

Chapter 253

The Hero of This Story

“Should we be getting out?” Sophie asked as the cloud house continued to shake.

“What if the church collapses on top of the cloud house?”

The cloud house was still hidden in the huge internal space of a cathedral.

“At most, it would be the roof falling on us,” Clive said. “That’s not enough to breach the cloud house, especially now it’s been upgraded to bronze-rank.”

“Yep,” Jason said. “We go out there and the first thing that happens is we fall on the ground. The second thing that happens is the ground falls on us.”

The shaking continued for more than a minute before settling down. The team opened the door to find it blocked by debris, but Jason just concentrated and a new door opened elsewhere on the wall. They made their way outside, finding the church half-collapsed. The nearby buildings had likewise suffered extensive damage, already weakened by age and the intrusive jungle growth.

Jason pulled out his cloud flask, into which the cloud house started returning.

“What do you think it was?” Neil asked, looking around. “Oh, I’ve spotted it.”

The others followed his pointed arm with their gaze, seeing the giant tower reaching into the sky. It looked to be in the centre of the city, taller than any building Jason had seen since leaving his own world. He estimated it to be somewhere between twenty-five and thirty storeys tall, made of the same stone as the rest of the city but untouched by jungle growth. There were windows around the outside but they couldn’t see inside at their current distance.

“Was that thing underground, or did the Builder just make it?” Belinda wondered aloud.

“If he did,” Clive said, “then he must have burned that vessel to a cinder. That tower would take far more power to create than knocking up some walls.”

“I think that might not be all,” Jason said.

Jason had received a system message right as the rumbling had come to an end.

➤ [Mapped areas of your current region are out of date. Visit affected areas to update details.](#)

Jason pulled up his map. The whole city had been revealed over their months in the astral space, but now a series of areas were once more occluded. Worrying, but

unsurprising, were their locations. Along with the former site of the Order of the Reaper's tower, was the towers around the city's edge and the golem hidden within.

"Something has changed at the towers around the city as well," Jason said and told the others about the changes to his map. As it was a separate ability to his party interface, he was unable to share it with the team except for Belinda. She could mimic it by shapeshifting into Jason's form.

"What do we do now?" Sophie asked. "Do we go and scout this new tower?"

"The cult forces will almost certainly be gathered there," Humphrey said. "I'm hesitant to make that move without a plan or objective."

"Why don't we take a look at the towers around the city?" Belinda suggested. "If the cult is going to them, they either need to split their forces or go through them one at a time."

"Meaning that we either run into a group we can handle, or don't run into them at all," Humphrey said. "I like it. I just hope that whatever we find there can finally let us figure out what the Builder is doing."

"That seems likely," Clive said. "Anything to do with those world engineer golems in the towers has to be on a grandiose scale."

"I think that qualifies," Neil said, glancing up at the tower looming over the city centre. "You don't suppose that there's an even bigger golem inside that tower?"

"It'd be an awfully skinny golem," Jason said.

"I really doubt the Builder just stone-shaped that tower into being," Clive said. "I think it's magical infrastructure that's been hidden this whole time."

"That's not even a surprise, at this point," Sophie said. "Add it to the absurd list of secrets in this place."

"If I can take a look at some of that infrastructure," Clive continued, "then maybe we can figure out how to top it."

"Something this large and this involved has to have a bunch of potential failure points," Jason said.

"Exactly," Clive said.

"Well then," Humphrey said. "Let's go looking for them."

It was a relatively short journey from the original walled fort to the new tower the Builder had caused to rise up from the crater at the heart of the city. Buried deep below where the Reaper's tower had stood for centuries, the new tower proclaimed the new dominant force in the astral space.

The remainder of the Builder's forces and resources were moving from the fort to the tower, where they were occupying the bottom floors. There had space enough for all of their people, especially with the teams that had already been sent off in the direction of the towers around the edges of the city. It also had defences enough that it would take a concerted effort by powerful monsters to threaten it.

"Do you think the Rejector will come here?" Zato asked. He and Timos were on the third floor of the tower looking out a window. It was the highest floor the cultists were occupying. Even they were unsure of what was contained above, having been forbidden from going higher by the Builder.

"It's hard to know," Timos said. He had been one of the cult's ringleaders in Greenstone and knew more about what had gone on there than most of the cult. He had been present for the Rejector's rise to prominence, although he only knew so much. By the time the Rejector's true fame came about, Timos had been driven from the city by Thalia Mercer and her obsessive purge.

"Asano is famously hard to predict," Timos said. "The things I've heard are strange and contradictory. Coming here would be foolish but he's made foolish choices before."

"I don't think he will," Zato said. "The Lord Builder believes that he will attempt to sabotage the towers."

"Is that even possible?" Timos asked.

"The Lord Builder told me that he has taken steps to ensure that the Rejector makes the attempt. Once he encounters one of our teams at a tower, though, the new adapted response teams will move to the adjacent towers to intercept them when they move to complete what they think is sabotage."

"They're completed already?"

"The ritualist team have been doing well since we moved them from astral magic work to their actual area of expertise," Zato said. "They have not only finished the new constructs but modified the old ones as well. As for the converted, the Builder made those changes personally."

Before the team reached the closest of the city's exterior towers, they stopped to let Jason and Sophie scout ahead. What they found was that the tower remained intact, with no discernable changes. Like all the towers, it abutted right against the water that ringed the city, but now there was a new feature.

A second tower was now present, around a dozen metres directly off shore from the first. It was a mirror of the existing tower, aside from a lack of the portal archway on the

top. In its place was some kind of plinth. They couldn't make out details, but they could see a magical glow shining from it.

A stone pathway had also arisen to form a bridge from the base of the original tower to the new one, leading to stairs spiralling up, around the outside. These had already been used by the two cultists they could see atop the tower. They had a single construct with them and a handful of converted. It was a small force, barely enough to make their way through a city infested with monsters now travelling in herds.

"Why so few?" Sophie wondered as she and Jason watched from a nearby rooftop.

"They have numbers, but they aren't infinite," Jason said. "If Shade is right, most of their force are those converted, now. They would have sacrificed all their iron-rankers to make them because iron-rankers are no good here."

"You think the Builder just sent a few to minimise his losses, wherever we turned up?"

"Or it's a trap," Jason said. "Shade is scouting around for any hidden reinforcements."

The team carefully joined them as Shade continued to look for any cultists lurking about and they started discussing how to strike.

"We don't want to show off our strongest tactics," Humphrey said. "Everything the Builder sees now will be less effective when it comes to the big fight."

"There's going to be a big fight?" Neil asked. "I don't suppose we could avoid that."

"The Builder will know the vulnerabilities of what he's doing," Clive said. "He wants to drag us into a fight against his superior forces, so he'll make sure they're between us and whatever we need to get to."

"We need to hide our greater strengths," Humphrey said, "while making enough of a splash that it doesn't look like we're holding back."

"Something flashy," Neil said. "I think I might have an idea."

There were two cultists on the new tower, along with the construct and the converted that were their protection. One of the two was looking over a notebook while the other was looking through a crate she had taken from a dimensional bag.

"I really hope the Rejector doesn't come here," the man going through the crate said. "That guy scares the crap out of me."

"I don't see why so many of us are so worried about that guy," the woman with the notebook said. "He's just some adventurer who got lucky."

"No," he said. "I felt that soul projection that was blasted over the city in Greenstone. That terrified me. It was like my star seed was scared of his aura."

“That’s nonsense.,” she replied. “That’s like saying the Lord Builder is scared of him. He’s just angry that the Rejector defied him. Beings that powerful aren’t used to not getting their way.”

“You should be careful with your words about the Builder.”

“He doesn’t mind the truth. He’s not some god with fragile sensibilities. And don’t worry about the Rejector. The Builder will bring him to heel. In the end, the Rejector is just another bronze-ranker. Like us.”

He shook his head. “We know better than anyone the power of the Builder. What kind of person do you have to be to even try and stand up to that, let alone win?”

“He didn’t win. He endured.”

“Against the Builder, that is winning. The Rejector may be a lot of things, but like us is not one of them.”

“Why don’t you go throw in with him then, if he’s so impressive.”

“I’ve chosen to follow the Builder. Power and victory, no regrets. I know he’ll deal with the Rejector sooner, rather than later. I’m just saying I don’t want to run into the Rejector before that happens.”

She notebook felt a surge of magic and looked up just in time to see her fellow cultist vanish. In his place was a man in dark robes.

“G’day,” the man said with a grin and plucked the notebook from the startled cultist’s hands. “I might be able to resist the Builder, but I couldn’t resist an entry line like that.”

The converted and the construct turned on Jason immediately but a bubble shield appeared around him. A stone claw landed on the shield and it immediately exploded with force. The cultist, the converted and the construct were all blasted off the sides of the tower.

On a nearby rooftop, the cultist who had been switch-teleported away by Clive suddenly found himself surrounded. He didn’t have enough time to look around in surprise before Humphrey’s sword came down.

“Let’s get down there,” Humphrey said to Sophie. “That fall won’t have killed them.”

“I get the construct, you get the converted?” Sophie asked. “The construct I can at least chip away at.”

“That works for me,” Humphrey said and they both ran to the edge of the rooftop and leapt off.

Jason was reading through the confiscated notebook when the others joined him atop the new tower. He was looking between the book and the plinth in the centre, which was

covered in glowing runes. It had the look of a control panel, like the one used to operate a mirage chamber.

“What do you have there?” Clive asked.

“Some kind of instruction manual,” Jason said. “There’s a simple, direct list of what order to push stuff in for someone who really doesn’t know what they’re doing, but there’s more about the functionality if you go deeper in. With all the magic study I’ve been doing, I can actually understand it.”

“That’s good,” Clive said. “I always told you that understanding theory was important.”

“When you’re right, you’re right,” Jason said. “This tower we’re standing on seems to be an activation tower for the other one. If we ignore the instructions at the front and don’t do that, I think I’ve spotted a way we can actually sabotage the tower, instead.”

“Great,” Clive said. “I’d best give it a look over.”

“Do you not trust me?” Jason asked, mock hurt.

“Trust is relative,” Clive said. “A ritual for digging a hole, I’m happy to trust you got it right. When massive death and destruction is on the line, I think it’s worth double checking.”

“That seems fair,” Jason said.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Clive said, “if saving the day comes down to rakish insouciance, I’ll bow to your expertise. We just have different areas of specialty.”

“You’re saying that your thing is useful and practical magic that’s incredibly useful to adventurers and mine is dashing good looks and frivolous charm?”

“That wasn’t what I...”

“I’m completely okay with that,” Jason said, slapping the notebook into Clive’s hand.

“If you’re going to be reading, read fast,” Humphrey said. “We have no idea how long it will take for the Builder to send people here.”

“I know the Builder can see through his followers,” Belinda said, “but how well?”

“It can’t be perfectly,” Jason said. “Otherwise he wouldn’t be using those things.”

He nodded his head at a broken eye spider construct.

“I found that thing hiding behind the plinth, which his why it didn’t get blasted off the side. Had to squash it myself.”

He picked up the small construct.

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- [Spyder \(destroyed\).](#)
 - [Drone \(iron rank\).](#)
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“Spyders are cooler where I come from.”

Walking over to the edge of the building, he dropped it off the side. Clive started looking through the book and Belinda started rifling through the dimensional bag they had taken from the cultist they had teleported into their midst. She pulled out a crate holding six identical magic devices.

“Are these mana lamps?” she asked.

“They are,” Clive said, glancing up from the notebook for only a moment.

“Those are for artificially raising magical density, to use high-end rituals in areas of low-end magic,” Jason said. “Carlos used them with that soul projection ritual.”

“What would they need those for?” Belinda asked. “They’re the ones who raised the magic density here.”

“I’m not sure they intended to,” Clive said, not looking up. “I think the damage to the dimensional membrane was unintentional.”

“There’s a whole bunch of them in here,” Belinda said, pulling out two more crates. “They must be intending to do some heavy rituals.”

“They look high end,” Clive said, despite not appearing to look up. “Good mana lamps are expensive, so we should take them.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Belinda said, putting one of the crates in her dimensional space. Humphrey did the same and Jason took the last one for his own inventory.

“It looks like you were right about the potential for sabotage, Jason,” Clive said, but he didn’t sound happy.

“You seem grouchy that I got it right,” Jason.

“It’s not that,” Clive said, still frowning at the book in his hand. “Something about this is niggling at me and I can’t figure out what.”

“Well, the notebook looks new,” Jason said. “The Builder might have even knocked it out himself. He seems like the one who knows how this place works, after all. I have to imagine he has a somewhat alien mind, which might be coming across in the way he organised the book.”

“Huh,” Clive said, turning the book over in his hands. “It does look like it was freshly made. He might have been the one to make it.”

He opened the book again and started rapidly skimming. “Oh, you sneaky... yes, the Builder wrote this. It’s a trap.”

“A trap?” Jason asked.

“The way this is written,” Clive said. “The sabotage you mentioned. It’s hidden, but only just enough that someone with a reasonable amount of magical knowledge could tease it out. It’s bait. The Builder wrote this specifically for Jason and his level of

knowledge. The sabotage seems like it would work, but I think it would just put on bit of a magic reaction that didn't really do anything."

"Why?" Humphrey asked.

"Because the 'sabotage,' would need to be done at every tower," Clive said.

"I see," Humphrey said. "The Builder's reinforcements aren't coming here. He's probably split them and sent them to the closest towers to ambush us."

"But why set a trap for Jason?" Neil asked. "Didn't he know Clive would figure it out?"

"No," Jason said. "The builder is an existence on a scale we can even comprehend. An entity like that doesn't learn about a mortal until it has to. Unless you give it a reason, the rest of you are just the Rejector's team. That why I went blabbering into that spyder thing yesterday."

"What do you mean?" Sophie asked.

"I can't stop the Builder and save the day," Jason said. "I don't have the skills or the knowledge. Clive is the hero of this story. He's our secret weapon. The Builder is focused on me because I'm the one that defied him, so my job is to keep that focus and keep our secret weapon secret."

"I'm the hero?" Clive asked. "I don't feel like the hero."

"See? You're getting it already," Jason said. "Claiming that you're not the hero is classic hero behaviour. You could stand to get that voice a bit more gravelly, though."

"You don't really think you can provoke the Builder with a few taunts, do you?" Neil asked Jason. "The Builder isn't some crime boss or pervy bureaucrat you can aggravate with your regular nonsense."

"Of course not. It doesn't matter what he thinks about me, just that it's me he's thinking about. I'm the guy that defied the will of the great Builder. We need him to keep thinking of the rest of you as the silhouettes in the background, because that's how you're going to beat him."

"Speaking of which," Humphrey said. "The sabotage is a trap, but is there anything in that book that will help up stop the Builder, or is that whole thing a lie?"

"The book seems authentic," Clive said. "It pretty much has to be or it would be too easy to give the game away. It's just organised in such a fashion as to subtly lead people below a certain knowledge threshold to a specific conclusion."

"I got suckered, you mean," Jason said.

"Describe it how you like," Clive said, "but yes. I'll need more time with this book if I'm going to find something useful."