

Chapter 909

Sometimes We Need Scars

When she'd been young — well, younger — Jennifer Landry had loved having visiting adventurers stay at her boarding house. All those powerful and attractive young people, politely calling her 'Madam Landry.' As years went on, the desire for excitement slowly gave way to a desire for reliability. Rather than cater to out-of-towners who were often interesting but frequently volatile, she shifted to catering to locals.

She didn't aim for the top-shelf adventurers, which they actually had now in Greenstone. The training program set up by the Geller and Remore families were producing better adventurers, especially now that Adventure Society assessments were being conducted legitimately.

Madam Landry found that the second-tier adventurers were the perfect clientele. Long-term tenants, they had the money to pay but the humility of not being the cocks of the roost. It was an unconventional bit of excitement, then, when one of her adventurers came bursting to the lobby, almost taking the door off the hinges.

"Dean Tuckell, if you take that door off, you're the one paying for a new one," she scolded.

"Sorry, Madam Landry, but I just heard something incredible at the Adventure Society. Is Jerrick here?"

"He's in the bath house, dear, but I..."

Dean shot off without listening.

"...don't think he's alone."

Gold-rankers were figures of legend in a low-magic town like Greenstone, making Emir's visit all those years ago a real event. Jason remembered his cloud ship sailing up to the private Adventure Society dock in grandiose fashion. But he had also known that Emir had been in the city for days before, in secret.

Jason followed this model, quietly reaching the city with several of his friends, days before his official arrival. His goal was to reacquaint himself with the city, indulging in the nostalgia of his early days as an adventurer. Jason, Belinda and Estella Warnock portalled to an old spirit coin transport waystation, not too far from the city. It had been abandoned years ago, after the local Magic Society director and a local crime boss had an adventurer tortured in the storeroom.

Emerging from the portal, The trio immediately staggered.

“It’s like trying to breathe when the air’s too thin,” Belinda gasped. “What’s happening?”

- You have entered a region of low magical density. High ranking individuals will suffer deleterious effects without supplemental magic.
 - Stamina recovery reduced by 50%.
 - Health Recovery reduced by 75%.
 - Mana recovery reduced by 99%.
 - Consuming a spirit coin of your rank or ten spirit coins of one rank lower will restore your recovery rates to normal for eight hours. This duration is reduced by using active magic abilities.
 - Rituals and summoning abilities require spirit coins to enact, in addition to any spirit coin cost they already have. Rituals will be unable to function without artificially enhancing the density of local ambient magic.
 - Summoned familiars will need to consume a spirit coin of their rank or ten coins of one rank lower to sustain their vessels. Consumption of spirit coins will allow them to maintain their vessels outside of the summoner for one day before requiring additional coins. This duration is reduced by using active magic abilities.
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“Oh,” Belinda said, reading the system message.

She pulled out her summoned familiars, an astral lantern that orbited droopily around her, and an echo spirit that looked like a blurry version of her. She plucked a handful of spirit coins from her storage space, pushed one into the lantern and handed the others to Gemini, the echo spirit, and Estella. She ate one herself as Jason declined the one she held out to him.

“I think I can compensate by drawing magic from my astral kingdom,” he said. He was half crouched, hands on his knees. “I’m still figuring out what I can and can’t do with this body. Just give me a few minutes.”

While Jason concentrated, occasionally making sounds like he was having trouble using the toilet, Estella and Belinda looked around. They were in an area between the sprawling river delta and the bone-dry desert. The waystation itself was an area of magically flattened stone, largely covered in windswept sand. There was a security booth, the glass in the windows long gone, and a large storage bunker. Of the bunker’s double doors, one was missing and the other dangled precariously from the remaining hinge. Beyond, stairs led down.

“How is this a memorable enough place to portal to?” Estella asked. “You haven’t been to this city in a couple of decades, right?”

“Yeah,” Jason croaked.

Belinda looked around, ending with her gaze fixed on the broken door.

“Jason, is this...?”

“Yeah,” he confirmed.

“Why would you bring us here?”

“Like Stella said, it’s memorable. You can still feel a little of my aura imprinted down there, if you look closely. Some things linger. Oh, bugger this, I’ll try again later.”

Jason took out a spirit coin and ate it, making a distasteful face as it melted on his tongue. Shade and Gordon appeared. Shade took a coin from his own storage space and consumed it while Jason tossed another into the nebulous void that was Gordon. He held his palm out and a leech crawled out through his skin. Jason held out a spirit coin for the leech to eat, but it turned it’s tooth-ringed maw away.

“Come on, Colin.”

The leech let out an alien screech of rejection.

“If you don’t eat this, you won’t be able to come out and eat anything else.”

While Jason was coaxing Colin into eating something that wasn’t at least recently alive, Belinda and Estella made their way to the door.

“That’s a good boy,” Jason said, scratching the top of the leech after it finally ate the coin. As Colin retreated back under Jason’s skin, Jason moved to join the others as they looked down the stairs.

“Shade and Gordon weren’t with me when this happened,” he said. “We’d just fought a water tyrant. Silver rank. It destroyed both of their vessels and left me with what, to this day, remains my largest scar. Colin was with me for this, though. Wouldn’t have made it through without him.”

“Made it through what?” Estella asked.

Instead of answering, Jason walked around them and went down the stairs.

“Jason,” Belinda called after him. “Are you sure you want to go down there?”

Elsbeth Arella was not happy. Being director of Greenstone’s Adventure Society branch was always intended to be a stepping stone. The first stage in a career that would lead her out of the magical and literal desert that was Greenstone. Then came the disastrous expedition. The aftermath of that failure, and the investigation that followed, undid everything she had worked for.

Her backroom dealings were dragged into the light, as was her status as daughter of an Old City crime lord. She barely held on to her position, which went from the first step in

a storied career to a purgatory she could not escape. Twenty years later, nothing had changed. Even her father had risen, from last man standing of the Big Three crime lords to legitimate mayor of Old City. They were both important members of Greenstone Society, now, but where he felt elevated, she felt trapped.

Leaning against the desk in her office, Elspeth rubbed her temples as she stared at a spot on the floor. Twenty years ago, she had used her powers to lift some jumped up iron-ranker by the throat, dropping him on that very spot. Now, that same speck of nothing was scheduled to arrive in just a few days, to great fanfare.

Twenty years on, things were very different. He was a gold-ranker, well-trained and battle hardened, with countless accolades to his name. She was a core-using silver-rank bureaucrat with a dead-end career. She'd heard the stories, even across the world. Running around with diamond rankers, coming back from the dead. Driving off the Builder, which was even more nonsensical than the rest. It all sounded like fanciful nonsense. But she'd seen the missives from the Adventure Society, and they weren't treating it like nonsense. There was an actual standing order to put a branch on low alert if he entered its jurisdiction.

She had been much happier when Asano was dead the first time. Giving his life to save the city made him a useful figure of noble sacrifice, but martyrs were awkward if they didn't stay dead. There was even a statue of him somewhere on the campus grounds. She'd had a bush grown in front of it after he came back to life.

She doubted he would forget that she tried to teach him a lesson that didn't take. Two ranks higher than him, her power wrapped around his throat. She didn't even remember what it was about. What she didn't forget was the defiant eyes that would rather let her choke him out than yield to her authority.

Would he kill her on this very spot, where it happened? The Adventure Society would give him a slap on the wrist, if that. They wouldn't chastise their interdimensional golden boy over a dead bureaucrat with a dead-end career. Not after everything he'd gotten away with already.

She sighed and pushed herself off her desk. There were a lot more feathers than hers to unruffle before Asano arrived, so she might as well get to it, on the off chance that she survived his visit.

Jason reached the basement storage area. The dry climate had preserved the interior enough that it hadn't completely degraded, but it showed the years of abandonment. A little sand had blown down the stairs, although not so much as to cover the bloodstain

spread out like a carpet. The blood pool spread out through the large storage room, too much to have come from one person under normal circumstances. Jason's self-healing had replenished him over and over as he bled out, but only Colin's help sustained him. His own regenerative power had been insufficient to last him through the ordeal.

The chains were still there, seized and rusty now. They lay on the floor where he'd yanked them from the ceiling in his escape. When he was last in the room, there had been a pile of tiny star seed fragments, pushed out of his body and leaving many small scars behind in the process. Those were long gone, no doubt claimed by the magic Society. Those were the early days of the Builder cult becoming active, making the fragments prime materials for study.

Belinda and Estella followed Jason down the stairs. They didn't share Jason's ability to see perfectly through the dark, so Belinda tossed out a floating glow stone to reveal the macabre scene.

"What is this?" Estella asked. "Is that your blood?"

"Yeah."

"All of it?"

"It was a rough day."

"What happened here?"

"This is where I found out who I am," Jason said. "When you strip away everything until there's nothing left to take. I don't recommend the experience."

His gaze didn't shift from the blood stain. The two women shared a side glance, then looked at Jason still facing the other way.

"This seems like a bad place to forge a personal identity," Estella said.

Jason laughed, the sound incongruous in the grim remnants of the torture chamber.

"Yeah," he said. "It very much is. But sometimes, you don't get to choose."

"You said you found yourself down here," Estella said. "That's a little concerning, if I'm being honest. Who did you find out you were?"

"Don't encourage him," Belinda hissed. "We don't want him going all dark and broody again."

Jason turned and gave her a smile.

"It's fine, Lindy. Sometimes we need scars to remind us that we can heal. Yes, the worst experience of my life happened in this room. But a lot of who I am, good and bad, began right here. If I can't face that, I'll be stuck in this room my whole life. And as for your question, Stella, I was put here by a conspiracy of forces that included a church, a cult, a

crime lord, a corrupt Magic Society director and a great astral being. I was iron rank. Ambushed by a silver ranker and chained up, naked but for a suppression collar.”

“How does that explain who you are?” Estella asked.

“Lindy, do you remember what I was doing when you all arrived and found me?”

“You were upstairs, adjusting the cuff links on your suit like you’d just walked out of the theatre.”

“That’s who I am, Estella. The guy who wins. It doesn’t matter who or what you are. How many people or how much power you have. You might kill me, you might scour my soul, but I’ll come back stronger, and I still won. That’s who I am.”

He walked past them and back up the stairs.

“That,” Estella said, “is the single most arrogant thing I have ever heard in my life. And I spend a lot of my time spying on aristocrats.”

“Well, sure,” Belinda said, “but we’re all shaped by our experiences. I’ve seen Jason fight a god, but I’ve never seen him lose.”

Estella looked at the blood stain again.

“Did all that really happen?” Estella asked. “The crime boss, the church, everything.”

“It was the Church of Purity, before people started to realise they were going bad. We actually killed the archbishop not that long after this.”

“And Jason just walked away?”

“Oh, gods, no. That thing with the cuff links? It was basically the last vestiges of his mind doing what he does, which is put on a smug façade to hid that he’s half a step from losing his mind. What he didn’t mention was the months of catatonia and intensive therapy that followed. Not many people manage to throw off a star seed implantation, so they called in a mental specialist and a soul specialist. The best the church of the Healer had. It still took them months to stitch a functional person back together.”

“So, the cult and the corrupt official and whatever else. What did an iron ranker do to get that many people going after him?”

Belinda looked up the stairs.

“You remember Jory?”

Her face took on an uncomfortable expression.

“Yes.”

“Me and Soph were in a real bad spot. And I mean it started bad and had been getting worse for months, like fermenting a turd.”

“Lindy..”

“Sorry. But the whole city was hunting us. Duke’s guards, adventurers, everyone. Even the crime boss that was meant to be protecting us was getting ready to sell us out. Jason and Clive were the ones that caught us. Jory wanted to help, but how could he? He’d have to go up against some of the most powerful people in the city.”

“Which sounds like exactly what Jason would do.”

“Now you’re getting it.”

“But he was the one that caught you?”

“Clive caught me. Didn’t think the Magic Society had anyone that smart. Jason caught Sophie; messed her up bad in the process. Those afflictions of his, you know? Caught up to her being healed by Jory, and that’s where things get interesting. He found out that Jory wanted to help us, and Jory was his friend, so he did. Just like that. No questions, no hesitation. Went up against the Director’s of the Adventure Society and the Magic Society, for two thieves he only knew from the time one of them kicked him in the face. We all thought he was crazy.”

“But he wasn’t.”

“Yes, he was! The guy’s a lunatic. Make those sorts of enemies and you’ll find yourself chained up in a hole somewhere, being bled out.”

Estella turned back to look at the blood stain and the rusty chains. Belinda leaned against the taller woman, slipping an arm around her.

“He saved Sophie and me when everyone else couldn’t or wouldn’t,” she said. “He went up against powerful people to make that happen, but he won. This was the price he paid.”

“Is he going to be alright, coming back here?”

“I don’t think he would have, if he wasn’t. It’s kind of his thing. One time, we were out on a road contract, and he took us to a place where a cult tried to sacrifice him to summon a blood monster.”

“Is that the same cult involved in all this?” Estella asked, gesturing at the blood pool.

“No, it was a different cult.”

“And different to that Order of Redeeming Light Purity cult back in Rimaros? The one Sophie’s mum belonged to?”

“Yeah. Also different to the Order of the Reaper, which Sophie’s mum also belonged to, and the Cult of the Reaper, which Sophie’s mum’s boyfriend belongs to.”

“Why does he keep getting involved with cults?”

“I stopped asking questions like that a long time ago. You just have to go with it.”

Dean didn't notice the sounds coming from inside the bath house as he tossed aside the 'occupied' sign in front the door, which he flung open and rushed through. There was an immediate splashing and yelling.

A few moments later, Dean had his back turned and his arm over his eyes for good measure. His teammate was in the bath, half-standing to shield the elf lady sharing the bath and using him as a privacy screen.

"I'm charging an extra half if he's going to watch," she said.

"Dean," Jerrick growled. "What in the Healer's bag of smoking herbs inspired you to come in here like that?"

Dean moved to turn around in his excitement but managed to stop himself.

"I heard something at the Adventure Society," he said.

"You'd have heard something inside this bathhouse if you weren't fired up like a bog lurker in heat. What's got you so—"

"He's coming back! Jason Asano is coming back to Greenstone!"

"When?"

"I don't know. I just heard it and rushed straight over."

"Well, we need to find out more."

"Yeah!"

Jerrick lurched out of the bath and started rubbing himself dry with a towel.

"Sorry, Lucy, I have to go. Feel free to charge me for the whole hour."

"Damn straight, I'm charging you for the whole hour. I don't care how big your—"

"Jerrick, are you coming or what?" Dean called from outside.

Jason parted ways with Belinda and Estella, after several reassurances to Belinda that he was fine. Once she accepted that he wasn't lying *too* much, she took off with Estella for the city, in a Shade-produced land skimmer.

Jason looked to the nearby delta edge, a shift from desert to verdant growth so neat it could only be magic. The Mistrun River carried water dense with life and water energy, making for the rich and swampy delta. Greenstone rice and tea from further upriver were both local specialties, although a small slice of trade compared to spirit coin export.

Back before he had a team, Jason would blow off steam by heading into the delta on foot. He'd roam the tall embankment roads that ran between mangrove swamps and paddy fields, moving from village to village. He developed a gliding-running style that used his cloak to reduce his weight. It allowed him to travel at relatively swift speeds without exhausting his mana or stamina.

It was a technique he had long ago left behind. Before Shade, before he had a team around him. Before the Builder's star seed was put inside him, setting him on a course to fight angels, gods and monsters with the fate of worlds on the line.

He had used the technique to roam the delta for a week or more at a time, taking trips alone to clear his head. He'd roam the towns and villages of the delta, healing the sick and clearing off contracts from their adventure boards. He looked back at the storage room door, then back at the delta. He laughed to himself, conjured his cloak and set off.

Almost immediately, he stumbled and landed face first in the sand.

He laughed again as Shade emerged from his shadow.

"Mr Asano, what are you doing?"

"An old trick. I seem to have lost the knack."