms of the Pact

“Those vampiric monsters were a bit disappointing,” Jason said. “They didn’t seem so much vampiric as hung over. A bit peaky, bloodshot eyes. They didn’t even summon any bats.”

“They’re spider vampires,” Neil said. “Why would they summon bats?”

“Well they didn’t summon any spiders, either.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” Belinda said. “Didn’t the spider kind of summon them?”

“That’s a good point,” Jason said.

The team had extricated themselves from the ring of dense jungle, returning to relatively intact streets and buildings of the overgrown city. They made sure they were well clear before putting up the cloud house and stopping to rest.

“Everyone take a good rest,” Humphrey said. “From here on out, our sole focus is on getting stronger.”

“It’s a shame there’s no movie essence,” Jason mused to himself. “A training montage power would be OP.”

“What nonsense are you talking now?” Sophie asked.

“I think I know this,” Clive. “There’s a fable from your world about learning to fight by cleaning an old man’s carriage, right?”

“There are different renditions of the story,” Jason said. “A lot of it comes down to your tolerance for power ballads. The message, though, is that everything we do is kung fu. That’s a term that, where I come from, has come to mean martial arts. What it really means, though, is accomplishment through diligent effort. Every action we take and every word we say is something that shapes us. The diligent person acts to improve and empower themselves.”

“Then why do you run around like a mad person, talking nonsense, instead of being all diligent?” Neil asked.

“Because everything is a weapon,” Jason said, “and there are few weapons as powerful as the way people look at you.”

Jason’s expression went through a subtle, yet powerful change. The cocky smile was suddenly sinister, his laughing eyes becoming predatory as they locked down on Neil. Neil shifted uncomfortably in his seat, unnerved as Jason watched him like a hawk eying a

mouse. Then Jason flashed a grin, eyes twinkling as he dissolved the tension as suddenly as he brought it about.

“Everything is a weapon,” Jason repeated, “if you know how to use it. There’s no better weapon you can hand an enemy than being predictable. Every one of you has, at some point, told someone to not bother trying to understand what I’m talking about. If someone doesn’t even try and understand me, that’s a weapon and shield they’ve just handed to me for nothing.”

“What about your allies?” Neil asked. “Don’t they need to rely on you?”

“They do need to, yes. Do you trust me, Humphrey?”

“Yes.”

“Clive?”

“Yeah.”

“Sophie?”

“Yes.”

Jason smiled at Neil.

“What about you, Neil? Do you trust me to stand at your back? That I’ll be there when you need me to be?”

“I guess I do,” Neil admitted.

“You grew up in a world of magical power,” Jason said, turning his gaze from Neil to address the whole team. “Direct, objective, honest power. I come from a political world, where power is nebulous and the wars are as much about ideology as territory. We grow up watching leaders who need to sway the populace in order to hold power, even as the populace can share information in ways that would be as amazing to you as magic was to me.”

Jason nodded at Humphrey.

“Humphrey’s mother encouraged our friendship because she recognised that I had a more political mind than is normally to be found in Greenstone. I’m sure it’s different in more cosmopolitan cities, but the politics here are amateurish and crude. Dangerous, yes, because power always is, but not especially complicated. She wanted Humphrey to get to know me so that he would see the next guy like me coming.”

Jason conjured his dagger into his hand.

“This,” he said, “is the weakest weapon there is. A blade can cut down a person but words can bring down a kingdom. Adultery can end a dynasty, greed can start a war and compassion can end one. People will die for strangers out of faith and kill their neighbours out of fear.”

He casually tossed aside the dagger and it vanished.

“Everything is a weapon,” he concluded. “The trick is learning to wield them without doing yourself an injury.”

The room fell quiet in the wake of Jason’s impromptu speech, until Sophie broke the silence.

“Gods damn, you like to hear yourself talk.”

The team fell into a regimented schedule of physical training, skill training, mental training and monster hunting. Days became weeks and Humphrey joined Clive at bronze rank, his square-jawed handsomeness becoming even more pronounced.

Clive had already reached bronze rank and was relegated to lowest priority during training. This afforded him the time to study the changes to the astral space’s ambient magic. He was trying to learn what was causing the changes and how it was preventing them from using portals or escaping. He didn’t find the answers he was looking for, but he did make other discoveries, which he laid out one evening in the cloud house.

“The magical density is increasing,” he announced to the team. “I’m not exactly sure why, but something seems to be forcing a highly dense magic into this astral space.”

“What does that mean for us?” Humphrey asked.

“A few things,” Clive said. “One, we aren’t getting out of here until we find whatever is causing this and stop it. Two, we need to keep up this training because the monsters are going to be getting stronger. We’ll see less iron-ranks over time and running into a silver will become more and more of an inevitability. Three, the rate at which this astral space will break down is on an increasingly steep curve. We’re still talking a matter of years, for the moment, but as the magical density goes up, the time frame will come down.”

“Well that’s only completely terrifying,” Neil said.

“What do you recommend we do?” Humphrey asked.

“We already have the right plan,” Clive said. “Improving our strength is more important than ever, and the cultists are still our best chance at getting a handle on what’s happening. We need to deal with that blood weaver and hopefully figure out what they were up to.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “Jason, Sophie and Belinda; we’ll be pushing all the focus onto you. Once Jason reaches bronze we’ll move immediately on the blood weaver. Sophie and Belinda, we’ll get you to bronze as quickly as we can. We can’t have you still at iron rank if we’re going to be meeting silver rank monsters with any regularity.”

Belinda's abilities were progressing at a steady, but not exceptional pace. She had reached the point where she could comfortably fight small groups of iron-rank monsters alone, using the abilities that gave her temporary skills. They found that she actually advanced more quickly from group fights, where more of her powers could be used effectively.

Belinda's jack-of-all-trades power set lacked the punch to jump ranks and fight a bronze-rank monster alone. Sophie had no such problems, relishing both the fights and the resulting rapid advancement of her abilities. The monster-infested city was eager to oblige as they saw as many fights in a day as an active adventurer in Greenstone would in a week.

Ranking up the latter stages of an ability was a harder, slower progress, but iron-rank monsters were getting harder to come by, being replaced with more bronze-rankers who offered enough challenge to keep their advancement proceeding at their original pace. The monsters started appearing in the kind of numbers the team had originally encountered the iron-rank ones in and the team was more and more required to fight as a whole instead of peeling off members to maximise the challenge.

Jason had expected his familiar ability for Shade to be the hardest to rank up. Colin and Gordon were both able to engage directly in combat, whereas Shade's power to attack amounted to little more than some mana draining. To Jason's surprise, Shade kept pace with Gordon, rapidly passing through the lower levels of advancement.

While not an attacker, Shade's utility as a shadow-jump target saw Jason heavily rely on him in combat. In hindsight, Jason realised that of course a utility-type familiar would advance from utility tasks. To help that along, he practised sharing the senses of one of Shade's remote bodies. It would be useful in allowing him to directly observe from safety whatever his familiar was scouting out. He could even speak through Shade, although his voice chat was still a superior communication method.

The cult hidden at the Vane Estate had a visitor in the form of Anisa Lasalle. Timos led her through the grounds, now dead and dry as the desert reclaimed them. The hedge maze was now more of a dry twig maze and the cult had cut a more direct path to the centre, through which Timos led the priestess. She had arrived alone, while Timos had a pair of iron-rank lackeys on hand.

"It's been a while, Priestess," Timos said, a smile playing on his lips. "How was your... sabbatical?"

Walking beside him, Anisa Lasalle glanced at Timos with disdain. The elven priestess was wearing extremely fitted adventuring gear, it's monochromatic white barely more pale than her skin. Her platinum hair was bound back in a simple and practical ponytail.

"I detest you and your kind," she said. "Frankly, I would rather have stayed in hiding than deal with you. Each indignity I have suffered over the past months can be laid solely at the feet of your failures."

"Your memory is poor, Priestess," Timos said. "I think you'll find that the impatience of your god has..."

Timos was cut off as Anisa's gloved hand clutched his throat, her thumb pressing savagely into his windpipe. His two lackeys moved to assist but a trio of searing orbs of light appeared to hover threateningly in front of them.

"You will not disparage my god," Anisa told Timos calmly. "In fact, it would be best for all involved if you never profaned his name with your tainted lips. Am I making myself clear?"

Timos nodded, choking all the more at the action, but she released him and he fell to his knees, coughing and spluttering. His eyes shot venom up at her as he rubbed his throat, but he nodded again.

"I understand," he said.

"See that you do. Now stand up; I'm not going to stand idle, waiting for you to recover from the latest in a long series of errors."

Timos's people looked ready to act, but he stilled them with a head shake. The gesture was not unnoticed by Anisa, but she did not deign to comment. He staggered to his feet and they continued on, reaching what had once been the well at the centre of the maze.

No one had checked on the estate since the Rejector's party had passed through and the cult had decided excavating the well and the crawl tunnel at the bottom was an acceptable risk. One of the cultists with earth-shaping powers had created a set of stone stairs into what was originally a natural cavern. The wooden walkway once traversed by Jason had been removed and the walls and floor smoothed out. Stone walls had been put up to form a subterranean complex. They had no woodworker, so despite ample materials above, curtains were hanging in place of doors. Glow stones affixed to the walls lit the rooms and hallways.

Timos led the priestess through the complex, but she stopped halfway. Her eyes were boring into one of the cultists, a grizzled man moving a crate of supplies.

"You," she said to the man. "I know you."

“Yes, Miss. I’m Dougall. I let you out of the cage, when the blood cult had you captured.”

“A rat jumping ship,” she said. “You caught wind of Remore putting paid to your little branch of the Red Table and realised you would need a new master. The blood cult deals with failure in very carnivorous ways, after all. Clearly you knew much more of Landemere Vane’s loyalties than anyone in the household realised. The opportunistic loyalty of a cultist is revealed as base and self-serving in the face of adversity. Where does your faith lie?”

“I…”

“I don’t want you to speak. Or perhaps you should. I remember that you were looking for a taste of elf flesh. Are you still looking to feast on my bones, cultist?”

“I would never, Miss…”

“Pathetic. You aren’t worth the blood stain to kill.”

She swept off, Timos hurrying to keep showing the way. They went all the way to the metal door leading into Landemere Vane’s old ritual room. Everything had been stripped away to the bare stone, the only features being an archway in the centre of the room, the complex ritual circle around it and the mana lamps that artificially heightened the ambient magic, allowing the circle to function. The cult was charging a large number of lamps around the estate to keep the ritual circle operational.

The archway looked like it had been made from salvaged building materials, an irregular construction of cheap-looking, mismatched bricks, held in place with what looked like ordinary mortar.

The silver rank leader of the cultists, Zato, was standing with his back to the door, looking at an inert archway. He turned at their entry, eyes lingering on the marks on Timos’ neck but saying nothing.

“How long?” Anisa demanded, without preamble.

“Weeks,” Zato said. “Two and a half months, at the outside.”

“Two and a half months!” Anisa raged. “You have already had more than enough time!”

“And your church has nowhere near enough patience!” Zato yelled back. “Every problem you blame us for goes back to your church refusing to wait, the way you were counselled. Your insistence on acting so early cost us everything and gained us nothing. It’s like you somehow think you worship the god of time, able to make things happen whenever you want. If your church had been willing to wait, then the cult’s identity and

your trafficking with us would both remain secret. We are still years away from the true beginning, but you had to be impatient children.”

Anisa fumed, but she was bronze to his silver rank and had her orders.

“I am here to inform you that your request is unacceptable,” she said, biting off every word. “We will not be acceding to it.”

“You go and tell your archbishop that not only will his people be joining us in the astral space, but so will he. The laxity of your church cost us every silver-ranker we had in this region. I’m the only exception and I had barely ranked up when your people led the Remores to the island. I hadn’t even been fully inducted into the leadership.”

“The blame for the island does not fall on us.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” Zato sneered. “Every success is your people and every failure is mine. I might as well argue with a child.”

“We lost a gold-ranker in the island attack, so do not come complaining to me,” Anisa said.

“I did not call you here to hear complaints,” Zato said, regaining his composure “I am invoking the terms of the pact. Nicolas Hendren will be leading his people to join us when the tunnel finishes forming and the portal opens. I expect all of you here in two months.”

Anisa gave him a smile that somehow perfectly encapsulated hatred, but said nothing. She turned on the spot and swept out of the room like an angry wind.