

Chapter 1: Strange Business

Jason woke up naked, face down in the grass. That was not how he expected to wake up, having gone to sleep in his own bed and his own Darth Vader boxer shorts. From the feel of cool grass on his unmentionables, he had been removed from his bed and shorts both. The last thing he recalled was doing what he did most nights; playing video games until he got tired and fumbling his way into bed.

The grass he woke up on was weirdly comfortable; a dense bed of lush green softness. It wasn't like any grass he had encountered before, which was a little unusual. His father was a landscape architect, and Jason had grown up learning more about grass than he ever wanted. Mostly because it was the only escape from his mother's Japanese lessons.

Jason rolled himself over and sat up. He was feeling very odd, beyond just the circumstances. It wasn't a bad sensation, more like waking up after a really long sleep. There was the lingering sopor, but also a feeling of refreshed energy. He ran a hand over his head, only to be startled to realise his hair was missing.

"Uh..."

He felt about his head with both hands, but his head was balloon smooth. He made a quick check with his eyes and hands, realising there was no hair at all. No eyebrows, nothing on his chest, or arms, or... other places.

"I thought it was meant to look bigger when you trimmed."

He pushed himself to his feet and started assessing his environment. Casting his gaze to the sky, the sun was high and the air was warm. It was unbroken blue, the blazing orb burning away so much as the merest hint of cloud. Sunburn, more than cold, was likely to threaten his exposed extremities.

Looking around, he was boxed in between two long, tall hedges. Looking up and down the dead-straight lane, it seemed to turn at sharp right angles in either direction. The lane itself was wide and grassy, with plenty of room for unconscious sprawling. The hedge walls were meticulously trimmed.

After an unhappy glance down at his bald, naked body, he set off at random to explore. He quickly discovered he was in a hedge maze, the living walls having been cultivated to almost twice Jason's height. Jason's first thought was to climb one to get a better sense of his location, but a closer examination of the hedges changed his mind. Instead of the usual boxwood, the hedges were something very prickly, and he was very

naked. He looked up and down the path he was on, with neither way looking any better than the other.

“What the bloody hell is going on?”

As if in response to his question, something appeared in front of him. It looked like a touch screen, floating in the air, disembodied. He reached out to touch it with an experimental finger, the screen shimmering as his finger passed straight through.

“Hologram?”

He looked at the ground and the nearby hedges for some kind of projector, but as he started moving, the screen followed. There was text on the screen, which he started reading.

New Quest: [Stranger in a Strange Land]

You have awoken in a place you do not know. Explore the area to discover more.

- **Objective: Explore the hedge maze 0/1.**
- **Reward: Simple pants.**

“Huh.”

He looked around, suspiciously. He even carefully probed the pointy foliage of the hedge walls, looking for hidden cameras. Looking up at the sky, he didn't spot any camera drones. What he did notice was the moon, pale and easy to overlook in the daylight. Then he noticed another moon.

“That can't be right.”

Jason looked down, at the floating screen, then back up at the sky. Still two moons.

“Am I going nuts?”

Jason sat down on the grass, unsure what to do. He kept glancing up at the sky and the extra moon. In front of him, the screen still waited patiently.

“This is crazy. I mean, a quest? I'm not a level 1 sorcerer.”

Another screen appeared next to the first.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: normal.
- Progression to iron rank: 0% (0/4 essences)

Attributes

- [Power] (no essence): normal.
- [Speed] (no essence): normal.
- [Spirit] (no essence): normal.
- [Recovery] (no essence): normal.

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Interface].
- [Quest System].
- [Inventory].
- [Map].
- [Astral Affinity].
- [Mysterious Stranger].

Essences (0/4)

No Essence [No Attribute] (0/5)

No Essence [No Attribute] (0/5)

No Essence [No Attribute] (0/5)

No Essence [No Attribute] (0/5)

“Is this a character sheet? Am I meant to understand any of this?”

He shook his head in bewilderment.

“It could have at least gone with a game system I know.”

He looked over the screen again.

“Map,” he read, latching onto something familiar. “I know what maps are. How do I see the map?”

A new screen obligingly appeared, but as the third screen, the space in front of him was getting crowded. He absently thought it would be convenient for the other screens to close, which they immediately did.

“I’m sure that’s good.”

Things were getting harder to explain away, even ignoring the extra moon. Some kind of voice-command hologram was implausible, but not impossible. Mental command holograms were something else entirely.

“I’m becoming increasingly concerned.”

Hoping it wouldn’t work, he started experimenting. He was able to open and close any of the windows with a simple thought.

“Maybe you’re unconscious,” he reassured himself. “Maybe you have a brain tumour and you’re in a hospital somewhere. Or passed out on the floor. Hallucinating in an asylum. A nice one, with a big garden. But no hedge maze.”

He closed his eyes with a groan. “How is this the way I’m trying to comfort myself?”

He took a deep breath, letting it out slowly before opening his eyes again. The screens were still there, waiting.

“Just go with it, I guess,” he told himself. “Reserve judgement until more information is available. That’s the rational approach.”

He turned his gaze back to the map floating in front of him. It looked like a map from any video game, complete with a location listing.

➤ [Zone: Vane Estate \(Hedge Maze\).](#)

Also like a video game map, it was mostly obscured. The only unveiled portion was the small section of the hedge maze he had already explored. He tried moving the map with mental commands, finding he could zoom it in and out as easily as he could open and close the disembodied screens.

Zooming all the way out he reached a world map that looked both familiar and unfamiliar. Although the details were obscured, he could make out the outline of the continents. Disturbingly, they weren’t quite the same as the ones he knew. South East Asia was a singular landmass, pushing Australia south and east where it looked to have consumed New Zealand. The Iberian and Arabian peninsulas were missing entirely, leaving Africa wholly disconnected from Europe and Asia. Sri Lanka was further south and several times larger, making for a huge land mass in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

“Well, that’s not what the world looks like. Lax cartography?”

According to the map, Jason was in south-west Africa, somewhere around inland Namibia. He looked at the rich, green hedges boxing him in. Felt the lush grass under his feet. He felt the hot, but not dry air on his skin.

“This doesn’t feel like the Kalahari Desert.”

He sighed, closing the map.

“This is some strange business.”

He pulled up his character sheet again.

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Interface].
 - [Quest System].
 - [Inventory].
 - [Map].
 - [Astral Affinity].
 - [Mysterious Stranger].
-

“Shouldn’t my race be human? What’s an outworlder?”

Jason half expected another screen to appear, but nothing did, so he started looking down the list.

“Interface seems obvious. Quest system too, I guess. Inventory?”

A window appeared, dominated by an almost empty grid of icon slots. There were five spaces down and eight across, for a total of forty. There was also what looked like a currency counter at the bottom.

“Well, that’s certainly a classic inventory,” Jason said. “Can I really put stuff in here?”

There was one item in the inventory, occupying the first slot. It was some kind of red icon, presumably representing an actual item.

“Alright, Jason. Time to see how nuts you’ve really gone. How do I get this thing out?”

After some quick trial and error, he discovered it was as simple as plucking the icon straight out of the screen. The icon vanished and the item appeared magically in his hand. a medallion the size of his palm. It looked and felt like polished red marble with gold engravings on both sides. It was pleasantly warm to the touch. On one side the engraving was a picture of a fire bird, while the other had symbols reading ‘Authority of the World Phoenix.’

“Well, that just magically appeared out of thin air,” Jason said. “That’s definitely not possible. Wait, why can I read this? I never even learned Japanese properly.”

Jason’s father, Ken Asano, was born in Japan, but raised in Australia from a very young age. Proving there is no zealot like a convert, Ken was all about the Australian lifestyle, from pub rock to footy matches and weekend barbecues. He fell right in with the family of his wife, Cheryl, who were as Australian as he could ask for. Miners and farmers, tracing their bloodline back through bushrangers, convicts, and indigenous Australians. Ironically, Cheryl was the one fascinated with Japan, trying to engage her children with

their father's cultural heritage. Despite very strong support from her mother in law, results were mixed.

Jason tried putting the red tablet back into the inventory. His first attempt was just shoving it into the screen, which surprisingly worked. It vanished from his hands and reappeared as an icon.

"That's disconcerting."

Jason's grip on reality was feeling increasingly tenuous. The screens were definitely odd, but could conceivably, if implausibly, be the product of hidden hologram projectors. It was when they started responding to his thoughts that he started to get worried, and now he was pulling objects out of thin air. He closed the inventory and pulled up his character sheet again. Next down the ability list was the map, which he'd already looked at, then astral affinity.

Ability: [Astral Affinity]

- Increased resistance to the dimension effects and astral forces. Dimension abilities have increased effect and transcendent damage is increased.

"No idea what that means."

Only one ability remained.

Ability: [Mysterious Stranger]

- Language adaptation.
- Essence, awakening stone and skill-book absorption.
- Immunity to identification and tracking effects.

"Language adaptation? Is that how I read the weird writing on the tablet?"

He took the tablet out again.

"What is this thing?"

Item: [World-Phoenix Token] (transcendent rank, legendary)

???. (consumable, ???).

- Effect: ???.
- Effect: ???.
- Uses remaining: 1/1

"Question marks. That's enlightening. Do I have to pay a wizard to identify items?"

He put the tablet away, closing all the open windows except for the map.

“Alright, then,” he said, looking up and down the pathway he was on. Neither offered anything to recommend it over the other.

“It’s no yellow wood,” he told himself, “but I guess it’s time to Robert Frost this thing.” He picked a direction at random and set off.

“I really wish I had clothes on.”

Jason was walking through the maze, the map open in front of him. It was being unveiled as he walked, so his current plan was to reveal enough that he could plot a way out. He froze when he heard a rustle in the hedges.

“Um, g’day?” he called out, hands moving to nervously hide his unmentionables.

“Hello? Buenos días? Guten morgen?”

There wasn’t any response.

“Maybe it’s not morning. Guten tag?”

There still wasn’t any response.

“Yeah, Jason; that was the problem. You got the time of day wrong.”

He shrugged.

“Makes as much sense as anything else here, I guess.”

He was about to resume walking when a window appeared.

New Quest: [No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service]

For unknown reasons, your immediate area has become infested with lesser monsters.

- Objective: Discover the reason lesser monsters have infested the area 0/1.
- Reward: Simple shirt.

- Bonus Objective: Defeat ten lesser monsters 0/10.
- Reward: Simple footwear.

“Monsters? That doesn’t sound plausible.”

He was looking around suspiciously when something small came hurtling from the bottom of a hedge. His hands shot back over his privates, which left his head an exposed target. He was blinded by something latching onto his face, something sharp digging painfully into his scalp. He yanked it off with both hands, screaming as a chunk of skin went with it. He dropped to his knees, slamming the thing into the ground, over and over until it stopped struggling.

-
- You have defeated [Potent Hamster].
 - Defeat lesser monsters 1/10.
-

Jason released the creature and scuttled back, still on his hands and knees. His heart was racing, the wounds on his head throbbing. Blood was trickling down his face and he wiped it away from his eyes.

“What in the merry hell is happening? How did a hamster jump on my head?”

Jason looked over at the creature. According to the window that popped up it was some kind of hamster, but was easily as big as Jason’s head. That made it bigger than any hamster he had heard of. It was distended from being pounded into the dirt, as well as streaked with blood from Jason’s head. He crawled forward cautiously, ready to jump back. Extending a hesitant finger, he poked at it.

-
- Would you like to loot [Potent Hamster]?
-

Jason rocked back, hands clutching his bald head. His fingers found the wound and he yelp in pain.

“What the hell is going on?”

Chapter 2: Of Course Magic is a Thing

Jason read the screen again.

➤ Would you like to loot [Potent Hamster]?

“Yes?”

The body of the dead creature made a fizzing sound, like a rapid chemical reaction. The body started rapidly melting, first the flesh, then even the skeleton, dissolving into rainbow-coloured smoke. It seemed pretty until it hit Jason with a stench thick as cheese, like burned hair and rotting meat. He scrambled away to escape the rancid smell, dry heaving on all fours. Looking over as he hacked out coughs, he saw the creature’s body had vanished, as if never existing at all. He ignored the window that popped up, dropping onto his back in the soft grass.

“I hate this,” he told the sky. “I’m naked, bleeding, and have no idea where I am. I can’t think of any better explanation for what’s happening than I’ve lost my bloody mind. Worst of all, I’m going to get sunburnt in places that don’t see a lot of outdoor activity.”

He sat up with a groan, reading the screen waiting for him.

- [Monster Core (Lesser)] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Healing Unguent (Iron)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Lesser Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“Oh, straight into the inventory. That place that lets me make things appear and disappear. I’ve definitely gone insane.”

Now familiar with opening and closing the screens, the inventory window appeared with a simple thought. Two more of the forty grids were now occupied with little icons, while what appeared to be a currency counter had the number ten listed over one of the coin symbols.

Jason took out the item called healing unguent. It was a small, round tin, reminding Jason of the nasty rubbing medicine his nanna would put on scrapes when he was a kid. At least this tin wasn’t rusty, like the one that had been under Nanna’s laundry sink longer than Jason had been alive. Nanna was his maternal grandmother, while his father’s mother was strictly Grandmother. She was a retired otorhinolaryngologist, and had no truck with rusty tins of ointment.

He took a closer look at the tin in his hand.

Item: [Healing Unguent (Iron)] (iron rank, common)

Topical healing ointment. Inexpensive concoction ideal for superficial injuries (consumable, healing).

- Effect: Apply directly to injuries to heal. Effect reduced on bronze-rank or higher individuals.
 - Uses remaining: 5/5.
-

Unlike the tablet, the magic screens had no problem identifying the tin. Jason pulled off the lid to discover it really did look and smell like the ointment under Nanna's laundry sink. There was a sharp, medical smell that cut through even the lingering stench of the dead creature. As for the contents, it was an oily substance that looked like butterscotch sauce made from dubiously-sourced ingredients.

"How did I get ointment from a hamster? How did it come in a tin?"

With an exploratory finger he gently prodded the wound on his head.

"Ow."

The oversized hamster teeth had dug into his scalp. The blood was still running down the front and side of his head.

"Can't hurt to try, I guess. At least there's no hair to get in the way."

He took some of the ointment and smeared it carefully onto the wound, which immediately started to sting.

- You have used [Healing Unguent (iron)].
 - Uses remaining: 4/5.
-

The stinging faded away rapidly, the pain from the wound itself quickly following. Jason delicately poked the affected area, but while it was still wet with blood and ointment, he could find no trace of the injury.

"Sure," he said. "If you're going to have medicine appear out of thin air, why not make it magically potent."

Jason placed the tin back in his inventory and pulled out the other icon. What appeared in his hand was a small, red-brown gem, in the shape of a teardrop.

Item: [Monster Core (Lesser)] (iron rank, common)

The magic core of a lesser monster (crafting material, magic core).

- Effect: Common component for ritual magic and magic item creation.

“Oh, it’s for magic rituals. I’m apparently in a video game, now, so of course magic is a thing.”

Jason sighed as he put the monster core back in his inventory.

“Maybe I’ve had an aneurysm and this is just my dying brain trying to sort things out as it shuts down.”

He thought about that for a moment. His sister would be the one to find his body. She’d have her little girl in tow, coming to see Uncle Jason.

“Wow. I’m actually hoping this whole, horrible experience is real. That’s the way, Jason. Indulge the delusion.”

Jason looked at the coin counter in his inventory.

“How do I take that out?”

He tried tapping on the number.

-
- You have 10 [Lesser Spirit Coins]. How many would you like to withdraw?

“Um. One, I guess.”

A coin appeared in Jason’s hand. It was a washed-out blue colour, with a metallic sheen but feeling more like glass to the touch.

Item: [Lesser Spirit Coin] (iron rank, common)

An impure distillation of raw magic. (currency, crafting material).

- Effect: Used to fuel lesser-rank magic items or as a ritual component.

Jason peered at the figure embossed on the coin. Looking closer, it was an image of Jason himself, giving a thumbs up.

“What?”

He turned the coin over to look at the other side, which was engraved with text.

PRODUCT OF JASON

G'DAY, MATE!

He ran a hand over his face. Somehow the coin itself was more ridiculous than the fact that he pulled it out of thin air.

“I’ve definitely gone insane.”

When the slippery creature latched its teeth onto his inner thigh, Jason yelled as much out of panic as pain. He still had no pants and that was much too close to the danger zone. He grabbed the long, slippery body, gripping down hard and yanking it off his leg. He screamed again as it took a chunk of thigh with it but kept his grip and started flailing the creature into the prickly hedge.

-
- You have defeated [Flying Eel].
 - Defeat lesser monsters 9/10.
-

Jason dropped to the ground, pulled out a jar of healing unguent and started rubbing it on the wound, ignored the blood coming out of it.

“Why can an eel fly?”

He looked down at the wound, high up the inside of his thigh. The eel had taken a decent gouge out of him, so the stinging lingered as the wound slowly closed. Even so, the ability to watch an injury vanish in front of his eyes was amazing. After nine encounters with different creatures, Jason had plenty of chances to see it, going through almost three full tins of the unguent. He used a full tin from one fight alone, against something called a malicious hedgehog.

One pleasant discovery was that he didn’t have to stand in the stinking smoke that came off them after they were looted. So long as he touched the creature he could back away before accepting. Even as he was far away from the dissolving creature, the loot went straight into his inventory. The only problem was that any of the creature’s blood that got onto him would dissolve away as well, giving Jason a full dose of the stink.

Every creature Jason looted gave out one lesser monster core and exactly 10 spirit coins. Most also produced additional, often nonsensical rewards. Tins of healing ointment were mercifully common, but mostly he received animal parts. That would have been understandable enough, given that he was killing creatures, but they arrived in his inventory already cut and packaged. The bundle of spines he received from the malicious hedgehog were bound with string, while the meat of the tyrannical pheasant came neatly wrapped in deli paper. The animal parts were all listed as crafting materials, some of which seemed to be for cooking. While he did enjoy trying new food, he wasn’t quite ready to put monster meat on his plate.

While he waited for the wound to heal, he checked the map again. He had a decent-sized chunk of the hedge maze mapped out now, but it was quite large and he'd met a lot of dead ends. He plotted out his next pathway and set out again.

There was a flower growing in the middle of the pathway. Everywhere else Jason had been, there was only uniform hedges and neatly-cut grass. He watched it from a safe distance, but to all observation it was just a plant. Jason moved forward cautiously, eyes glued to the flower. He gave it as wide a berth as he could, but just when he thought he had passed without incident, the flower twitched, spraying spores all over him.

He got dizzy and fell to the ground, then felt something on his leg. A vine with a bulbous head had grown out of the ground near the flower stem, and was now winding its way around his leg. He tried to kick away, but his head was swimming and he flailed ineffectually. The vine kept growing, crawling up his body. The bulbous head of the vine opened up, clamping onto his head like a lamprey.

Jason clenched his teeth, fighting through the haze with anger. He reached down, grabbed the vine with both hands and started hauling on it. The ground under the flower bulged, soil spilling away as a grotesque shape emerged from the earth. It looked like a root vegetable, but was the size and shape of a baby. The vine was attached to its stomach like an umbilical cord, while the flower grew out of its head. Jason let go of the vine, crawling over to the main body and grabbing it in both hands. He lifted it up, then brought it down on his knee, smashing it again and again.

"People. Are. Vegetarians," he yelled through gritted teeth. Every word punctuating a strike to the knee. "Vegetables. Aren't. People-tarians!"

With a final shout he brought the creature down on his knee with all his strength. The plant monster broke apart like a potato dropped off a building and hitting concrete.

➤ You have defeated [Carnivorous Mandrake].

Quest: [No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service]

- Bonus objective complete: Defeat ten lesser monsters 10/10.
 - [Simple Footwear] has been added to your inventory.
 - Primary quest objective still available.
-

Taking the footwear out of his inventory he discovered it was a pair of sandals. Although the thick grass was pleasant underfoot, Jason still put them on. That left him standing naked except of a pair of sandals.

“I think I might hate this place.”

Chapter 3: Local Cuisine

Jason frowned at the object in his hand. The carnivorous mandrake proved to be the most generous monster thus far in terms of loot, producing not only an extra tin of the precious healing unguent, but also something new.

Item: [Trowel of the Blood Cult] (iron rank, uncommon)

A gardening implement enchanted to affect certain kinds of plant. (tool).

- Effect: Improves health of carnivorous plants.
-

The trowel looked rather sinister, made out of some kind of black metal with a red sheen. It carried the wear marks of having been used as a planting tool, but also a razor edge that was wholly unnecessary for gardening purposes.

“Blood cult?” Jason read unhappily from the item description. “Who gardens with an evil trowel? Whose hedge maze is this?”

Not having anything better, Jason kept the sharp trowel in hand, on the ready for more monsters. After checking his map again he set off, weapon in hand. Still naked aside from a pair of sandals, he was very careful about where he held it.

Jason looked at the well. It was a circle of bricks, the mortar aged and crumbling. There was a wooden bucket and crank, both weathered with age. It was the kind of rustically picturesque feature he could imagine someone putting at the centre of their hedge maze.

Quest: [Stranger in a Strange Land]

- Objective complete: Explore the hedge maze 1/1.
 - [Simple Pants] have been added to your inventory.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason gave a fist pump and took the pants out of his inventory. They were made of plain white linen, with billowy legs and a very low crotch fit, held up by a drawstring.

“It’s like a Mennonite made some hammer pants. Did I wake up in 1991 rural Pennsylvania?”

Putting aside fashion concerns, Jason slipped the pants on, walking around experimentally. They were sufficiently roomy that it didn't feel much different to walking around without them.

"I don't suppose I can get a quest for some boxer shorts?"

He waited hopefully for a few moments, but no window appeared.

"Worth a try."

After being attacked by so many creatures, Jason was a mess of blood and ointment, even if the wounds had been healed. The result was the white pants being immediately stained red and unguent-yellow.

With his nudity concern ameliorated, Jason was able to turn his thoughts to other aspects of his situation. He sat down on the edge of the well to think over his next move.

The things he was experiencing were clearly impossible, which broadly placed him in one of two situations. One, his faculties were significantly compromised and his understanding of what he was doing was massively detached from the reality. Brain trauma, hallucinogens, some kind of severe mental break. His knowledge was too shallow and his observation point too subjective to make any definitive assessment. To the best of his understanding, though, none of those options made sense. He was too lucid, too capable of critical thinking. His consciousness wasn't skipping around, glossing over the inconsistencies of a compromised mental state. That being said, his understanding of mental conditions was essentially nil, so that might be what crazy felt like from the inside.

The big point going for the mental-impairment hypothesis was that the alternative scenario required Jason's most fundamental understandings of reality to be somewhere between woefully incomplete and breathtakingly wrong.

Either way, his only real option was to get on with it. If it was all in his head, then it didn't matter what he did. Inversely, if it was real, and he ran around acting like it wasn't, the consequences could be dire. He took a deep, calming breath.

"Alright, Jason" he said, steeling himself. "What's next?"

Sooner or later he would need to find his way out of the maze, but the fact that his quest ended on reaching the well implied there was something special about it. He started by examining the wooden frame which had a simple crank and rope to lower a bucket, along with a little wooden roof to shield the mechanism from the weather. It only seemed to have worked to a degree, with the rope and bucket both looking the worse for wear. The brickwork was likewise dilapidated, with mortar crumbling at the touch. He stuck his head over the well to look down. To his surprise, iron rungs had been affixed to the inside of the well, leading into darkness below.

New Quest: [Secrets of the Well]

You have discovered a ladder descending into the well. Do you have the courage to explore the depths?

- Objective: Explore the well 0/1.
 - Reward: Awakening stone.

 - Bonus objective: Don't die 0/1.
 - Reward: Essence.
-

“Don't die? What kind of quest objective is don't die?”

He shook his head.

“Bugger that.”

- Reject quest [Secrets of the Well]?
-

Jason was about to reject the quest when he heard voices coming from somewhere close within the hedge maze.

“I tracked the aura of the mandrake that took my trowel,” a gravelly male voice said. “Someone had already killed it and my trowel was nowhere to be found.”

“Someone with those adventurers we caught?” another man asked.

“I don't care who they're with,” the first voice said. “I'm going to kill 'em, cook 'em and eat 'em.”

“I wanted to try some of that elf girl, but the mistress said we're keeping them all for the sacrifice. Bloody waste, if you ask me.”

“Nah, elves ain't good eating. Not much meat on them, and what's there is all stringy. That human girl, she's the one you want. Lean and tender.”

“I don't know, Dougall; she looked pretty tough to me. And we always have humans. I just want a little variety, is all.”

“Well, this lot is all spoken for, regardless.”

Ducked down behind the well, Jason didn't let out a breath until the voices faded into the distance. He ignored the fact that they were talking about elves in the face of a casual discussion on the pros and cons of eating people. Was that real, or just a couple of guys with a weird sense of humour?

“Cannibals?”

He gave it some consideration. Normally cannibals would be right at the top of the crazy pile, but the day Jason was having, it was at least a familiar horror. Then he considered it some more and started climbing down into the well.

“What kind of lunatic place is this?”

Jason was not happy with his options. A quest with the explicit objective of ‘don’t die’ wasn’t great, but wandering blindly through a maze with cannibals roaming about struck him as an even worse option. What was he going to do? Fight them off with their own trowel? There were two of them, and they were a lot bigger than a tyrannical pheasant. It might have been an evil monster chicken, but it still barely came up to his waist. Even then it got some savage pecks in. He didn’t have a weapon, so he had to get in behind, reach around and savagely choke the chicken with both hands.

Jason started reconsidering his choice to go down the well when only the second rung down shifted in his hand. It was set into the brickwork at the top, the shaky mortar apparently ready to give way. Then he thought about himself hanging from a butcher’s hook and kept going.

“Going down a creepy well or dodging cannibals,” he muttered unhappily. For what felt like the hundredth time he wondered where he was, what was going on and what evil prick dumped him naked, right in the middle of it. The well was quite deep, judging from the diminishing light coming from above. He kept a careful grip on the cold metal rungs as the interior of the well became dank, the sides slick and wet.

“I’m definitely getting Legionnaire’s disease.”

The light did not penetrate far down the narrow well, and Jason was soon moving entirely by feel. He descended cautiously, each foot carefully seeking out the next rung down. He would occasionally glance up at the shrinking blue circle that was all he could see of the sky, reassuring himself it was still there.

“Maybe they’re not really cannibals,” he told himself. “Maybe they’re just talking themselves up.”

Unconvinced, he kept moving down into darkness, barely able to make out his hand on the rung in front of him. He discovered he had reached the bottom when his foot met water instead of the next rung. Some experimental probing revealed it was ankle deep, enough to submerge his sandals in the icy cold. The bottom of the well was flat, but as it turned out, just as slippery as the walls. His feet slid out from under him and only his hands still gripping the rungs saved him from bashing his head against the side of the well. He ended up sprawled at the bottom of the well, dank water joining the blood and ointment in staining his new pants.

“Lovely.”

The advantage of his low perspective was that he found himself looking directly at a slightly darker circle in the wall of what was already a very dark well. He reached out tentatively and found it was a hole, large enough to crawl through. He didn't know if it was the source of the well's water or some kind of drainage tunnel.

“No,” Jason said. “I'm definitely not interested in crawling in there.”

➤ [Reject quest \[Secrets of the Well\]?](#)

“Sod off.”

Jason looked up again at the bright circle of sky, then the dark circle of the tunnel. With a groan, he started probing the pitch-black hole with his hands.

Chapter 4: Cannibals and Spelunking

Jason slowly crawled his way into the dank tunnel, a circular pipe of wet and slimy brickwork. It was wide enough to push himself along, but tight enough that he was pressed against the clammy sides. The darkness engulfed him as he moved away from what meagre light reached the bottom of the well. Edging down the tunnel, touch was the only sense with which he could navigate. With the ubiquitous smell of wet rot, he wished his nose was as useless as his eyes.

“This is not what I planned to do with my day.”

If it turned out to be a dead end, he would be forced to shimmy backwards, the tunnel far too tight to turn around.

“Admittedly, my plans for the day were fairly loose, but cannibals and spelunking aren’t things you just casually slide into the schedule.”

Talking to himself didn’t help much, but any distraction was a welcome bulwark against the encroaching claustrophobia. The gloom of the well had seemed stifling, but the dark of the tunnel was much deeper. He felt panic’s icy fingers crawl over his flesh as the tunnel closed in on him. He knew it wasn’t actually getting smaller, but his rationality seemed powerless in the cold, wet oblivion.

His unravelling nerves were reaching their limit . He was ready to start pushing his way back and risk the cannibals when his hand came down on slimy, wet wood instead of slimy, wet brick. There was still no light, so he probed with his hands. He had reached the end of the tunnel, but had no idea what kind of space it opened into. He had a feeling of open space, but in complete darkness it could well have been his imagination.

His hands felt out some kind of platform made of wooden planks. It was wet and a little slimy, although it felt reliably solid under Jason’s hands. The surface of the wood was rough, like sandpaper. Some kind of long-enduring adhesive had been used to apply sand or something similar, improving friction on the wet planks. Jason had seen something similar on bushwalking tracks. Feeling around as he crawled free of the tunnel, he felt the planks were lined up to make a walkway, a metre and a half wide.

It felt like there was enough room to stand, but even with the sand coating he didn’t trust the slick wooden path in the dark. He continued forward as he had in the tunnel, hands exploring in place of his eyes. Just a short way down the path he found a vertical metal rod sticking out the walkway, at the edge to his left. His hands traced the shaft

upwards to a hooked end, from which was hanging some kind of metal box with a loop on top.

Item: [Crude Magic Lamp] (iron rank, common)

A simple lighting device fuelled by low-level magic. (tool).

- Effect: Casts light.
- Current charge: 00%. Requires a [Lesser Spirit Coin] to replenish.

Jason tried using the glowing window as a light source, but even hard up against the lamp it failed to produce so much as a murky outline. Jason fumbled about to unhook the lamp from the pole.

-
- You have acquired [Crude Magic Lamp].
 - Current charge: 00%. Requires a [Lesser Spirit Coin] to activate.
 - Expend 1 [Lesser Spirit Coin] Y/N?

“Please and thank you.”

As the lamp lit up, Jason discovered the hard way that he had been holding the front of it pointed directly into his face. He screamed as light blasted into his eyes, dropping the lamp from his hands. It clattered away as he fell back onto the wooden pathway, moaning with hands over his eyes.

“Good job, genius,” he croaked, waiting to recover. “Light a lamp right in front of your face. Real smart idea.”

He tentatively opened his eyes and saw the space around him illuminated from somewhere below. The light was largely obscured, but compared to complete darkness, even some shadowy outlines were bliss. It was at least enough to recognise that he was in a natural cavern. It didn’t have the conveniently smooth floors of a video game cave, which was presumably why someone had put in the walkway, raised on thick wooden posts. Jason was already laying on the walkway, so he rolled over to reach down and fetch the lamp from where it had fallen. The walkway was only about an arm’s length above the cave floor, so he fetched it up easily enough.

Jason pushed himself to a sitting position and examined the lamp, careful not to blind himself again. As the name suggested, the crude magic lamp was a simple affair, looking rather like a miner’s tin lamp. It had three boxy, metal sides, a glass front in a loop handle on the top. Dropping it didn’t seem to have harmed the glass at all. Inside, the light came from what looked like a round stone, glowing like a light bulb. Using the lamp to get a

better look at the cave, it was spookier than Jason would have liked, with plenty of dark crevices and ominous shadows.

“Hello?” he called out. Between the racket he had made and the light of the lamp, there was little point trying to hide from any denizens occupying the cave. The quest drove him down into the cavern, rather than back into the cannibal maze. He was hoping that meant whatever was at the end of the cave was worthwhile. A pirate ship filled with enough treasure to stop the local country club from foreclosing on the family home would be ideal. He would be willing to accept someone who doesn't eat people.

“Is anyone down here?” he asked. “If you want me to kill ten goblins in return for an uncommon spear, I'm only really equipped for light gardening.”

He thought about the evil trowel, now ready at hand in case of sudden attack.

“It could be evil gardening.”

Since the beam of the lamp lit up the cave like a lighthouse on a dark night, there was no point being stealthy. His hope was that he could bait out whatever creatures were lurking into the light. They would probably be adapted to darkness and if he could dazzle them it would at least be some advantage.

The idea of sneaking through in pitch blackness gave him the feeling that he wouldn't even know how he died. And 'don't die' was the bonus objective after all. In video games, Jason was the kind of player who could take it or leave it with secondary goals. In this one instance, his motivation levels had reached a previously unseen zenith.

He started following the walkway, taking care with his steps. The sand coating had worn away in a lot of places, leaving patches of the wood slick and frictionless, from years in the bleak, damp cavern. The cave turned out to be something of a natural tunnel, rough speaking, through which the walkway followed.

He made his way slowly and carefully until it came to an end at a brick wall, set into the side of the cave. In the middle of the wall was a hefty metal door with a big wheel set into it, like a bulkhead door on a submarine. Both door and wheel were rusty and didn't look to have been opened in some time.

“Now we're getting somewhere.”

Setting down the lamp, Jason grabbed the wheel with both hands and pulled, but it didn't budge.

“Oh, come on.”

He yanked on it harder and harder, until his feet were braced against the door as he hauled sideways with his full body weight. He felt a little give, then a little more, each

accompanied by an unwilling metal groan. Finally the wheel jerked loose and Jason could turn the reluctant mechanism with heavy jerks.

Panting from the exertion, Jason shouldered open the door. Like the wheel it resisted, and he had to shove it open in fits and starts. His shoulder grew sore as he repeatedly rammed it into the door. Finally, the door gave way with a shriek and he stumbled through the door.

Quest: [Secrets of the Well]

- Objective complete: Explore the well 1/1.
- [Awakening Stone of the Stars] has been added to your inventory.
- Bonus quest objective (don't die) still available.

“Awakening stone of the stars? Is that like magic version of those celebrity house maps?”

He went and retrieved the lamp from where he had set it down, pulling the object from his inventory. It looked kind of like a fist-sized marble, black, but containing what looked like tiny stars.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Stars] (unranked, epic)

An awakening stone that unlocks the power of the stars. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 0 unawakened essence abilities.
- You do not meet the requirements to use this item.

That seemed more complicated than Jason wanted to get to when there was a door right in front of him with the promise of (hopefully non-cannibal) civilisation. The interior was dark, so he stepped inside and started panning the light beam of the lamp. It was a room, thankfully, not just more cave. It was like a large parlour from a stately home, but after a tornado passed through. Furniture was upended, tapestries and paintings ripped down from the walls. Bookshelves had been toppled, their contents tossed around the room. There was an ornate chandelier that had crashed down from the ceiling, scattering shattered crystal across the polished floor.

Searching through the mess by the light of the lamp, there was an overturned couch in the middle of the room. Under it, Jason found a man unconscious. Heaving the couch off of him revealed that he was sprawled in the middle of an elaborate pentagram, set into

the floor in brass or copper. The man was youngish, maybe thirty, clean shaven with an olive complexion and a handsome face. To Jason's eyes he looked rather Mediterranean. The good-looking kind with the dark wavy hair. Oddly, he was wearing what looked like honest-to-goodness wizard robes.

Jason set down the lamp to examine the man. He had a strong pulse and regular breathing, but was showing early signs of extensive bruising and his body temperature felt way too high. As Jason was examining him, his eyes flickered open.

Chapter 5:

Wizard

“G’day mate,” Jason said. “Looks like you’ve had a spill. Need a hand up?”

Jason offered his hand and helped the wizard-looking man to his feet. Despite a frame as slender as Jason’s own, the wizard was surprisingly heavy. Standing unsteadily on his feet, the wizard looked around at the room in disarray, then at Jason, his expression confused.

“Who are you?” the wizard asked. “How did you get here?”

“I’m Jason, and I have no idea. I went to bed what I think was last night and woke up in some kind of alternate universe.”

The wizard narrowed his eyes as he peered at Jason.

“There’s something off about your aura,” the wizard said. “You’re not human.”

“That’s hurtful. Wait, auras are really a thing?”

“You said something about an alternate universe?” The wizard asked.

“That’s just a guess,” Jason said. “I mean, the continents are different. Could be a crazy-far, time travel thing. Do you know anything about continental drift?”

The wizard’s gaze moved to the magic circle on the floor, then back at Jason.

“It was you,” he said angrily. “You’re what went wrong with the summoning.”

“Yeah, well, at least you did summon something. Do you have any idea how wrong your summon made my night’s sleep go? One of us has a lot more to be grouchy about than the other.”

The wizard looked a combination of confused and angry, but as he was about to retort he went pale and stumbled in place.

“Crap, sorry,” Jason said, moving to support him.

“GET OFF ME!”

The wizard staggered in the direction of a heavy writing desk. It seemed to have escaped major displacement by being the heaviest piece of furniture in the room. He almost tripped, still weak from whatever happened prior to Jason’s arrival. The wizard opened a drawer, took out a small bottle and drained the contents.

“I could use a stiff drink myself, if you’re offering,” Jason said.

“It was a recovery potion, fool,” the wizard said, then winced with pain. “It seems the backlash will take more than a potion to fix.”

He gave Jason a smile that Jason did not like.

“Since I can’t recover mana right now, I’ll have to do things the old fashioned way. I’ve never tasted an outworlder before.”

“Oh no,” Jason said, shoulders slumping. “You’re one of the cannibals.”

As the wizard pulled a knife out of the drawer, Jason looked around the room. There was a set of wooden double doors that were presumably an exit, but the wizard was a lot closer than Jason. Remembering how weakly the wizard staggered over to the table, Jason took a risk and tried barrelling past him. It worked, but when he pulled on the door handles they were locked. He spun around to make back for the cave, only to find the wizard lunging at him.

Jason grabbed at the arm holding the knife. Wrestling back and forth, they tripped on a piece of the overturned furniture and fell to the floor, still struggling. The lamp was lost somewhere along the way and they battled in shadows, each trying to seize control of the weapon. Jason had a grip on the wizard’s arm, trying to keep the knife from digging into him. In spite of his small frame and apparent weakness after being knocked out, the wizard was much stronger than Jason. Taking a lesson from the small, aggressive monsters he had been fighting, Jason bit into the wizard’s hand.

The wizard yelped in surprise more than pain, but it gave Jason a chance to seize the advantage, yanking the knife from the wizard’s grip. Still scrambling on the floor, he shoved the knife out blindly and suddenly the wizard went limp. The knife was sticking out of the wizard’s throat, but the wizard was still alive, looking at Jason with disbelieving eyes. Jason snatched the knife back and blood sprayed over Jason, getting into his eyes and mouth. Recoiling, he spat out blood as he rubbed at his eyes. By the time his panicked flailing came to a halt, the wizard’s body was still.

➤ [You have defeated \[Builder Cultist\].](#)

Jason pushed himself up with bloody hands, tripped on debris and fell back over. His breath came in ragged starts as he just lay where he fell. Eventually he sat up, looking over at where the body had fallen directly into the light beam from the lamp. He pulled his legs up and hugged his knees, rocking slightly as he stared at the body.

He had no sense of how long he stayed like that, but eventually he pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. He walked over to the bloody knife and picked it up.

Item: [Seal Knife] (bronze rank, common)

A dagger with the Vane family seal on the pommel. (weapon, tool).

- Requirements: Bronze rank [Speed], bronze rank [Spirit].
- Effect: When used to imprint a wax seal on a letter, the letter will be destroyed if opened by anyone other than the addressee.

Jason stared at the bloody knife in his equally bloody hand. After a few moments there was an unusual tingling, slowly rising to become pain. He tightened his grip until the pain became too much and the dagger clattered to the floor.

-
- You do not meet the requirements to use this item.

Finally, he turned to the body. Its eyes were open, face frozen in a final expression of surprise.

The room was still and silent, Jason's eyes locked on the corpse.

"You did this," he accused it. "You did this."

He didn't sound convincing, even to himself.

Jason's mind was nothing but white noise as he stood standing over the body. When a new sound broke him out of his trance he didn't know if it had been seconds, minutes or hours. The sound came from above, a metal ventilation pipe in the ceiling. There was a hollow, echoing timbre to the sound and it took Jason a moment to recognise it as a hissing noise. It was coming from the hole.

He watched the hole, eyes unfocused and disoriented. He watched absently but his mind was still on the knife, He could feel it, even after it fell back to the floor. He could taste the hot blood spilling out of the wizard's neck. His gaze sharpened when something came out of the hole in the ceiling. It was an enormous, pitch-black snake, head barely small enough to pass through the aperture.

Jason and the snake looked at each other, frozen for a moment. Jason could see intelligence in its eyes, although he may well have been imagining it. Then the snake hissed at Jason and continued emerging from the vent shaft, body dangling down from the ceiling. Jason sprinted for the door back to the cave, snatching up the lamp as he moved.

New Quest: [Time to Run]

The familiar of the Builder cultist sensed its master's death and has come to investigate.

- Objective: Escape [Umbral Mountain Snake] 0/1.
 - Reward: Iron-rank (rare) magical dagger.
-

Jason almost stumbled as the window popped up, flailing wildly at it as he willed it closed. He bolted through the metal door, dropped his lamp and grabbed onto the wheeled handle, hauling back with adrenaline-fuelled strength. The rusty hinges groaned shut and Jason yanked on the wheel to latch the door. There was another wheel on the other side, but snakes didn't have thumbs.

Jason let out a breath he didn't realise he'd been holding and reached down to pick up the lamp. He would need to go back up the well, but he'd rather dodge cannibals than fight a giant snake. The danger at least snapped him out of the daze he was left in after killing a man. He was making his way along the pathway when he heard the grinding of metal behind him and had a horrifying thought.

What if monster snakes do have thumbs?

Running along the pathway, forgetting his previous caution turned out to be a mistake. His sandalled foot slipped on a slick section of plank and he tumbled over. He landed hard on the walkway, the sand coating scraping on his naked torso. Lamp still clutched in a death-grip, he ignoring the pain to get up and keep moving. Going as quickly as he dared, he reached the end of the walkway and ducked straight into the tunnel, dropping the lamp that would slow his crawl.

His hands and knees hammered into the hard surface of the narrow passage, shoulders and head banging against the side and top. He didn't let it slow him down, scrambling forward until he saw the dim light at the bottom of the well. Crawling out, he fumbled straight for the rungs set into the side. Hand over hand, he yanked himself upwards. Only after he was a good way up the inside of the well did he let himself pause to look down. The snake shouldn't be able to climb up, but it shouldn't have been able to open a door, either.

He was just turning back to resume climbing when he heard the hiss from below. He saw the snake emerged from the tunnel, pausing to look up at Jason before sliding more of its body into the space at the bottom of the well. Jason watched in horror as its body started climbing up and around the outside of the well like the thread of a screw. Despite

the wet and slippery surface of the well, the snake started winding its way up, as if adhered to the sides.

Jason resumed his climb, more energetic than ever. The snake was fast, but its circuitous path around the sides was long. Jason clambered up as fast as he could, but panic made him rush and more than once a foot slipped before getting proper purchase. He kept pushing upwards, every hand and foothold a step closer to the outside.

The final rung was set into the brickwork that sat above ground, but just as Jason's hand gripped it, he felt something slip around his leg. The snake was as thick as Jason's thigh and he hadn't even seen the full length of it. The weight of it prevented him from pulling himself any higher and it only got worse as the creature wrapped around his torso.

He couldn't pull himself any further up but he clenched onto the top rung. Hands clammy and quickly tiring, his fingers threatened to give out at any moment. But in the end it wasn't his fingers that crumbled. The mortar in the bricks gave out, the whole side of the well collapsing. Jason, the snake and a rain of masonry fell backwards into the dark.

Chapter 6: Potent Potable

Jason, as a rule, enjoyed waking up. He loved the brief hazy moment between dream and reality, shrouded in warm, soft bedding. Even awaking in the soft grass of the hedge maze hadn't been an unpleasant experience. It was very different from regaining consciousness at the bottom of a dark well, soaked in filthy water and entangled in the corpse of a dead snake. He ignored the screens that had popped-up while he was unconscious. They shrank away to hover inconspicuously in the periphery of his vision.

His left arm was pinned under some rubble, a chunk of fallen masonry from the well from above. He didn't feel any pain from it, which was good, then realised he didn't feel anything at all from it, which was bad. When he tried pulling it free the pain arrived in full force, his screams reverberating up through the well.

Holding his left arm as still as he could, he rolled the chunk of masonry off with his right. It wasn't insurmountably heavy, but he had to hold back more screaming with gritted teeth. He couldn't examine the freed arm properly in the dark, but it was hot and swollen to the touch. Even probing it gently with the fingers of his good hand sent ripples of pain radiating through it. He was confident it was broken and started carefully applying all the healing ointment he had left. The swelling reduced and the skin cooled, but the arm was still delicate and painful to move. The ointment didn't seem effective on the bone-deep injury it couldn't reach.

There was so much of the snake that he was laying on its dead body rather than the bottom of the well. Jerking his foot free of its coils sent fresh pain spiking through his arm. It took multiple attempts to struggle to his feet, using his good arm to yank himself upright with one of the wall rungs. Each time he achieved some precarious stability, his stomach roiled and he threw up, dropping back to his knees. Vomit spewed out in fits and starts, even as the motion drove new pain into his injured arm.

He finally made it to his feet, holding himself up, using a rung for support. He drew ragged breaths, exhausted just from the effort of standing up. For the first time since climbing down the well he was grateful for the cold walls, ignoring the wet as he pressed his back into the cool surface. His head swam, pulse pounding through it like a hammer. His stomach churned with the threat of secondary eruptions.

It wasn't the worst he'd ever felt. The worst was after eating one of his Great Aunt Marjory's casseroles, which led him to taking up residence in his parent's bathroom for ten

hours. For all her efforts to push Jason into the waiting arms of the Lord, the closest she came was food poisoning so bad it had him praying for death.

Jason looked down at the snake, its incredible length piled up at the bottom of the well. It was big enough that there wasn't anywhere for Jason to stand except on the snake itself. The largest individual piece of shattered masonry had crushed the creature's head against the bottom of the well. Either the hefty chunk or the snake itself could have killed Jason, but wild luck led to one danger handling the other.

He glanced up at the blue circle of sky, uncertain of how long he had been unconscious. He had to decide between climbing back up the well or going back through the tunnel, neither of which seemed easy with a busted arm. He put off the unpleasant choice and looked at the windows he had been ignoring.

-
- You have defeated [Umbral Mountain Snake].
 - Would you like to loot [Umbral Mountain Snake]?
-

"Sure," he said wearily, then froze. Belatedly remembered that monsters dissolved into stinking smoke when they were looted, but to his relief and surprise, that didn't happen. All he felt was the snake shift a little under his feet. He looked over the list of items he got from the snake.

-
- [Night Scale Leather] has been added to your inventory.
 - 30 [Dark Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Unlike every other monster Jason killed, the snake didn't turn into a stench cloud and didn't produce a monster core.

"I need to learn the rules of this place."

He took a look at the next screen.

Quest: [Time to Run]

- Hidden objective discovered: Kill [Umbral Mountain Snake] 0/1.
 - Hidden objective complete: Kill [Umbral Mountain Snake] 1/1.
 - Main objective reward increased from rare magical dagger to epic magical dagger.

 - Objective complete: Escape [Umbral Mountain Snake] 1/1.
 - [Night Fang] has been added to your inventory.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“Hidden objective? I just fell on it; that seems kind of cheap. Wait, why am I complaining? Get it together, Jason.”

He checked the last window.

Quest: [Secrets of the Well]

- Bonus objective complete: Don't die 1/1.
 - [Dark Essence] has been added to your inventory.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“Well, if you're only going to complete one quest objective, 'don't die' is a winner.”

There were new items in his inventory, but his only interest was in something that could fix his arm. Looking over the icons in his inventory, nothing stood out. Suddenly Jason remembered the wizard who drank what he called a recovery potion. He looked up at the ladder leading out of the well and realised that between his bad arm and what was probably a concussion, he was more likely to fall back down than reach the top. A return to the tunnel wasn't an appealing prospect, but at least he couldn't fall if he was already on his hand and knees.

The tunnel proved trickier than he hoped, every nudge sending agony through his cradled arm. He had to stop frequently and let the waves of pain subside before moving on. Finally he reached the wooden walkway, collapsing onto his back. There was light, the lamp laying where he had cast it aside in his mad flight from the snake.

After resting awhile he pushed himself stumbingly upright and started shambling down the walkway, lamp in hand. He moved slowly. He'd learned his lesson about the

slippery wood, but also it was the top speed he could muster. Eventually, he reached the still-open metal door.

“How did a snake get this open?”

He glanced at the wheel mechanism on either side. Part of the wheel was wet with what may have been saliva.

“Did it use its mouth? No way.”

Not sparing more than a moment on curiosity, he made his way to the desk he had seen the wizard get the potion from. It wasn't hard to find, being one of the few pieces of furniture not overturned. Jason's eyes avoided the body still on the floor as he navigated the debris of the trashed room. The drawer was still open, and inside was a small rack for vials like the one he had seen the wizard drink. Only one vial remained and Jason carefully picked it up.

Item: [Recovery Potion (bronze)] (bronze rank, rare)

Potent potable with strong healing and mana recovery effects (consumable, healing).

- Effect: Recovers health. Effect reduced on silver-rank or higher individuals.
- Uses remaining: 1/1.

The vial was quite small, about the size of a rifle cartridge. Jason pulled out the stopper and tipped it back in a gulp. It tasted remarkably like strawberry schnapps and Jason's unruly stomach settled the instant the potion arrived.

“Nice.”

The stinging sensation Jason associated with magical healing started seeping into him, especially his head and injured arm. It was worse than what he had experienced before, whether because of the nature of the injuries or the potency of the potion. It didn't bother him; compared to the pain he was already in, it was nothing more than a tickle.

-
- You have used a recovery potion, restoring health, stamina and mana.
 - Until the remnant magic fully dissipates, consuming further health, stamina or mana potions will result in toxic side-effects.
 - By using a potion above your current rank the effect is increased, but the residual magic will take longer to dissipate.

He lay on the floor taking exhausted breaths. His head was still full of cotton wool, but the constant throbbing was gone. His arm didn't seem to be broken anymore. The pain

was gone and mobility was restored, but it still felt delicate and weak. In the periphery of his vision was a trio of small icons slowly shading over. When he focused on them they grew larger for him to examine. They were all squares with a picture of a potion on each, one red, one yellow and one blue. They were mostly greyed-out, but the grey was slowly dropping off as a timer underneath each counted down, with just under ten minutes remaining.

“Cooldown timers. That’s fancy.”

He pushed himself to his feet, much easier now than back in the well.

“Alright,” he told himself. “Damaged, but operational. So what next?”

He shone the light around until he found the dead body of the wizard, walking over to look closer. There was an eerie stillness to it that only came from death.

“I’m sorry,” he told it. “I think you might have had it coming, but I didn’t want it to go that way.”

He knelt down and closed its eyes.

➤ [Would you like to loot \[Builder Cultist\]?](#)

“What’s a builder cultist?”

Chapter 7: Spoils

- Would you like to loot [Builder Cultist]?
-

The idea of rifling through the pockets of a corpse filled Jason with disgust. Would the system just loot the body like it did with monsters? Corpse-robbing was a nasty business, but Jason had no idea what kind of place he was in, or how to leave it without being eaten. He was going need every advantage he could get his hands on. He thought about the snake back in the tunnel.

“It won’t skin him, will it?”

He took a step back.

“Alright,” he said. “Loot the body.”

- > [Landemere Vane’s Key Ring] has been added to your inventory.
 - > [Robes of the Astral Verdict] have been added to your inventory.
 - > 4 [Gold Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - > 16 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - > 138 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - > 437 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - > 228 [Lesser Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“Where were you carrying all that? That’s about eight-hundred coins.”

The robes the wizard was wearing had vanished, although he turned out to be wearing a full set of clothes underneath. Jason pulled the robes back out of his inventory and held them up to examine. They were dark blue, but covered in the blood of their former owner.

Item: [Robes of the Astral Verdict] (bronze rank, rare)

Robes designed for summoning. (armour, cloth).

- Effect: Increases the damage dealt by dimension spells.
 - Effect: Summoned creatures have increased damage reduction.
 - Effect: Damage reduction against disruptive-force damage.
-

Jason wasn’t ready to wear the clothes he took from a person he killed, especially when they were still wet with his blood. He returned the robes to his inventory and started searching about for something to cover the body. There was a fallen tapestry he dug out

and laid over the corpse. Partly he felt it was the decent thing to do. Mostly, he didn't want the body out in the open while he searched the room, always at the edge of his vision. He needed to find anything he could to aid his escape from this place and its cannibalistic inhabitants.

He started by examining the magic circle in the middle of the room. It was large, around three metres across, the metal set directly into the floor. The lines were intricate and complex, like someone had started with a pentagram and gotten severely carried away. It was also damaged. Some of the metal had been pried up, other sections warped as if by great heat, although there was no indication of burning anywhere.

The circle wasn't useful to him, so he started going through the rest of the room. He starting with the big desk the potions had been in. There were no more potions, but there were a few tins of healing unguent, which he took. Unlike the plain tins he got from monsters, these tins were branded with some kind of logo.

"Greenstone Alchemy Association," Jason read from the bottom of the tin. "I guess alchemy is a thing, too. Maybe I can pick up a crafting skill."

The rest of the drawers contained piles of notes and diagrams that seemed related to the magic circle. Oddly, Jason could read the individual words despite never having seen the language before, but they didn't make any sense to him as a whole. From what he could gather they were on some set of magical principles, as arcane to him as high-end theoretical physics. During his brief stint at university he studied political science. Regular science had never appealed.

He moved on, searching through toppled bookshelves and overturned tables. There were a variety of what looked like curios and display pieces, mostly tossed to the floor and broken, but nothing useful. He picked up a few of the books, flipping through the pages. There were a lot of them scattered around the room, their bookcases knocked over or even smashed. They seemed to be written in a variety of languages, but Jason had no problems reading any of them. Each new and unfamiliar text came as easy as if he'd been reading it his whole life.

"That's a little disconcerting."

Although he could read the words, that wasn't the same as understanding it. Every book he picked up seemed to be about magic theory, making them as impenetrable as any advanced textbook from a field he knew nothing about.

Moving a large, overturned table from where it had been tossed against the wall, Jason discovered a display cabinet with a glass door. Despite the table that had crashed into it, the cabinet was wholly unaffected, the glass remaining clear and uncracked. Inside

were four books, each on their own small easel stand. Compared to the other books Jason had found, these looked more impressive, with intricately embossed leather covers.

Trying to open the cabinet, he found it was locked shut. After a few attempts to break the surprisingly sturdy glass, he remembered the key ring he had looted from the dead body. Pulling it out of his inventory he discovered it was like a dungeon keeper's key ring from an old movie; a huge array of keys dangling from a large metal hoop.

Item: [Landemere Vane's Key Ring] (normal rank, common)

The keys for various locks throughout the Vane Manor, as well as personal keys for Landemere Vane's possessions. A mixture of ordinary keys and magical keys. (tool).

- Effect: Open specific locks.

Jason looked over at the covered body laying on the floor.

"Was that your name? Landemere Vane?"

He sighed.

"Sorry I killed you, Landemere. But you tried to kill me first."

He looked away from the covered corpse and focused on the task at hand. The keyhole on the cabinet door was quite small, so he tried the more delicate looking keys until the lock clicked open.

The cabinet wasn't very large but there were only four books in the entire case, set out for display rather than efficiency. The embossed leather didn't have titles, instead bearing patterns like the magic circle on the floor. Jason took out one of the books at random.

Item: [Astral Magic II] (bronze rank, uncommon)

A magical book that can impart the knowledge of intermediate level astral magic. (consumable, skill book).

- Requirements: Bronze rank, ability to use skill books, basic ritual magic theory, intermediate ritual magic theory, basic astral magic theory.
- Effect: Imparts intermediate astral magic theory.
- You do not meet the requirements to use this item.

Jason was familiar with skill books from video games that instantly gave out spells or special abilities. He couldn't try this one because he didn't meet the sizeable list of requirements.

“Does that mean I can be a wizard if I find the right book?”

Jason started checking the remaining books. From the descriptions the four books covered two different fields of magic, with one book at basic and intermediate level for each subject. Of the four books, Jason could only use one.

Item: [Ritual Magic I] (iron rank, common)

A magical book that can impart the fundamentals of performing magic rituals. (consumable, skill book).

- Requirements: Ability to use skill books.
 - Effect: Imparts basic ritual magic theory.
 - You are able to use skill book [Ritual Magic I]. Use Y/N?
-

Reading over the description, he lingered on the requirement of being able to use skill books, which he apparently met. Remembering his character sheet he pulled it up and started looking through the listings under racial abilities.

Ability: [Mysterious Stranger]

- Language adaptation.
 - Essence, awakening stone and skill-book absorption.
 - Immunity to identification and tracking effects.
-

“Infinite language. Is that why I can read everything?”

The ability seemed to give him the power to use skill books, along with whatever essences and awakening stones were. He looked at the book in his hand. According to its description it would give him knowledge. That meant it would alter his brain, but didn't his ability to read weird languages mean it was already affected? Was it already affecting his decision making?

For the time being, he stowed the books in his inventory. He could always look at them later. There didn't seem to be anything else he could make use of, so he decided to take stock. He found an undamaged chair and table, setting them up as far from the body as he could. There were a lot of tables for one room, although it was a large room.

After sitting down, he started pulling out the items he had picked up but not looked at yet, placing them all on the table. He began with the items he looted from the snake. Mercifully, the night scale leather wasn't as drippy as the snake had been after it was skinned.

Item: [Night-Scale Leather] (bronze rank, uncommon)

The skin of an umbral mountain snake. (crafting material, leather).

- Effect: Crafting material for clothing, armour and accessories.

It was dark and matte, thick and cool to the touch. It was also surprisingly flexible. Like the snake, it was much longer than it was wide, coming out of his inventory rolled up like a traditional bolt of cloth. It was bound by a length of thick cord.

“Did I loot the string from the snake too? That’s weird.”

The snakeskin was listed as a crafting material, as was the dark quintessence, which turned out to be small black gems.

Item: [Dark Quintessence] (iron rank, common)

Manifested essence of darkness. (crafting material, essence).

- Effect: Crafting material for items with darkness attributes.

They had the look of uncut gemstones, but the shine of polished onyx. They even came with a pouch to hold them.

“This is weird.”

The rest of the items he received as quest rewards, mostly from quests he completed by accidentally braining the snake with a chunk of masonry. He thought the night fang would be crafting material like others he had taken from monsters, but it turned out to be a scary-looking dagger. It came in a sheath made of the same night-scale leather, which was also used for the dagger’s grip. It was curved in the shape of a fang, and drawn from the sheath, turned out to be made of bone. It had a wickedly sharp edge, tapering to a point.

Item: [Night Fang] (iron rank, epic)

A dagger made from the fang of an umbral mountain snake. The magic of the blade allows it to retain the power of the snake’s poison (weapon, knife).

- Effect: Inflicts [Umbral Snake Venom].
 - Effect: Attacks ignore bronze rank damage reduction and poison resistance.
 - [Umbral Snake Venom] (damage-over-time, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

The knife even came with a belt of the same leather but there were no loops for it on Jason's drawstring pants. He put it back into his inventory, along with the dark quintessence gems and the roll of snakeskin.

The remaining items were both quest rewards for exploring the well. The awakening stone of stars was a smooth, rounded stone about the size of a fist. There were tiny speckles in the stone that seemed to move as he stared at it, although the effect was slight enough that it may have been his imagination.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Stars] (unranked, epic)

An awakening stone that unlocks the power of the stars. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 0 unawakened essence abilities.
- You do not meet the requirements to use this item.

"Essence abilities," Jason read. "Is that like magic powers? If I'm going to be dealing with cannibal wizards, I could use some magic powers."

The last item was the dark essence. It was a cube about 15cm to a side, with a glossy sheen like polished jet. It seemed to be made of the same material as the dark quintessence, and given the names, he assumed they were related objects. He picked it up.

Item: [Dark Essence] (unranked, uncommon)

Manifested essence of darkness (consumable, essence).

- Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.
- Effect: Imbues 1 awakened dark essence ability and 4 unawakened dark essence abilities.
- You have absorbed 0/4 essences. Once absorbed, an essence cannot be relinquished or replaced.
- You are able to absorb [Dark Essence]. Absorb Y/N?

"Are you what I need to get those magic powers?"

Chapter 8: Dark Magic

Jason frowned at the description of the black cube in his hands.

“Dark essence abilities. Sounds a bit sinister. How does that work, exactly?”

Help: Essence Abilities

- Essence abilities are personal supernatural abilities. They come in a variety of forms, including passive abilities, special attacks and spells.
 - Compared to time-consuming and preparation-intensive ritualised magic, most essence abilities can be used spontaneously.
-

“Wait, there’s been a help function this whole time? Can you help me get out of here without getting eaten by cannibals?”

- You are able to absorb [Dark Essence]. Absorb Y/N?
-

“Oh, I see what’s going on here. You want me to accept the dark powers you provided, after following your plan got me here in the first place. Making it seem like my only way out is to use the dark magic you conveniently provided. Classic seduction of evil routine. You could have at least been a little bit subtle. I think this is the point where you remind me how bad my situation is.”

- Zone: Vane Manor (Subterranean Ritual Chamber).
-

“Is that snark? Do I have a snarky user interface? Also, I know where I am.”

He scowled.

“I have no idea where I am.”

He looked at the dark cube he was holding in his hands. Despite the slickly-smooth surface it had no sheen, not reflecting the lamp light at all. If anything, it almost seemed to be absorbing the light.

“That’s only completely ominous.”

Jason picked up the lamp and panned it around the room. The magic circle, the covered body, the double doors leading into the inevitably perilous unknown. His whole reason for searching the room was to find any advantage before he went through those doors and his gaze drifted back to the cube.

“Why not?” he said. “What’s the point of going to magic land if you don’t get a few magic powers?”

He stood up, took a couple of deep breaths, then picked up the cube.

➤ You are able to absorb [Dark Essence]. Absorb Y/N?

“What could possibly go wrong? Don't answer that, just absorb the essence.”

The cube suddenly turned sizzling-hot in his hand and he dropped it to the floor.

“What the...?”

Dark smoke started rising up off the cube and Jason backed away.

“It’s possible I made a bad decision here.”

The smoke coming off the cube was rising up in narrow streaks, like black streamers. They twisted in the air, heading in Jason’s direction. He backed away further, but was quickly moving out of the light coming from the lamp he had left on the table. The smoke followed him into the shadows where he could no longer see it.

“Sure, just get the dark magic powers. Good choice, idiot.”

He felt the smoke reach him because of the same scalding heat he had felt from the cube. He screamed as the black steam forced its way over his face, invading his mouth, nose and eyes. At some point he passed out from the pain, his next sensation being waking up on the floor.

Sitting up, he probed his face with his hands. The sensation of pain was completely gone and nothing was sensitive to the touch. His eyes seemed fine and he realised he could see the room as if it weren’t dark at all. The colours were a little washed out, but he could clearly see into the parts of the room previously cast in shadow.

-
- You have absorbed [Dark Essence]. You have absorbed 1 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 25% (1/4 essences).

 - [Dark Essence] has bonded to your [Speed] attribute, changing your [Speed] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all dark essence abilities to increase your [Speed] attribute.

 - You have awakened the dark essence ability [Midnight Eyes]. You have awakened 1 of 5 dark essence abilities.
-

There was a mirror on one of the walls. It was huge, double the size of even full-length mirrors Jason had seen. There was a spiderweb crack coming up from the bottom, but mostly it was fine. He moved over to it, checking his face for burn marks. It was a little

hard to tell, under the encrusted blood and tunnel grime, but he appeared unmarked. His eyes weren't even bloodshot. The rest of him was just as dirty as his face, his skinny frame smeared with filth. The quest reward pants, originally white, were stained to the point that they looked like camouflage.

It was the first time he'd gotten a look at himself since arriving. He'd been imagining himself looking like an action hero, heading into act three with masculine dirt stains reflecting enemies bested and challenges overcome. Instead he just looked grubby and ragged, the skin visible under the filth pale and taut. His Japanese facial features, inherited from his father, were even sharper than usual, making his face look gaunt. His bald head and absent eyebrows made him look manic and unhinged. His skinny body wasn't flattered by all the muck on it either, looking less action-movie and more refugee-documentary.

He sighed.

"Alright, lets take a look at my shiny new magic power."

Ability: [Midnight Eyes] (Dark)

- Special ability (perception)
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): See through darkness.

"At least it isn't complicated."

He looked around the room some more, the shadows no longer hiding anything from him. It wasn't like a low-light filter, as the lamp didn't interfere with his sight at all. Its light was more like a beam that brought things into full colour, compared to the muted look of the areas covered in shadow.

"That's cool, I guess," he said. "A little disappointing for a magic power, but I guess I'm not getting fireball from a dark essence."

He looked over at the table and the round stone still where he left it. The magic stone of something-or-other would apparently give him another power, so he walked over and picked it up.

-
- You have 4 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of the Stars]. Absorb Y/N?
-

He thought about the excruciating pain that came from absorbing the essence. On the other hand, there didn't seem to be any after-effects, and he did get a magic power out of it. Before he used it, though, he made some preparations. One of the chairs he had seen scattered around the room was a deep, comfortable-looking arm chair. It was extremely heavy, but he managed to drag it out from under a fallen bookshelf and flip it back upright. It was a huge wooden affair with plush, stitched-in cushioning. He was sick of falling over in pain.

He sat in the chair, the awakening stone in his hand.

"Absorb."

Rather than turn hot and dissolve into smoke, the awakening stone grew cold before growing soft and melting in his hand like ice cream. It seeped into his hand, filling his arm with a bone deep chill that once again left him yelling out in pain. It was not on the same scale as the essence. He kept control of his faculties while frantically shaking an arm that felt like it had been plunged into ice water. Eventually the bone-deep chill receded and the pain passed, leaving him sprawled in the chair, heaving in breaths.

-
- You have awakened the dark essence ability [Cloak of Night]. You have awakened 2 of 5 dark essence abilities.
-

Jason could feel a change within himself. It was something new, yet weirdly familiar, like when he was reading a language he'd never seen before. The power was inside him, as if it had always been there, waiting to be awoken. He knew the power instinctively. It was waiting for him, eager to be used.

He stood up and moved back to the mirror before using his new power. It responded immediately, as easy and natural as lifting his hand. Dark energy suddenly engulfed his body, hiding his visage in the mirror. It wasn't disturbing at all, feeling cool and refreshing. The energy coalesced into the form of a voluminous cloak, enshrouding his body and hiding his head within a deep, impenetrable hood. The cloak seemed more like an object of living darkness than fabric, dotted with tiny points of light. They shifted and twinkled, tiny stars in the night sky of the shadowy garb.

Jason could feel the cloak, not like a piece of clothing, but like one of his limbs. He could feel its power. With a thought, the stars grew brighter to the point that they outshone the lamp. They dimmed until he couldn't even see himself in the mirror, disappearing into the shadows.

Ability: [Cloak of Night] (Dark)

- Conjunction (darkness, light, dimension).
 - Base cost: Moderate mana to conjure.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

 - Effect (iron): Conjures a magical cloak that can alter the wearer. Offers limited physical protection. Can generate light, or blend into shadows. Cloak can reduce the weight of the wearer for a low mana-per-second cost, allowing reduced falling speed and water walking. Cannot be given or taken away, although effects can be extended to others in very close proximity.
-

“Water walking,” Jason read. “Now that’s a magic power.”

He looked around the room.

“That I can’t try out right now.”

He instinctively understood how to use the weight reducing aspect of the ability and hopped lightly into the air. He went up much higher than he normally would and dropped back down much slower.

“It’s like being on the moon.”

He bounced around the room with a goofy grin on his face until he remembered the dead body.

“Not the time to be having fun,” he scolded himself.

He experimented further with the magical cloak. He could see through it as if it wasn’t there, so even with his head covered it didn’t obstruct his vision. He could make any or all of it lose physical substance, so if he wanted to grab it he could, or his hand could pass through, unobstructed.

“Nifty.”

He could make it vanish with a thought and pull it out again, which he tried several times. After the third attempt he suddenly felt woozy and had to sit down. He went back to the armchair and fell into it.

- Your mana is low.
-

“I’m out of mana already? Also, I have mana? Is there a mana bar or something?”

Two horizontal bars appeared at the periphery of his vision. One was blue, but mostly empty, while the other was orange and about two-thirds full. Next to them was a silhouette of a person that was mostly green, but the head area and the left arm were yellow.

“Alright, so the blue bar is mana, the little body is health and the yellow bar is... something?”

➤ Current stamina: 64%

“Okay, stamina. I think I’m getting a handle on this. I don’t seem to have a lot of mana, though.”

Help: Mana

- Mana is a resource required for many essence abilities. Low mana will lead to mental exhaustion.
 - Maximum mana is based on the [Spirit] attribute. Bind an essence to the [Spirit] attribute to increase maximum mana.
 - Mana recovery is based on the [Recovery] attribute. Bind an essence to the [Recovery] attribute to increase mana recovery rate.
-

Jason let out a yawn. He had gone through a lot and his time unconscious was hardly restful.

“One last thing,” he said, pulling one of the skill books out of his inventory. He walked over to the comfy chair and fell into it.

Item: [Ritual Magic I] (iron rank, common)

A magical book that can impart the fundamentals of performing magic rituals.
(consumable, skill book).

- Requirements: Ability to use skill books.
 - Effect: Imparts basic ritual magic theory.
 - You are able to use skill book [Ritual Magic I]. Use Y/N?
-

“Yes.”

The book floated out of his hand and into the air. The cover flung itself open and the writing on it started removing itself from the page, changing from black to gold as the disembodied text floated into the air. The pages started turning, faster and faster, gold text pouring into the air. Turning pages flicked over in a rush as the golden text formed a corona around the floating book. Then the flutter of pages started slowing, until the last page turned and the book fell to the ground, every page blank.

The cloud of golden text swarmed over Jason like angry fireflies, disappearing into his body as it landed on his flesh with stinging bites. His mind was bombarded with information too quickly to process, leaving it lost and adrift. The pain and disorientation finally passed, leaving him in general control of his faculties, but dizzy and confused. He had no idea if seconds or hours had passed. He was weary to the bone, limbs as heavy as his eyelids.

➤ **Your stamina has been exhausted.**

Unable to keep his head up, he slumped over in the chair, fast asleep. After what felt like no time at all, he was jolted awake by a loud hammering. His head was still hazy, and he shook it clear in time to see two men storm through the now-broken double doors. The one in the lead was holding a hammer, the one behind, a shovel.

“Uh... g'day blokes. I don't suppose there's any chance you're not cannibals?”

The pair scowled, the one with the shovel moving forward as he hoisted it menacingly. Jason scrambled to pull the curved dagger out from his inventory. He used all his knife fighting expertise, which was none, and the shovel slammed into his face.

Jason dropped the dagger, staggering back with his hands over his nose, bleeding spilling between his fingers. The shovel came down a second time and everything went black.

Chapter 9: Escape

The circumstances in which Jason regained consciousness were unpleasant for a number of reasons. He was cramped up in some kind of tight space, forced into a foetal position. His head was spinning, and there seemed to be a little man inside it, trying to pickaxe his way out. His nose was congested with what felt like a fistful of bees, and to top it off, he had a sudden urge to vomit. He lay curled up in the constricted space, throwing up on himself. As the vomiting subsided he noticed the head section of his health silhouette was now a warning orange.

“I am getting knocked out way too much.”

He then heard a male voice.

“He’s woken up.”

Jason’s eyes swam into focus, although they felt puffy and didn’t seem to open properly. He was in what looked like a dog cage, too small to stretch out his limbs. His new ability to see in the dark was intact, allowing him to make out that his cage was on a dirt floor in some kind of cellar. The roof and walls were rough timber, and there was a pervasive smell of damp earth. There were four more cages in the cellar with him, each containing a person. One had a black guy, two had white girls. The last cage was bigger than the others, with thicker bars. Inside was an enormous, impossibly hairy man.

“A Wookiee?” Jason asked deliriously.

“What’s a Wookiee?” the hairy man growled.

“Hey,” the black guy called out to him. “Did they put a collar on you?”

“Wha...?”

Jason’s thoughts refused to walk in a straight line.

“Try and focus,” the man said. “Looks like you were hit rather hard.”

Jason ran his fingers over his face, feeling the dried blood thickly caked onto it. He yelled in pain as his fingers brushed against what turned out to be his very delicate nose.

“Did they put a collar on you?” the man asked again.

Confused, Jason reached up and patted his neck.

“No,” he croaked. “Why would they put a collar on me?”

“To suppress your essence abilities. You can still use them?”

Jason nodded, which annoyed the man in his head who went on a pickaxe frenzy.

“Ow. Yeah, I can use them, but I only have two.”

“Can they get you out of that cage?”

“One lets me see in the dark and the other makes me sparkle, so probably not.”

“Sparkle?”

“I’d show you, but I think I might throw up again. Actually...”

Jason vomited again, ending in a coughing fit, after which he passed out again.

Jason swam at the edge of consciousness, hearing two people talk.

“He was in the underground ritual chamber?” a woman said. It was a controlled, elegant voice.

“Yes, milady,” a gruff male voice replied.

“You left him in quite a state.”

“Actually, milady, that’s not much worse than how we found him.”

“You didn’t put a collar on him?” she asked.

“Mr. Caruthers only procured the four, milady. For the ones we were warned about.”

“It doesn’t matter,” said the woman. “Feel how weak his aura is. I doubt he has more than two or three abilities at most. Do you really think he’s the one that killed Landemere?”

“That would be my guess, milady. He had more blood on him than wounds to produce it. He was also locked in the room with the young master’s body.”

“How could he even do it?” the woman asked. “He’s so weak.”

“It seems the young master had mostly done himself in, milady. Summoning spell gone awry, from the looks of it.”

“Is that why all those little monsters are running around?”

“It would seem so, milady.”

Quest: [No Shirt, No Shoes, No Service]

- Objective complete: Discover the reason lesser monsters have infested the area 1/1.
- [Simple Shirt] has been added to your inventory.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

Jason stifled a yelp. He had been pretending to be unconscious when a bright blue screen appeared in front of him and his whole body went tense. The pair continued talking, however, as if nothing had happened.

“So whoever this is got lucky and killed my son when he was at his most vulnerable?”

“Not that lucky, milady. He met me.”

“Just so, Dougall,” she acknowledged. “Do we know what Landemere was trying to summon?” the woman asked.

“I had a bit of a potter through his notes, milady. It was one of them entities from beyond the void.”

Jason heard the woman sigh.

“Astral beings,” she muttered unhappily. “I told that boy it would be the death of him.” She said. “We’re a nice, traditional blood cult family. This nonsense about ineffable ancients from outside reality was never going to work out. What did you do with Landemere’s body?”

“Mulch, milady.”

“You mulched my son?”

“Well, he won’t be mulched yet, milady. Composting isn’t a quick process. I can fetch him out from the pile if you like, but milord wont be happy. He was quite specific as to the dispensation of the body.”

“I don’t care what my stupid husband thinks; he married into the family. This is my manor, my family and we do things the traditional way. Goodness knows what poor Landemere will taste like after having gone in the mulch pile.”

“I’ll give him a good and proper wash before I bring him into the kitchen, milady.”

“Thank you, Dougall. Excellent work, as always. Now, do we know where this man came from?”

“No idea, milady. As you said, he’s too weak to be an adventurer and he wasn’t exactly well-equipped. He did have a good knife, though. Not sure if he took it from the young master, so I put it with the gear we took off these others.”

“You don’t think he’s with them?”

“I wouldn’t think so, milady. He wasn’t up to much.”

“Did he say anything?”

“I think he might have been about to, milady, but that was when he walked into me shovel.”

“Why did you take his shirt?”

“He didn’t have one, milady. Didn’t have the chance to ask why, on account of his walking into me shovel again. Do you want me to send him to the kitchen as well?”

“No. If he really did kill my son, I don’t want him trotting off to death with his soul intact. Put him with the others for the blood feast.”

“Yes milady, although that will be one too many.”

“I don’t think the extra blood will be a problem.”

“I was thinking about the high priest, milady. You know how he gets.”

“Yes, quite right, Dougall. Very well. Pick out one of the others you like, and keep it for yourself.”

“Very generous, milady. I’ll take the elf, if milady had no objections.”

“Are you sure, Dougall? Elves are quite stringy.”

“Derrick was keen to try one, milady. I told him, of course, but you know how young ones are.”

“Oh, yes,” she said. “They never believe you until they suffer the consequences for themselves. Just look where it got Landemere, and my daughter isn’t much better. If it wasn’t for the cult, I swear I never would have had children. Go fetch my idiot son’s body before you take the elf. I don’t want him picking up any more flavour than he already has.”

“Of course, milady.”

The pair left and Jason let out a long breath. He didn’t know who those people were, but he heard enough to know that he wanted the hell out. He manoeuvred about for leverage and tried to force the door with his legs, but it wouldn’t budge no matter how much strength he put into it.

“That’s not going to work,” the black guy told him.

“Have you got a name?” Jason asked. “I’m Jason, and just thinking of you as the black guy is making me feel racist.”

“Rufus,” the man responded.

“G’day,” Jason said. “If you’ve got a better idea, I’m all ears.”

“Afraid not,” Rufus said. “Unless you’ve got some spirit coins tucked into those pants, you won’t get it open that way.”

“Spirit coins?” Jason asked. “Sure, I’ve got some, but how will that help? I don’t think these cages are coin operated.”

“This guy’s an idiot,” one of the women said.

“Not helping,” Rufus said through gritted teeth. “Jason, you don’t happen to have a silver or gold ranked coin, do you?”

“Hang on a sec,” Jason said, checking his inventory. There were sixteen silver coins and four gold ones, all looted from Landemere Vane’s body. He took out one of the silver ones.

Item: [Silver Spirit Coin] (silver rank, common)

A distilled quantity of raw magic. (crafting material, currency).

- Effect: Used to fuel silver-rank magic items or as a ritual component.
 - Effect: Consume to briefly increase all attributes to silver rank.
-

“Oh,” Jason said. He had previously examined the lesser spirit coins, which didn’t have an option to increase attributes. He tried to remember if there was a strength attribute.

“So, I consume this to increase my attributes?” Jason said. “Consume, as in, eat?”

“Yes, Jason, it’s very easy,” Rufus said. “You just put the coin in your mouth. Once you do, you’ll only have a few moments to force open the cage.”

“So these attributes,” Jason said. “I assume one of them is strength?”

“The power attribute increases strength,” Rufus said. “The coin will increase them all, but only for a very short time.”

Jason placed the coin uncertainly on his tongue, where it dissolved, like a soluble tablet. His body was immediately flooded with a tingling sensation and he felt an immense sense of power. His senses were sharpened. Eyes, already able to see through the dark, suddenly took in everything as if seeing it for the first time. His ears picked up ambient sounds he had previously missed. He could taste the blood, sweat and dirt on the air. It only lasted a fleeting moment before the world went back to normal, suddenly seeming dull and plain.

“Uh, Jason?” Rufus asked.

“Yes, Rufus?”

“Did you use the coin?”

“I did, yes.”

“I don’t want to pressure you, but did you, perchance, forget to open the cage?”

“Sorry,” Jason said. “I got distracted.”

“This is who you’re relying on to save us?” the woman’s voice spoke up again.

“Still not helping, Anisa,” Rufus told her.

Jason took out a second silver-ranked coin and put it in his mouth. This time, as the sensation of power came over him, he placed his feet against the cage door, easily bracing himself in the tight confines. His feet pushed out with the temporary surge of strength, the hinges on the cage door immediately starting to warp. He pushed harder and the door fell away just as the strength drained out of him again.

He crawled out of the cage and stood up. Waves of dizziness washed over him and he gripped the cage to stay upright. His body felt weak, even more than it had when he woke up.

“Are there side effects to those coins?” Jason asked.

“You used a coin with more power than your body could handle,” Rufus said. “It will recover. A little more slowly, having used two of them in quick succession.”

Jason looked over at the other cages, and a screen popped up.

New Quest: [Escape!]

You have been trapped in the cellar of the blood cult and you need to get away.

- Objective: Leave the grounds of Vane Estate without being caught 0/1.
- Reward: Essence.

- Optional objective: Rescue your fellow prisoners 0/4.
- Reward: Awakening stone.

“Good job,” Rufus said. “Now you need to find something to get the rest of us out. Giving us some silver coins would work, if you have more. That won’t be enough for Gary’s cage, though. You shouldn’t use more coins yourself until you’ve recovered.”

Jason pulled out the big key ring.

“I’m hoping this does the job,” he said. “Couldn’t reach the lock from inside the cage.”

“Even better,” Rufus said. “I’d rather not have to fight our way out of here suffering the after-effects of using a coin.”

Rufus pointing to the large, hairy man in the oversized cage.

“Him first,” Rufus said.

Jason went over to the big cage, getting a better look at it’s occupant. His body was size and shape of a professional wrestler and the parts not covered by his clothes were covered in fur. His head looked like a lion, complete with a glorious mane.

“So you’re Gary?” Jason asked. He crouched down and started trying keys on the lock.

“That’s right,” the big man said. His voice had a deep, growling timbre.

“I’m Jason,” he introduced himself. “You look like Ron Perlman from that old Beauty and the Beast TV show.”

“I have no idea what that means,” Gary said.

“I’d say good to meet you,” Jason said as he continued trying keys, “but the circumstances aren’t terrific.”

“Thanks for not just running off,” Gary said.

“Are you kidding? I need you lot to get me out of wherever it is we are.”

“We’re in a storage cellar,” Gary said.

“I can see that much,” Jason said. “I meant this whole place. I have no idea where we are.”

“You don’t know?” Gary asked. “Did they kidnap you?”

“Someone did,” Jason said. “I woke up in the hedge maze.”

Gary the lion-man’s voice seemed to be growly as a default.

“Look out!” Rufus called out and Jason turned to look around.

There was a doorway that seemed to lead into another section of the cellar, through which the man Dougall had returned, shovel in hand.

“Cheeky little sod,” Dougall said.

Jason tried to think quick, but his head was far from in its best state. Shoving the key ring back into his inventory, he got up from his crouch, but was hit by a dizzy spell and stumbled. The shovel came down and everything went black.

Chapter 10: The Evil Pit of Evil

Jason was jerked back into consciousness as his body choked out more vomit. His throat seared as his empty stomach tried to cast out what wasn't there, almost gagging him as it did. His head was filled with stabbing pain and when he opened his eyes everything blurred like he was underwater. The only clear thing was the little silhouette showing his health, the head now a glaring red. His thoughts skittered about like a roach, dashing out of reach as he tried to pin them down.

Slowly, he came to something approximating his senses. There was a light source somewhere up ahead, but the light it put out was blood red. Otherwise, the tunnel was dark, but his new power allowed him to see through it. He was once again in a cage, but bigger than the last. It was the same kind of heavy cage the lion-man had been in, with thick, heavy bars. Apparently they didn't want him kicking the door open again.

His cage was being taken down a wide, stone tunnel. It was more like a train tunnel than a cave, with an arched roof and flat floors. There was even a rail, like for a mining cart. His cage was on a platform, being pushed along the rail. Three more cages were being pushed the same way.

The people doing the pushing were wearing bright red robes and ugly demon masks. More of them led the way up front, carrying lanterns with stained glass that produced the ominous red light.

Jason wasn't thinking about what to do so much as desperately hoping the pain in his head would subside. He was concentrating on his breathing when a screen appeared.

Quest: [Escape!]

- Objective failed: Leave the grounds of Vane Manor without being caught.
- Quest failed.

New Quest: [The Blood Feast]

You have been captured and are set to be sacrificed by a blood cult. You need to avoid becoming a sacrifice.

- Objective: Avoid being sacrificed 0/1.
 - Reward: Essence.

 - Optional objective: Save the other designated sacrifices 0/3.
 - Reward: Awakening stone.
-

The long tunnel ended in a pair of enormous stone doors into which impressive but grotesque images had been carved, depicting some kind of cannibalistic orgy. Four cultists stepped forward, two to a door, grabbing the handles and pulling back until the doors swung ponderously open. When they did, red light flooded the tunnel, accompanied by an incredible heat and a bitter smell. It washed through the doors and over the group like a wave, carrying with it a coppery taste of blood that lay thick on tongue.

“That’s a lot of red flags,” Jason said.

A fist landed hard on the side of his cage.

“Quiet,” a harsh voice barked.

Beyond the doors was a vast, circular chamber, like a great cylinder carved straight out of solid rock. Some twenty-five metres across and at least twice as high, it was enough to boggle Jason’s mind even through his punch-drunk haze. The walls were black, like some long-dormant magma chamber, but even starting from a natural cavern it would have been a monumental labour to bring it to its current state. Flat stone slabs, carved out of the same black stone, had been inserted into the walls like pegs. They made a punishingly steep set of stairs that wound their way up to the higher parts of the chamber.

Dominating the room was a red pool of roiling, bubbling liquid, taking up almost all the floor space. It was the source of the light, along with the heat and the coppery stench of blood. The centre of the pool churned, as if on the point of boiling. The sound of thick, sloshing liquid echoed up through the chamber. The red light shone from deep within the pool, washing the whole chamber in red as if everything was coated in blood.

“That isn’t good,” Jason heard from one of the other caged people. It was Rufus, who had told him how to use the spirit coins. The lion man was there in his own big cage, along with one of the two women. The other was nowhere to be seen. One of the robed cultists bashed on the side of Rufus’ cage.

“I said quiet.”

“Or what?” the lion man grumbled. “You’ll sacrifice us in your creepy ritual pit?”

The other prisoners were also dirty and ragged, but nothing like Jason. He had no shirt, no hair, there was blood and old healing ointment crusted all over him. His face was coated in blood from his broken nose, along with puffy black eyes and flecks of vomit.

The rail that had carried the cages on platforms through the tunnel ended at the door. The cultists lifted the cages off, two people to each small cage, and four to the large ones. They carried them up the steep stairs, audibly straining at the effort. The lion-man’s cage was the most troublesome, even with four people lugging it. The stairs wound up and around the circular wall, the group pausing after a quarter turn. They had reached a

platform, set into the wall like the stairs, but much larger. It extended out well over the blood pit below.

“Leave the big one first,” one of the cultists said. “No point carrying the heaviest one all the way to the top.”

Jason recognised the voice of the woman he had heard in the cellar while pretending to be unconscious.

“Thank you, milady,” one of the cultists said gratefully. Jason recognised the voice as the shovel-carrying man she had addressed as Dougall.

The cage holding the big man was left against the wall. Dougall and one of the other cultists walked over to the edge of the platform and took up a waiting position, facing out over the pool below. The rest continued on. The stairs continued to wind upwards beyond the platform, making another quarter-turn around the room before reaching a second platform.

“Leave the other big cage,” the woman said.

“Isn’t he the one that killed the young master?” one of the cultists asked. “You don’t want to save that one for last?”

“I’m not going to make you haul that thing all the way up for my own satisfaction.”

“Thank you, milady.”

The four cultists roughly dropped Jason’s cage up against the wall. As at the first platform, two cultists took up positions at the platform’s edge while the rest of the cultists with the remaining two cages resumed the climb. Jason watched as they made another quarter-turn ascent to the next platform, which hid them from sight.

Jason took a look around. His vision was still like looking through a stranger’s glasses, but it was slowly improving. The platform he was on looked like rough-hewn obsidian, shiny and dark. He had no idea how the massive stone platform had been shoved into the wall like a six ton peg.

Examining the cage, the bars were much thicker than the last one he had been in. Looking closer, there even seemed to be faint traces of magical engravings on them. Oddly, Jason recognised them as reinforcing magic. The knowledge from the skill book was making itself known. It was an odd sensation, remembering something he had never learned. He was certain the silver spirit coin he used before wouldn’t be enough to break out, and he couldn’t reach the lock through the narrow bars to try his key ring.

Pulling out one of the gold ranked coins, he turned it over in his hand. Unlike the ones he got from looting monsters, this one was embossed with the profile of a serious looking

man on one side and some kind of crest on the other, along with the engraved word 'Greenstone'. His hope was that the gold coin would be powerful enough.

He looked up at the two people standing at the edge of the platform. He couldn't tell if they were men or women in their hooded robes, but neither were paying attention to him. Instead they were at the edge of the platform looking out. If he could escape the cage quick enough, he thought there was a chance to rush at least one of them right off the edge

He took a deep breath, focusing on the coin in his hand. He thought the silver coin had flooded him with strength, but compared to the gold, that had been a meagre trickle. It was like having a hurricane inside him and he lashed out with his feet, hoping it was enough to burst open the cage door.

Instead of opening, the door shot off its hinges like it was fired from a cannon, metal screeching as the whole front of the cage was warped. The door moved almost too fast to see, barely deflecting as it slammed into one of the cultists, sending them flipping off the edge of the platform. They didn't even scream, dead the moment the cage door crushed the top half of their body.

➤ You have defeated [Blood Cultist].

Startled, Jason crawled from the ruined front of the cage and to his feet. The other cultist reacted quickly, turning and rushing Jason. The coin's power was fading quickly and Jason threw out a fist with the lingering strength of the coin behind it. To his horror, his fist buried itself in the cultist's chest cavity. The cultist let out a gurgling sound and died, dropping off Jason's fist as the strength from the coin left him. Jason looked in horror at his own bloody fist.

➤ You have defeated [Blood Cultist].

It wasn't just his newfound strength that left him as the power of the coin faded. The strain of the coin's power left him feeling enervated, barely staying on his feet. His eyes wanted to close, his body urging him just to lay down and sleep. He was jolted back to wakefulness by a powerful, roaring voice.

"THEY'RE COMING FOR YOU!"

Jason's head snapped up and saw multiple cultists coming back down the stairs. Looking around, the pair from below were coming up as well. Peering over the edge, he spotted the door below, on the far side of the blood-red pool. He had a terrible idea.

“Magic power, you’d better work.”

As he backed up, the starlight cloak formed around his body, shrouding him in light-speckled darkness. After a steeling breath, he ran to the edge, leaping out as he urged the cloak’s power to reduce his weight. He sailed through the air, shadow cloak sweeping out behind him like a trail of stars. Floating over the bloody pool, he landed almost perfectly in front of the huge stone doors, still open.

“That went startlingly well.”

He looked up at the stairs, spotting the cultists bolting down them in pursuit. He ran through the doors and into the tunnel, then stopped.

“Just run,” he told himself. “You can’t save them, you’re terrible at everything. Just run.”

Instead of running he ducked behind one of the heavy stone doors, which the cultists had not opened fully due to their enormous weight. He pressed himself between the wall and the door and waited. The cloak dimmed, going from bright stars to melding Jason into the shadows as he admonished himself silently.

Well done, idiot. Now you’re going to be tossed into a pit of blood by cannibals and then probably eaten. Good job.

Cultists came rushing through the door, sprinting up the tunnel as fast as their bulky ceremonial robes would allow. None of them so much as glanced back at Jason’s hiding spot. Jason stayed stock still as more cultists came through as he cowered behind the door.

Chapter 11: Dashing Heroics

Jason cautiously stuck his head around the door but didn't see any more cultists. Even going back into the chamber he didn't see anyone. Whoever hadn't chased up the tunnel were most likely on the platforms above. He made his way up the stairs as quietly as he could, still no cultists in sight as he reached the first platform.

He dismissed the cloak as he approached the lion man's cage. It had the same heavy bars and large space as Jason's cage, but where Jason had been able to stretch out, the lion-man barely fit.

"Sorry," Jason said as he fished the key ring from his inventory. "I've been hit on the head a lot today, so I don't remember your name."

"Gary," the lion man said, a low, rumbling growl to his voice. "I didn't think you were coming back."

"I tried to talk myself out of it, believe me."

"Instincts of a hero," Gary said.

"I'd probably put it down to compromised judgement," Jason said. "I've been knocked out several times today."

Jason kept trying keys.

"I'm not even sure one of these will work," he said. "I was hoping to do this quietly but I still have some more coins... oh, there we go."

The lock clicked open and Gary squeezed his enormous frame through the door. Inside the cage, he had looked like a professional wrestler. Towering over Jason, it looked like he'd eaten a professional wrestler.

"Is there a key for my collar on that thing?" Gary asked. Around his neck was a thick iron choker.

"No idea," Jason said.

"Give me a look at that."

Jason handed over the key ring. It had an unhelpful abundance of keys and Gary started looking over them for what he needed. Despite his lion-like head, his hands were fairly normal, albeit huge, and hairy. While he went through them, Jason looked around. There didn't seem to be any cultists coming down the stairs or back in from the tunnel. What he did find was some kind of ceremonial bowl built into the top of the cage. Inside was a round crystal, very dark red in colour. He picked it up.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Feast] (unranked, common)

An awakening stone that unlocks the power of consumption. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
 - Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
 - You have 3 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of the Feast]. Absorb Y/N?
-

He shoved the stone into his inventory.

“None of these are for a suppression collar,” Gary said. “They got these collars especially for us, so whoever you took the keys from mustn’t have been in on it.”

“Yeah, I think he was on the outs with the family a bit,” Jason said. “He seemed to have his own thing going on. What does that collar do exactly?”

“It suppresses all essence abilities,” Gary said. “Some race powers, too, but not all of them.”

“Does it suppress you from being a huge guy who can kick the crap out of people?”

A grin Jason could only describe as predatory crossed Gary’s leonine face.

“No it doesn’t.”

Gary took the lead as they went up the stairs toward the next platform, which they reached unchallenged. Jason’s cage was empty, the bars on the front bent outwards. The dead cultist was still laying on the platform with a hole in his chest. While Gary knelt down to examine it, Jason checked the top of his cage. There was another ceremonial bowl, but it had been dislodged. Jason looked around a bit and found another awakening stone of the feast, where it had fallen to the platform when he kicked his way out of the cage. He slipped it into his inventory.

“What happened to this guy?” Gary asked.

Jason held up a still-bloody fist. Gary looked from the Jason’s hand to the corpse to the blasted-out cage.

“I think at this point,” Gary said, “they may be wishing they’d just let you go. How did you get mixed up in this, anyway?”

“Not really the time,” Jason said.

“Right. Good job, though.”

“It wasn’t a good job,” Jason said. “I killed someone.”

“What do you think they dragged us out in cages for?” Gary asked. “It wasn’t to dance for their entertainment.”

“Killing them in return doesn’t make us any better than they are.”

“Sure it does,” Gary said. “Better at killing. Look out!”

Jason turned to see three cultists coming down the stairs. Gary stepped forward to meet them, grabbing the first pair by the throat. He lifted them up, one dangling from each hand as he walked them over to the edge and dropped them into the blood pool below. As Gary walked off, Jason was left face to face with the third cultist, still on the stairs.

Jason’s eyes went wide with panic. He dropped to his knees, hands held out in supplication.

“Please don’t kill me. I don’t want to die.”

The cultist’s surprise registered even through the loose robes and mask. Jason used that moment to shove a fist right into the cultist’s crotch. A strained groaning came from behind the mask as Jason lashed out a second and third time, leaving the cultist doubled over. Jason stood up, grabbed the cultist by the robes and shoved him right off the side of the stairs.

➤ You have defeated [Blood Cultist].

“Did I just hear you begging?” Gary asked, walking back.

“It wasn’t a lie,” Jason said. “I really don’t want to die.”

Gary laughed as he led the way to the third platform, which was now unattended. Whoever had been manning it had either pursued Jason out the door or been thrown to the pit below.

Gary and Jason walked over to the cage, which contained Rufus. Jason now knew the right key to open the cages, which he used promptly. Rufus crawled out the door and stood up, giving Jason his first clear look at him. Rufus had dark skin, a bald head and was stupidly handsome. Roughed up and grimy from his ordeal, he looked like an action hero heading into act three with masculine dirt stains reflecting enemies bested and challenges overcome.

“That’s not fair,” Jason said.

“What isn’t?” Rufus asked, his voice like dark chocolate.

“It doesn’t matter,” Jason muttered. “Let’s just go.”

“Too bad I don’t have a weapon,” Rufus said, and Jason produced the evil trowel.

“It’s not much,” Jason said, “but it is suspiciously sharp.”

“I’ll take it,” Rufus said gratefully, looking it over in his hand. “It is suspiciously sharp, isn’t it.”

Gary and Rufus lead the way up, Jason pausing to snatch a third awakening stone from the top of Rufus’ cage. As they ascended the stairs, a lone cultist walked casually down to obstruct them. The cultist pulled her hood back and took off her mask, revealing long, dark hair and the face of a young woman. She pulled a short sword out from within the folds of her robes.

“I’ve got this one,” Rufus said, stepping past Gary. He brandished the trowel in the woman’s direction.

“Alicia Vane, I presume?” he said.

“I was disappointed that I wouldn’t get to cross swords with the famous Rufus Remove,” she said with a sneer. “Looks like I’m lucky after all.”

Rufus didn’t respond, instead lunging forward. What followed was a blaze of movement so fast Jason had, at best, a vague grasp of what was taking place. They bobbed and weaved, both restricted by the width of the stairs. Between them was a blur of motion, sword against trowel. Despite the inferior weapon and the lower ground, the cultist was being pushed back.

“That’s enough, Alicia,” a voice came down from above. Jason recognised it as the woman from the basement. With a look of reluctance, Alicia disengaged from her fight with Rufus and started backing up the stairs. Rufus lazily tossed the trowel into the air, where Gary smoothly snatched it and launched it out with a flick of his powerful arm. The practiced ease of the pair’s teamwork took Alicia by surprise; she failed to react before the trowel lodged itself in her throat.

“You’ll die in pain for that, you hairy brute,” the woman’s voice came fiercely down. As the woman yelled, Alicia dropped her sword, clutching at the trowel buried in her throat as she staggered and fell off the stairs.

Rufus moved forward, snatching up the dropped sword as he went. he led the way up to the final platform. The last cage, and the woman inside it, were against the wall like all the others. The platform was slightly longer than the one below, with some kind of ritual altar on the end. There were two figures standing in front of it. Rufus and Gary stepped onto the platform first, while behind them Jason pulled a gold spirit coin from his inventory and discreetly palmed it.

The final two cultists had both removed their masks and hoods. The woman seemed much younger than Jason expected for someone with adult children. To Jason’s eyes she looked to be in her early thirties, no older than her son Landemere. She was beautiful, with

the same olive skin and dark hair as her daughter. The man next to her, by contrast, was plain. In his ceremonial robes looked like a chartered accountant at a costume party.

Despite his appearance, the man quickly demonstrated his power was not to be dismissed. He threw out his arms and Rufus and Gary were both thrown back, slamming into the wall. Glowing chains emerged from the stone to wrap around their limbs, binding them in place. Jason, now the last one left, looked nervously at the now helpless pair.

“You’re still causing trouble,” the woman said to Jason. “First my son, now my daughter? They may have been worthless, but weren’t for the likes of you to kill.”

“Not a lot of pictures up on your fridge, I’m guessing.”

“SILENCE!” the man roared. “You think you can stop what I will do today? You think any of you can stop me?”

Whether due to the absurdity of the situation, the concussion or just pure adrenaline, Jason couldn’t take the man seriously. Even with the power he had just demonstrated, he just seemed like a petty little man who hated to be ignored.

“Mate,” Jason said, “I don’t know if anyone told you, but you’re very melodramatic.”

The man’s face flashed with fury.

“You will bow before the magic of Darryl Caruthers, worshipping my name as I...”

“Wait, wait, hold on,” Jason interrupted, holding up a hand. “Did you say your name was Darryl Caruthers?”

“You have heard of my greatness!”

“Sorry, mate, no. It’s just that Darryl Caruthers isn’t exactly a high priest of evil kind of name.”

“What?”

Jason gestured at the woman.

“I mean, what’s your name?”

“I am Lady Cressida Vane,” she sneered.

“See, now there’s a quality high priest name,” Jason said. “High Priestess Lady Cressida Vane. Just listen to it; you can practically hear the tyranny.”

“Stop babbling,” Darryl scolded. “This doesn’t...”

“Why didn’t they put you in charge?” Jason asked Cressida, ignoring Darryl. He gave her a sympathetic look. “They didn’t want a woman in charge, did they?”

Darryl’s face was starting to redden with anger.

“That has nothing to do with...”

“Oh, be quiet, Darryl,” Cressida spat out. “You and I both know who should be running things, but they refused to let a woman take a seat at the Red Table. If I was...”

“Stop being hysterical, Cressida,” Darryl said.

“Hysterical? I should...”

Neither had noticed Jason edging closer from the moment he started provoking them, or when he slipped the gold coin in his mouth as they turned on one another. Strength flowed through him, again, but this time joined by pinching, cramping pain. It was too soon since he used the last coin, and his body was paying the price. He fought through it and stepped between the bickering pair. They both looked at him in surprise as he shoved a hand out either side, one slamming into each of them.

The result was like firing them from a catapult. They both hurtled through the air horizontally, not even arcing down with gravity before they smashed into the sides of the chamber. The sheer force crushed them into the hard stone, from which they tumbled down, out of sight.

-
- You have defeated [Blood Cult Leader].
 - You have defeated [Blood Cult Leader].
-

Chapter 12: Sanguine Horror

“That was amazing!” Gary said, coming up to slap Jason on the back. Jason staggered forward to support himself on the altar at the end of the platform.

“The way you made them disregard you as a threat by appearing weak and harmless,” Gary praised. “Feeble and helpless, even touched in the head a little. It was masterful how impotent you came across. Even after you kept escaping from the cage they had no respect for you as a threat whatsoever.”

“Please stop complimenting me,” Jason said. The strength of the coin was gone, and the backlash of two in quick succession was enervating. His mana and stamina bars had drained to almost empty, and adrenaline was the only thing keeping him awake.

“How did you get down off that wall?” Jason asked.

“The magic died with him,” Rufus said, also approaching. “Which was lucky, because it doesn’t always work that way.”

“You’d have had a right problem getting us down,” Gary said.

“How about someone gets me out of this cage?” a female voice asked, impatiently. It wasn’t the same voice that had been dismissing him back in the cellar. That person must have been the one whose place Jason took.

Jason staggered over to the cage, swiping the stone on top into his inventory as he took the keys out. The woman inside the cage was pretty with strawberry blonde hair and a button nose. She was clearly unhappy, but that just left her looking rather adorable. Jason opened up the cage and let her out.

“Thanks for the rescue,” she said to Jason, tamping down her annoyance, before blasting it full force at Rufus and Gary.

“What the hell were you two doing? I had to get saved by a random homeless man?”

“He only seems like that,” Gary said. “It’s all a cunning ruse.”

Jason left the three of them talking while he wandered back to the altar at the edge of the platform. It was decorated with grotesque carvings that appeared to feature teeth very heavily. On top of the altar was a thick book, left open halfway through. Glancing over the text, he could only understand fragments. Having used the ritual magic skill book he took from Landemere, the knowledge it imbued him with offered some insights, but this new book was still above his head. The contents seemed to involve a more specific field of magic, operating at a higher level than the skill book allowed him to grasp.

“What have you got?” The woman asked, walking up to the altar next to him.

“Not sure,” Jason said, pushing the book in front of her. “Looks like they were trying to make something, but it’s well beyond my expertise. I only found out magic exists today. I’m Jason, by the way.”

She gave him an odd look.

“Farrah. Thanks again for the rescue.”

“No worries. I figured the best way out of wherever we are was to get you three to help me. Can you make anything out from that book?”

She turned her attention back to the pages in front of her.

“You’re right about them making something,” she said, flipping through pages.

“Something not very nice.”

“I got that much from context,” he said, waving his hand at the chamber around them, black stone reflecting blood-red light from below.

“Fair point,” Farrah laughed.

While she continued examining the book, Jason looked around some more, noticing Gary and Rufus were gone.

“Where’d the others go?” he asked.

“They went to see if those cultists you led off are coming back.” Farrah said.

“I completely forgot about them,” Jason said.

Looking around some more, he found a small white sack next to the altar. He picked it up and looked inside, seeing a white, crystalline powder. He pinched some between his fingers.

Item: [Salt] (normal, common)

Ordinary salt (crafting material).

➤ Effect: Common ingredient for use in cooking or magic rituals.

“Salt?” he said curiously.

“It’s good for making quick and easy magic circles,” Farrah explained, not looking up from the book. “A lot of ritual magicians keep some around. Me included.”

Jason dropping the sack back down next to the altar. There didn’t seem to be anything else of interest, but he noticed that Farrah had the same iron collar as Gary and Rufus.

“I don’t suppose the key to your neck thing is here somewhere,” Jason said.

“Cressida had it,” Farrah said.

Jason glanced at the wall where Cressida had crashed into it before dropping out of sight.

“Oh. Sorry I pushed her into the pit.”

“Things would have gone a lot worse if you hadn’t,” Farrah said.

Jason looked over at the stairs leading down.

“Can I ask you something about Gary?” he asked.

“What’s that?”

“Are there a lot of lion people running around, or was he cursed or something?”

Farrah looked up from the book, again giving Jason a curious gaze.

“You’ve never seen a Leonid before?”

“I’m not local,” Jason said.

“That’s coming across,” she said. “Leonids are a normal race you’d see anywhere in the world.”

“Good to know,” Jason said.

She frowned, curiously, but turned back to the book while Jason continued to look around. He peered over the edge, looking down at the red pit far below. It could have been his imagination, but the room seemed to be getting hotter. The sloshing noise of the pit below seemed louder as well. He spotted Rufus and Gary making their way back up the stairs.

“The others are coming back up,” Jason said to Farrah.

“That’s not good,” Farrah said.

“That seems rude,” Jason said.

“No,” Farrah said, “I mean I figured what the cultists were up to.”

“Bad?”

“Very bad.”

She waited for Gary and Rufus to arrive before explaining.

“No sign of the other cultists,” Gary said, “and one of the wagons was gone. I’m guessing they came back, saw their high priest splattered on the ground and decided to make a run for it.”

Quest: [The Blood Feast]

- Objective complete: Avoid being sacrificed 1/1.
 - Reward: [Blood Essence].

 - Optional objective complete: Save the other designated sacrifices 3/3.
 - Reward: [Awakening Stone of Adventure].

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason's eyes lit up at the sight of another essence, but it wasn't the time to start going over his loot and he closed the window.

"I know what they were doing here," Farrah told Gary and Rufus.

"I'd assume some kind of summoning ritual," Rufus said.

"More like trying to create something," Farrah said. "It's called a sanguine horror; an artificial creature made from alchemy, blood and things best left unmentioned."

"Sounds friendly," Gary said.

"It's an apocalypse beast," Farrah said. "A world ender. A hive mind made up of carrion leeches that rot your flesh as they drain you dry. It feeds on blood to multiply itself, growing in mass and power until there's nothing strong enough to stop it. Then it spreads and spreads until there's nothing left to consume."

"Why would anyone create something like that?" Jason asked.

"They presumably had some way to control it," Rufus said. "Use it as a weapon."

"That's a big gamble with an apocalypse beast," Farrah said. "Maybe that's possible before it gets too powerful. Until it feeds enough to grow strong it remains vulnerable."

"Still seems like way too high a chance of going wrong," Jason said.

"Speaking of which," Rufus said, "have you noticed it's getting hotter in here?"

"No," Farrah said.

"Yes," Jason said at the same time.

"It's more noticeable closer to the pool," Rufus said.

"The smell is stronger down there too," Gary said.

"They should probably be tossing us into the blood pit by now," Rufus said. "Is something going wrong because we interrupted them?"

"I think we're overlooking something," Jason said.

"What's that?" Farrah asked.

“Are we sure we interrupted them? They were going to throw the four of us into the pit, right?”

“Right,” Rufus said.

“Well,” Jason said, “how many people did we throw in?”

Farrah’s pretty brown eyes went wide.

“Oh no,” she said, turning back to the altar and started madly flipping through pages of the book.

As the others waited, a screen appeared in front of Jason.

New Quest: [The Sanguine Horror]

- *Destroy the sanguine horror before it becomes too grave a threat.*
- Objective: Destroy the [Sanguine Horror] 0/1.
- Reward: Essence.

“Oh crap,” Jason said.

Farrah snapped the book shut. It was a hefty tome and she tucked it under one arm.

“I’m pretty sure we just finished their job for them,” Farrah said.

“I don’t think they’ll appreciate it,” Rufus said.

“Are we the blood cult now?” Gary asked.

“We have to get down there and stop it while it’s still weak,” Farrah said.

“Will the book help?” Gary asked.

“Not at all,” Farrah said.

“If we have to do it, we have to do it,” Rufus said. “Failing that, we go find someone stronger to deal with it. A lot stronger.”

“Do you think Emir has arrived yet?” Gary asked.

“No,” Rufus said. “He’s weeks away at best.”

“Then we need to handle this ourselves,” Farrah said. “I don’t trust the competence of the locals.”

“This guy’s alright,” Gary said, dropping a hand on Jason’s shoulder that almost knocked him over.

“I’m not local,” Jason said.

“I’m concerned that we don’t have our abilities with these collars,” Rufus said. “You’re sure there’s nothing in the book about how to fight it?”

“No, I’m not,” Farrah snapped. “I’ve had it for about eight minutes and it’s written in a language that you haven’t even heard of. So maybe there’s something in there, but I’m not going to find it by randomly skimming through a few pages.”

“Did you check for an index?” Gary asked.

Farrah’s eyes landed on Gary like attack dogs.

“I guess there’s no time for research,” Gary said, heading for the stairs.

“Let’s go,” Rufus said, following after Gary.

Farrah watched them vanish down the steep staircase, then turned to the back of the book. Jason narrowed his eyes as he watched her.

“Are you checking for an index?”

Chapter 13: This is the Part Where We Step Back

The three former captives pounded down the stairs as Jason followed unsteadily behind. As they went down the steep staircase, the smothering heat rose up to engulf them. The air became wetter and heavier until even breathing was a chore. The copper taste of blood felt like it was coating Jason's tongue. The pool was churning loudly, as if something was thrashing just below the surface. The sound echoed loudly, especially as they neared the base of the chamber. Near the end of the stairs they stepped over the corpse of High Priest Darryl, splayed out like a discarded puppet.

Jason touched a finger to the body as they passed.

➤ [Would you like to loot \[Blood Cult Leader\]?](#)

Jason gave his mental assent as they continued down the stairs.

-
- [\[Recovery Potion \(Bronze\)\] has been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [3 \[Gold Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [11 \[Silver Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [216 \[Bronze Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [341 \[Iron Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [471 \[Lesser Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
-

Like Landemere Vane, the high priest had been holding more than a thousand coins on his person. As to where he had them stowed away, Jason could only guess.

"Does everyone here have an inventory?"

"What?" Farrah asked loudly. It was hard to hear over the wild splashing of the blood pit as they drew closer.

"Nothing," Jason said loudly.

Jason's real interest was in the recovery potion, which he took from his inventory and tipped down his throat as soon as they reached the bottom of the chamber.

Farrah saw Jason tip back the potion and threw out a hand in a warning gesture.

"Jason, don't..."

The potion was already making its way down Jason's throat.

"What?" Rufus asked, as he and Gary turned around to look.

"Jason just drank a potion," Farrah said.

"Right after using a spirit coin?" Gary asked.

“Is that bad?” Jason asked “Actually, why didn’t the potion do anything?”

The others only answered in sympathetic wincing. Moments later, his stomach was filled with cramping pains. He doubled, felt his body desperately wanting to vomit, but unable to do so.

-
- You have used a recovery potion while your body is flooded with residual magic.
 - Recovery potion has failed to take effect.
 - You have been afflicted with [Mana Toxin].
-
- [Mana Toxin] (affliction, poison, magic): You cannot regain mana. Recovery items will have no effect. You will suffer damage when using mana.
-

Jason groaned. The initial pain passed, but now his stomach felt as awful as his head.

“I should have thought to warn you when you didn’t know how to use spirit coins,” Rufus said. “I didn’t realise you had any potions. Are you alright?”

“Honestly,” Jason croaked, “it isn’t going to affect me that much. There’s only so much worse I can get.”

Rufus nodded, and they turned to the giant pool of churning red liquid, Jason very much at the back. The space near the large doors leading out was the widest area around the pool, with most of the room having only a small lip between the edge of the red liquid and the wall. When they first entered the chamber, the pool had been churning in the middle. Now the whole thing was like a pot of water threatening to boil over, splashing red liquid over the sides.

“That can’t all be blood, right?” Jason shouted over noise.

“It isn’t,” Farrah called back. “Mostly it’s an alchemical mixture, although there is a lot of blood in there. At least a dozen people’s worth. Maybe twenty.”

“Are you sure we need to fight this monster?” Gary asked. “I’d feel a lot better without this collar on my neck.”

“We all would,” Rufus said.

“I’m just saying,” Gary said. “If I’m going to fight something called an apocalypse beast, I’d rather have my powers.”

“We do what we can with what we have,” Rufus said. “Complaining about what we don’t have doesn’t help.”

“It isn’t actually called an apocalypse beast,” Farrah said. “That’s more of an informal category.”

“That’s what we need,” Gary said, “Pedantry.”

“Did you say podiatry?” Jason yelled. The churn of the blood-like pool was growing louder and louder. “Is there something wrong with your feet?”

“I said pedantry!” Gary yelled back.

“Will you both please shut up!” Rufus bellowed.

“If we let this entity go,” Farrah yelled, “it will get out and start feeding on the local animals. The more it feeds, the stronger it gets. If it eats its way through a village or a town, then it will get too strong for any of the local powers to stop it.”

“Can we even do this with our abilities sealed away?” Gary asked. “A few cultists is one thing, but a world-destroying blood monster? We have one sword between us. Going for help might not be the worst idea.”

“Real help is a long way from here,” Farrah said.

The pair looked to Rufus for the deciding vote, who turned his attention to Jason.

“You’re the reason we aren’t all monster soup right now,” Rufus shouted. “The decision is yours.”

Jason looked at the three of them looking back at him. They clearly had no idea of the magnitude to which he was out of his depth.

“What are our actual chances?” Jason yelled.

“Terrible,” Gary said.

“Not good,” Rufus said.

“Getting better,” Farrah said, pointing. They all looked and saw Cressida’s body hadn’t fallen into the pool, but onto the stone floor at the edge of the chamber. Unfortunately, it was on the far side. That portion of the floor had barely a lip of stone between the pool and the wall, but Cressida had landed lengthways along it.

“She has the key to the collars,” Farrah said. “If I can get this thing off my neck, I can blast whatever crawls out of this pit back into blood soup.”

“Not sure I’d want to walk around the edge of that pool,” Jason said. “Sometimes all your choices are bad, I guess.”

“We do it, then,” Rufus said. “Farrah, go for the key, but be careful of the pool. Ideally you’ll have it and be back before this thing emerges, but Gary and I will stall it if we have to. Jason, what kind of combat abilities do you have?”

“None,” Jason shouted “I was taken out multiple times by a guy with a shovel. I am very bad at fighting.”

“That’s fine,” Rufus shouted back. “Just stay back and try not to die.”

Farrah was already moving, putting the book on the ground and setting off around the pool, not waiting for Rufus’ to finish talking. She carefully hugged the wall, wary of the

churning blood pit. Suddenly the blood, which had been roiling like a stormy sea, went as still and serene as a sheltered pond. The roaring noise they had all been shouting over immediately fell silent.

“Here we go,” Rufus said, his voice an intrusion to the sudden quiet.

Ripples disturbed the edge of the pool, and something emerged from the blood.

“Is that a leech?” Jason asked. It was the right size and shape for a leech, but had the gaping, tooth-ringed maw of a lamprey.

“I do not want that thing crawling up my leg,” Gary said.

“I think that’s a consensus opinion,” Jason agreed.

A second leech crawled out, then a third. They came two at a time, then five, ten until they were spraying out like runoff from a storm drain. They piled on top of one another, forming squirming, writhing mass.

“We should probably attack while it’s still forming,” Rufus said to Gary. “I don’t suppose you want to go first?”

“How am I supposed to fight a pile of leeches?” Gary asked. “I don’t think the sword will work. Also, you have our only sword.”

Strips of blood-soaked cloth, long and thin like bandages, started pushing their way out of the leech pile. They wrapped themselves around the leeches, pushing the pile into shape.

“Any idea what it’s doing?” Rufus asked.

“None,” Gary said. “Jason?”

When Jason didn’t answer, they turned to look around, finding Jason was no longer there.

Gary look up the stairs and out through the door, seeing no trace of Jason.

“He’s done a runner!”

There was no time for distraction and they turned back to the monster forming in front of them. More bloody strips were emerging from the pile, pushing into what they started to recognise as a humanoid shape. It was only a crude approximation, splitting at the seams as leeches spilled out between the bandages. It shambled forward, barely in half-steps, shedding leeches as it struggled to keep balance.

“Just stay close enough to keep its attention,” Rufus said. “It doesn’t seem very fast and we just have to stall it.”

“Or I could punch it,” Gary said. “It’s a person shape, now. I know how to punch people.”

“What? No...”

Gary's fist slammed into the creature, passing straight between the red-stained bandages and burying itself in the creature's chest. It seemed to have no impact and Gary staggered back. His arm emerging from the leech monster with a sucking noise like pulling out a leg stuck in mud. It was covered in leeches, burrowing through his fur to sink teeth into flesh. He staggered about, yelling more in anger than pain as he started ripping them off. Chunks of flesh and fur went with them, clenched in rings of teeth.

The bindings around the mass slowly tightened, giving it a more discernibly humanoid shape. It grew faster and more coordinated. Frowning, Rufus tossed aside the sword and picked up the heavy book Farrah had left behind. Winding up as he lunged at the creature, he took a huge, two-handed swing.

The book slammed into the creature's torso, sending it staggering back. The bindings loosened, leeches once again spilling out of the main mass. The floor was now covered with them, crawling at Gary and Rufus, seeking out their legs.

Rufus watched with satisfaction, stepping back from the seeking leeches.

"And she said the book wouldn't help."

Rufus failed to notice the leech crawling over the book until its teeth buried themselves in his hand, causing him to yelp as the book dropped to the floor. He tore the creature off his hand, a chunk of flesh going with it. He reached down for the book, but there were leeches crawling all over it.

"Help!" he heard Farrah call out, and he looked around. Gary was still wildly ripping leeches off his now blood-soaked arm. Farrah was most of the way around the pool, but bloodied bandages, like those wrapping the leech monster, had emerged from the pool and were trying to drag her in.

Rufus looked around for where he had dropped the sword, picking it up and hurling it through the air. His confident throw was on the mark, dropping only a few feet from Farrah. She hauled back on the bandages trying to pull her into the pool, leaning hard for the sword.

The leech monster, in the mean time, had once again tightened its bindings and started walking toward Rufus. He skittered back, still faster than the creature but its speed increased with every step.

Rufus stumbled, falling onto his back with the creature still coming at him, when a bright light descended from above. Jason, starlight cloak floating around him at maximum illumination, drifted down to land between Rufus and the sanguine horror. Tucked under one arm was a small sack. Reaching into the sack, Jason grabbed a fistful of salt and

tossed it at the horror. The creature recoiled and Jason did it again, forcing the creature back again.

“I’m really glad that worked.”

“What is that?” Rufus asked, getting lightly to his feet.

“Salt,” Jason said, throwing out another handful.

“Did you use mana while suffering from mana toxin?” Gary asked, wandering over. His arm was drenched in blood and still looked to be bleeding freely, but the leeches were gone and he didn’t seem worried.

“Seemed time sensitive,” Jason said. “Oh, this hurts. I was pretty much bottomed-out on mana in the first place.

Gary looked over Jason’s cloak of stars.

“You weren’t kidding about a power that makes you sparkle.”

Suddenly an explosion of light and noise erupted from the other side of the pool. A bright stream of lava cut through the air like it was coming from a fire hose, crashing into the leech monster. Jason’s head pivoted, goggle-eyed to the source of the blast.

“Was that frigging LAVA?”

Farrah, collar now gone, was holding a glowing red hand out toward the creature. She mumbled something and a second stream of lava blasted across the chamber. The blood pit audibly sizzled as the lava seared over it, scouring moisture from the air. After two bursts of white-hot lava, the leech monster was largely destroyed, the bindings holding it together completely unravelled.

“This is the part where we step back,” Rufus said, putting a hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“*This* is the part?”

Jason could still feel the heat on his face as he staggered back behind Rufus, then back some more for good measure. He heard chanting from Farrah across the pool and looked over. There were several orbs of fire floating around her. One of the cloth strips burst from the pool to grab at her, but was intercepted by an orb, burning up on contact.

She stopped chanting and Jason heard a rumbling from the direction of what was left of the leech pile. It started to scatter, but a cascade of lava geysered out of the ground underneath it. Gary, Jason and Rufus backed off even further as lava spattered around the geyser before it dwindled and came to a stop.

Jason looked at the glowing hole left behind, jaw hanging slack. The red light from the blood pool faded and died, plunging the chamber into darkness. Only Jason’s cloak and the remnant glow of lava provided any illumination.

“We need to get every leech!” Farrah called out. “It can reconstitute itself, even from one!”

Jason looked around the floor. The main mass of leeches had been incinerated, but many leeches had spilled onto the floor as Rufus and Gary stalled it. Salt bag tucked under his arm, he started flinging handfuls at the leeches while Rufus and Gary stomped them underfoot. While the leech mass had only recoiled from the salt, individual leeches vomited blood from their tooth-ringed mouths as they dried up and died.

Eventually there was nothing left of the leeches but blood stains and ash.

➤ You have defeated [Sanguine Horror].

Quest: [The Sanguine Horror]

- Objective: Destroy the sanguine horror 1/1.
- Reward: [Sin Essence].

- Quest complete.
- 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

Jason edged forward warily. He noticed a leech that had managed to get far enough away that it was burnt to a crisp instead of being completely annihilated. He poked it with his toe.

➤ Would you like to loot [Sanguine Horror]?

Jason gave his mental assent.

-
- [Awakening Stone of the Apocalypse] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 100 [Iron Coins] have been added to your inventory.

Jason looked at the listed awakening stone. Apocalypse.

That didn't sound wildly positive.

Chapter 14: Worlds Apart

Jason sat on the bottom stair of the chamber while Farrah removed the collars from Rufus and Gary. His whole body was wracked in pain after using the last of his mana to conjure the cloak and float down from the top of the chamber.

“Explain something to me,” Jason said. “If you can do...”

He gestured at the sections of wall and floor melted by lava.

“...that, then how did they catch you in the first place?”

“Ambush,” Rufus said. “We were meant to resupply and get information from a local contact. Instead, he set us up for capture.”

“We’re going to go find him,” Gary said.

“And have a sizzling conversation,” Farrah added.

“But first,” Rufus said, “we have to get back to the Vane Estate. They still have Anisa and I’m concerned about the cultists that Jason lured away. If they left because they saw the tides turning, they’re probably heading back to the Estate.”

“You think they’ll use Anisa as a hostage?” Gary asked.

“Possibly,” Rufus said. “They might take her for leverage, or worse.”

After the collars were removed, Rufus and Gary started stretching like they’d just woken up. Farrah, in the meantime, held her hand out over the ground and chanted something quietly. It was a short chant, only a few words. When she was done, a large chest made of dark brown stone rose out of the ground. It didn’t break through the floor, instead rising up through it, like a ghost. Farrah pushed open the hinged, heavy lid and took out fresh clothes for herself, Gary and Rufus. They all started changing clothes, having no qualms stripping down to their underwear in front of Jason or each other.

Jason glanced surreptitiously at the three of them. Rufus and Farrah had the bodies of Olympic athletes; lean muscle filled with the power of coiled springs. Gary was so huge he made bodybuilders look like they were still under construction. His wild mane and leonine features completed his majestic appearance. Jason didn’t know what passed for handsome in Gary’s species, but he suspected Gary was it.

“Why am I the only one who isn’t super good-looking?”

“What?” Rufus asked, looking over as he pulled on a shirt.

Jason thought back to the beautiful Cressida Vane, standing next to the ordinary-looking high priest Darryl, and was struck by an unpleasant revelation.

“I’m the Darryl,” he said disconsolately.

“What are you talking about?” Rufus asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jason said, shoulders slumping gloomily.

“Clothes are fine,” Farrah said, “but we need to get our gear back.”

“I just hope the ones who left didn’t go back to the manor and swipe it all,” Gary said.

Watching the others change clothes reminded Jason that he had completed the quest to get a shirt. He’d forgotten because that was two cages and a shovel to the head ago. He stood up and pulled the shirt from his inventory, discovering it was plain, white T-shirt, complete with what looked like machine stitching. Holding it out in front of him, he read the text printed on the front.

I WENT TO A MAGICAL ALTERNATE UNIVERSE AND ALL I GOT WAS VAST COSMIC POWER.

Jason shook his head.

“This must be what insanity feels like.”

“What does it say?” Gary asked, moving up to examine the shirt.

“You can’t read this?” Jason asked.

“It’s not in any language I know,” Gary said.

“Probably for the best,” Jason said as he pulled on the shirt.

-
- You have equipped [Starting Gear] outfit. Outfit tab has been added to your inventory.
-

“Outfit tab?”

“What?” Gary asked.

“Nothing, never mind.” Jason said.

Jason checked his inventory, which now had a second screen he could access with a tab at the top labelled ‘outfits’. Jason was now used to navigating the screens with a thought and opened the new section. It showed a silhouette with various slots for equipment, most of which were empty. There was also a column to the left, empty aside from two entries. The first was listed as ‘starter gear’, the second as ‘new outfit’.

“How does that work,” he muttered to himself.

Help: Outfits.

- You can designate sets of gear as outfits, allowing you to quickly switch between them. Outfits can be modified by adding or removing items from item slots. An outfit can only be equipped so long as all items in that outfit are in the inventory or already equipped.
-

“Huh.”

He noticed the others were all watching him stare into the distance and mumble to himself.

“You alright there, Jason?” Gary asked.

“Sure,” Jason said. “Actually, now you say it...”

He'd been pushing through on a potent mix of panic and adrenaline, but now the immediate threat was gone he was starting to crash. His wooziness came back, his vision going dark and blurry. He stumbled forward, dropping to his hands and knees as his empty stomach again tried to heave out what wasn't there. The next thing Jason knew, something was being splashed over his face.

Sputtering awake, he was helped into a sitting position and a glass bottle was shoved into his hands.

“Drink it,” Farrah said. “It's just water. You can't take any potions for at least a couple of hours.”

As Jason slowly sipped at his water, he looked over the icons he could see at the edge of his vision. The health silhouette showed a warning yellow all over, with a more ominous orange on his head and mid-section. The potion cooldown icons were also present, but were completely greyed out. There was an icon for the mana toxin, with more than two hours listed under it.

While Jason was taking stock of his miserable condition, the others were recovering theirs with stamina potions from the magic chest. After drinking his, Rufus made a sour face.

“Oh, that was sickly. What happened to the other potions?”

“Gary chose the flavour,” Farrah said.

“I think it's nice,” Gary said defensively.

“Me too,” Farrah said. “Rufus only likes things when they're bitter.”

After letting him rest awhile, Gary pulled Jason easily to his feet. Jason wavered and Gary held him upright until the dizziness passed.

“Thanks,” Jason said. “I've passed out... three? Four times today? I think my brain might be bleeding.”

“We can't use potions on you any time soon,” Farrah said, “but once we get Anisa back, she can heal you.”

“What are we waiting for, then?” Jason said.

They left the chamber through the huge stone doors. Jason glanced back at the space he had hidden in behind one of them. The tunnel was surprisingly long, carved directly out of the stone.

“Who made this tunnel?” Jason asked. “It must have been a tough job.”

“Wouldn’t be that hard,” Farrah said. “Construction magic would make it a straightforward process.”

She looked up and down the extensive length of the tunnel.

“Might have taken a while, though,” she acknowledged.

They emerged from a gap that, at a distance, would have looked like a natural crevice. They were on the gentle slope of the lower portion of a mountain that tapered up to a towering height. The upper reaches were black and lifeless, while the lower portions turned to yellow stone and red earth, with patchy coverage of dry, yellow grass. There was a wagon outside the tunnel, wheels chocked to stop it rolling down the slope. It had a yoke for animals, but the harness was cut and the animals were gone.

“Did they scatter the horses so we couldn’t use the wagon?” Jason asked.

“What are horses?” Gary asked.

“You’ve never heard of horses?”

The other three shook their heads.

“Then what was pulling the wagon?” Jason asked.

“Heidels,” Gary said.

“What’s a heidel?”

“It’s a work animal, the kind you see everywhere,” Gary said. “They pull wagons, carry packs. You can ride them. I can too, but you can tell they don’t like it.”

“Maybe the name is just different,” Jason said. “Four legs, hooves?”

“Sounds right,” Farrah said.

“Long body,” Jason continued, “long head.”

“Heads,” Gary corrected.

“Heads?” Jason said. “As in more than one?”

“Yeah, two heads, scales, horns...”

“That sounds horrifying,” Jason said. “We are definitely not talking about the same animal.”

“The animal doesn’t matter if there aren’t any here,” Rufus said. “Which means we start walking.”

Jason looked down the slope, getting a panoramic view of the land below. It was a flat, dry landscape of sandy yellows and sober reds, punctuated by withered grass or spiky

scrub. Every so often, a low tree with sparse foliage would jut reluctantly up from the barren earth. The sun hammered relentlessly down over all of it, but the arid air was almost pleasant after the cloying humidity of the sacrifice chamber.

The climate bore no resemblance to the moderate warmth and lush greenery he had experienced in the hedge maze. Even the heat had felt different there, more pleasantly warm than this unforgiving desert air. He remembered looking at the world map, a warped, but not entirely different globe to the one with which he was familiar. It marked his position as being in the Kalahari Desert, which matched the terrain now before him.

They started down the slope, Gary in the lead. He was wearing loose clothing to let air flow through, along with a hood to shield him from the sun. The others were wearing more fitted clothes but didn't appear discomforted.

"They brought us here while I was unconscious, right?" Jason asked.

"That's right," Rufus said.

"How long was I knocked out for? This is very different from the place we were before."

They all turned to look him with curiosity.

"The Vane Estate was using climate magic," Farrah said. "Didn't you notice when you went there in the first place?"

"Actually, how did you get involved with all this?" Rufus asked. "Now that we have time to talk."

"Um, I think I might have been summoned," Jason said. "Not on purpose, obviously. I mean, who'd summon me? I went to bed, which was last night, as far as I know, and woke up in the middle of the Vane family hedge maze. I sort of stumbled around for a bit until I found one of the residents, and from what I gather he was trying to summon something and got me instead. He called me something that sounded specific. I don't remember what, exactly. 'Other-worlder,' maybe?"

"Outworlder?" Rufus suggested.

"Sounds right," Jason said. "Is that what the name suggests? Is this really a whole different world?"

"We've always been in this one," Rufus said. "You'd have to tell us if it's different enough from where you came from."

Jason thought about the flying eels and leech monsters, people throwing around magic chains and streams of lava. Healing potions, reading languages he'd never seen before. The magic powers he'd used for himself. All of it was impossible.

“It’s definitely different enough,” Jason said. “My world has its share of strangeness, but this is a whole different kind of strange. Some things are weirdly the same, though. Like hedge mazes, and people named Gary. I have a cousin named Gary. Not as tall as you, Gary, but almost as hairy.”

“He’s a leonid?” Gary asked.

“I think it’s a glandular thing. We don’t have leonids on my world.”

“I’m not well versed in astral magic,” Farrah said. “I’ve heard of outworlders, but it isn’t my field of expertise.”

“Alternate realities maybe,” Jason said. “Some things are the same, others different. If that’s what this is, then this world diverged from mine a very long time ago. The continents are different, but not completely. The fundamental physical laws here have some interesting addenda. My world doesn’t have magic, at all. Or a second moon. I did see a second moon, right?”

“Your world only has one moon?” Gary asked. “That’s weird.”

Chapter 15:

Outworlder

They continued walking through the stony desert. There was a rough trail to follow back to the manor, and Jason's map ability had apparently been plotting locations, even when he was unconscious. The hard ground was uneven but not too difficult to walk on.

There was a stash of water bottles in Jason's inventory, provided from Farrah's own magical storage space. The pounding heat was not helping Jason's condition and he emptied one bottle after another.

Jason was grateful they were walking over dry, hard earth instead of weren't trudging through endless sand dunes. His knowledge of African geography was limited but he'd seen a documentary about Namibia's Skeleton Coast once. From what he could remember, things got very sandy there. Of course, it could be a completely different in another world.

The others helped introduce him to their world as they marched on.

"What I don't understand," Jason said, "is why I have abilities that I never had before. Is it because my world doesn't have magic, but this one does?"

"I'm not sure," Farrah said. "I don't know much about outworlders."

"I'd never heard of them before this," Gary said, "so don't look at me."

"I've met some before," Rufus said, prompting groans from Gary and Farrah.

"What?" Rufus asked.

"Of course you have." Gary complained.

"What's wrong with that?" Rufus asked again.

"Your childhood friend is the Crown Princess of Vitesse," Farrah said.

"This again?" Rufus asked. "It's not my fault who my parents chose to socialise with."

"So, Rufus is a big deal?" Jason asked.

"No."

"Yes."

"Yes."

Rufus glared at the other two.

"I do know a little bit about outworlders," Rufus said. "They've been pulled into our world from another one through some magical accident. Usually a summoning spell that's gone awry."

"The evil cult lady's son," Jason said. "He blamed me for ruining his magic thing."

"That's how it usually works," Rufus said. "As far as I'm aware. I'm no expert."

“This happens enough that there’s a name for it?” Jason asked.

“My understanding is that it’s something that happens in high-magic worlds like ours,” Rufus said. “I really don’t know any more than that.”

“Is there a way to go back home?” Jason asked.

“I’m not sure,” Rufus said. “If there is, it probably involves magic well above our level, let alone yours.”

Jason bowed his head in disappointment.

“Jason, tell me if this sounds familiar,” Rufus said. “Do you have some kind of guide that helps you interact with our world? Something that doesn’t fit our world but does fit yours. Maybe something you’ve heard of from a legend, or a part of your world’s mythic traditions. Something that exists in your world as a story, but here has become real.”

Jason thought about the video game interface he had been experiencing. The quests, the inventory system. The map he had open at that moment, even if the others couldn’t see it.

“I think I know what you’re talking about.”

“That’s something all outworlders have,” Rufus said. “It works differently for every outworlder, but whatever magic that brought them here changes them. It gives them abilities to help them adapt and survive.”

“That’s why I can read languages I’ve never seen?”

“And speak languages you’ve never spoken,” Rufus added.

Jason frowned.

“Someone say something,” Jason said.

“You didn’t even realise it, did you?” Rufus asked.

Jason focused on the sounds, rather than the words. It wasn’t English. He didn’t know if it was more disturbing that he could speak some unknown language or that he didn’t notice he was doing it.

“I have an ability,” he said, listening to the sounds he was making. “One of the effects is called language adaptation. Does that mean I can speak any language and not even notice?”

“Most likely,” Rufus said.

“That’s why you sound like you learned the language from a skill book,” Gary said.

“I do?”

“You do,” Farrah said. “There’s a recognisably neutral accent and things sometimes come across as odd because of the difference in language structure. It’s a giveaway, if you’ve seen it enough. Colloquialisms can translate very strangely.”

“Your telling me the old lingo is hard yakka to get the noggin around?” Jason asked, leaving them looking at each other in confusion.

“It seems there’s a limit to the translation,” Rufus said. “You might want to stick to plain language.”

“Stuff that for a bag of chips,” Jason said, laughing as three brows creased in confusion.

“I’d love to know how that got translated,” he said

They continued on, answering more of Jason’s questions as they trudged through the desert. At least, Jason trudged. The others looked as comfortable as they would strolling through a park.

“Outworlders like you might have their advantages,” Farrah said, “but we natives have advantages of our own. Take Gary, here. His leonid race are stronger and faster than us, and that’s only the beginning of what leonids can do. Elves are powerful spell casters and their skill with healing magic is unparalleled.”

“I forgot there were elves” Jason said. “Some guy said he wanted to eat one.”

“That’s not good,” Gary said.

“They’re cannibals, Gary,” Farrah said. “Of course it’s not good.”

“What about dwarves?” Jason asked. “Gnomes? Non-copyrighted small people who live inside hillocks?”

“I don’t know what any of those things are,” Gary said. “Except for hillocks.”

“We have elves,” Rufus said. “Leonids like Gary, obviously. We’ll eventually be heading for a port city, so while this region is human-dominated, you’ll see all kinds of people.”

“Each of which have their own special gifts,” Farrah said. “Some are there from birth, while others only show themselves once you get essences. Humans like Rufus and I are kind of like you, in a way. Our abilities differ from person to person, based on our essences. They start out dormant and we have to figure out how to wake them up.”

“How do you do that?” Jason asked.

“You push yourself,” Rufus said. “Take yourself to the limit and beyond.”

“I wouldn’t complain too loudly,” Gary said. “Humans have their essence abilities increase faster than other races. They’re kind of annoying about it.”

“Do I get that?” Jason asked. “I’m human, right?”

“Um... I have some bad news,” Rufus said. “You’re an outworlder, now. Not a human.”

“I’m not a human?”

“Not strictly, no” Rufus said. “You might be kind of human.”

“That somehow sounds worse,” Jason said.

“I met an elf outworlder,” Rufus said. “She retained some of her race’s abilities, while others were replaced by her outworlder gifts. It’s possible you might still have some human abilities.”

“Every race gets exactly six gifts,” Farrah said. “There are ways of examining them with magic.”

“I can do that myself,” Jason said.

“You can?” Farrah asked.

“No worries,” Jason said, pulling up his list of abilities.

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Interface].
- [Quest System].
- [Inventory].
- [Map].
- [Astral Affinity].
- [Mysterious Stranger].

“I have a half-dozen already,” he said. “I think these might all be outworlder abilities. Do humans normally get astral affinity?”

“Definitely not,” Farrah said. “That’s something celestines get.”

“Celestines?” Jason said. “That’s not something we have where I’m from.”

“They’re similar to elves and humans,” Farrah said. “One of the many new kinds of people you get to meet.”

“As long as none of them try to eat me,” Jason said.

As they walked on across rocky desert landscape, the dry heat started to overwhelm Jason. His head started throbbing worse and worse until he was no longer walking in a straight line. They found a rocky outcropping to rest in the shadow of, Rufus helping Jason along.

The others fetched out bronze spirit coins while Jason sipped at his water, laying back on the warm rock.

“You don’t need water?” Jason asked Gary. The enormous leonid was covered in fur, which can’t have been pleasant in the desert heat.

“Gary’s people require a lot more exertion than the rest of us to get tired,” Rufus said. “Another one of his racial gifts.”

“Also, when you have a full set of essences, you don’t need to eat or drink anymore,” Gary said. “You can, of course, but just for pleasure.”

“To actually sustain ourselves,” Rufus said, “we need a concentrated source of raw magic.”

He held up the spirit coin he was holding.

“There are various ways to get it,” he continued, “but spirit coins are the easiest, by far.”

“You’re lucky I even had that water,” Farrah said, “because we don’t need it. I just like to be prepared.”

“If you’re using coins,” Jason said. “What about the after-effects? Using those coins knocked it right out of me.”

Rufus popped the spirit coin into his mouth.

“It’s about not going over your limit,” Rufus said. “We’re bronze-rank adventurers, so a bronze coin will sustain us without stressing our bodies.”

“I don’t know what that means,” Jason said.

“What, bronze rank?” Gary asked.

“Also, adventurer,” Jason said. “Is that where you guys hang around in a tavern until someone hires you to kill forty gnolls in a dungeon?”

“What’s a gnoll?” Gary asked.

“And why would there be forty of them in a dungeon?” Farrah added. “Are gnolls a kind of criminal?”

“There’s an organisation,” Rufus said, forestalling more unhelpful questions. “It’s called the Adventure Society. They give out jobs to people like us, mostly to deal with monsters that are threatening towns, villages or whatever.”

“But sometimes to investigate a cult full of bloodthirsty cannibals,” Gary added.

“As for bronze rank,” Rufus said, “that’s related to your essence powers. Once you have all four essences, you become iron rank, and you can work your way up from there. Bronze is one rank above iron, but you can worry about that later. Reaching iron rank will fundamentally change you. Make you powerful.”

“Not that powerful,” Farrah said. “Not straight away. You become partially resistant to attacks that don’t have any magic behind them. You live on magic instead of food and water.”

“But my world doesn’t have any magic,” Jason said. “Doesn’t that mean if I became iron rank or whatever and then go back, I’d eventually run out of coins and starve?”

“You can get by on food and water,” Farrah said. “It just takes more of it, depending on how powerful you are. Some foods are better than others. Meat, sugar, anything with magical ingredients, obviously.”

Jason was relieved. He could handle living on protein bars and cake. Was he immune to getting fat?

“We owe you for getting us out of that mess,” Rufus said. “We’ll help you find a full set of essences.”

“Well, I do have a couple of extras,” Jason said. “On top of the one I used, already.”

“Where did you get those?” Gary asked. “I thought you only arrived in this world today.”

“I did,” Jason said. “I just kind of... came across them.”

Rufus raised a sceptical eyebrow.

“You just came across them?”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “You know; here and there.”

“I can do an essence ritual for you,” Farrah said. “Not before we find Anisa, of course. Who did the ritual for your first essence?”

Farrah’s suggestion prompted some of the ritual magic knowledge in Jason’s mind the skill book had put there. Remembering something he never learned in the first place was an odd sensation, like *déjà vu*. The new knowledge in his head told him that an essence ritual was required for a person to absorb an essence. Except, he knew from experience that wasn’t always true.

“I didn’t actually use a ritual,” Jason said. “I just kind of absorbed it. I think it was part of the same power that lets me speak all the languages.”

“What was that like?” Gary asked. “Just straight-up absorbing it?”

“Strenuous,” Jason said. “I passed out.”

“Can I watch when you do the next one?” Farrah asked. She was looking at Jason like a scientist with a lab rat.

“It wouldn’t hurt to have someone watching out for you,” Rufus said. “We at least owe you that much.”

“I haven’t even decided what I want to do,” Jason said. “I’ve been too busy trying to not die.”

“What’s to think about?” Gary asked. “Who doesn’t want power?”

“Hey look,” Farrah said, pointing out ahead of them. “I can see it.”

As they crested a rise they could see, in the distance, a strange patch of green in the middle of the desert.

“Let’s pick up the pace,” Rufus said.

“I don’t think I can,” Jason said. Under the harsh desert sun he was sweating buckets, his skin tingling with the promise of sunburn.

“Farrah, get him another bottle of water,” Rufus said. “Gary, are you alright to carry him?”

“Wait, carry me?” Jason said. “That doesn’t sound very dignified.”

The others turned to look at him and he looked down at himself. The filthy skin and clothes; the stains from blood, muck and sweat. The ridiculous shirt. Then there was the smell that all the sweating had turned from bad to egregious.

“Never mind,” he said.

Chapter 16: Rescue Party

Rufus, Farrah and Gary were racing across the desert, feet pounding into the dry earth. Rufus had told Jason they would be running at a sustainable pace. Their unflagging momentum confirmed his words, but they were moving at a pace that, in Jason's world, would be the equal of world class sprinters.

Jason had little time to think about such things as they stormed over the rough ground at ten metres a second. He was draped over Gary's back like a cloak, legs flailing as he desperately clenched his arms around the tree trunk Gary used as a neck. Any concerns over dignity quickly went out the window. His only objective became not getting thrown off.

The edge of the estate grounds was startlingly apparent; a green line of grass and trees cutting across the barren browns and yellows of the desert. Like stepping into a different world, a single step took them from scorched air and unyielding earth to cool grass and a welcoming breeze.

They slowed down and stopped just across the line. Rufus and Farrah crouched, hands on knees, panting heavily while Jason poured off Gary's back to form a puddle on the ground. He groaned miserably as Gary looked down at him.

"You've built up quite a sweat for a guy who didn't do any running," Gary chuckled. Despite all his fur, body mass and having carried Jason, he wasn't even breathing heavily like Rufus and Farrah. He looked as comfortable as if he'd been lounging at a pool, rather than sprinting through the desert. Jason, sweating enough for both of them, raised his head to retort.

"Brshrglkrk."

He didn't care that his mouth was too dry for vowels, only regretting the energy he had expended to lift his head. He was happy to let it drop back onto the soft grass.

Farrah once again pulled her magic chest out of the ground. Retrieving a handful of potion vials, she handed one each to Rufus and Gary.

"Stamina potions," she said.

"I'm fine," Gary said as Rufus knocked his back without hesitation.

"I think he needs one more than any of us," Farrah said, looking at Jason. "Too bad, really."

"He has water," Rufus said.

Jason pushed his unwilling body into a sitting position and pulled a bottle from his inventory. He started chugging it thirstily.

“Life is hard, outworlder,” Rufus said without sympathy. “And you, my friend, are soft. If you want to get by in this world, you’ll need to toughen up.”

Jason struggled to his feet.

“How did you all handle the desert so well?” Jason asked. “I was being carried and it broke me. I think I got sunburn through my clothes.”

“How much do you know about the four attributes?” Rufus asked.

“I remember that there are attributes,” Jason said. “Now that you say it. There’s the strength one and... some others.”

“One of the others is recovery,” Farrah said. “Our recovery attributes are all in the upper range of bronze tier, so our bodies replenish themselves as fast as the desert can take it out of us.”

“Unless we push ourselves too hard,” Rufus said. Jason unhappily compared himself to Rufus, whose glistening sweat and unconscious poise made him look like a model for an athletics calendar. Jason, by contrast, looked like a rag someone had just used to clean up a spill.

Replenished somewhat by the water and the rest, Jason took a look at the startling border between desert and garden. It was a straight line, like a border between worlds. A single step went from scorched, desert earth to springtime in an English country garden. Looking along the border, Jason spotted pillars placed periodically along the edge, white stone columns with magic symbols carved into the surface.

“Are those things making it like this in the middle of the desert?” Jason asked.

“They’re only part of it,” Farrah said. “It takes a large and sophisticated system to make something like this work.” She handed out spirit coins to Gary and Rufus. All three popped them into their mouths.

“What now?” Gary asked.

“Now we get to the manor house,” Rufus said. “We find Anisa and kill everyone else.”

“I like this plan,” Gary said. Grey light started sparkling around him, growing thicker until it formed a set of metal armour, encasing his entire body. It was thick and heavy, made from dark steel plates held together with large bolts. Engraved into the surface were runes that looked to have been carved out with a blade, rough but radiating strength. Where the engravings dug into the dark metal, red forge light shone from within.

“That’s impressive,” Jason said. “Isn’t it hot in there?”

“Heat I can handle,” Gary said. After seeing him sprint through the desert like he was jogging on the beach, Jason believed it.

Rufus held out a hand, around which motes of golden light were gathering. The light coalesced into a sword in Rufus’ hand, an elegant scimitar that seemed as much a work of art as a weapon. The hilt was a vibrant red gold, as was the edge of the blade. The bulk of the blade was yellow gold that shone like the sun, with red gold inscriptions running down its graceful curve.

After Gary and Rufus called their impressive equipment, Jason looked over at Farrah.

“All the stuff I conjure is made of rock,” Farrah said. “I’m not carrying that lot around.”

“I’d conjure up my cloak,” Jason said, “but even if I had the mana, I think it’d kill me.”

“What can that cloak ability do?” Rufus asked.

“It gets bright or dark,” Jason said unenthusiastically. “It can also make me lighter, so I can jump from high places.”

Suddenly he perked up.

“Oh, and it lets me walk on water,” he said. “I haven’t tried that yet, though.”

“I have some magic boots that let me do that,” Rufus said, then frowned. “At least I did, until they were taken from me. We’ll get our equipment back after we’ve freed Anisa.”

Before sending away the stone chest, Farrah took out two belts with heavy pouches. One was grey, which she handed over to Gary, the other red, which she kept for herself.

“What are those?” Jason asked. He watched Farrah loop her belt into her clothes, while Gary tied it around the outside of his armour. The heavy metal suit barely seemed to impede him.

“Summoning materials,” Farrah said.

“Summoning?” Jason asked.

“You’ll see soon enough,” Rufus said. “Let’s not tarry more than we have to.”

They set off through the grounds. The outer areas were manicured woodlands, shaded gravel trails making their way through artfully placed trees and shrubbery. Somewhere he could hear the babbling of a stream.

“This is nice,” Jason said, looking around.

“Indulgent,” Rufus criticised. “They should be working with the surroundings instead of against them. The cost of building and maintaining all this in the middle of the desert is beyond extravagant.”

“I know what you’re talking about,” Gary said. “There’s a desert city not too far from where I grew up. It has a subterranean river, and half the city is built underground around

it. They use the natural landscape to their advantage. Hardly any core infrastructure requires magical upkeep.”

“Is that Zartos you’re talking about?” Rufus asked.

“Wait, did you just say Zardo?” Jason asked.

“No, Zartos,” Rufus said. “Is Zardo a place in your world?”

“No, Zardo is...” Jason searched for the best way to describe it. “Let’s just say it’s for the best you didn’t say Zardo.”

“Have you been to Zartos, Rufus?” Gary asked.

“No, my brother told me about it,” Rufus said. “He said it was definitely worth seeing.”

“Knowing your brother,” Farrah said, “he probably meant the women.”

“He’s not that bad,” Rufus said, prompting looks from Gary and Farrah. “He’s not.”

“Zartos has a large celestine community,” Gary said. “But I suppose your brother didn’t tell you about that.”

“He may have mentioned it,” Rufus said evasively. “In passing.”

“Celestines,” Jason said. “That’s another one of the races in this world, right?”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “Like elves they’re famous for being attractive to human sensibilities.”

“We only have humans in my world,” Jason said. “The idea of meeting whole new races is exciting.”

He slapped Gary on the back, which was currently encased in metal.

“But you’ll always be my first, Gary,” Jason said.

“I like your attitude,” Gary said. “Humans have something of a bad reputation when it comes to other races.”

“I can believe it,” Jason said. “My world only has humans and we’re still awful to one another. My Dad’s parents came from a different country from where I grew up, so I look different from most of the people I know. People in my own country look at me like I’m a foreigner. Even the people who do look like me call me a banana.”

“A banana?” Farrah asked.

“Yellow on the outside, white on the inside,” Jason said. “My Mum’s name is Cheryl; why can’t I listen to Pat Benetar without people turning it into a thing.”

The other three looked at each other, shaking their heads.

“I don’t think any of us know what that means,” Farrah said.

“Probably for the best,” Jason said.

The cultivated woodlands were small, soon giving way to gardens of colourful flowers. The pathway continued out from the woods weaving its way through the garden beds.

Beyond lay the manor house, which Jason hadn't seen from the outside before. Like the grounds, it was very much in the vein of a sprawling English country house. Three storeys of old stone and dozens of windows, in the old money style.

"I think that's the hedge maze over there," Jason said, pointing as they made their way through the garden. "I woke up in there with no idea of where I was or what was going on."

"That's where they found you?" Gary asked.

"It would be nice if it was that simple," Jason said.

"Quiet," Rufus ordered. "We could meet enemies at any point. We have no idea how many were left behind or if the others came back from the sacrifice chamber."

"Are you sure I should be going with you?" Jason asked. "I'm not exactly an asset if combat breaks out."

"You want to stay by yourself?" Rufus asked.

"Uh, no. Now that I think about it."

"Then shut up."

They moved out from among the flowerbeds and onto the lawn in front of the manor.

"Seems quiet," Rufus said.

"Use our summons now?" Farrah asked.

"We go quiet as we can until we find Anisa," Rufus said. "We don't want someone deciding to make her a hostage."

Suddenly glass shattered as a person crashed through a second storey window. He landed hard on the ground, but immediately scrambled up and into a sprint. He was taken aback to find the four people looking at him, but didn't pause as he kept running.

"You think you can run from me?" a woman's voice roared from the broken window, prompting a laugh from Gary.

"I don't think we have to worry about someone taking her hostage," he said.

Three spheres of bright light erupted from the broken window, spinning around each other as they pursued the fleeing man. He was bleeding from the broken glass and limping from the fall, but still moving faster than Jason could have managed. It still wasn't enough to escape the accelerating spheres of light, flashing white and gold as they unerringly pursued him.

When they caught up, the spheres started spinning around the man, firing beams of light into his body. He let out a painful cry with every beam that lanced into his flesh, but he kept moving in the drive to escape. The orbs tenaciously followed his every movement,

firing over and over until he dropped. His screams gave way to dead silence. The spheres vanished.

The group looked back to the broken window, in which a pretty blonde woman was now standing. She stepped out into the air, light glowing under her feet as she delicately drifted to the ground. She started walking across the lawn to meet them.

“Didn’t you all say she was the healer?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” Rufus said.

“This lady here,” Jason said. “The one with the death orbs.”

“That’s her,” Farrah said.

“Suddenly I’m less enthused about subjecting myself to her ministrations.”

Anisa was slender, almost frail-looking, with platinum-blonde hair and pale skin. She was wearing a practical outfit of fitted pants and top, all in spotless white. Sturdy-looking cloth covered her from neck to boots, with thicker panels over vital areas. There was a belt, also white, with many small pouches and a sword at her hip. Even her boots were white, without so much as a blemishing smear of dirt. Her hair was cinched severely back into a ponytail, revealing ears that gently tapered to a point. She walked with lithe grace and absolute confidence, nodding her head in greeting.

“You got free as well,” she said, as if expecting no less. “Why is there a vagrant following you around?”

Chapter 17: A Conservative Pillage

“Aren’t you the person that tried to get us out of the cages but got hit upside the head?” Anisa asked, giving Jason a second glance.

“That’s me,” Jason said.

Jason recognised Anisa’s voice from where they had all been locked up in cages. He recalled she hadn’t thought much of him, even then. She looked him over, her expression suggesting her opinion hadn’t improved.

“He’s lucky you were there,” she said to the others. “I hope you didn’t let him slow you down.”

“Actually, he rescued us,” Rufus said.

“I find that hard to believe,” Anisa said.

“It was something to see,” Gary said. “He’s taken a few too many blows to the head, though. We’ve been dumping potions into him, but only a couple of hours in the desert left him a wreck. Any chance you could throw a healing spell his way?”

Anisa turned her gaze back to Jason. With a reluctant grimace, she held a hand out in front of his face and recited a short chant.

“Let the life that has withered return to full bloom.”

“I think ‘withered’ might be a bit harsh,” Jason said.

A soft light started shining from under his skin. The perpetual ache in his head turned sharp, the now-familiar sense of magic healing, although the spell was far gentler than the potions he had consumed.

➤ You have been affected by [Regenerate]. Your health will be restored over time.

An icon appeared in his vision relaying the remaining duration of the spell. The injury indicator in Jason’s vision was still yellow and orange, but over the half-minute duration of the spell, the health silhouette all cooled to a healthy green. His head had long been an overfilled balloon threatening to burst, until the healing magic deflated it to his great relief. He fell into a sitting position on the grass, letting out a long, satisfied breath.

“Thank you so much,” he said, letting himself fall back, arms splayed out. “I’m suddenly very sleepy. I don’t think being unconscious is actually very restful.”

“You can sleep after we’ve cleared this place out,” Rufus said, moving to stand over Jason. He held out a hand, which Jason gripped reluctantly, letting Rufus pull him to his feet.

“You found our gear, then,” Gary said, looking at Anisa. Rufus, Farrah and Gary had changed clothes, but were still various degrees of sweaty and dirty, while Anisa wasn’t just geared-up but also clean. Jason looked the worst of the lot. His shirt was sweaty and smeared with trail dust, while his pants could only be described as wretched.

“They have a store room in the cellar complex under the manor,” Anisa said. “Most of our equipment was there, but they’d already taken some of it away. Including the dimensional bags, which is why I didn’t bring it with me.”

“Let’s start there, then,” Rufus said. “They didn’t take my boots, did they?”

“Your boots are still there,” Anisa said, prompting relief on Rufus’ face.

“Summoning time?” Gary asked.

“Go ahead,” Rufus said.

“No,” Anisa countermanded. “Your summons are both too destructive. My church is seizing this estate, so I won’t let you destroy it.”

“Let the summons search the grounds,” Rufus said. “If that doesn’t flush out any hiding cultists, nothing will.”

“They’ll ruin the grounds,” Anisa said.

“Priestess,” Rufus said to Anisa, “You brought this contract to us, so I’m willing to accommodate you, but only to a degree. After what we’ve already gone through, I am not going to compromise the capabilities of this team to save your church from hiring a landscape gardener. Is that understood?”

Anisa’s face was a picture of unwillingness, but she nodded acquiescence.

“My dad’s a landscape architect,” Jason said. “I don’t think we could get him out here, though.”

“Alright,” Gary said. “We’ll just whip out the old summons and then pillage the manor.”

“You will not,” Anisa commanded.

“Come on, Rufus,” Gary said, not bothering to appeal to the elf. “What’s the point of being an adventurer if we can’t do a little looting?”

Rufus frowned.

“Any personal possessions you find, you can take,” Rufus said. “Anything that is part of the manor stays where it is. That’s furniture, decorations, art, whatever. And no unnecessary damage.”

He waving a finger between Gary and Farrah.

"This means you two," he said.

Anisa still looked like she had a mouthful of lemon, but didn't protest further.

"Fine," Gary said. "It'll be a conservative pillage."

"Not helping," Rufus said through clenched teeth. "Gary, Farrah, you're staying out here. Use your summons to flush out any loose cultists."

"But the loot," Gary said.

"Maybe think about that next time you open your big mouth," Rufus said.

"My mouth was closed," Farrah complained, drawing a scolding look from Rufus.

"Fine," she said.

"Just find any cultists still on the ground and pick up any who make a run for it," Rufus said. "Anisa and I will sweep the manor, so you may get some people running out."

"What about my gear?" Gary asked.

"You can collect it once the place is clear. Do you really need your hammer now that the collar is off?"

Gary held up a fist, now encased in metal by the gauntlet of his armour.

"No," he acknowledged reluctantly.

Gary's chagrin seemed to mollify Anisa somewhat. Gary stepped away from the group and untied from his belt the pouch Farrah had given him earlier. Opening a small flap that served as a nozzle, he started pouring a grey powder from the pouch onto the ground in a circle.

"Are those iron filings?" Jason asked.

"They are," Farrah said. "Summons are a little more involved than most essence abilities and require something to act as a medium. Salt circles are the most common, but plenty use other things. For Gary's ability, it's iron filings."

She patted the pouch on her own waist.

"For me it's obsidian powder. We keep a good supply of both in my magic chest."

Gary finished pouring out the iron filings into a circle and returned the pouch to his belt. Then he crouched down and held his hand out, which startled Jason by spontaneously bursting into flame. Unconcerned, Gary reached out and touched the circle. The iron where his finger touched almost immediately turned red and started to melt, smoke coming off the ground where the grass met the burning iron. The flame spread like burning a fuse, making its way around the circle.

Once it was a complete ring of glowing metal, complex magical patterns started appearing inside the circle. From those patterns something rose up as if emerging from the

ground, but the ground remained unbroken. It was a humanoid figure, crudely hewn from ugly black iron. With it came a strong smell of ozone.

It was huge, around three metres tall. It looked ungainly and menacing, like something hammered together from leftover slabs of pig iron. In between the joints, the glow of molten metal could be seen shining from within. The head was flat and blank. The centre of the torso looked to be two separate pieces of metal pushed together, the edges ridged like interlocking teeth. As he watched, its torso opened like a hideous mouth, revealing a pool of molten metal inside, radiating heat over the group before closing shut again.

“Impressed?” Gary asked Jason, having already cheered up.

“Very,” Jason said. “What is it?”

“It’s a foundry golem,” Gary said proudly. A droplet of molten metal dripped from it, sizzling as it hit the ground.

“I do understand why Anisa doesn’t want it in the house,” Jason said.

“You too?” Gary asked sadly.

Anisa was giving Jason an unhappy glare.

“You,” she said, making it sound like a swear word, “may address me as Priestess.”

Jason didn’t care for being talked to like he was something scraped off the bottom of a boot.

“Well you,” he said with an insolent grin, “may address me as Rakishly Handsome Jason.”

“Excuse me?” Anisa said, barely believing what she just heard.

“You’re excused,” Jason said pompously, as he looked away. “Just don’t let it happen again.”

Anisa’s eyes went wide and Rufus stepped into her path as she took an angry step forward.

“Jason, you should probably stick with Gary and Farrah,” Rufus said.

Farrah took her turn to summon a creature. She poured out her own circle next to the ring of scorched earth that had been Gary’s. Farrah’s process was the same, right down to the powder melting into a red-hot ring. Instead of a golem like Gary, Farrah’s summon was a pile of black and red magma with arms.

“Lava that can punch you with a fist bigger than my head,” Jason said. “Why does she get that when I get to see in the dark.”

“Well,” Gary said, “what essence did you use?”

“The dark essence.”

“Well, hers came from the volcano essence, so there you go.”

“There’s a volcano essence? That definitely sounds better than mine.”

“That depends,” Gary said. “Farrah’s not great when it comes to sneaking.”

“That’s because she has volcano powers,” Jason said. “Everyone else has to do the sneaking.”

Gary considered for a moment.

“That’s a pretty good point,” he acknowledged.

Rufus and Anisa made for the house as Gary and Farrah set out though the grounds.

“I can’t believe they made us wait outside,” Gary said. As they walked, the two monstrous figures ranged ahead. Both emanated searing heat, so Gary and Farrah didn’t keep them close.

“I can believe they made you wait outside,” Farrah told Gary.

“Maybe we’ll catch some cultists,” Jason said.

“That’d be nice,” Gary said.

“How long do these summons last?” Jason asked.

“Depends on your power level,” Farrah said. “A few hours for me and Gary.”

It was around an hour later that Rufus came out to find them. He looked down the row of scorched archways cutting a straight line through the hedge maze.

“You said flush them out,” Gary said defensively.

“You were unspecific as to how,” Farrah added.

“Well,” Jason said, “he did point at you and say, ‘no unnecessary damage, this means you.’”

“Whose side are you on?” Gary asked.

“Justice.”

Farrah snorted a laugh.

“Did you actually find anyone?” she asked.

“There was one guy in some kind of storeroom,” Gary said.

“Did you get anything out of him?” Rufus asked.

“The storeroom kind of burned down with him in it,” Gary said.

Rufus shook his head.

“We found a carriage shed with a missing carriage,” Jason said. “It looked like they left in a hurry. Seems like someone raided the valuables and made a run for it, not even stopping to pick up the stuff they dropped.”

“Cowards,” Gary said.

“They can’t be cowards,” Jason said. “They would have needed those horrifying monsters to pull the carriage.”

“Monsters?” Rufus asked.

“They’re not monsters,” Gary said. “Heidels are just normal animals.”

Jason had his first encounter with a heidel when they found the stables. They were the size and shape of a horse, but with scales in instead of hair and two heads, each of which had a horn sticking out of the forehead. To Jason’s eyes it looked like someone had put two unicorns and a lizard in a teleporting machine and they came out blended together.

“They’re horrifying.”

“If you think they’re bad,” Farrah said, “you’re in for it when you see an actual monster.”

“What did you find?” Gary asked Rufus.

“We found a few people squirreled away. After those cultists came back, the lord of the manor cleared out the vault and they all took off, leaving the staff behind.”

“Wasn’t the lord that high priest guy?” Gary asked.

“Apparently not,” Farrah said.

“What did you do with the cultists you caught?” Jason asked.

“We questioned them and then we killed them,” Rufus said, matter-of-factly.

“You just executed prisoners?”

“What’s wrong with that?” Farrah asked.

Jason ran a hand over his face, the energy draining out of him.

“Oh, damn it.”

Chapter 18:

One of Us

With their sweep through the manor house, the group completed their mission. The cultists were dead or running and they found plenty of documentation pointing them to the main cult.

“So, these people were only a local branch?” Jason asked as he rifled through a closet.

“That’s right,” Rufus said, opening a chest of drawers. “It’s called the Red Table. They’re only weak in remote areas like this. Core membership takes higher-ranked adventurers than us to deal with.”

They decided to remain at the manor overnight before leaving. Jason was able to explore and was surprised at what he found. Rather than the medieval technology he was expecting, magic had been used to replicate amenities from indoor plumbing to lighting to refrigerators. The horrors found in the cannibals’ kitchen were the stuff of nightmares.

Jason was looking for clothes to replace the filthy rags his current outfit had become. The local fashion was big on loose fits, letting airflow combat the desert heat. That made it easy to find something in his size.

He put together something suitable and took a hot shower, the water flow and temperature controlled by a pair of crystals. Stepping out feeling refreshed, he put on some of the new clothes. The top was lightweight and breathable, fully covering the arms and with a wrap-around hood to shield the head and face from the sun. Gary had worn something similar for their previous trek across the desert. The rest of the outfit was some loose pants and practical desert boots. Underneath were the silkiest pair of boxer shorts he had ever encountered.

He hesitated before using purloined underwear, but he decided not to go commando when they headed back into the desert. He wondered if he had killed the person whose clothes he now wore. As for his old clothes, only the t-shirt was salvageable. The pants and sandals were beyond saving and got thrown away.

-
- You no longer own items belonging to the [Starting Gear] outfit. [Starting Gear] outfit has been removed from the outfit tab of your inventory.
-

Remembering the outfit tab, Jason played around with it, creating several outfits from the clothes he had collected. His snake tooth dagger had been retrieved along with the gear from the rest of the group, so it joined the default ensemble, along with the snakeskin belt

and sheath. He put together a few extra outfits, creating more sets for them. Conveniently, items in the outfit tab didn't take up space in his main inventory slots.

The most interesting part was when he changed outfits. Switching gear-sets shrouded his body in dark mist for a brief moment, during which the old gear was returned to the inventory and the new gear appeared directly on his person. He switched rapidly back and forth between outfits to try it out. The dark smoke lightly tingled his skin.

Night time found Jason laying in a bed, staring at the ceiling. He was exhausted after the strangest and most dangerous day of his entire life, but his mind refused to retreat into sleep. Shoving off the covers, he opened his inventory to throw on one of his new outfits.

The group had claimed bedrooms in a row on the top floor. A shared balcony connected all the rooms, each accessible through French doors. Jason opened his set of doors and wandered out. He rested his hands on the balustrade and looked up at the sky. In a massive field of stars, a pair of moons shone bright, one half moon and one crescent.

"I really am in a different world."

"You're just figuring that out?" Rufus' voice came from behind.

Jason turned to see Rufus emerging from his own room. He walked over and joined Jason in leaning on the balustrade.

"Couldn't sleep either?" Jason asked.

"I'm on watch," Rufus said. "We don't think the cultists will come back, but they've surprised us before. We're rotating turns through the night."

"Didn't want me to take a turn?" Jason asked.

"Honestly? No."

Jason chuckled.

"Good call."

He turned his gaze back to the sky.

"So why aren't you sleeping?" Rufus asked. "I would have thought you'd be out the moment you hit the sheets."

"Everything that happened today just keeps running through my head," Jason said. "I was concussed for most of it, so it feels like it wasn't me, somehow. But it was me. It was my hands I washed the blood from."

"You were impressive today," Rufus said. "We'd be dead if it wasn't for you."

"It didn't feel impressive," Jason said. "It felt like a perpetual state of desperation and panic. I think all the blows to the head may have helped, strangely enough. My head hurt like hell, but I was too punch drunk to really think about what was happening. Otherwise I would have freaked out and hidden under a table."

“I don’t believe that,” Rufus said. “I’ve seen a lot of adventurers. Most you can teach, but some will never have what it takes. Others...”

He patted Jason in the shoulder

“... others take to it like it’s what they were born for. You’ve got the stuff, Jason.”

Jason sighed.

“It doesn’t feel like I’ve got the stuff,” Jason said. “Not the stuff you’re talking about, anyway. When I first woke up here, I had no idea of what was happening or where I was. I didn’t think any of this was real. The best explanation was that I’d gone mad and it was all in my head.”

“You thought I was imaginary?” Rufus asked.

“By the time I met you,” Jason said, “I was past stopping to contemplate. I was too busy scrambling from one deadly situation to the next.”

“You certainly arrived in rough circumstances.”

“Impossible circumstances, from my perspective,” Jason said. “Everything in this place is impossible. Where I come from, there’s no magic, no elves. Definitely no awesome lion-men named Gary. Monsters are just myths and metaphors. Stories we tell ourselves about the dark corners of our own nature.”

“But now you believe it? That all this is real?”

Jason nodded.

“Anisa gave me pause, but yeah.”

“Anisa?”

“A haughty, elf girl in tight leather that doesn’t hide how much she dislikes me? That’s exactly the kind of thing my brain would throw out.”

Rufus gave Jason a sideways look.

“Don’t look at me like you don’t have hang-ups,” Jason said.

“I didn’t say a thing.”

“Sure, mate. But I get it. She’s real. It’s all real. This experience has been too long and too coherent, even with the concussion. Any explanation that makes sense in my world doesn’t fit. At least, none that I know of. Hallucinations, madness, dreams. The ability to muster even a little bit of logical detachment implies that they aren’t the answer.”

Jason sighed again.

“If nothing else,” he continued, “there’s just too much going on for me to have come up with all of it. I don’t have the imagination to have thought up all this. I mean, broad strokes, maybe, but not all the little details.”

“Well,” Rufus said, “now that you’ve accepted it, what comes next?”

“I have no idea,” Jason laughed. “If I’m really here, then I guess I start looking for a way home.”

“You don’t seem too enthusiastic about that.”

“I didn’t leave a lot behind,” Jason said. “I kind of made a mess of my life.”

“A fresh beginning, then,” Rufus said. “You can start by becoming an adventurer, like us.”

Jason looked over at Rufus.

“I’m not sure that’s what I want,” Jason said. “This, today, is what you do, right?”

“It normally goes better,” Rufus said. “Not so dangerous. Although it’s a dangerous life; I won’t lie.”

“It’s not the danger that worries me,” Jason said. “Well, it is, but that isn’t what’s keeping me awake.”

“It was the first time you’ve killed someone?” Rufus asked softly.

Jason nodded.

“This time yesterday,” Jason said, “I hadn’t been in a fight in ten years. I don’t remember what it was about. Some nonsense that seemed important when I was thirteen. A child’s fight, for a child’s reasons. But I killed people today. I can tell myself they were evil, but that doesn’t matter. I can say I was defending myself, but I manipulated people in order to bring about their deaths.”

Jason shook his head.

“That isn’t the even worst part,” he said. “That came later, when I was laying in bed. A stranger’s bed, maybe even someone I killed. That was when I realised I had to count to remember how many people I murdered today.”

Jason fell quiet and they stood in silence, looking out into the dark for some time.

“I’m guessing your world is a safe one,” Rufus said after contemplating Jason’s words.

“Not all of it,” Jason said. “But my part, yeah.”

“That’s good,” Rufus said. “But you have to accept that you’re not there any more. This world can be hard, and life can be cheap. You said it doesn’t matter that the ones you killed were evil, but you’re wrong. You think we were the first people on their chopping block? You saw what was in that kitchen. There’s a larder downstairs with a cell to keep people in, and it wasn’t a new cell, either. They’ve been doing this for a long time. If we hadn’t stopped them, they’d have killed us too, and plenty more after. I don’t know what justice is like in your world, but in this one, it sometimes comes down to people like us dealing with people like them.”

"I'm not sure I can be that hard," Jason said.

"I saw you today," Rufus said. "You can be."

"And if I don't want to be?"

Rufus nodded.

"That's a choice only you can make. I don't know what kind of person you were before, but this is a chance to leave that person behind. To become whoever you choose to be. That's a rare chance. Just remember that every choice has its consequences. Even if you choose to do nothing."

Rufus looked over at Jason, then back out at the night sky.

"I'm an adventurer," Rufus said. "Being an adventurer can open every door, give you everything you ever wanted. Power, money, respect. Travel the world, see amazing things. Nine days out of ten, being an adventurer is the best thing you could possibly be. But on that tenth day, that's the one where you earn all the others. Where you make the hard choices, where you walk through fire so no-one else has to."

Rufus turned to Jason, giving him a weary smile.

"Has it made me callous?" Rufus asked. "Yes it has. Has it cost me sleep? Absolutely. But there's a whole lot of people sleeping safe and happy tonight because of me and people like me. You can be one of those safe and happy people if you want. Never making the hard choices; never doing the things that need to be done. But think about what happened to you today. You stood up in a horrifying situation and you took control. The safe and happy people don't get to do that. When fate comes for them, they need people like me to stand in its way. That's fine; it's what I'm here for. But if you want to control your own fate instead of people like me doing it for you, then you have to become one of us."

Rufus took a deep breath, letting it out slowly.

"I'm not going to lie" he continued. "If you become an adventurer like we are, this won't be the last night of sleep you lose."

"Is it worth it?" Jason asked.

"Only you can answer that. You saved lives, today, mine included, but you had to stain your hands doing it. If you got to remake those choices, would you do it all again?"

"I don't know."

Rufus pushed himself off the balustrade.

"Give it some thought," he said. "When you can answer that question, maybe you'll know what to do. I'm going to patrol around a little. You've got a lot to think about."

He walked off, but Jason called out to him before he disappeared back into the manor.

“Rufus.”

“Yeah?”

“If I decide to become an adventurer, what do I need to do?”

“We can teach you,” he said, “but you start by absorbing more essences. Before everything else, adventurers are strong.”

Chapter 19: I Want a Lava Cannon

"I'm not sure I'm comfortable doing it with everyone watching," Jason said.

It was a clear-skied morning, but the magic affecting the manor's climate dulled the scathing desert heat to a pleasant warmth. Jason, Rufus, Gary and Farrah had gathered on a terrace, sitting out on some patio furniture. Most of them were gathered around a picnic table in chairs, but Gary was too big for the chairs and went to pick up a low bench.

"But you said I could watch," Farrah said to Jason.

"Actually, you asked," Rufus said, "but he didn't answer either way."

"I want to watch too," Gary said. He picked up the bench, which turned out to have been affixed to the tiled terrace. Some of the tiles came loose along with the bench. Gary looked at the damage and shrugged.

"Can you please stop destroying the place?" Rufus asked. "Anisa is prickly enough at the best of times."

"Compared to what we did to the hedge maze, this is nothing," Gary said.

"And you somehow think that makes it better?" Rufus asked.

Gary walked back to the group and dropped the bench loudly. The legs were uneven after having been torn from the ground, but Gary was happy enough and plonked himself down. The bench loudly scraped the terrace under his weight as Rufus wearily shook his head.

"I'm part of the Magic Society," Farrah said to Gary. "My interest in seeing Jason use an essence is academic. What would you get out of it?"

"What else am I going to do?" Gary asked. "Help Anisa organise documents? No thanks."

"That probably wouldn't go well for anyone," Farrah acknowledged.

The missing member of the group, Anisa, was in the manor's main study. They had managed to dig out various letters and other records linking the occupants to the blood cult in other regions. Before they left the manor behind, she was gathering it together for use as evidence.

"You might as well stick around," Jason said. "I don't want anything happening to me if I pass out again. Don't anticipate a great show of dignity."

"I'm still a little surprised you got your hands on so many essences," Rufus said. "You did say you only arrived in our world yesterday, right?"

"It was a busy day," Jason said.

“You’re not wrong there,” Gary said.

“Should I be doing this on an empty stomach?” Jason asked. “I’m hungry, but I don’t trust any of the food here. All the kitchen had was every nightmare I’m ever going to have again.”

“Sorry,” Farrah said, “but we didn’t pack food.”

“Right, you all eat money, which definitely isn’t weird. I do have some tyrannical pheasant meat. Maybe we could roast it with your fire powers.”

“I love tyrannical pheasant,” Gary said. “How did you stop it from dissolving with the rest of the monster? Do you know monster harvesting magic?”

“There’s a magic for that? It’s an ability I have.”

“Makes sense,” Rufus said. “Outworlders all have different abilities, but they’re usually all focused around giving them the tools to survive.”

Farrah nodded.

“Looting abilities are rare, and valuable, but far from unique.” she said.

“If you have enough essences to make a full set, you can get to iron rank,” Rufus said. “Then you can just eat some coins as well.”

“A full set of essences is four, right?” Jason asked. “I’ve only got two more, plus the one I already used. I don’t suppose you have another one on you?”

“Three is enough,” Farrah said. “I keep forgetting that you really don’t know anything. Once you use your third essence, a fourth one manifests itself on the spot. They’re called confluence essences, because they’re a result of the three essences you already have. In my case, I used the fire, earth and power essences, which gave me the volcano essence.”

“Confluence essences only manifest after three essences are used,” Rufus added. “You can’t find a volcano essence anywhere. Even when essences manifest near a volcano, you’ll usually get essences like fire and earth.”

“Is that where essences come from?” Jason asked. “They just appear randomly?”

“That’s right,” Farrah said. “Your world may not have any magic, but this one has it in abundance. To the point where it just starts manifesting all over the place.”

“Most magic manifestations are monsters,” Rufus explained. “They just appear, hopefully in the wilderness, but the magic they’re made of isn’t stable. Eventually they break down and dissolve back into magic. Killing them just makes it faster.”

“Just say you killed something that wasn’t a monster but an animal,” Jason said. “A giant snake, for example. That wouldn’t dissolve into a stinky cloud?”

“Exactly. Monsters frequently aren’t a problem when they first manifest, but as they get closer to breaking down they become highly aggressive. The bulk of our job as adventurers is hunting them down before they reach that stage.”

“It isn’t just going places and killing everyone you find?” Jason asked.

“No,” Rufus said. “I’m not sure I’d have the stomach for that. I definitely wouldn’t care to work with those that did.”

“How long do monsters last before they go berserk?” Jason asked.

“Depends on the rank of the monster,” Farrah said. “Lesser monsters only last a week or two. They start so close to breaking down that they’re aggressive from the moment they appear, but they aren’t really a threat. An old woman with a broom can handle them. Iron rank monsters last about a month, getting aggressive in the final week or so. It goes up from there, but this is a low magic region so mostly you’ll see iron rank with a smattering of bronze.”

“Monsters have ranks, then?” Jason asked. “Do they use essences too?”

“No,” Rufus said. “It just means they exist within a certain power threshold. Whether an essence user or a monster, each rank has a suppressive effect on lower ranks. We’re all bronze rank. If you were to fight any of us, your iron-rank abilities would have much less effect.”

“You can overcome that briefly by boosting your attributes with spirit coins,” Farrah added. “That only works to a degree, though, and not for very long. You have to pick your moment, because it will leave you weaker once the strength fades.”

“I know all about that,” Jason said.

“There are other manifestations of magic,” Rufus said. “They’re not alive, which makes them more stable and they stick around until you use them.”

“Essences,” Jason said.

“That’s the most powerful manifestation,” Rufus said. “Also the rarest. Then there’s quintessence, which is kind of like chunks of essence.”

“Could you get a pile of it and use that as an essence?” Jason asked.

“Afraid not,” Rufus said.

“People have been trying to make that work for years,” Farrah said. “There’s always some crackpot who claims to have figured it out, but it isn’t possible.”

“Quintessence is still useful, though,” Rufus said.

“It may not be as powerful as an essence,” Farrah said, “but it gets used a lot more. Ritual magic, alchemy, weapon forging.”

"I make weapons and armour," Gary said. "I go through quintessence by the pile. Literally, piles of it."

"We found a magic supply storeroom yesterday," Farrah said. "They took all the good stuff when they left, but there was quite a lot of iron-rank quintessence left behind."

"Nice," Gary said.

"The last manifestation of magic is awakening stones," Rufus said. "Mostly they're used to awaken essence abilities, but they can be used in various kinds of magic as well."

"Like the thing they were trying to sacrifice us to," Jason said. He took out four red crystals from his inventory, laying them on the table in a row.

"We all had one of these in some kind of ritual bowl, wired into our cages," he said.

Rufus picked one up.

"I wonder what kind of stone they are," he mused.

"Awakening stones of the feast," Jason said. "All four are the same."

"They're pretty common," Farrah said.

"I had one manifest in my kitchen when I was a kid," Gary said, "right into a pot of soup. My dad said that's why the soup tasted funny, but I think he was just bad at making soup."

"They can be useful with the right essences," Rufus said. "They're common, so there's no telling what kind of ability it can give you. They'll be related to the concept of a feast, but that can manifest in any of hundreds of powers."

"Thousands," Farrah said. "The more rare an awakening stone is, the more specific the powers."

"So, rare stones are better?" Jason asked.

"Not necessarily," Rufus said. "A common as muck awakening stone can give you any ability the rarest could. It just has a much higher pool of potential powers. Rare stones don't give out better abilities, just more specific ones. So if you want a specific kind of ability, that's when you need to find yourself the right flavour of rare stone."

"There aren't any guarantees, though," Farrah said. "Even the rarest stone might not give you what you want. You should always remember, though, that the biggest determinate of what ability you get is the essence it comes from."

"I have this blood essence," Jason said, pulling a red cube from his inventory. The slick surface looked like it was wet with blood, but it was dry and warm to the touch.

"Hardly surprising that you found a blood essence around here," Rufus said.

"Blood is a fantastic essence," Gary said enthusiastically. "You might get a health-drain power if you use all those feast stones. Then you can be your own healer."

“Maybe,” Farrah said. “It could be almost anything with common stones, but blood, plus feast? The chances are decent.”

“Self-healing would be useful,” Rufus said, “given how hard it can be to get a healer on your team. We’ve struggled with that ourselves.”

“What about Anisa?” Jason asked.

“Anisa is a temporary addition,” Rufus said. “It’s usually just the three of us.”

“Self-healing is very common with the blood essence,” Farrah said. “Don’t expect much in the way of powerful attacks, though,” Farrah warned. “Blood essence abilities tend to be more insidious. Bleeding, poison, that kind of thing.”

“No lava cannon?” Jason asked.

“Sadly no,” Farrah said with a chuckle.

“But I want a lava cannon.”

Chapter 20: By the Power of Grayskull

“You probably want your essence abilities to be more well-rounded than Farrah’s,” Gary said.

“Hey,” Farrah complained.

“In terms of raw power, Farrah is easily the strongest of us,” Rufus said. “But that focus comes at the cost of versatility.”

“She’s great at blowing things up,” Gary said.

“It’s true,” Farrah said. “I am good at blowing things up.”

“Which, admittedly, solves the bulk of our problems,” Rufus said. “But when overwhelming, barely-contained annihilation isn’t the answer, it leaves her somewhat at a loss.”

“Power is always the answer,” Farrah said.

“Mass destruction sounds pretty good to me,” Jason said, “but it doesn’t seem like the blood essence would give me that. Should I use it, or hold out for something better?”

“That’s up to you,” Rufus said. “It’s best to consider what other essences you’ll have.”

“Well, I’ve already used the dark essence,” Jason said.

“That could work,” Farrah said. “A sneaky assassin type. A bit of poison here, exsanguination there.”

“Just make sure you avoid the death essence,” Rufus said, the others nodding in agreement.

“Death essence?” Jason asked.

“The death essence has some powerful abilities,” Gary said, “but they come with big drawbacks. Very few essences have side-effects, but death can produce some nasty ones.”

“Remember how we explained about confluence essences?” Rufus asked.

“That’s your buy three, get one free deal on essences, right?” Jason said.

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “More or less. Some confluence essences are produced by a wide variety of combinations. The death essence has a nasty habit of producing the confluence essence undeath. There are many combinations that produce it, almost all of which involve the death essence.”

“Take the blood essence you have here, for example,” Farrah said. “Add in a death essence and pretty much anything else and the undeath essence will pop right out.”

“Undeath is bad,” Gary said.

“The abilities in the undeath essence have a nasty habit of turning you into some kind of unliving monstrosity,” Rufus said.

“If it came along with the blood essence,” Farrah said, “you’d almost certainly get an ability that turns you into a vampire.”

“Vampires are a thing?” Jason asked.

“They are,” Rufus said, “and they’re bad. For one thing, they can’t sustain themselves with spirit coins or even regular food anymore.”

“They drink blood,” Jason said.

“They do,” Rufus confirmed. “Imagine having vast magical powers and an unquenchable thirst for blood.”

“Not a combination good for public safety,” Jason said.

Rufus nodded.

“People with the undeath essence almost always awaken a power that changes them like that,” he said. “Such powers are very strong, but they all bring with them unnatural appetites.”

“If that wasn’t enough,” Farrah added, “they can often turn normal people into monsters like them. Not with the essence powers of the original, but dangerous enough.”

“Vampires turning other people into vampires,” Jason said. “Can’t beat the classics.”

“Even if the undeath essence doesn’t turn you into a monster,” Farrah added, “it tends to give out less than palatable abilities.”

“You already said the blood essence has life-draining powers,” Jason said. “Less palatable than that?”

“Yes,” Gary growled. “No one will mind if you drain some health out of a guy that stabbed you. As long as you don’t drink his blood to do it, anyway. When you raid the local cemetery, though? No one wants their dead family members shambling into town as part of your undead army.”

“And that’s one of the lesser evils,” Farrah said. “We actually all met fighting a zombie plague,” Farrah said.

“A proper zombie plague?” Jason asked. “Zombies turning other people into zombies, the whole deal?”

“The whole deal,” Gary said. “Entire towns were burned out just to contain it. Bad business.”

“None of us want to see something like that again,” Farrah said. “If you get the undeath essence we’ll kill you ourselves.”

Jason looked at the expression on the faces of the others and saw they weren't joking.

"Avoiding the death essence then," he said.

"On top of everything else," Rufus said, "the Adventure Society has a list of restricted essences that pose an inherent threat to ordinary people."

"The death essence sitting at the top of that list," Gary said.

"Mostly it's combinations of essences," Rufus explained, "since the confluence essence is usually the bad one. The death essence is on the list by itself, through, because it always seems to go wrong. You need to pay attention to the restricted essences. It's impossible to get membership in the Adventure Society if you have one of them."

"And I want to be a member of this Adventure Society?" Jason asked.

"You do," Rufus said emphatically.

"Well," Jason said, "I don't have a death essence, but I'm a little wary of the one I do have."

Jason took a second cube from his inventory. This one looked like white jade flecked with gold.

Item: [Sin Essence] (unranked, legendary)

Manifested essence of transgression (consumable, essence).

- Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.
- Effect: Imbues 1 awakened sin essence ability and 4 unawakened sin essence abilities.
- You have absorbed 1/4 essences. Once absorbed, an essence cannot be relinquished or replaced.
- You are able to absorb [Sin Essence]. Absorb Y/N?

"May I?" Farrah asked, reaching for the essence. Jason nodded and she picked it up, turning it over in her hands.

"Pretty," she said. "I don't recognise it."

"It's a sin essence," Jason said.

"Are you sure?" Farrah asked, examining the white and gold cube. "It looks more like the holy type."

Rufus looked at Jason with a thoughtful expression.

"You have an ability to identify items, don't you?" he asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It’s one of my outworlder things.”

“I’ve seen it before from other outworlders,” Rufus said.

Farrah placed the cube back on the table.

“I’ve never heard of the sin essence before,” she said. “It must be one of the really rare ones. I would have thought a sin essence would be all dark colours.”

“You have a problem with dark colours?” the midnight-skinned Rufus asked.

“I knew a guy with the sin essence,” Gary said. “Back when I was growing up there was this priest in my home town who had it.”

“A priest had the sin essence?” Farrah said. “Who was he a priest of?”

“God of Justice,” Gary said.

“Seems a little odd,” Rufus said. “What kind of powers did he have?”

“I was just a kid and it was a long time ago,” Gary said. “He was bit of a hard man, the way those Justice guys can be. I seem to recall a lot of smiting going on.”

“I could get behind some smiting,” Jason said. “Hold up; you guys have gods here?”

“Of course,” Gary said. “You don’t have gods in your world?”

“We have religions,” Jason said.

“Isn’t that the same thing?” Gary asked.

“No,” Jason said. “No it is not. Do your gods turn up and do things? Where people can see them?”

“Of course they do,” Farrah said. “Anisa’s a priestess. We’ve seen her god show up in person. Spend some time in the worship square of any good sized city. You’ll see one sooner or later.”

“That must forestall a lot of theological debate,” Jason said.

“If you decide to use that sin essence,” Gary said, “you might not want to tell Anisa about it.”

“Why not?” Jason asked.

“She’s a priestess of the God of Purity,” Farrah explained.

“That’s not good,” Jason said.

“You have a problem with purity?” Gary asked.

“In my world, you have to keep an eye on the ones who talk about purity all the time. Leave them be and they start rounding people up into camps, getting all enthusiastic about purging the unclean.”

“That does sound like something Anisa would get behind,” Farrah said. “Her church has this idea that the essences we use change who we are, so they only like the ones they see as holy or pure. They say other essences taint the soul.”

“You say that like you think she’s wrong,” Jason said.

“She is,” Rufus said. “Essence abilities aren’t inherently good or bad. Like a sword they can be used to oppress or protect. The accountability isn’t with the tool, but the one wielding it. The only people who advocate that essences guide our actions, instead of the other way around, are religious zealots and people looking to abdicate the responsibility for their actions.”

It was clear Rufus was speaking from experience, and not a good one.

“Didn’t you all just finish explaining that I need to be careful of essences changing me?” Jason asked.

“That was a warning about rare and extreme cases,” Rufus said. “That’s what the restricted list is for. But people try and claim that extends to all essences, when it simply doesn’t.”

“Not that Anisa would agree,” Farrah said.

“Anisa is wrong,” Rufus said.

“I’m going to pull out the restricted list,” Farrah said, getting up. “See if the sin essence is on it before Jason decides what he’s going to do.”

“Good idea,” Rufus said.

Farrah caused her stone storage chest to rise out of the ground. It rose up through the terrace without breaking through the tiles, like it wasn’t truly substantial until it had completely emerged.

She took out a stone tablet from inside the chest. It looked to be made of swirling blue and white marble, with script written across it in what looked like actual gold. Farrah touched a finger to the script and it started shifting about, the text changing in front of their eyes.

“What is that?” Jason asked.

“This is called a living document,” Farrah said. “It stores large amounts of information and is connected to a central record. When the central record is updated, the information in the tablet changes. This one has the full list of every essence and essence combination known to the Magic Society.”

“Is that different to the Adventure Society you mentioned?”

“Yes, but we can explain all that once we get back to civilisation,” Rufus said.

“The tablet is lot more expensive than a paper copy of the list,” Farrah said, “but it’s smaller and doesn’t have to be replaced when the list is updated.”

“Does it get updated a lot?” Jason asked.

“There are all kinds of essences,” Farrah explained as she kept her eyes on the shifting text of the tablet. “Many of them are extremely rare. Most people go for tried and tested combinations, but there’s always someone trying new things. Ah, here we are.”

She found what she was looking for in the tablet and the text stopped changing about.

“We can look up an essence and see what combinations are known for it, as well as any restricted combinations,” Farrah said. “Looks like your sin essence is in the rarest category. There really aren’t a lot of them going around.”

“Is it restricted?” Jason asked.

“Not by itself,” Farrah said. “Not a big list of known combinations. Looks like there is one restricted combination. Never heard of the succubus essence before. Probably because it takes two insanely rare essences.”

“What about the essences Jason has?” Rufus asked.

“Hold on. Dark, blood and sin, right?”

“That’s what I have,” Jason said.

“It’s actually here,” Farrah said. “It produces the doom essence, another one I’ve never heard of. Not restricted, so good news.”

“Did you say the doom essence?” Jason said.

“I did,” Farrah said, putting away the tablet. “Sounds imposing, right?”

“Is that something I really want to run around with?” Jason asked.

“Of course you do,” Gary said. “Who’s going to mess with the guy with the doom essence?”

“Did it say what kind of abilities it produces?” Rufus asked.

“Affliction specialist is what’s listed,” she said.

“Affliction specialist?” Jason asked. “Is that like a ‘death by a thousand cuts’ kind of thing?”

“Yeah,” Gary said. “Ongoing damage, debuffs.”

“Did you just say debuffs?” Jason asked.

“Yeah that’s where...”

“I know what debuffs are,” Jason said. “I’m just wondering how directly my ability translated that word.”

“So what do you think?” Rufus asked. “Afflictions are an uncommon specialty, and the exact opposite of what Farrah does. Her damage powers are immediate and explosive, but she exhausts herself quickly. An affliction specialist is weaker in short fights but unparalleled in drawn-out conflict.”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I don’t know what’s good.”

“I say go for it,” Farrah said. “There aren’t a lot of affliction specialists, which will put you in demand.”

“You’ll get called out for all the big fights, too,” Gary said. “When it comes to the really tough monsters you want staying power. In a battle like that, someone who burns through all their mana like Farrah is just trashy.”

“Hey!”

Jason looked at Rufus.

“What do you think I should do?”

Rufus gathered his thoughts for a moment before answering.

“Affliction specialists usually don’t have abilities that will hit hard and fast. That gives them a harder time with what most people consider the easy fights,” Rufus said. “As a trade-off, they become more and more dangerous the longer a fight goes on. They have endurance. An enemy others will exhaust themselves fighting, an affliction specialist can fight multiples of at once. It isn’t an easy path, though. It requires good judgement to avoid losing a fight before you really get going.”

“There’s also the intimidation factor,” Gary said. “Smart people don’t mess with affliction specialists. Poisons, curses, setting your insides on fire. Even if you kill them, you might be a dead man walking. No one wants that kind of enemy.”

“There is certainly a social factor,” Rufus said. “Affliction masters scare people.”

“Should I do it, then?” Jason asked. “Use these essences I have?”

“My advice would be yes, you should,” Rufus said. “It doesn’t matter if the easy fights aren’t quite as easy. The hard fights are what matter. You’re going to need skills to make it work, which you don’t have right now. But I can teach you.”

“Now there’s an offer not to refuse,” Gary said.

“Agreed,” Farrah said. “Rufus’ family runs one of the most exclusive prep academies for adventurers in the world. Kings go to that school. If he’s willing to teach you, let him.”

“We all owe you, Jason,” Rufus said. “If it weren’t for you, we’d be dead right now, and we aren’t going to forget that. So we’ll do our best to help you find your feet as an adventurer. Maybe you can eventually discover a way home.”

“Thanks,” Jason said, “although I wouldn’t have gotten out of there without you either. If I’d just ran out of that chamber I’d be in the middle of the desert. No water, no idea where I was or where to go. Even if the cultists hadn’t chased me down, I’d have died out there anyway.”

“I don’t know about that,” Gary said. “You seem to have a way of turning situations around.”

“I think turning the sun around is a bit beyond me,” Jason said.

He placed a hand on the blood essence sitting on the table.

“Alright,” he said. “I guess we should do this before Anisa comes out.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that,” Farrah said. “I left her buried in documents in the study. I think she’s going to read every piece of paper in the whole manor to make sure she doesn’t miss anything.”

“That’s good,” Jason said, “because I have an awakening stone that seems a little questionable as well.”

Jason picked up his two essences and stood up. Jason was concerned about passing out again, so he led them off the terrace and onto the grass where they all sat on the lawn.

“So how does this work?” Farrah asked.

“I just kind of do it,” Jason said. “I want to try something this time, though.”

He held up the blood essence in his hands.

“Fabulous secret powers were revealed to me when I held aloft my magic cube...”

He raised the cube above his head with one hand.

“What in the world are you doing?” Farrah asked.

“I told you, I’m trying something,” Jason said. “I didn’t expect it to work, but it wouldn’t be the least plausible thing I’ve seen in the last day.”

Jason lowered his arm back down.

“I’m starting to suspect that it isn’t just that you’re an outworlder,” Rufus said. “I think you might be strange in any world.”

Chapter 21: I Have the Power

When Jason used the dark essence it had turned into smoke, painfully invading his body until he passed out. The blood essence instead melted over his hand, becoming a viscous liquid that crawled up his arm and started coating his torso as it seeped through his pores and into his skin. It savagely burned its way into his flesh, leaving him sprawled on the ground as he fought to endure the pain. Gritting his teeth, he barely managed to stave off unconsciousness. By the time the pain subsided he was on all fours, rapidly panting. His clothes were wet with perspiration.

-
- You have absorbed [Blood Essence]. You have absorbed 2 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 50% (2/4 essences).
 - [Blood Essence] has bonded to your [Power] attribute, changing your [Power] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all blood essence abilities to increase your [Power] attribute.
 - You have awakened the blood essence ability [Blood Harvest]. You have awakened 1 of 5 blood essence abilities.
-

“That was interesting,” Farrah said, voice clinical. “Functionally it appears similar to how a confluence essence is absorbed, although the strain on the subject is clearly increased. Too many unanswered questions for one subject. I wish I had more of you.”

“The subject has a name,” Jason groaned painfully.

“I wonder if the type of essence affects the process,” Farrah mused. “You said you passed out last time, yes? Perhaps subjects adapt with each event.”

“The first one was definitely worse,” Jason said. “Not that this one was a lot of fun. I’m still going to need a moment.”

“What’s your new ability?” Gary asked. “You should be able to feel it, right?”

As Gary suggested, the new power had engraved itself into Jason, making itself a part of him.

Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Iron: Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.
-

“Looks like it’s for healing up after a fight,” Jason said.

“Sounds like a good one,” Gary said. “Abilities with restrictions are usually more powerful. Especially if it makes them hard to use in the middle of a fight.”

“Who doesn’t love a balanced ability,” Jason said.

“A healing ability, too,” Gary said. “That’s especially good when you don’t have a healer with you. We go through a lot of potions.”

“Yes we do,” Farrah agreed.

“But you have a healer,” Jason said.

“Anisa isn’t a permanent part of the team, remember?” Rufus said. “This contract is for her church. They asked us to take her along, give her some field experience. Seemed like a good deal for both sides.”

“Seemed?” Jason asked.

“She can be a little judgemental,” Farrah said.

“A lot judgemental,” Gary said.

“Also cold,” Farrah said.

“Weren’t you just calling me ‘the subject’ a minute ago?” Jason asked.

“Don’t talk behind her back,” Rufus scolded. “If you can’t say it to her face, then don’t say it.”

“Now you’re being judgemental,” Gary said.

“Gary...”

“Should I use my other essence next?” Jason asked. “Or should I use some of these awakening stones to get more abilities?”

“Essences first,” Farrah said. “Your abilities are based on the essence and stone you got them from, obviously, but also on the essences and abilities you already have. Using all your essences first means your abilities will better complement one another.”

“If you awaken too many abilities before you have all your essences,” Rufus said, “your abilities will lack focus. There will be more random powers that don’t work as well together.”

“Synergy,” Jason said. “Makes sense. Another essence it is. Not quite back in shape for the next one, though. I might just lay here for a little bit.”

Jason lay back on the grass while he recovered his strength. He took the chance to ask the others where they were going once they left the manor. They told him about a city on the coast, the only city in the entire desert region.

“Alright,” Jason said, sitting up. “I think I’m good to go again.”

He sat cross-legged on the grass, the sin essence in his hands.

➤ You are able to absorb [Sin Essence]. Absorb Y/N?

The white and gold cube started to shrink as motes of light emerged from it to float around Jason. By the time the entire cube vanished, the lights swirling around Jason had become a bright corona.

“Are you sure that’s a sin essence?” Gary asked, only to be shushed by Farrah.

The lights began sinking into Jason’s skin, a feeling of internal pressure building as they filled his body. More of the lights pushed their way inside and discomfort became pain as he felt like someone was trying to inflate him. Eventually the sensation passed, the pressure giving way to relief. It felt like finally taking a wee after needing one really badly.

-
- You have absorbed [Sin Essence]. You have absorbed 3 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 75% (3/4 essences).
 - [Sin Essence] has bonded to your [Recovery] attribute, changing your [Recovery] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all sin essence abilities to increase your [Recovery] attribute.
 - You have awakened the sin essence ability [Punish]. You have awakened 1 of 5 sin essence abilities.
-

“That one wasn’t so bad,” Jason said. “I think I’m getting used to it.”

“Good,” Rufus said, “because you need to do it again.”

As if to punctuate Rufus’s words, three shimmering, incorporeal cubes emerged from Jason’s torso and started spinning around him in the air. The cubes were images of the essences he had absorbed, plainly lacking in substance. The images converged in front of Jason, interposing themselves over one another. Once the three cubes merged into one,

the result was a new cube, swirling with light and shadow. The patterns shifted like thick oils mixed together.

- The confluence of your essences has produced the [Doom Essence]. This is a confluence essence that you may claim or reject. If you choose not to claim this confluence essence it will not be available to you again.
-

“It’s like a yin-yang lava lamp,” Jason said. “What happens if I don’t take it?” Jason asked.

“Then I slap you over the back of the head,” Gary said.

“If you refuse your confluence essence,” Rufus said, “you can only replace it with a normal essence. I promise you that is not the way to go. Only the clergy reject the confluence essence, because their gods give them divine versions of regular essences.”

Jason nodded, reaching out with both hands to grab the essence. The immaterial image become solid the moment Jason touched it. Light and shadow started streaming out, wreathing Jason in a strange mix of light and darkness. It then moved in on Jason, sinking into his body. Compared to the previous essences it was uncomfortable at worst.

- You have absorbed [Doom Essence]. You have absorbed 4 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 100% (4/4 essences).
 - [Doom Essence] has bonded to your [Spirit] attribute, changing your [Spirit] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all doom essence abilities to increase your [Spirit] attribute.
 - You have awakened the doom essence ability [Inexorable Doom]. You have awakened 1 of 5 doom essence abilities.
-

Once the essence was completely subsumed into Jason, a light started emerging from within his body. It was a strange, grey light, washing out the colours of everything it touched, from the grass to the adventurers sitting around him. They were unconcerned, Rufus smiling broadly while Farrah laughed and Gary clapped enthusiastically.

- All your attributes have reached iron rank.
 - You have achieved iron rank.
 - You have gained damage reduction against normal-rank damage sources.
 - You have gained increased resistance to normal-rank effects.
 - You have gained the ability to sense auras.
 - You have gained the ability to sustain yourself using sources of concentrated magic.
-

Jason leapt to his feet. He felt like he'd just been stabbed with a huge adrenaline needle, bursting with energy. He laughed out loud, looking down at his own arms. The light was shining right through his skin.

"This feels amazing!"

The others also got to their feet.

"I feel like I need to go climb a mountain or something," Jason said. He was too caught up in the sensation of power surging through him to notice the others giving him sympathetic looks.

"Yeah, well," Gary said, "just give it a moment."

"What for?" Jason asked. "Why are you all backing away?"

The light started to diminish, drawing back inside Jason's body. As it did he experienced a rising nausea, the sensation growing and growing as he resisted the urge to throw up. He collapsed to his hands and knees, vomit spraying out of him. Red-brown pus started oozing from his pores, staining his clothes and coating his skin in oily filth. He kept vomiting and vomiting, bloody tears pouring from his eyes.

Finally, he fell unconscious, dropping into a pool of his own body fluids. A terrifying stench was coming off of him and the others backed even further away. Even in unconsciousness, pus and vomit fought their way free of his body. The others looked on until it finally subsided.

"That was a lot," Gary said.

"I've done a lot of essence rituals," Farrah said, "but I've never seen anyone purge that many impurities before."

"What do you think he's been eating?" Gary asked.

"He's from another world, so there's no telling," Farrah said.

"Do you think we should have told him about this part?" Rufus asked.

"Not at all," Gary said. "Did you see the look on his face? Completely worth it."

"I kind of feel bad, though," Rufus said.

"It isn't like it would have been any different if he knew," Farrah said. "We all went through it."

"And he's an outworlder," Gary said. "He didn't absorb his essences the same way we did. We couldn't be sure this would happen."

"Probably should have told him to strip down first, though," Farrah said. "There'll be no getting the stink out of those clothes."

"Gary," Rufus said, "at least go drag him out of his own filth."

"You can do it, if you want," Gary said. "I'm not going over there."

“Farrah?” Rufus asked, but she shook her head.

“If you’re so concerned,” Farrah said, “then you go move him.”

Rufus looked over at Jason, splayed out in the stinking puddle.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

Chapter 22: Apocalypse Stone

"I need a shower," Jason said.

"You just had a shower," Rufus said.

"I need another shower. The stink won't go away."

"Oh, we're aware," Farrah said.

After waking up Jason had been fed a stamina potion and pointed in the direction of one of the manor's bathrooms. After washing away the gunk that had oozed out of the very pores of his skin, he had changed into fresh clothes.

"What was that stuff all over me?" Jason asked.

"We told you," Farrah said. "Reaching iron rank made your body advance closer to a state of perfection, which included purging your body of impurities."

"There is no way I was that impure."

"It did seem like a lot," Gary said, wrinkling his nose. "Maybe he should have another shower."

"He still has awakening stones to use," Rufus said, "and I want us out of here and on the trail by noon."

Jason frowned as Rufus took out a pocket watch to look at.

"You have noon in this world?"

They explained timekeeping in their world to Jason as they went back outside. To his surprise, it seemed exactly the same as in his own. He couldn't be sure how close their hours, minutes and seconds hewed to the ones he knew without a clock from his own world, but they were at least close.

"It's weird they're the same," Gary said.

"Suspiciously weird," Jason said.

"What about the calendar?" Jason asked. "Is that the same too?"

The local calendar, as it turned out, was similar, but not the same. Although not as close as the time. There were twelve months of thirty days, divided up into early, mid and late stages of each season. There were five additional days that didn't count as days of the month, for the solstices, the equinoxes and the new year, which was at the beginning of spring.

"It still seems strange that we keep time the exact same way across two worlds," Jason said.

“Well, maybe someone from your world came here,” Gary said, “saw how we do it and took it back to yours.”

“Or someone brought our system here,” Jason said.

“Nah, that doesn’t sound right,” Gary said.

“Are you saying your world’s better than mine?” Jason asked.

“We have magic,” Gary said.

“We have internet porn,” Jason said.

“Will you two please stop?” Rufus asked. “Gary, go check on Anisa. Tell her she needs to finish up in the next couple of hours.”

Rufus, Farrah and Jason went back outside, the others giving Jason and his lingering smell some distance.

“Did something happen to you?” Jason asked the others.

“Like what?” Rufus asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jason said. “I’m getting a weird vibe from the two of you. From Gary as well. It feels... I’m not sure how to describe it. Dangerous, maybe?”

Rufus laughed.

“That feeling is our auras,” Rufus said. “Now that you’re iron rank, you can sense them. We’re both bronze rank, and not that far off silver, so we’re a lot more powerful than you. That’s the danger you’re sensing. You’ll soon learn to differentiate strength, and tell a monster from an essence user from a regular person.”

“So it’s like a warning,” Jason said.

“Yes,” Farrah said, “but it isn’t completely reliable. Some monsters can hide their auras. People can too, if they have an aura power.”

They arrived back on the lawn outside, staying upwind of where all the Jason goo was still laying in a puddle.

“You’ve already used an awakening stone, right?” Rufus asked. “Was it much different to using an essence?”

“It was easier,” Jason said. “You need a ritual for those as well, right?”

“You do,” Farrah said. “Well, not you, apparently, but everyone else. How many stones do you have?”

“Six,” Jason said.

“Good thing you can just use them, then,” Rufus said. “Going through a half-dozen rituals would take hours.”

“Wouldn’t be that bad,” Farrah said. “I’ve done a bunch of them, so I can knock them out fast.”

They sat down on the soft grass and Jason took out his awakening stones, laying them out in a row.

“Where did you get all these?” Farrah asked.

“The feast stones were on those cages they had us in.”

“In those ritual bowls wired into the top?” Farrah asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I snagged them up as we went.”

“Sometimes awakening stones get used as part of a large-scale ritual,” Farrah explained. “Even essences, sometimes.”

“They did make an apocalypse monster,” Rufus said.

“Could that thing have really wiped out the world?” Jason said. “Not to say it wasn’t scary, but it didn’t seem up to the task of global annihilation.”

“They would have had to feed it for a long time before it became a genuine threat,” Farrah said. “They people probably intended to keep it somewhere isolated and supply it with a steady stream of victims. Killing it as soon as it emerged was like smashing an egg before it could hatch into a dangerous animal.”

“Even if we hadn’t,” Rufus said, “there are people far stronger than us that could deal with it. Even if it became truly powerful, there are diamond-rank adventurers out there.”

“Is that the highest rank?” Jason asked.

“It is,” Rufus said, “but you don’t see them very often.”

“Or at all, if you’re most people,” Farrah said. “I’ve only met one because of Mr. Fancy Britches, here.”

“I don’t wear britches,” Rufus said.

“Rufus’ grandfather is diamond rank,” Farrah said. “He’s chancellor of the academy his family operates.”

“Diamond rank essence users are the peak of mortal power,” Rufus explained. “The Adventure Society likes to keep two or three in the biggest cities, in case a diamond rank monster shows up. That rarely happens, though, so they largely go unseen. When you’re that powerful, the idea of a higher authority is laughable. Mostly, diamond rank adventurers are mysterious figures pursuing goals known only to them.”

“And there aren’t that many diamond-rankers in any case,” Farrah said. “The only reason they exist in the numbers they do is because they live so long.”

“They live longer?” Jason asked.

“All essence users age slower,” Rufus said. “At iron rank you wouldn’t notice the difference, but bronze rankers can live well past a hundred. Silvers can double that; reach

silver rank young enough and you'll look young for decades. Gold rankers live for centuries, and I'm not even sure diamond rankers can die of old age."

"They're immortal?" Jason asked.

"It's a rumour," Rufus said, "but a persistent one. There's kind of an unwritten rule that diamond rankers don't tell the rest of us the limits of their abilities."

"So, am I going to get super old now?" Jason asked.

"Keep raising your rank, and yes," Rufus said.

"Wow, that's actually quite the bombshell," Jason said.

"What's a bombshell?" Farrah asked.

"It's a weapon that causes a great big explosion. Imagine shooting Farrah at people."

"We kind of do that already," Rufus said.

"So how do I raise my rank?" Jason asked. "I want some of that sweet immortality action."

"How about we walk before we run," Rufus said. "You can't even properly progress toward bronze rank until you awaken every essence ability you have. That's all twenty. The first step is using those awakening stones."

Jason nodded, picked up the first stone and took a deep breath.

"Here we go."

The stone melted in his hand, sinking into his skin with little fanfare.

-
- You have awakened the blood essence ability [Leech Bite]. You have awakened 2 of 5 blood essence abilities.
-

"That's it?" Farrah asked.

Jason's stomach made a large rumbling sound.

"I was pretty hungry already," he said. "I think the stone of the feast made it worse."

"You're an essence user now," Rufus said. "Eat a spirit coin."

Jason took an iron-rank coin from his inventory. It had the metal-grey colour of iron but was actually made of crystal. Hesitantly he placed it into his mouth, where it immediately dissolved with an intense fizzing sensation. It tasted like he'd touched his tongue to a battery, tangy and energetic. He felt power flood through his body, washing away the hunger of moments before. Rufus and Farrah laughed as they watched his expressions, wide-eyed and panting.

"What's wrong with him?" Gary asked. He had left the manor through the terrace doors and approached to sit with them on the lawn.

"He just ate his first spirit coin," Rufus said, causing Gary to chortle.

Jason shook his head to clear it.

"I don't think I've ever been this awake," he said.

Rufus picked up another awakening stone and handed it to him. Jason nodded and took it. He went through the remaining awakening stones of the feast in quick succession.

- You have awakened the blood essence ability [Feast of Blood]. You have awakened 3 of 5 blood essence abilities.
 - You have awakened the sin essence ability [Feast of Absolution]. You have awakened 2 of 5 sin essence abilities.
 - You have awakened the sin essence ability [Sin Eater]. You have awakened 3 of 5 sin essence abilities.
-

Jason had abilities before he reached iron rank, but now he could feel them within himself much more clearly. They were like hunting dogs, waiting to be unleashed at his command. Even without the descriptions Jason clearly understood the abilities he had just awoken. Two came from the blood essence and were different ways of draining health. The other two came from the sin essence, letting him resist afflictions on himself or remove afflictions from others.

"My abilities feel incomplete," Jason said. "Like a puzzle where I don't have all the pieces."

"There's a scale," Farrah said. "At one end of the scale is people whose abilities are individually strong. Those people don't tend to feel what you're feeling, because their powers might work together, but aren't reliant on one another."

"Those kind of abilities are strong, but simple," Rufus said. "Farrah's abilities are like that."

"Of course, simple doesn't mean bad," Farrah said. "Straightforward power is the usually most effective solution to a problem. It's when you try to get complicated that things go wrong."

"According to people with simple powers," Gary said.

Farrah stuck her tongue out at Gary.

"At the other end of the scale," Rufus said, "are abilities that underwhelm in isolation, but used together become very dangerous. Affliction specialists tend to fall at that end of the scale, so expect your powers to feel awkward until you get the full set."

"Doesn't that dagger of yours poison people?" Gary said.

Jason's dagger had been stored away along with the gear of his new companions. He had gotten it back at the same time Rufus reclaimed a pair of ostentatious blue boots. Despite the garish colour, he was demonstrably quite fond of them.

"You can rely on your dagger for an extra source of afflictions until you've awakened all your powers," Gary said.

"Speaking of which," Rufus said, "you have two more awakening stones to get through before we leave."

Jason nodded, picking up the next stone. Unlike the awakening stones of the feast, his next awakening stone was higher rated.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Adventure] (unranked, rare)

An awakening stone filled with the spirit of adventure. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.

"With awakening stones," Jason said, "you said rarity doesn't make stones better, right?"

"No, just more specialised," Farrah said. "And harder to find, obviously. All stones have some amount of focus, but there's no telling exactly what they'll give you. Those feast stones, for example, could have given you anything from mana-draining special attacks to conjuring food to summoning flesh-eating fish. People like to have some control, so stones with desirable specialties tend to be the most expensive."

She patted Rufus on the knee.

"Although when you come from a big important family like Rufus here, they ship you high-rarity stones by the crate."

"There are no guarantees when it comes to awakening powers, though," Rufus said. "Not even with the rarest of stones. What kind of awakening stone is that one?" Rufus asked.

"Awakening stone of adventure," Jason said.

"Really?" Farrah said, surprised.

"Those highly sought-after," Rufus said. "As a mid-rarity stone it's hard to pin down what it will give out, but it's almost always a useful utility power."

"Just having a bunch of destructive combat powers makes you less useful to a team," Gary said. "Even Farrah knows that. A few good utility powers can really help you when it comes to getting jobs, since lots of teams will be happy to have you along."

“Here we go, then,” Jason said as the stone melted into his hand. His whole forearm went numb, and for a moment he could see right through it before it returned to normal.

“That was weird.”

-
- You have awakened the dark essence ability [Path of Shadows]. You have awakened 3 of 5 dark essence abilities.

Ability: [Path of Shadows] (Dark)

- Special ability (teleport)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Teleport using shadows as a portal. You must be able to see the destination shadow.

“Teleport between shadows,” Jason said with a laugh. “Now that’s a proper magic power.”

He looked around for a shadow to try it out on, then stopped.

“Aside from this weird springtime estate thing here,” Jason said, “We’re in the middle of the desert, right?”

“That’s right,” Rufus said.

“I don’t recall seeing a lot of shadowy nooks in the barren desert wasteland,” Jason said.

“It is a lot of open country,” Rufus acknowledged.

A little disheartened, Jason turned to his final awakening stone.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Apocalypse] (unranked, legendary)

An awakening stone containing a seed of annihilation. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.

- You have 10 unawakened essence abilities.
- You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of the Apocalypse]. Absorb Y/N?

“I’m a little wary of this one,” Jason said.

“What kind of stone is it?” Farrah asked.

“It’s, uh... an awakening stone,” Jason said.

“Of what?” Farrah asked.

“Of... well... the apocalypse.”

Gary erupted into laughter, falling back on the grass. Rufus raised an eyebrow while Farrah’s eyes went wide.

“Really?” Rufus asked over the top of Gary’s laughter.

“Should I actually use it?” Jason asked.

“I’m not sure,” Rufus said. “I’ve never actually heard of that one before. It does sound like trouble.”

“You should consider selling it,” Farrah said. “An awakening stone like that would get you enough to buy all the awakening stones you’re going to need.”

“Don’t you dare!” Gary yelled, sitting back up. “You’re going to use that stone!”

“Gary,” Rufus said, “He needs to be careful with his choices. We don’t know what kind of ability that stone could produce.”

“A powerful one,” Gary said. “Jason, you need to grab all the power you can.”

“He’s already using a rare essence combination,” Rufus said. “What if that stone unlocks some power that gets his combination on the restricted list?”

“You know they’re lenient on people who discover new things,” Gary said. “They can’t blame him if even they didn’t know.”

“It’s an awakening stone of apocalypse,” Rufus said, “that’s a pretty big hint.”

“It doesn’t matter either way,” Farrah cut in. “Look.”

Jason’s arm was blood red from where the awakening stone had sunken into it, before returning to a normal colour.

“That was rash,” Rufus said.

“Before everything else, adventurers are strong,” Jason said. “Your words. These abilities I’ve been getting are fine, but I saw Farrah spray lava like it was shooting out of a hose. I want that kind of power.”

“Yeah you do,” Gary said.

“Not helping, Gary,” Rufus said.

“No, Rufus,” Gary said. “He’s right. He needs all the power he can get, and you know it.”

“There’s no point arguing about what’s done,” Farrah said. “Jason, you might as well tell us what power you got.”

Chapter 23: I May Have Made a Huge Mistake

“Uh oh,” Jason said.

“Uh oh?” Farrah repeated. “What power did you get exactly?”

“I may have made a huge mistake,” Jason said.

“Where was that sensibility a minute ago?” Rufus asked. “What were you thinking?”

“He was thinking,” Gary said, “that if you don’t want to be a pawn of fate, you need the strength to kick fate square in the beans.”

“Actually, that’s pretty close,” Jason said, nodding at Gary who grinned back.

“Would you please just tell us what the power was?” Farrah asked.

“It’s a familiar power,” Jason said. “That’s like a magical companion that follows you around, right?”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “What kind of familiar do you get from an awakening stone of the apocalypse?”

“Funny story...” Jason said weakly.

An hour later, Jason was drawing a complex magical diagram in chalk on the floor of one of the manor’s many rooms. They had taken out the furniture and the rugs, leaving a smooth, polished floor. Jason had been working on the diagram for some time, guided by the ritual magic knowledge inserted into his head as well as Farrah’s expertise. He stopped drawing for a moment to take some powder from a nearby pouch on the floor. He sprinkled a pinch over the part of the circle he had just drawn, most of which started glowing. He rubbed out the parts that didn’t glow and redrew them.

The powder was ground-down monster cores from lesser monsters. Jason had several but they were all intact, so the powder had been provided by Farrah. She was guiding him through his first magical ritual.

“Putting together a magic circle isn’t as simple as knowing the right design,” Farrah explained. Any time she wasn’t pointing out something specific she was lecturing. “If it were that easy I could just carry around a bunch of boards with different magic circles on them. Every time you draw a magic diagram you need to adjust for the ambient magic conditions. A weak source of congealed magic like the core of a lesser monster is a perfect way to check your work.”

“There’s a ritual room under the manor with a permanent circle,” Jason said.

“That must have been expensive,” Farrah said. “You have to design the whole room around something like that to regulate the ambient magic. Did we loot that room?”

“Wasn’t much in there,” Gary said. “The most valuable stuff was set behind the walls and into the floor, so Anisa wouldn’t let us touch it. It was all pretty trashed, anyway.”

Jason got to his feet.

“I’m done,” he said. “So, am I able to do a magic ritual like this because I already have essence magic?”

“You really don’t know anything about magic,” Farrah said.

“Was that not clear at any point?” Jason asked.

“Alright,” Farrah said. “You understand essence magic already. Simple, instinctive, usually doesn’t cost anything but your own internal reserves. External magic is the opposite. Complicated, requires extensive training...”

“Or a skill book,” Jason said.

“...or a skill book,” Farrah acknowledged through gritted teeth. “If you’re satisfied with quick and dirty knowledge.”

“Don’t knock quick and dirty,” Gary said. “All my favourite things are better quick and dirty. Or slow and dirty.”

Farrah shot Gary a look as Rufus shook his head.

“Ritual magic,” Farrah continued, “relies on external sources of magic. That’s ambient magic, plus more concentrated sources, like quintessence or spirit coins.”

Scattered all through the magic diagram Jason had drawn were small piles of blood quintessence, looking like uncut rubies. There were also stacks of iron-rank spirit coins. There were a few other materials, but the largest requirement by far was the blood quintessence.

Fortunately for Jason, and rather unsurprisingly, the manor’s magical supply room had more blood quintessence than anything else. The lord of the manor had taken all the bronze-rank materials when he fled, but most of the iron-rank materials were left behind. It was more than enough for Jason’s ritual.

“External magic doesn’t require you to have an essence,” Farrah explained. “There are people who make careers out of learning a specialised slice of external magic.”

“Like plumbers,” Gary said. “They know the magic to set up running water in a building. That shower you like so much.”

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “They know just enough to do a specific job. Most of those people don’t have essences and lack the proper grounding in theory. The fundamental theory is the same, whether you specialise in rituals like me, magical craftsmanship like Gary, or something like alchemy. Same basis, different applications.”

“What about you?” Jason asked Rufus.

"I'm good at stabbing."

"Rufus doesn't know external magic," Farrah said. "His obsession is swordsmanship."

"Your skill book gave you the minimum to be considered a proper ritual magician," Farrah told Jason. "The bare minimum. That's how you awakened a familiar summoning power."

"You can only awaken that kind of essence ability if you already understand ritual magic," Gary said. "That's why me and Farrah have summoning powers and Rufus doesn't."

"You've seen Gary and myself call up short-lived monsters," Farrah said. "Rituals that are also essence powers tend to be..."

"Quick and dirty," Gary said with a grin.

"Please stop," Farrah said.

"I remember when you summoned those things," Jason said. "You just kind of knocked out a circle and out they came."

"Summoning a familiar is a more elaborate ritual," Farrah said. "Unlike a regular summoning, you should only need it each time you go up a rank. Unless your familiar gets killed, in which case you'll have to summon it back."

"Not everyone summons their familiar," Rufus said.

"That's true," Farrah said. "Some familiar powers act like a call, and a creature that has an affinity to that call will come and form a bond with the person. Less costly than summoning, but if that kind of familiar dies, you can't just summon it again. You need to find a whole new creature to be your familiar, which may or may not be like the one you lost."

"Let's get this thing going," Rufus said. "You don't want Anisa to walk in on us."

"You definitely don't," Gary said.

Jason stood in front of the diagram. He could feel the power inside him aching to trigger the ritual. He knew the incantation; he had since the moment he used the stone. He held a hand out over the magic diagram. In his other hand was a knife. He hesitantly cut the palm of his outstretched hand, letting blood drop into the circle as he chanted.

"Let this mortal blood beckon the all-devouring power of the final threshold. Answer the call and claim the offering. Heed my command and bring forth the avatar of life's annihilation."

"Oh, using that stone was a terrific idea," Rufus said.

"Shush," Farrah told him.

Red liquid started oozing out of the floor where Jason's blood had fallen. Dark, thick and viscous, it spread out over the entirety of the magic diagram, obscuring the lines and only stopping when it reached the edges.

"Does that remind anyone else of something we saw recently?" Gary asked.

Jason felt a prickling sensation spreading throughout his body. It became sharper and sharper, turning into pain as it focused on points on his arms, legs and chest. He gritted his teeth, but yelled out as blood burst out of a dozen pain points, spraying over the circle.

Rufus moved to intervene, but Farrah grabbed his arm.

"Interfering now would be more dangerous than letting it happen," she said. Rufus turned a frustrated face to look at her, but stepped back on seeing her resolute expression.

Blood sprayed out of Jason like a fountain, ripping right through his clothes. He staggered, struggling to stay upright as the blood kept spurting out of him. As the blood mixed with the pooled liquid on the floor, the obscured lines of the diagram underneath started to light up, shining red light through the liquid. The other three looked at each other as the room was filled with the same red light that had suffused the ritual chamber they escaped together.

Jason stumbled as the blood finally stopped pouring out of his body. He was pale and sweaty, swaying as he struggled to avoid toppling over, but remained on his feet. His eyes were locked on the glowing red pool in front of him.

Rufus and Gary flinched as a leech with a horrifying ring of lamprey teeth emerged from the pool, mirroring the scenario of the day before.

"Isn't that...?"

Ability: [Familiar: Sanguine Horror] (Blood)

- Ritual (familiar, summon)
- Cost: Extreme mana, extreme stamina, extreme health.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Summon a [Sanguine Horror] to serve as a familiar.

A second leech crawled up through the red liquid, then a third and fourth as their rate of appearance accelerated. Soon leeches were tumbling out until they formed a waist high pile on the floor. Unlike their experience the previous day, no bloodied rags appeared to push the pile into a humanoid shape. The pile remaining as a pile.

The red pool started slowly soaking into the floor, which absorbed it as if it were disappearing down a drain. Jason's blood, the circle he drew and all the magical materials within it, vanishing into the floor as if they had never existed. Jason watched the process with eyes foggy, standing unsteadily.

"That's not going to drip downstairs, is it?" Gary asked.

"No," Farrah said. "Its all being drawn back through the astral channel created by the summoning."

"It'd be funny if Jason summoned another outworlder."

"That'd be fantastic," Farrah said. "The paper I could write on that would be the talk of the Magic Society."

As the final traces of the blood pool drained away into nothingness, Jason collapsed to the floor.

"He really does pass out a lot," Gary said. "And he really goes through clothes. Wait, is that thing going to eat him?"

The mound of leeches was undulating its way toward Jason's unconscious body. It wasn't far, but the pile moved slowly.

"It's his familiar," Farrah said. "It's not going to eat him."

They watched the slow-moving pile undulate closer to Jason's unconscious form.

"Are you sure?" Gary asked.

The pile crawled over Jason's limp body, seeking out the wounds where the blood had sprayed out. The leeches started disappearing as they buried themselves into the wounds.

"Uh, I'm pretty sure," Farrah said.

"Are they crawling inside him?" Gary asked.

"It's a summoned familiar," Farrah said. "A summoned familiar can temporarily disperse its body and place its spirit inside the summoner."

"Does it usually look that disturbing?" Gary asked.

"You're the one who wanted this," Rufus said. "Farrah, what do we do with him?"

"Well," she said uncertainly, "he should be fine."

"He's covered in wounds," Gary said. "With leeches crawling into them."

"They won't hurt him," Farrah said. "They're not even really crawling inside him. Look closely and you'll see they're actually merging into his blood. See how they're kind of melting as they push their way in."

"I think that might be worse." Gary said. "I mean, melted leech can't be something you want in your blood, right?"

“He’ll be fine,” Farrah said. “Probably. Every familiar gives different benefits when it subsumes itself into the summoner,” she said. “They can merge themselves into the hair, the skin, even the aura. If I remember rightly, the ones who enter the blood usually induce rapid healing. So really, he should be better than fine.”

They watched as the last of the leeches vanished in Jason’s blood. The three adventurers stood over Jason, laying unconscious and undignified on the floor.

“Is he healing?” Gary asked.

“I can’t tell,” Rufus said. “There’s blood over all the wounds.”

“Well, wipe some off,” Gary said.

“You’re the one who wanted him to use that stone,” Rufus said. “You wipe some off.”

“I have fur,” Gary said. “I don’t want to get blood in it.”

“Since when has that been a concern?” Rufus asked.

“It’s a new thing,” Gary said. “I’m growing as a person, and I think you should support that. By being the one who wipes the blood off.”

Farrah shook her head, pulling a handkerchief out of her pocket.

“You two are children,” she said, wiping carefully at a blood patches on Jason’s arm. Underneath was clear, unbroken skin.

“See?” she said to the others. “I told you he’d be fine. I had total confidence.”

Jason regained consciousness while being rattled around in the back of a wagon. He was on a blanket but it barely softened the hard wood he was laying on. It was an open wagon, giving him a wide view of the rocky desert as he looked blearily around. In the wagon with him were Farrah and Anisa, while Gary was on a seat at the front holding reins. Rufus wasn’t in the wagon, instead riding alongside. He was in the saddle on one of the two-headed horse-lizards called heidels, leading a string of them all tied together.

“Why would you bring those horrifying things?” Jason called out to him.

“You’re hardly in a position to talk,” Rufus called back with a laugh.

Jason could feel the blood monster flowing though his veins. It was unnerving, but he couldn’t help but grin at the sensation of power.

“How are you feeling?” Farrah asked.

“Tired,” Jason said, “but strong.”

“Are you still not going to tell me what happened to him?” Anisa asked Farrah, not even looking at Jason.

“Him is right here,” Jason said, “and you could ask him yourself.”

Anisa turned her gaze to Jason.

“Then what happened to you?” she asked.

“I said you could ask,” Jason said. “Didn’t say I’d tell you.”

Gary burst out laughing from the front, Farrah stifling a chortle behind her hand.

Anisa schooled her fury into a look of blank disdain and turned away, staring out at the desert horizon.

Chapter 24: Astral Space

“So how long are we going to be trekking through the desert?” Jason asked. “I’m not saying there isn’t a stark beauty to it, but I’d like to go someplace where even the sunshine isn’t actively trying to kill me.”

They’d left the manor at noon while Jason was still unconscious after his summoning ritual. By the time they stopped for the evening Jason was feeling battered by half a day of riding the wagon over rocky desert terrain. They camped in tents taken from Farrah’s magic chest and set off again in the morning.

The wagon’s progress along the little-used trail was slow but steady, only pausing occasionally to water the heidels from a barrel in the wagon. The creatures could handle the arid conditions well enough, but couldn’t forego water entirely. There were a dozen of them between Rufus’ string and the four pulling the wagon. Rufus had insisted on taking them over Anisa’s objection, refusing to leave them to starve in the stables of the abandoned manor.

They had taken a wagon because the lord of the manor had taken the more comfortable carriages when he fled, only leaving a few uncovered wagons behind. After waking up in the back one, Jason had joined Gary on the driver’s bench so he could take in the landscape. Luckily Jason’s slight build required little room, as Gary’s huge frame occupied most of it.

“It kind of looks like parts of my homeland,” Jason said. “We call it the outback.”

“Out back of what?” Gary asked.

“Out back of everything,” Jason said.

“We’ll reach a village this afternoon,” Gary said. “Not sure how long we’ll stay. The guy that set us up lives there.”

“We’re going to pay him a little visit,” Farrah said.

“After that, we’re about two days from the river valley. From there, it’ll be a nice boat ride down to the coast. That’ll take a couple of days and bring us right into the city.”

“I’d like to take a couple of days with the prick that served us up to those cannibals,” Farrah said.

“We should be leaving that man to my church,” Anisa said. “His betrayal to my god was greater than his betrayal to you.”

“No one was going to eat your god,” Farrah said. “We’re going to peel this prick like an apple.”

“You have apples in this world?” Jason asked brightly. “I love apples.”

“Me too,” Gary said brightly.

“Remember not to kill him,” Rufus called over from where he was riding alongside the wagon. “He has questions to answer.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” Farrah said. “I’m going to take it nice and slow.”

“Is the heat getting to me?” Jason asked, “or is that mountain green?”

The hills and mountains they had seen were largely barren, with a few scraggly trees at best. The trail was leading them in the direction of a dark green mountain. On the lower reaches it was largely plant life, more verdant than elsewhere in the desert. Toward the peak it was bare stone, which was also a deep green colour.

“Green marble is a regional specialty,” Farrah explained. “They export a lot of it through the city on the coast, which is where we’re going. They even named the city Greenstone.”

“There’s a village on the other side of the mountain,” Gary said. “That’s where we’re heading now.”

“The village is based around quarrying,” Farrah said. “We’ll see more traffic from here on as they cart the stone to the river and boat it down to the coast.”

The trail improved as it curved around the base of the mountain. It became wider and smoother, making the wagon ride less bumpy. As they made their way around the mountain Jason spotted rapidly increasing signs of life. The occasional patches of yellow grass became thicker, with more of the rare, scrubby trees.

They passed several quarry faces before the village came into sight. The trail had become a proper road at that point and their wagon become one of many. Jason noticed magic was being combined with manual labour, resulting in a more modern operation than he would have expected. There were even huge slabs of stone floating over the ground, along mine-cart style rails that glowed with magic.

When the village itself came into view, Jason was agog. From high on the mountain water sprayed out from a hole in the mountain itself, catching the light in a gorgeous waterfall that spilled hundreds of metres to a pool below. The pool fed a wide channel, stretching the better part of a kilometre into a small lake. There was a village built up around the shore of the lake. The lake was ringed with green, rich grass and some kind of palm tree. The village buildings were nestled amidst the lush greenery, buildings of stone, white plaster and occasionally vibrant green marble.

“You could make some real tourist money here,” Jason said.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” Farrah said. She had got up on her knees behind Jason and Gary to look out.

Jason’s gaze drifted up to the waterfall spraying out of the mountain.

“Aren’t they worried about digging into the water source?” he asked.

“Almost every oasis in this desert has a magical water source,” Gary said. “They could tear this mountain down to the ground and the water would just fall from the sky.”

“How does that work?” Jason asked.

“There’s an astral space connected to this desert,” Farrah said. “I’m assuming you have no idea what that is.”

“From the name, I’d guess some kind of interdimensional pocket,” Jason said.

“Um, yeah, actually,” Farrah said. “It’s connected to various places around the desert and produces a bunch of water, therefore, oases.”

“That sounds awesome,” Jason said. “Wonder if I could get up there for a closer look.”

“Astral spaces are actually pretty common,” Farrah said, “but normally they’re sealed off and you need magic to track one down and break in. Being naturally open like this is rare, especially with so many apertures. The river we’ll be going down comes out of the biggest one.”

“You can’t just constantly introduce new water,” Jason said. “Even if it takes a long time, it’ll eventually start messing with the climate.”

“No,” Farrah said, “the water coming out of the astral space has a high level of magic. When too much accumulates it turns into water quintessence. When it forms, it condenses huge quantities of magically-imbued water into a little crystal.”

“Is the crystal super-heavy?” Jason asked.

“No,” Farrah said. “Why would it be?”

“Conservation of mass,” Jason said. “Or energy, or something. Physics isn’t my thing.”

Gary and Farrah glanced at each other and shrugged. They were quickly getting used to not knowing what Jason was talking about.

Farrah pointed out boats on the small lake that looked like fishing boats.

“Those are all people scouring the bottom of the lake for it,” she explained. “As forms of quintessence go, water is a common one. It’s one of the most useful, though.”

“Especially in the desert,” Gary added. “Being able to find it reliably means there’s real money to be made.”

“Yeah,” Farrah agreed. “There’s whole villages along the coast dedicated to hunting up water quintessence that forms after the river water washes out to sea. Funnily enough, this desert is one of the best sources of water quintessence in the world.”

The wagon was drawing closer to the village. They passed by what looked to be a staging area for exporting the marble before reaching the village itself. Rufus separated himself from the group to find somewhere to stable the string of heidels for the night. An inn would have livery room enough for the ones pulling the wagons, but not the extras ones as well.

The village was made up of a single, circular street running around the entirety of the lake, paved in tan-coloured brick. It looked like sandstone, but for all Jason knew, it could be some weird magic rock. It was close enough to yellow that if it didn’t loop in a circle he’d expect to find a shady fake wizard at the end.

“Or a real one,” he said to himself. “I wonder if I count?”

There were buildings on either side of the ring-road, the ones fronting onto the lake being larger and nicer. The smaller buildings were made from the same brick as the road. The larger ones were coated in a white plaster, with green marble embellishments.

The buildings were pleasantly placed among the trees and bushes growing around the lake. It was a stark contrast desert, with its dry dirt and spiky scrub. The smaller buildings had their own appeal, with an inviting homeliness to them. The street was busy with people, but more than broad enough that neither wagons nor pedestrians were inconvenienced. Looking around, everyone seemed happy.

Gary pulled the wagon to a halt in front of an inn and everyone climbed off. After hours of riding the wagon over bumpy ground, Jason’s body was creaky and sore. He took in a luxurious breath, heavy with moisture from the lake. Compared to the dust and heat of the open desert, it was like drinking in nectar.

“Think I might walk off the stiffness of bumping along in this wagon,” Jason said. “This is my first piece of civilisation not full of cannibals. Hopefully.”

“They’re not cannibals that we know of,” Farrah said with a laugh.

“Good,” Jason said. “I think I’ll have a look around.”

“Sounds good,” Gary said. “I’m going to get us some rooms and get these heidels unhitched.”

“Then Anisa and I will go track down our little friend,” Farrah said. “Don’t want him spotting us and running off.”

Anisa nodded her assent.

“Will he still be in town after selling you out?” Jason asked.

“Should be,” Farrah said. “He wasn’t expecting us to ever come back.”

“Do you need any money?” Gary asked Jason.

“I have some gold spirit coins left,” Jason said. “The rest are lower ranked, but I have a lot of them. Will that be enough?”

Gary and Farrah started laughing, even Anisa had an amused look on her face.

“Jason,” Gary said, “A gold spirit coin would buy the nicest building in this village, and I doubt there’s enough currency in it to give you the change. Unless you’re buying magic items or bulk trade goods, most people use lesser spirit coins, iron-rank at the most.”

“What’s the exchange rate between coins?” Jason asked. “Actually, I’ll figure it out myself. That’s part of the fun in coming to a new place, right?”

“That’s the spirit,” Gary said.

Chapter 25: Blasphemy is Kind of My Thing

After handling the string of heidels, Rufus made his way into the village. He knew from their previous visit that the inns were all clustered together, so he had no concerns about finding the rest of the group. The sky was turning a rich blue, with orange and gold encroaching as twilight came over the desert. Along the ring road of the village, magic lamps were lighting up and some kind of night market was setting up. He came into the village along with a good many quarry workers who had finished up as they lost the light. Moving amongst the gathering people, he saw a familiar face.

“Jason?”

“Oh, g’day, Rufus,” Jason said with a wave. He was behind a stall selling skewered meat, helping what Rufus assumed was the stall owner to fry meat.

“What are you doing?” Rufus asked.

“Dan here is teaching me to cook... what was it called again?”

“Bruschard,” Dan said.

“It’s a giant worm!” Jason said. “Luckily I tried it before I found that out.”

“You seem to be adjusting well,” Rufus said.

“Yeah, no worries,” Jason said. “You go get your revenge, or whatever. I’m good here. Gary picked the inn on the end with the big livery, by the way. There’s a sign with a little house and a cart on it.”

“Thanks,” Rufus said.

“Now,” Jason said, turning back to Dan. “Give me those sauce ingredients again. I haven’t heard of any of them, so I’ll have to write them all down. Which means I’m going to need some paper...”

Hours previously, Jason was happily meandering around the circle road, frequently pausing to take in the village. He’d stop and talk with villagers who proved more than ready for a conversation. They were proud of their village and rightly so, Jason was happy to acknowledge. The colourful houses looked inviting, everywhere was lush with greenery, so removed from the desert around it. The air was fresh, cool and clean. Jason thought back to Gary’s claim about a gold coin buying whole buildings and found himself tempted.

He came across something that looked like a covered bus stop, but instead of a timetable there was a bulletin board with various pieces of paper pinned to it. Looking over them he saw they were all descriptions of monsters, along with when and where they were

last seen. He asked a passer-by about it and, true to form for the village, she was happy to explain. According to the villager, Doris, any time someone discovered a monster around the village they would write down the details and put it up on the board. Every month some adventurers would pass through and clear out all the monsters on the board.

Doris was surprised at Jason's lack of knowledge about something so basic. As he had done a number of times that afternoon he explained that he had recently come from an isolated area with little knowledge of the outside world. It was more-or-less true.

Jason himself was as interesting to the locals as they were to him, as visitors were mostly the same selection of stone traders. Adventurers didn't often appear outside of the monthly patrol, and by all accounts were a surly bunch. Roaming the remote villages was apparently a punishment duty, so their visit wasn't often friendly.

A group of higher-ranked adventurers passing through was the talk of the village. Jason was travelling with them, but wasn't an adventurer himself, making him more approachable. This was the perfect combination for villagers looking for gossip. Jason obliged with harrowing tales of blood cults and ritual sacrifice.

The locals showed Jason the best place to get a drink and where to avoid because it was full of drunken quarry workers. He met people who made a career out of diving the lake for water quintessence, the village mayor and the man in charge of guarding the waterfall. People were allowed to go up for a look, but there were guards at all hours to keep people out of the astral space aperture that was the water's source.

When the sun started to set, Jason watched the sky turn into red gold from the bridge over the channel that flowed from the waterfall into the village lake. He knew from the locals that there would be a night market and he slowly wandered in that direction. One of the earliest booths to set up was a man frying skewers of meat. The smell of the meat and the sauce he had on them was incredibly enticing.

"That smells amazing," Jason said. "I have to try one. I'm Jason, by the way."

"Dan," the man introduced himself.

Gary blearily stumbled downstairs, his huge feet thundering on the wooden steps. Downstairs was a common area with a number of tables and a bar that saw use in the evenings. Gary wandered into an adjoining courtyard with more tables, sitting with Anisa, Rufus and Farrah at theirs.

"Jason not up?" Gary asked.

"I tried his room, but no answer," Rufus said.

"Heavy sleeper?" Farrah said.

“He was knocked out how many times in two days?” Gary said. “He probably needs it.”

A serving girl walked up to their table.

“Are you looking for your friend?” she asked. “He’s in the kitchen.”

“What’s he doing in the kitchen?” Farrah asked.

“Performing miracles!” Jason announced, walking into the courtyard. He was carrying a huge tray in front of him with four plates. He sat it down on the table, distributing the plates and attendant cutlery.

“Turns out they have tamarind, and some kind of little onion,” Jason said, “so I made son-in-law eggs. No idea why they’re called that, by the way. Or what kind of animal these eggs are from. Delicious, though.”

The dish was eggs that had been boiled then deep-fried, served in halves with a sauce, fried onions and generous garnish. Jason handed the tray off to the serving girl before taking a place at the table.

“I had to play trial and error with some of the other ingredients,” he confessed, “but it worked out pretty well. Martha is an absolute treat.”

“Martha?” Farrah asked.

“These are fantastic,” Gary mumbled around a forkful of egg.

“Martha’s the landlady,” Jason said.

“You really seem to have settled in,” Rufus said.

Jason nodded, but didn’t speak with his mouth full.

“These are good,” Farrah said between bites.

“I’m quite satisfied sustaining myself with spirit coins,” Anisa said.

“Great,” Gary said, yanking her plate in front of himself.

“The way I look at things,” Jason said to Rufus, gesturing with an impaled egg, “is that coming here is like a fresh start. I can do the things I regretted never doing. I’m only twenty-three but I’ve been pretty efficient about squandering my opportunities.”

“There’s a surprise,” Anisa said flatly.

“Apparently being mean isn’t impure,” Jason said, prompting Anisa to jump to her feet.

“You dare blaspheme?”

“Frequently,” Jason said with a laugh. “It’s kind of my thing.”

“I think cooking might be your thing,” Gary said around another mouthful of eggs.

“I can have more than one thing.”

Anisa was clearly about to erupt, but Rufus forestalled her.

“Anisa,” he said firmly. “If you’re not having breakfast, then go get ready to start out.”

“I’m already prepared,” she said stiffly.

“Then take a walk,” Rufus said.

Anisa glowered at Jason but walked away without speaking further. Rufus turned a weary gaze on Jason.

“Is there any chance you could maybe not poke at her so much?” Rufus asked.

“Honestly?” Jason said. “Probably not.”

Gary snorted a laugh.

“Could you at least try?” Rufus asked. “We both know she’s never going to bend, so I need you to be the bigger person. For the unity of the team.”

Jason sighed.

“I guess I have been a bit childish,” Jason said. “Alright, I’ll do my best. Fair warning, though; my best may not be that good. She just gets under my skin, you know?”

“Oh, we know,” Farrah said.

“I’m amazed she doesn’t bump into things,” Jason said, “always looking down her nose like that.”

“Think of it this way,” Rufus said. “You were just talking about getting a fresh start. Try and see this as an opportunity to be a better person.”

Jason thought it over.

“I like it,” he said. “I can be the person I choose to be, without all the baggage of my old life.”

“And if you find your way back to that life?” Farrah asked.

“Then I’ll return better than I left,” Jason said.

“That’s admirable,” Rufus said, then popped his fork into his mouth. “These really are good.”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Farrah told him. “You’re not Gary.”

“Was that a compliment or an insult?” Gary asked.

“So how did your roaring rampage of revenge go?” Jason asked. “You did say you weren’t going to kill him, right? Farrah seemed a bit keen on torturing him, though.”

“We didn’t find him, but we have a trail to follow,” Rufus said. “We’ll track him down, ask our questions, then hand him over to Anisa’s church.”

“Assuming we can run him down at all,” Farrah said. “Seems our boy left town in a hurry yesterday morning.”

“You think the people who ran from the manor warned him?” Jason asked.

“Most likely,” Farrah said. “We’ll do some digging around town today, see what we can find. If we come up dry, we’ll move on and leave it to Anisa’s church.”

“Well, you should start with Old Murph down at the general store,” Jason said. “He knows all the village secrets.”

“Jason,” Farrah asked, “was the world you were summoned from this village?”

“What?” Jason asked. “I met him last night.”

“So, will you be coming with us?” Rufus asked Jason.

“I’ve had quite enough blood-cult shenanigans, thank you very much, and want no part of whatever you do to that man. I found a guy who’ll take me to the top of the waterfall. Apparently there’s a mountain path that leads all the way up.”

“Surely they wouldn’t let you go into the astral space,” Farrah said.

“Sadly no,” Jason said. “They keep a guard up there to make sure no one mucks about with it. They’ll let you get right up close for a look, though. I was going to invite you, but you’ve got your whole revenge thing going on.”

“I bet the view is good up there,” Gary said. “I kind of want to go with you.”

“Focus, Gary,” Rufus said.

“If the guy’s gone, he’s gone,” Gary said. “If we’re handing him over to Anisa’s church anyway, just let them deal with it.”

“No,” Rufus said. “I have questions that need answering. We’re going after him.”

Rufus skewered his fork into another halved egg.

“After breakfast.”

Chapter 26:

Waterfall

Jason was only an occasional bushwalker, so as he climbed the steep mountain trail, he appreciated his new iron-rank attributes. He hadn't become a sculpture of perfection like Farrah and Rufus, but it was still a solid step up.

Jason's guide on the waterfall track was a man of late-middle years named Hiram. Hiram's job was to watch over the aperture that was the source of the waterfall. Jason had met him the night before, with Hiram agreeing to take Jason along when he started his shift in the morning.

Hiram was shorter than Jason, who was not tall, but with a barrel chest and limbs of thick, ropy muscle. He guessed the shorter man outweighed him by a good margin, and that compact power didn't go to waste. He was hauling a backpack half his own size up the mountain, yet barely seemed to notice the weight.

Moisture from the huge waterfall scattered over the mountainside. Farrah had told him that the water had a strong power of vitality, allowing the mountain's thick tree cover to grow up, even under the desert sun. The dense canopy gave the trail blessed shade, but the heat still made its presence felt. The heat of the desert and the moisture from the waterfall made the air thick and heavy, almost a chore to breathe. Jason reflected that this small patch of desert felt more like a jungle.

There were regular stopping points along the trail, with benches to pause and rest. Hiram didn't seem to need them, but didn't begrudge Jason. Each resting spot was placed close to where the tree line met the waterfall, where the air was cooler and anyone resting could look out over the village. With every stop on the ascent, each being higher than the last, the view became more and more magnificent. Jason grew up in a little tourist town and knew the kind of money a place like this could make. He suspected his new world didn't see a lot of tourism.

"The flesh-eating monsters wouldn't help."

"What's that?" Hiram asked.

"Nothing," Jason said. "Best get going again, I guess."

The roar of the waterfall grew louder as they closed in on the point where it erupted from the side of the mountain. The trees became smaller and thinner as they approached the upper tree line.

"Getting close, now," Hiram said loudly over the noise of rushing water. "These trees are around the same height as the fall, so only the closest ones see a lot of moisture."

The sound of the waterfall grew to a cacophony where they had to shout to hear each other. The final stretch of the trail was actually a cave that led into the mountain. There was a wooden walkway with grit glued on for purchase and a magic lamp to light the way. Jason was unpleasantly reminded of the cavern he had navigated below the Vane estate hedge maze.

It was the first time he had seen wood used in construction since arriving in the village. Even the doors were made of woven reeds, suggesting the village didn't have much of a crime problem.

Once they entered the cave, the thundering sound of the waterfall was amplified in echo, making even shouts a futile effort. The cave was filled with wet air and they moved forward carefully. Hiram had the respect for the slippery boards that Jason had learned the hard way.

When lit up by lamplight on glistening stone walls, the cave was actually quite pretty, with much of the stone being marbled green. Compared to the humid exterior, cold, clean air blew over them from the tunnel. Jason enjoyed the refreshing feeling as they made their way toward the light he could see at the far end.

As they closed on the end of the tunnel, a cool mist started wafting towards them. They reached the end of the tunnel and stepped out into a stone chamber. The first thing he noticed was the light, blue and shimmering, glinting off the mist. It gave the whole chamber the feel of being underwater.

The chamber looked like it had once been a natural cavern, later carved into more practical dimensions. The ceiling was untouched from the original cave, but the floor had been worked flat, with grooves cut into it for traction in the wet.

The chamber's most arresting feature was the back wall, which wasn't a wall at all. A torrent of water, blasted in one side of the room and out the other, through a tunnel taller and deeper than the chamber itself. The whole chamber looked oddly like a subway station, with the rushing water in place of a train.

There was a fence of vertical bars in front of the water, like a safety rail going floor to ceiling. There was a gate in the middle of the fence, although Jason could imagine no reason to go through it. The water looked like it would rip off any limb someone was foolish enough to shove into it.

Velocity kept the water on course instead of spilling into the room; gravity wouldn't win out until the water escaped the mountain. More than a little spray still escaped, filling the chamber with wet mist. It left the walls and floor slick with water, quickly making Jason and Hiram the same.

The water was also the source of the blue light. Either there were powerful magic lamps behind it, or the water had its own luminescence. Jason would have asked Hiram, but any attempt to talk would be futile over the sound of water.

Hiram went to the side of the chamber, where Jason noticed a glazed window set into the wall. Through the window was a second chamber, cut deeper into the mountain. Inside, a young man in a comfortable chair was giving them a wave.

There was a metal door along from the window, which Hiram opened and led Jason through. Beyond was a small antechamber, barely big enough to hold both men. A lamp was set firmly into the wall for light, next to another metal door, but Hiram didn't open it. With a door between them and the main chamber, the din from the water was greatly reduced. Jason noticed that there seemed to be some kind of seal around the door to keep the moisture out.

"Just wait a moment," Hiram said.

Jason looked about the tiny room, but there wasn't much to see. He did spot neat arrays of fingernail-sized holes in the floor and ceiling. As he was looking at them, hot, dry air blasted from them like a giant blow dryer.

"Close your eyes," Hiram shouted over the rushing air. "The air will dry them out."

Jason did as instructed, waiting around half a minute as the air dried out his clothes and hair.

"It draws the dry desert air from the other side of the mountain," Hiram explained, "with a little bit of magic to help it dry faster."

When the air stopped, they were both nice and dry. Hiram opened the next door and took them inside. There was a comfortable-looking chair in front of the window, a number of cupboards, and an overstuffed bookshelf.

"Morning, boss," the young man said. "Who's your friend?"

"This is Jason," Hiram said, dropping the backpack with a loud thud. "He's passing through with a group of adventurers and wanted to see the aperture. Jason, this is Griff."

"Travelling with adventurers," Griff said enviously. "That must be exciting."

"It has its moments," Jason said.

They exchanged greetings and Griff made to leave.

"Any idea when Duggan will be back, boss?" he asked. "I'm really looking forward to sleeping during the night time again."

"His wife is still on the mend," Hiram said. "Probably another month."

Griff's shoulders slumped.

"Make it to the end of the week and I'll switch with you," Hiram said.

“Thanks, boss.”

Griff gave a weary smile and left. Jason looked out through the window as Hiram unloaded his backpack, stowing its contents in the cupboards.

“Ready for a closer look?” Hiram asked when he was done.

Jason grinned and Hiram led them back out. Leaving didn’t trigger the drying mechanism again.

“It’s set to go off when the outer door is opened first,” Hiram explained.

Back out in the loud, wet chamber, they walked carefully over wet stone to reach the fence. They both grabbed a hold of the wet bars, which Jason noticed were engraved with magic symbols.

Being close to the torrent, water sprayed over them both, but Jason didn’t mind. There was a feeling of refreshment that was more than just cool water on a hot morning. He felt like a child running under a lawn sprinkler on a hot day. Farrah had told him there was magic in the water. Was it the cause of the strange reminiscence, or was he just homesick in a strange land?

He craned his head to try and see the actual source of the water, but it came from somewhere deeper in the mountain where he couldn’t see. As there was no way to talk over the noise, Hiram grabbed his shoulder to get his attention. Hiram pointed in the direction the water was flowing and Jason spotted a tunnel on their side of the fence. It ran alongside the water, through which Jason could see daylight. He nodded at Hiram and they started off in that direction.

The tunnel went all the way to the outside of the mountain, where the water broke free to tumble down through the air. There was a chest high railing to keep people from falling off. The view was breathtaking. Below them was the pool where the waterfall landed and the channel flowing into the village lake. Beyond that, the vast expanse of the desert.

Jason was taking in the view when he noticed the noise of the water seemed to be dimming. At first he thought it was his imagination, but then he saw Hiram looking at the water stream with a confused expression. They watched the avalanche of water rapidly diminish, as if someone was turning off a giant tap. The flow dropped down to nothing, leaving an empty tunnel carved out by the water as smooth as machine-made pipe.

“Is that meant to happen?” Jason asked, in the sudden silence.

“No, it isn’t,” Hiram said, concern plain on his face.

“Has it ever done this before?” Jason asked.

“No, it hasn’t,” Hiram said.

“Should we tell someone?”

“It’s a waterfall, son. I’m pretty sure everyone noticed.”

Hiram went over to the room, ignoring the blast of warm air to rush inside, still wet. He came back out with a large key, unlocked the gate and dropped down into the curved floor of the water tunnel. Jason hesitated a moment before following. Hiram glanced at Jason, but didn’t comment.

Jason immediately spotted the aperture, some twenty metres down the pipe. It was a huge circle with a surface that shimmered with the same blue light the water had produced. Through the circle he could make out what looked like a rainforest, but the distortion of the circle made it blurry and indistinct.

“Is that sky?” Jason asked. “Is there a whole world through there?”

“Never actually been through to see,” Hiram said.

A large shape crawled into view through the aperture. It lumbered through the aperture and into the tunnel, like passing through a sheet of water. It had the body and head of a shark, but instead of skin it had a plated shell in hues of dark purple and red. Emerging from its sides were eight crab legs and a huge pair of pincers. The creature was three metres long and the pincers were bigger than Jason’s head.

“Do you see a lot of those?” Jason asked.

“No,” Hiram said. “That’s new.”

New Quest: [Waterfall Monster]

A monster has unexpectedly emerged from the local astral space. It has already entered the blind aggression stage and will attack anyone it encounters. Defeat it before it causes any harm.

- Objective: Defeat the [Shab] 0/1.
- Reward: Quintessence.

“I don’t suppose you know what that thing is?” Hiram asked, drawing the knife on his belt.

“I think it’s called a shab,” Jason said.

Jason drew the snake tooth dagger at his own waist.

“You any good with that?” Hiram asked.

“No,” Jason said. “No I’m not.”

Chapter 27

Water, Fall

"It's pretty slow," Jason said. "If we get back behind the fence, is it strong enough to hold it?"

"Not sure," Hiram said. "It's mostly to keep out people. The magic is just to stop the water from ruining it, not make it any stronger."

"I guess we fight, then," Jason said reluctantly.

"I guess so," Hiram said, equally lacking in enthusiasm.

The creature was moving up the tunnel, but at a lethargic pace. Its crab legs were better suited to sideways movement than forwards, so it was shuffling side to side as it approached. The back and forth motion was hampered by the curved sides of the pipe-like tunnel.

"You have any essences?" Jason asked. "Is that what I've been feeling in your aura, there?"

"One," Hiram said. "You're an adventurer? I thought the people with you were the adventurers."

"They are," Jason said. "I have the essences, but they're very new."

"You can try them out here then," Hiram said. "I guess you're in luck." Hiram said, causing Jason to chuckle.

"That's exactly what I was thinking," Jason said. "How lucky I am to be here."

The creature continued moving closer, its legs tapping on the stone as it slowly zigzagged up the tunnel.

"Any idea on how we should do it?" Jason asked.

"I have a might essence," Hiram said. "It makes me strong. If I tie up those pincers, think you can get around them and kill it?"

Jason looked at the creature. His knife wouldn't do much to the hard shell, but was just right for digging into the segmented joints.

"Yeah, I think I can do that."

Hiram looked at the knife in his hand and shoved it back into its sheath before striding down the tunnel. Jason followed behind, his own knife at the ready.

As they drew closer, one of the pincers shot out and Hiram caught it in one hand. The stocky man and the creature struggled back and forth, but Hiram didn't employ his second hand. He waited for the second pincer and grabbed that one too.

Hiram stood with hands over his head, a pincer gripped in each one. His arms swayed like branches in a storm, but his body was the tree's unmoving trunk.

Seeing Hiram and the monster in a stand-off, Jason knew it was time to act. The sides of the round tunnel curved up, wet and smooth. Closest to flat was the middle of the tunnel, which was unfortunately full of monster.

Jason had two options for getting behind it. One was trying to slip past on the outside, risking the slippery walls. The other, more terrifying option was to crawl underneath the monster's body. It's crab legs emerged from either side of the body, leaving the a large open space underneath.

He ruled out crawling under the monster because it would involve crawling under a monster. Instead he rushed forward, trying to half-slide along the pipe to get past the creature's legs.

He failed immediately. His feet slipped out from under him and he slid down into the creature's legs. It raised one of them, which Jason realised tapered into a point as it came down and stabbed into him.

Jason cried out with pain, but he still held a death-grip on his dagger. He slid the blade across the monster's leg, skittering over the hard shell until it found a vulnerable joint. The knife slotted right in between the plates of shell and he sliced the edge across the cartilage.

As the dagger cut into flesh, he used one of his abilities. He felt power surge out from deep inside his body, electric and exhilarating. It passed through his arm and into the dagger, filling the weapon with magic.

Ability: [Leech Bite] (Blood)

- Special attack (melee, drain, wounding, blood)
 - Cost: Low stamina.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts or refreshes the [Bleeding] condition. Drains a small amount of health and stamina when refreshing the [Bleeding] condition.

 - [Bleeding] (affliction, wounding, blood): Deals ongoing damage by causing or increasing blood loss. As a wounding effect, this condition absorbs and negates an amount of incoming healing, after which this affliction immediately ends.
-

As Jason yanked the knife free, blood sprayed out of the joint. The monster raised its leg sharply, pulling it free of Jason while releasing a high-pitched, alien shriek. Along with Jason's power, the magic of his snake-tooth dagger did its own work.

> Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Shab].

Jason scrambled to escape its legs as one of them rose up, poised to stab him again. He found himself directly underneath the creature, laying on his back. In front of him was the creature's underbelly, which turned out to be fleshy and unprotected by shell. Jason called up the power within him again, raking the vulnerable underside with his dagger.

Ability: [Punish] (Sin)

- Special attack (melee, curse)
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage and the [Sin] affliction.

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Blood and other fluids splashed over Jason from long wound, leaving him spluttering salty fluid as he shimmied on his back out behind the creature. The monster itself went wild at the wound to its underside, breaking its pincers out of Hiram's grip and flailing about with more high-pitched shrieking.

One of the monster's legs impaled one of Jason's by accident as the creature thrashed about. It didn't seem to notice, yanking its leg back out again. Jason turned himself over and crawled painfully away, still spitting out monster juice.

After getting free of the maddened monster, Jason looked back to see Hiram doing his best to hold the creature's attention, both arms wrapped around one of the pincers. Without getting up Jason held a hand out toward the creature and chanted out a spell.

"Your fate is to suffer."

There was no visible effect, but Jason felt the power surge out of him to enact itself upon the creature.

Ability: [Inexorable Doom] (Doom)

- Spell (curse)
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Periodically applies an additional instance of each stacking curse, disease, poison or unholy affliction the target is suffering from. This is a curse effect. This effect cannot be cleansed while any other curse or any disease, poison or unholy affliction is in effect.
-

Jason forced himself to his feet, ignoring the pain from his stabbed leg and abdomen as he limped further from the creature.

“Hiram!” Jason yelled past the creature. “Let it go and back off. It’ll die on its own.”

On the long wagon ride through the desert, Jason had spent hours going over his abilities, discussing with the others how to use them. Except Anisa, who refused to help him use his ‘unclean powers.’ The time spent strategising proved its worth now as he knew to withdraw and let the afflictions to do their work. It was obvious when considering things calmly beforehand, but in the heat of the moment he may well have kept attacking, putting himself and Hiram at unnecessary risk.

Jason’s first special attack had inflicted the bleeding affliction. This was effectively a powerful anticoagulant, making blood loss all the worse. The second special attack inflicted a curse called sin that increased any necrotic damage that was suffered. The dagger inflicted a necrotic poison, which was amplified by the curse. Finally, Jason’s spell would continually stack up both the poison and curse, increasing their effect. The result of all this was an exponentially escalating necrosis that would inevitably overcome the creature. All they had to do was wait.

Jason and Hiram backed off while the monster between them thrashed about. Dark fluids started oozing from its joints as it staggered forward toward Hiram, but soon it collapsed, the dying flesh in its legs unable to hold the creature’s weight. The pincer’s lifted up weakly in a last gesture of defiance before falling still.

-
- You have defeated [Shab].

➤
Quest: [Waterfall Monster]

- Objective complete: Defeat shab 1/1.
 - 50 [Water Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.
 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason was happy with how his abilities worked out, although he had one major concern. He was reliant on necrotic damage for his abilities to take full effect and his only current source of that damage was not his abilities, but his magic dagger. The others assured him that he would get such a power, but until then he would be reliant on an external tool.

Hiram and Jason cautiously approached the creature from either side. Jason had two painful wounds and he could see an injury on Hiram's arm. Hiram stood over the creature, cradling his bleeding arm.

"What did you do to it?" Hiram asked.

The monster was oozing black fluid from under its shell, which gave off a horrifying stench.

"I wasn't confident about cracking that shell," Jason said, "so I killed it from the inside out."

Jason held hand over the creature and chanted a spell.

"As your life was mine to reap, your death is mine to harvest."

Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
 - Iron: Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.
-

Dark red light rose up from within the creature. Jason's aura sense told him it was the monster's remnant life force made visible. It siphoned up into Jason's hand, draining away from the dead monster. As it did, Jason felt the sting of healing flesh as his wounds closed over. His body was reinvigorated as his stamina and mana were replenished. As he

consumed the red light, the flesh inside the shell withered, the shell itself growing brittle and crumbling. By the time the red light was fully devoured, the monster was little more than a withered husk.

Hiram had been looking askance at Jason as he recited sinister spells and drained the residual life force from the monster.

“Did you just say you were harvesting death?” Hiram asked.

“It’s just the incantation for a spell,” Jason said.

“You sound like an evil farmer.”

“You didn’t even see my evil trowel.”

Jason pulled a rag and a bottle of water from his inventory, cleaning his dagger before slipping it back into its sheath. He then tapped a finger on the gutted shell of the monster.

➤ [Would you like to loot \[Shab\]?](#)

“You might want to stand back for this,” Jason said. “There’s going to be a smell.”

“Worse than the one that’s there already?” Hiram asked.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “It’s worse.”

They backed off and Jason gave his mental assent to loot the body. What was left of the monster rapidly dissolved into rainbow coloured smoke before vanishing.

Tragically, Jason had forgotten the monster fluids that had splattered onto him while he was underneath it. They too dissolved, the rainbow smoke coming from his nose and mouth where the fluids had splashed into them. He fell to the ground, heaving his breakfast onto the base of the tunnel.

“You alright?” Hiram asked.

Eventually Jason gave a coughing nod.

-
- [\[Monster Core \(Iron Rank\)\] has been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [\[Shell-Skin Potion\] has been added to your inventory.](#)
 - [10 \[Iron Rank Spirit Coins\] have been added to your inventory.](#)
-

“Not worth it.”

Jason took a tin of healing unguent from his inventory and handed it over to Hiram.

“You know what that is?” Jason asked.

Hiram pulled the lid off the tin, sniffing at the contents. He nodded and immediately started rubbing ointment into his bloody arm.

“Boss!”

Griff called out from the other side of the fence.

"I came back when I couldn't see or hear the waterfall. What happened?"

"No idea," Hiram said, still rubbing ointment on his arm. "I imagine people are coming up here to check on things, but I'm not sure what they'll accomplish. I think we might need to bring in those adventurers of yours, Jason."

"I was thinking the same thing," Jason said, without turning to face the others. His gaze was focused on where the tunnel went deeper into the mountain.

"Is it just me," he asked, "or is the aperture more blue than it was before?"

Hiram followed Jason's gaze down the tunnel. The blue shimmer of the aperture was definitely brighter than it had been before.

"I think," Hiram said, "It might be time to get out of..."

He was cut off by a wall of water erupting through the aperture and down on top of them. It smashed them together in a tangle of arms and legs. Together they were blasted down the tunnel and hurled into the air, hundreds of metres above the ground.

Chapter 28: How Did You All Fit in There?

Water crashed into Jason like a derailed train, ploughing him straight into Hiram and blasting them both out the end of the tunnel. Sensations came faster than he could process; pain, wet, disorientation. He couldn't breathe, or even tell which way was up.

Jason and Hiram had clutched onto each other reflexively, their limbs tangled together. Landscape blurred past as they span through the air, tumbling like the now-resumed waterfall. Jason's first coherent thought was Hiram slipping away and he reasserted his grip. Darkness emerged from Jason, enveloping both men.

-
- Extending the weight-reducing function of [Cloak of Night] increases the cost from low mana-per-second to moderate mana-per-second.
-

Their downward plunge was reduced to a drift, floating out and away from the waterfall. Their wild spinning was arrested, and they were able to orient themselves as they descended. Jason was grateful that his cloak could be conjured at a thought. If it had required an incantation like a spell, he doubted he would have been able to get the words out. Only now they were free of the water and gently drifting could they even speak intelligibly.

"What in the Gods' merry garden is going on?" Hiram asked, voice tinged with panic. He was half-hugging Jason from the side,

"The first thing you should know," Jason said, "is to not let go."

Hiram lurched as he looked down, almost letting go.

"What did I just say?" Jason asked.

"We're in the sky!"

"Awesome, right?" Jason said.

"ARE YOU INSANE?"

"That was right in my ear!"

Jason started laughing madly as they drifted down to the ground.

"This is fantastic," he said.

"You're crazy!"

Between the force with which they were ejected from the mountain and the lightness of their reduced weight, they had drifted some way from the mountain before they lightly touched down. They landed close to the channel leading from the pool under the mountain

to the village lake. Hiram immediately fell to the grass and hugged the ground, tension escaping his body in sobbing laughs.

Jason took a look around. They were about halfway between the mountain and the village, in an expanse of shin-high grass. The channel ran dead-straight through the grass from the base of the waterfall to the village. He could see people heading for the mountain trail he and Hiram had taken earlier. None of them seemed to have noticed his and Hiram's descent.

On the other side of the channel were a bunch of children who had been looking up at the absent waterfall until they spotted Jason and Hiram fall from the sky. Jason gave them a wave. He then looked back up at the mountain and saw how far he had just fallen. A grin spread across his face.

"If this is the adventuring life," he mused, "I think I want some more."

"You're a crazy person," Hiram said, getting unsteadily to his feet. He looked uncertainly at Jason, still shrouded in the cloak of stars. Under the desert sun, the void black stood out more than the starlight.

"Hiram," Jason said, still looking up at the mountain. "Are they what I think they are?"

Hiram followed Jason's line of sight to the top of the waterfall. He spotted objects being tossed out the same way he and Hiram had been, at least a dozen of them.

"People?" Hiram asked. They were distant and hard to make out as they fell.

"Those aren't people," Jason said.

As they fell from the sky, the objects grew larger in their vision. Horror crossed Hiram's face as he recognised the shape of the creatures.

"More of those things!" Hiram said with horror.

"Don't be too worried," Jason said. "A shab is a half-shark, half crab. Neither of which have wings."

The large creatures lacked Jason's weight-reducing power and fell well short of the distance Jason and Hiram had reached. The first one hit the ground with a sickening crunch, with others soon following. Jason counted seventeen by the time they finished falling, most of which died on impact. Those that fell either side of the water channel hit the ground and didn't get up. Of the six that landed in the water, two struck the surface at a bad angle. Hitting water flat from that height was as good as hitting solid concrete, with similar results. The other four survived, but were clearly injured as they staggered out of the water.

New Quest: [Protect the Village]

A number of shabs have emerged from the astral space. Intercept them before they wreak havoc in the village.

- Objective: Defeat [Shab] 0/4.
 - Reward: Iron-rank (uncommon) magic bracelet.
-

One of the monsters had emerged on Jason and Hiram's side of the channel, the others on the far side. They all looked about, disoriented, then made a straight line for the village. The sideways walk of the creatures wasn't a breakneck pace, but was at least faster than what Jason had seen from the one in the tunnel.

"What do you think, Hiram?" Jason asked.

Hiram's face was stern as he stared at the creature on their side of the channel. It looked to have at least two broken legs and the shell around its body was cracked and oozing.

"I think I can take one," he said. "If it's injured. But what about those kids on the other side?"

"I'll get the kids away," Jason said. "Then I'll deal with the other shabs."

"Are you up for that?" Hiram asked.

"I guess I'll have to be," Jason said, flashing Hiram a grin. "Don't worry; I've still got a gimmick or two."

Jason started sprinting toward the channel. It was a natural waterway, thirty or so metres across. Jason leapt off the short embankment, landing on the gently flowing surface of the water as if it were solid ground. He laughed with delight as he sprinted over the surface to the other side. He ducked down briefly as one of the dead shabs floated past, long enough to brush his fingers over its shell.

-
- This monster corpse is unclaimed.
 - Would you like to loot [Shab]?
-

Jason kept moving as he looted the body, rainbow smoke rising behind him.

- 1 [Monster Core (Iron Rank)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Water Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason recalled an odd potion he had looted from the first shab. After climbing onto the grass on the opposite embankment he pulled it out of his inventory.

Item: [Shell-Skin Potion] (iron rank, uncommon)

- *Potion that increases the hardness of skin at the cost of agility* (consumable, natural).
 - Effect: Skin is hardened against physical attack and [Speed] attribute is decreased for 10 minutes.
 - Uses remaining: 1/1.
-

The kids, five of them, came running up to Jason with the fearlessness of children.

“Are those things monsters?” they asked.

“Yes,” Jason told them. “You need to run back to the village.”

“Are you going to fight them?”

“Yes. You need to run back to the village.”

“Can we watch?”

Jason sighed, and dropped down to one knee.

“Look, everyone,” he told them. “I have an important mission for you. I need you to go back to the village and warn everyone about the monsters.”

He took five iron-rank spirit coins from his inventory, holding them in front of the children.

“This is a very important job,” he told them solemnly, “and I need some brave junior adventurers to help me. Do you think you can help?”

Jason smiled at the five eagerly nodding heads, handing them each a coin.

“Hurry up now,” he told them. “Warn everyone, fast as you can!”

As the kids sprinted away, Jason turned to look at the three shabs that were scurrying alongside the channel in his direction. They had emerged from the water much closer to the mountain than where Jason had landed, placing him comfortably between them and the village.

“Why didn’t you stay in the water?” he wondered. “Did getting belted down here by water give you a complex?”

Their sideways crabwalk was faster than they could manage moving forwards, but their injuries were slowing them down. Jason looked at the potion in his hand, which would slow him down as well. He wasn’t skilled enough that the extra agility would do him any good, so he drank it.

-
- You have used a defence potion, hardening your skin and reducing your [Speed] attribute.
 - Until the remnant magic fully dissipates, consuming further defence potions will result in toxic side-effects.
-

He could feel his skin tightening, like he'd left it too long in the dryer. It felt like old leather as he flexed, restrictive but tough. He looked at the approaching creatures, wondering about the range of his spell. He could feel his abilities instinctively, realising that anything he could clearly see was a viable target. He fixed his gaze on each monster, chanting a spell for each.

"Your fate is to suffer."

The inexorable doom spell would add more and more of any stacking effect on the victim. The shabs didn't have any on them yet, but Jason would change that as soon as they caught up with him. He drew his dagger, he ran the blade across the back of his forearm, but it didn't draw blood.

"Huh."

He realised he should have done it before drinking the potion. He gripped the blade tightly in his fist and yanked it out, this time managing to a shallow cut on his palm.

- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Outworlder].
 - You have resisted [Umbral Snake Venom].
 - [Umbral Snake Venom] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

Jason, swore, having forgotten that his dagger was poisonous. Luckily, it didn't take effect. There was now an icon representing the resistant buff next to his mana and stamina bars.

"Not that I want to complain, but why didn't the poison work?"

Combat Log

- >You have been afflicted with iron-rank poison [Umbral Snake Venom].
 - Ability [Sin Eater] gives you increased resistance to all afflictions.
 - You have resisted [Umbral Snake Venom].
 - Resisting an affliction has triggered ability [Sin Eater], granting you an instance of [Resistant].
-

Sin eater was one of the abilities Jason had awakened from a feast stone. Most of his planning and discussion involved his active abilities, while this passive power went largely

overlooked. The sluggish pace of the injured shabs meant they were still some distance from him, so he had time to pull up the description.

Ability: [Sin Eater] (Sin)

- Special ability (holy)
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Increased resistance to afflictions. Gain an instance of [Resistant] each time you resist an affliction or cleanse an affliction using essence abilities.

- [Resistant] (boon, holy, stacking): Resistance to afflictions is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect. Consumed to negate instances of [Vulnerable] on a 1:1 basis.

“Not bad,” he said. “It’s a holy power, too. From the sin essence, no less.”

Jason glanced down at his hand, which had a line of blood but the wound had closed. The healing his familiar provided couldn’t swiftly regenerate the kind of impaling wounds he took from the shab, although thinking back, it may not have been pure adrenaline that kept him moving. A little cut on the hand, though, it made short work of.

“Oh, come on.”

He put his dagger in hand and yanked it free again, reopening the wound.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Outworlder].
 - You have resisted [Umbral Snake Venom].
 - [Umbral Snake Venom] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].

“I’m liking this ability,” he said as the number two appeared on the resistant icon.

He held his hand out, wounded palm pointed at the ground. Leeches started pouring out like water from the world’s most terrifying shower. By the time the pile was finished, the total volume of leeches was more than his entire body.

“How did you all fit in there?”

The pile had no way to respond. Jason intrinsically understood the nature of the familiar and knew there wasn’t anything like telepathic communication. He would have to command them verbally, although he wasn’t sure how that worked.

“Do leeches have ears?”

The pile said nothing.

“We’ll have to work out a system.”

Chapter 29: That's What Adventurers Do

The shabs were finally drawing close.

“Din-dins, Leechy,” Jason told the pile, which started undulating slowly in the direction of the shabs. “I’ve got to come up with a better name.”

The approaching shabs hadn’t regrouped after their fall from the sky, so were coming at Jason individually. The first one gave up its side-shuffling as it spotted Jason, turning its shark head to face him. He had time to really take a look at the creature. A shark in a purple and red shell, with legs halfway between a spider and a crab. Above the mouth full of jagged teeth it had tiny crayfish eyes; black orbs waving back and forth on short stalks.

“You certainly are creepy.”

As the first shab approached, it seemed to lock onto the leech pile in its path. It lunged with both pincers, which dug into the pile with little effect. Instead, the pile slithered over the pincers and up the arms, which it started shaking to get them off. Some were tossed away, others crawling over the shell in search of the gaps hiding vulnerable flesh. The remaining pile made for the creature’s legs, crawling up and all over it. Some leeches were squished between sections of shell, but more and more found something soft to sink their teeth into and the monster started shrieking.

-
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Shab].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Shab].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Shab].
 - [Bleeding] already in effect, [Bleeding] is refreshed.
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Shab].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Shab].
-

The notifications came thick and fast as every leech that found purchase started delivering the same bleed effect Jason used, plus two different kinds of poison.

-
- [Leech Toxin] (affliction, poison, blood, stacking): When [Bleeding] is negated, an instance of [Leech Toxin] on the target is consumed to reapply [Bleeding]. Additional instances can be accumulated.
-

On top of inflicting damage through blood loss, the strength of the bleeding affliction was that it soaked up healing, negating its effect. The leech toxin would reapply the bleed, requiring even more healing to eliminate it. He didn’t think the shab had any rapid healing ability, but it would be useful against monsters with the power to regenerate. So long as

enough of the leech toxin was applied, it would refresh the bleed over and over, leaving any healing stopped cold.

The other poison the leech inflicted was much the same as Jason's dagger.

-
- [Necrotoxin] (affliction, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Unlike Jason, the leeches didn't require an external source of necrotic damage. They were a tiny army of ambulatory poison daggers.

Jason was going to move in on it, but the shab was already in bad shape. He felt a little pointless compared to his familiar. His inexorable doom spell was already on the shabs, but compared to what the leeches were doing, his spell adding a few more afflictions was barely relevant.

The second shab was drawing close and Jason went forward to meet it. He tried to move around the pincers to get his knife into one of the leg joints, but met with immediate difficulty. When not restricted by a tunnel, a shab could easily skitter sideways to keep its savage mouth pointed right at its prey. The defensive potion slowing Jason down didn't help.

A pincer came at Jason. He avoided it clamping down on him, but took a glancing blow to the head. His skin might have been hardened by a potion, but it still rang his bell, sending him stumbling back. He glanced over at the first shab, which was woozily staggering back and forth, covered in leeches.

"I think my familiar might be stronger than me," Jason said. "Good job, Leechy; see if you can't catch that next one."

Leeches started dropping off the stricken shab, and Jason continued to square off with his own monster. Realising there was no going around the pincers, he tried a new tack, moving straight in.

A pincer shot out to grab him and he raised his left arm, letting the pincer have it. The sharp pincer broke through even his toughened skin, applying crushing force to his arm and trying to drag it into its mouth.

For the price of letting the pincer grab his empty-handed left arm, his knife-wielding right was free to strike. With Jason's arm in its grip, the pincer was no longer jerking about. Jason slammed the point of his dagger into the joint of the pincer.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Shab].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Shab].
-

The creature shrieked, releasing Jason's arm. He stumbled back, the dagger sliding free of the creature. The shab lashed out with its other pincer and Jason gave up the injured arm again. Whether from the previous injury or the rage of the monster, the pincer clamping down was much more agonising. He screamed at the pain, but fighting through it, savagely stabbed with his knife, again finding the joint of the pincer. It was the monster's turn to shriek as it once again released Jason's arm.

➤ **Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Shab].**

Jason stumbled away from the shab, his left arm hanging limp and dripping blood. Unlike his familiar, Jason couldn't pile-on the afflictions rapidly, but now all he needed was time. The inexorable doom spell would live up to its name, escalating the curse and the poison until the monster was overcome.

So long as he could stay out of the creature's reach, its defeat was inevitable, but Jason wasn't done. The shab might be quick side-to-side, but just by jogging backward Jason created distance. Then he stopped, held up his good arm and chanted a spell.

"Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast."

-
- **Ability: [Feast of Blood] (Blood)**
- **Spell (drain, blood)**
 - **Cost: Moderate mana.**
 - **Cooldown: 30 seconds.**
 - **Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)**
 - **Effect (iron): Drain health and stamina. Only affects targets with bleeding wounds or who are suffering from the [Bleeding] affliction.**
-

Red life force shone out of the shab. Some of it started streaming out from the wounds Jason had inflicted and into his waiting hand. Jason felt the healing sting in his wounded arm, but the life force drained was limited. Unlike his blood harvest spell, feast of blood didn't take all the life force, but he could use it on living enemies. Jason's arm was still far from healed, but at least now he could move it a little.

The shab let out an ear-piercing shriek, driven to madness by the effect of Jason's spell. The red glow retracted back into the shab, which seemed frantic at Jason plucking away its life force. It scrambled madly, but was not physiologically designed for pursuit. If anything, its panicked movement was slowing it down. Jason was easily keeping out of reach as his afflictions slowly overtook it.

-
- You have defeated [Shab].
 - Defeat [Shab] 1/4.
-

Jason glanced at the shab the leeches had left behind. It was an emptied-out shell, collapsed on the ground. He looked around for where the leeches had moved to intercept the third shab. Spotting them, he slapped an exasperated hand over his face. The third shab had apparently seen what the sanguine horror did to the first one and was trying to avoid it.

The leeches moved slowly, but the shab was apparently unwilling to take its eyes off the leeches long enough to crabwalk away. The result was two monsters shuffling around in an awkward circle.

“When I said ‘see if you can’t catch it,’ I didn’t actually mean for you to not catch it!”

Jason couldn’t get past his own shab to intervene, being forced to wait out the ridiculous display.

- Defeat [Shab] 1/3.
-

The number of shabs he needed to kill dropped by one. Looking back over the channel, he saw a bloody and weary Hiram standing over a fallen shab.

“Good for you, mate.”

Jason’s own shab finally collapsed and he was able to corral the last one into the sanguine horror, which made short work of it.

Quest: [Protect the Village]

- Objective complete: Defeat [Shab] 3/3
 - [Oasis Bracelet] has been added to your inventory.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason had noticed that his quests were a lot less lucrative than killing cultists, at least in terms of spirit coins. There was the other item, but he could check that later. On the far side of the channel, Hiram was bloodied but triumphant, standing with one foot on a dead shab. He waved broadly at Jason, who waved back.

Using his blood harvest spell, Jason drained the remnant life force from the three shabs, healing himself back into pristine condition. He ran a hand over the bloody, but fully intact arm that had not long ago been badly mangled.

“Not bad. Not bad at all.”

He looted the shabs, reabsorbed the sanguine horror and made his way back across the channel. When he got there, he tried to loot Hiram’s shab.

➤ This monster kill was not yours. You are unable to loot this monster.

“Hey Hiram,” Jason said. “Can I loot this corpse?”

“Sure,” Hiram said.

Jason tried again.

-
- [Monster Core (Iron Rank)] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Water Essence] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason raised his eyebrows at the loot message. From his adventuring companions Jason had gotten the impression that essences were fairly rare, in spite of his own experiences. He took the essence out of his inventory, a shimmering blue cube reminiscent of the aperture. He held it out to Hiram.

“Is that what I think it is?” Hiram asked.

“Water essence,” Jason confirmed.

“I can’t take that,” Hiram said. “Do you know what they’re worth?”

Jason looked at Hiram, then down at the shab. He pointed toward the mountain.

“The monster came from over there,” Jason said.

He pointed in the opposite direction.

“The village is over there.”

He pointed at the ground.

“You stood here, right in between them.”

He shoved the cube into Hiram’s chest.

As Hiram stared disbelievingly at the cube in his hands, Jason took out another object he looted from the shab. It was a monster core, which he had seen before, but this one was iron rank, compared to the lesser ranked ones already in his possession. It was teardrop-shaped, like a lesser core, but slightly larger and a more vibrant red.

Item: [Monster Core (Iron)] (iron rank, common)

The magic core of an iron rank monster (crafting material, magic core).

- Effect: Common component for ritual magic and magic item creation. Can be absorbed directly to advance essence abilities.
 - You are able to absorb [Monster Core (Iron)]. Absorb Y/N?
-

Jason's eyes went wide when he saw it could advance his essence abilities. He was tempted to try it immediately, but decided to ask Rufus and Farrah first. He didn't want to wind up with any strange side effects.

Hiram and Jason sat down on the grass for a well-earned rest. Hiram's eyes didn't shift from the essence in his hands.

"I can probably help you out with an essence ritual for that," Jason said. Essence rituals were one of the most fundamental magical practices and the knowledge Jason got from the skill book was more than sufficient to perform one.

"No thanks," Hiram said. "I'm saving this for when my granddaughter is old enough. An essence makes you an important person in a village, which is why I'm in charge of watching over the aperture."

"How old do you have to be to use an essence?" Jason asked, earning a strange look from Hiram.

"I'm from a very isolated area," Jason said. "We don't really know anything about magic there. I'm just starting to learn this stuff for myself."

"Must be pretty damn isolated," Hiram said. "If you try and absorb an essence too young, there are problems. Never seen it myself, but I've heard it's bad. There's a simple test to see if your body's ready. It's usually at around sixteen or seventeen, but it can go a year or two either way."

"Thanks," Jason said. "I still have a lot to learn."

"Well, I owe you," Hiram said, getting to his feet. "So does the village. I don't want to think about what would have happened if four of those things got in there."

Jason likewise stood up.

"I'm sure it would have been fine," he said. "If they made it to the village my adventurer friends would have seen it and stepped in. That's what adventurers do, right?"

"That's right," Hiram said, putting a hand on Jason's shoulder. "That's what adventurers do."

Chapter 30: Closing the Door Too Hard

In the garden courtyard of the inn, Jason was sitting comfortably in the late afternoon shade, looking down at a single leech on the ground.

“So you’ve got it, right?” he asked. “Left for yes, right for no. That’s my left and right, so your right and left. You have that?”

The leech moved to the left.

“Okay, that’s a yes. Unless you don’t have it right and you were trying to say no.”

The leech wobbled side to side.

“Yeah, I’m confused too. I can’t seem to help overcomplicating things. Alright, let’s just assume you’ve got it. That fine by you?”

The leech moved left.

“Great. So, do you have a name?”

The leech moved right.

“No name, okay. Would you like me to give you one?”

The leech moved left.

“That’s good,” Jason said. “I don’t want to keep calling you Leechy. That’d be like Gary calling me Humany. Or Outworldery, I guess. Not being human anymore is bit of a blow.”

“Who are you talking to?” Gary asked, walking into the courtyard.

“I’m trying to come up with a name for my familiar,” Jason said.

“How do you know it doesn’t have one already?” Farrah said, following Gary into the courtyard.

“I asked,” Jason said.

“And it answered?” Gary asked.

“We have a system,” Jason said. “Where have you all been? There was some excitement here.”

“We found out the guy had a cabin in the desert,” Farrah said. “There’s a cave where he’d go searching for earth quintessence. We thought that might be where he’d holed up.”

From inside the inn Jason heard the door slam open. He got up and went into the common room to look, seeing Martha the landlady, doing the same. What they saw was a fuming Rufus stomp loudly up the stairs, followed by the sound of another slamming door.

“How did he get that reed door to slam so loud?” Jason wondered aloud. “They’re really light.”

“A heady combination of finesse and rage,” Farrah said.

“I take it the guy wasn’t in his cabin, then,” Jason said.

“Oh, he was there,” Farrah said. “Anisa killed him before he could get a word out.”

Jason winced.

“I guess she was serious about the guy being her church’s to deal with,” Jason said.

“Why was Rufus so set on talking to the guy anyway?”

“We can sit down for that,” Gary said, “but I could really use a drink first.”

“Just use a spirit coin,” Farrah said.

“We can do better than that,” Jason said. “Martha, could we get some of that fruit punch?”

“Anything for you, sweetie.”

“What is it with you and the people in this village?” Farrah asked as they walked back into the courtyard and sat down at a picnic table. “I could swear I heard people talking about you when we came back into town.”

“It’s the dashing good looks,” Jason said.

Farrah and Gary shared a look.

“Hey...” Jason said sadly. He knelt down and held his hand out for the leech to crawl onto, then lifted it up to rest on his shoulder.

“Are you sure you want to put that there?” Gary asked. “I don’t think I’d want those teeth that close to my ear.”

“He won’t hurt me,” Jason said. “He’s my little guy. I think he’s a guy; I think I read that leeches can switch it around.”

“You are a strange man,” Farrah said.

Martha came in with a huge jug filled with juice and large chunks of ice. Her nephew, Harold, followed with a trio of glasses, getting a swat from Martha when he goggled at the leech on Jason’s shoulder.

“Thanks, Martha,” Jason said, filling each of the glasses. One was even a Gary-sized mug with a big handle.

After the landlady and her nephew left, Jason asked again about Rufus.

“The area we come from,” Farrah said, “has a higher density of magic than this region, so the monsters there are stronger, on average. In this region, iron-rank monsters are the norm, with a good smattering of bronze-rank. Silvers can show up, but only very occasionally.”

“But where we come from,” Gary added, “you get more silver rank monsters than anything. You see as many golds as you do bronze, and sometimes even diamond rank monsters. And if iron ranks do appear, there’s always about forty of the pricks.”

He chugged half of his giant glass at a go, topping it off from the jug.

“You’re from one of those big cities?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” Gary said. “Vitesse.”

“The City of Flowers,” Farrah added.

“That’s weird,” Jason said. “There’s a language in my world where Vitesse means speed.”

“Not how it works in our city,” Gary said.

“Vitesse is as leisurely as any place you’ll find,” Farrah explained. “Culture, cuisine. Lots of money floating around, even at the low end. A labourer in Vitesse can make as much as a craftsman here.”

“Not a good craftsman,” Gary said, “but still..”

“What does any of this have to do with Rufus being angry?” Jason asked.

“Well,” Gary said, “around here an iron rank adventurer can wander about in relative safety. If some monsters show up then an iron rank adventurer can go after them on their own, or with a small team.”

“But around Vitesse,” Farrah said, “that’s just asking for death. Even bronze rankers go out with a silver ranked escort. Coming here was our big chance to strike out on our own.”

“Prove ourselves,” Gary said.

“And then you went and got captured,” Jason said. “Rufus is in charge, so he blames himself.”

“Exactly,” Farrah said, “but you don’t understand the level of pressure on him. His family operates the Remore Academy, which is a big deal everywhere, not just Vitesse.”

“Let me guess,” Jason said. “Rufus is the living paragon of this academy’s teaching methods, so when he fails it’s a black mark on his family’s reputation.”

“His family isn’t like that,” Gary said. “They understand better than most that failure is a valuable lesson. Rufus is the one putting pressure on himself.”

“More than anything, he blames himself for putting us in danger,” Farrah said. “He takes responsibility seriously and he thinks he let us down.”

“The reason he was obsessed with catching the guy,” Farrah said, “was so he could find out what he did wrong. Rufus works harder than anyone to avoid making a mistake once, let alone twice. In his eyes, Anisa took away his chance to understand what he did

wrong. As far as Rufus is concerned, what Anisa did was the same as putting the team in danger.”

“Is anyone else getting a shady feeling from Anisa?” Jason asked. “Like she’s quietly on the shonk?”

“I think that’s going a bit far,” Gary said.

“Probably,” Jason said. “I’m definitely biased, but think about it. She brought this job to you from her church, right? Then the guy supposedly working for her church sets you up?”

“The shonk?” Farrah asked.

“Anisa was in a cage like the rest of us,” Gary said.

“Sure,” Jason said, “but she didn’t go to the ritual chamber, did she? Who’s to say that if I hadn’t shown up there wouldn’t be some other excuse to leave her behind. Then she breaks out all by herself?”

“So did you.”

“They underestimated me backwards and forwards,” Jason said, “and even then I was lucky. Do you think a blood cult is going to underestimate a priestess of purity?”

“She had a collar like the rest of us,” Gary said. “They might have thought she couldn’t do anything.”

“Sure,” Jason said. “But did you notice that her escape took just long enough that if she rushed to save us she would have been tragically late?”

“That’s thin,” Farrah said.

“So we busted ourselves out,” Jason continued, “leaving you free to find and question the guy who might have answers. Except he gets silenced before you even start with the questions.”

“I’m not convinced,” Farrah said. “You’re jumping a lot of gaps there.”

“I’m not saying anything definitive,” Jason said. “Like I said; I know I’m biased enough to not see things objectively. But a lot of things are coming up funky on the smell test, so maybe keep your eyes open.”

“Always do,” Gary said.

“You were blind-sided and handed over to a blood cult,” Jason said.

“This is really good,” Farrah said after emptying her glass of fruit punch, veering off topic.

“I know, right?” Jason said, refilling her glass. “I’ll have to ask what’s in it. Most of the local ingredients I’ve never even heard of. Bought a notebook last night at the market to jot down recipes.”

They heard the front door of the inn slam open.

“That door’s going to get ruined,” Jason said.

Anisa strode out into the courtyard, storming up to Jason.

“Why is everyone talking about you like you’re the town hero?” she asked. Her face filled with fury when she spotted the leech on Jason’s shoulder.

“What is that thing?”

“That’s Colin,” Jason said. “I’ve decided to call him Colin. And his friends. Team Colin.”

Anisa’s hand flashed towards it, her bronze-rank reflexes too fast for Jason to react. Not too fast for Gary, however, who clamped her wrist in his huge, hairy hand. Anisa glared at Gary as she tugged at her arm, but his grip didn’t budge.

“Not happening,” Gary said.

“That thing is obviously evil,” Anisa said.

“It doesn’t matter what it is,” Rufus’ said, striding into the courtyard. While the others turned to look, Jason pulled a knife and pricked his finger, letting Colin the apocalypse leech melt back into his bloodstream. He’d bought a small, sharp knife for the purpose after accidentally poisoning himself with the snake-tooth dagger. Looking up after putting the knife away he saw Anisa and Rufus squaring off.

“You knew he had that thing,” Anisa accused.

“I did,” Rufus said calmly.

“He’s tainted,” she said. “We need to burn him.”

“You don’t get a say in what we do anymore, Anisa. Especially when it comes to killing people. You’re out.”

“What are you talking about?”

“This was always a temporary collaboration,” Rufus said. “The collaboration ends here.”

“Over him?” she asked, gesturing at Jason.

“No, Anisa, over you,” Rufus said. “You decide for yourself when to listen and when to do whatever you like. You’re willing to place even your slightest ideal over the wellbeing of this team and that is unacceptable. The most important thing in a team is trust, and I don’t trust you.”

“Humans,” Anisa said, spitting out the word like a curse. “You’re all filth.”

She turned, marched away, and they heard the door slam as she departed the inn. Rufus was stewing on the spot, Jason, Farrah and Gary sharing wary looks.

“I think we may be paying for a new door,” Gary said.

Chapter 31: Taming the Beast

“Mr. Mayor,” Rufus said, “are you certain you don’t want us to investigate the astral space?”

“We considered it,” the mayor said, “but we are only one of many places with an aperture leading to that astral space. We have no idea if the other locations are having similar issues and the cost of a mistake could be critical.”

“I respect your prudence, Mr. Mayor,” Rufus said. “As promised, I’ll deliver your letters to the Adventure Society and the Magic Society when we reach Greenstone.”

“Thank you.”

The mayor was meeting them at the inn as they were ready to go. They were travelling on foot as Anisa had claimed the wagon and its animals for her church, which Rufus didn’t bother to argue. Hiram was standing alongside the mayor.

“Farewell, adventurers,” the mayor said, “and thanks again to you, Jason. I don’t like to think what would happen if those creatures had entered the village.”

“No worries, Greg,” Jason said, shaking the mayor’s hand, then Hiram’s.

“If there’s anything I can ever do for you,” Hiram said.

“Well, if you find another essence...” Jason said. “I looted all those monsters and you got the only one.”

“Stuff that,” Hiram, said. “If I find another essence I’m keeping it. I have more than one grandchild, you know.”

Jason laughed.

“You’ll have to introduce me next time I come through,” he said.

“That shouldn’t take long,” Farrah said. “The Adventure Society uses patrol contracts as punishment and...”

She placed a hand on Jason’s shoulder.

“...this one has a mouth on him.”

“Hey,” Jason said, mock hurt on his face.

They set out along the road on foot. Jason didn’t mind so much, since the wagon hadn’t been a comfortable ride over the hard desert ground. On their walk out of the village it seemed like everyone gave them a friendly wave or a few words of farewell.

“We’ve been here two days,” Farrah muttered.

“Not my fault you weren’t here when monsters started raining from the sky,” Jason said.

They set out along the south trail normally used by quarry transports, leaving the lush village behind for the dry wastes of the desert. Jason was much more comfortable than the last time they endured the arid waste. The reward he received from his quest to protect the village was exactly what he needed.

Item: [Oasis Bracelet] (iron rank, uncommon)

A bracelet that draws on the power of water quintessence to bestow the blessings of a personal oasis (accessory, bracelet).

- Effect: Keeps the wearer cool and refreshed. Bracelet energy is consumed at a varying rate according to climate.
 - Effect: Reduces incoming fire and heat damage. This rapidly consumes bracelet energy.
 - Effect: Consume a water quintessence gem to completely refill bracelet energy.
-

The bracelet was a cord looped with small round stones. When he first touched a sapphire-like water quintessence gem to one of the stones it had vanished. All the stones had turned from a sandy yellow to vibrant blue, and would slowly turn back as the magic of the gem was used up.

Under the refreshing effect of the bracelet, Jason was happily making his way alongside the others. Now he wasn't preoccupied with cursing the sun, he had a greater appreciation of the barren desert. It wasn't that different to parts of central Australia.

They were on an unsealed road, compacted to a hard surface by the scorching sun and heavy wagonloads of quarried stone. Wagons full of green marble rolled along the road in the same direction they were headed, while wagonloads of food came the other way.

"Did you really name your familiar Colin?" Gary asked as they walked.

"Yeah, I told you that," Jason said.

"You should have given it a more intimidating name, like 'Devourer' or something."

"Gary," Jason said, "it's a bloodthirsty apocalypse monster. It's intimidating enough."

Farrah, Gary and Jason chatted away as they walked. Rufus was still withdrawn after his confrontation with Anisa.

"It's a little strange to be so comfortable in such an inhospitable environment," Jason said.

“It gets much worse closer to the coast,” Farrah said. “At least here you can see some grass, the occasional tree. There, it’s just endless, lifeless sand. Dry and dead, like the sun scorched all the life out of it.”

“That’s cheery,” Jason said.

“We won’t need to trudge through that,” Gary said. “We’re heading south now until we hit the river, then we’ll take a boat west to the coast.”

They encountered a wagon that had been carrying fresh fruit to the village when it threw a wheel. While Gary and Farrah fixed the wagon, Jason and Rufus helped pick up the spilled fruit. Gary used one of his forge essence powers to repair the wheel. Jason was startled as Farrah used superhuman strength to lift the wagon so Gary could slip the wheel back onto the axle. Gary at least looked like he had overpowering strength. Seeing the same kind of power from Farrah was startlingly incongruous.

“What’s wrong with you?” Farrah asked Jason.

“I thought you were some kind of spell caster,” Jason said. “What’s with that strength?”

“I have some spells,” Farrah said, “but humans have an affinity for special attacks. I spend most of my time up close and personal. The spells just give me a little flexibility.”

“I don’t have any spells at all,” Rufus said. “Farrah having as many as she does is unusual.”

The wagon fixed, the grateful teamster left them walking away eating some kind of juicy melon. Jason, Rufus and Farrah had a slice each, while Gary ate the rest of the melon. Afterward, Rufus seemed a little less broody than he had for most of the day.

“Where are they getting fresh fruit in the desert?” Jason asked.

“You’ll get to see for yourself soon enough,” Rufus told him.

As they travelled, Jason took Rufus aside.

“I have kind of a delicate question,” Jason said softly.

“What’s that?” Rufus asked.

“Well,” Jason hesitated, “being iron rank does things to your body, right?”

“That’s right.”

“I just... I haven’t needed the toilet in four days. I had a sneaky wee back in the hedge maze, but since then, nothing.”

Rufus erupted into laughter, drawing the attention of the others.

“Really?” Jason asked.

“That’s normal,” Rufus said. “Your body doesn’t waste anything anymore; it can burn almost anything for fuel. I heard about a man that had to live on tree bark for a month.”

“That’s a myth,” Farrah.

“No, I know a guy who met the guy who did that,” Gary said.

“Of course you believe it,” Farrah said. “Mr. ‘I don’t need to check what’s in the box.’”

“Again, with this? How was I meant to know Vivienne would betray us?” Gary asked.

“Because it was really obvious,” Farrah said. “And we told you she would.”

“We did tell you,” Rufus agreed.

“You two have no sense of romance,” Gary said.

Late in the afternoon they came across a town, enclosed in massive walls made of tan-coloured, desert stone. It was laid out in a square with large gates in every wall. Inside was a town mostly built of the same bland bricks as the walls. The town’s layout was based around a huge central square, with wide, straight roads leading from the town gates right into it. The square was a bustle of activity, covered in wagons hauling the local green stone.

“This is the main distribution point for all the green marble in this region,” Farrah explained. “There are villages like the one we stayed in all through the region. From here it all gets taken south and shipped downriver on barges.”

“I figured there were more when they told me the name of the village was North East Quarry Village Four,” Jason said.

“No wonder they all just called it the Village,” Gary said.

“What’s with the huge walls?” Jason asked. The walls surrounding the town were at least seven metres high and almost three metres thick.

“That’s for the monster surge,” Rufus said.

“What’s a monster surge?” Jason asked.

“Every ten years,” Rufus explained, “there’s a massive increase in the spawn rate of monsters. All across the world, all at the same time. Whole villages evacuate to fortified towns like his one, which is why most of this town is actually empty. So long as there isn’t anyone left in the villages, the monsters largely leave them alone.”

“So how long has it been since the last monster surge?” Jason asked.

“Eleven years.” Rufus said.

“It’s never exactly ten years,” Farrah said. “It’s been as little as eight or as many as thirteen. The last few have all come pretty late.”

They didn’t need to find an inn to stay the night. Most of the town was composed of transient shelters that villagers used during the surges, which were available to anyone passing through. Mostly that meant teamsters hauling stone one way or food the other. Rufus led them to register in the square, where they were provided basic accommodation

without cost. After they found the simple stone cottage to which they had been assigned, Rufus approached Jason.

“There’s still a few hours of light,” Rufus said. “Come with me for a little bit.”

Rufus led them in silence. They went to the edge of town and up one of many sets of stairs, arriving on the top of the west wall. There he stopped to look out at the horizon, Jason stopping beside him.

“So you’ve fought your first proper monster,” Rufus said.

“The shabs were certainly rougher than the potent hamster,” Jason said.

Rufus turned his head to glance at Jason.

“Your power to identify things extends to monsters?”

“Just their names,” Jason told him.

Rufus looked back out at the desert landscape.

“It’s time you learned how to advance your abilities,” he said.

“Actually, that reminds me,” Jason said. “I have a bunch of monster cores. Apparently they can raise abilities up.”

Rufus’ head snapped sideways.

“You didn’t use any, did you?”

“No, I was waiting to ask you,” Jason said. “I thought there might be side effects. After that reaction, I’m assuming there are.”

Rufus let out a breath.

“I’m glad. I should have thought to tell you, but I forgot you had an ability to loot monsters. You’re lucky; it’s a rare power.”

“It’s not just me that can do that, then?”

“No, but it’s a highly coveted ability. I’m starting to get envious,” Rufus said.

“Don’t humans have their abilities go up faster than everyone else?” Jason asked.

“Everyone else including me, since I’m not human. Which still seems harsh.”

“Being human does have its perks,” Rufus acknowledged.

“Rub it in, why don’t you?” Jason asked. “How about you tell me how to raise my abilities so I can start catching up to you three.”

“That’s what we’re here for,” Rufus said. “There are two ways to raise your abilities. One is to use monster cores. Every core increases your abilities a little, but only a little. It takes hundreds of iron-rank cores to reach bronze rank, and that’s for humans. For everyone else, it takes even more. It takes iron-rank cores when you’re iron rank, bronze when you’re bronze, and so forth. But you should never, ever use this method.”

“Do you turn into a monster or something?”

“No,” Rufus said. “I said there were two ways of raising your abilities. Every time you use a monster core to raise your abilities, it makes the other method a little less effective. The impact is minimal, at first, but every core you use eats into your potential. If you used cores to get to where I am, the top end of bronze rank, then cores would be the only thing that works anymore. And bronze rank isn’t that high.”

“Couldn’t you just hunt up more monsters for cores?” Jason asked.

“You could,” Rufus said, “and some do. In the city we’re going to, Greenstone, almost everyone uses cores. So long as you have the money to buy them you can reach bronze rank without ever facing a monster. But every rank requires more and more cores. By the time you reach silver rank, things slow right down as the costs go up significantly. Most core users don’t make it to gold.”

“If people know this, why would anyone use cores?” Jason asked.

“Because it’s easy and you can buy the cores instead of risking your own neck.” Rufus said. “Most aristocratic families only have a few truly powerful adventurers, while the rest use cores. Do you have aristocracy in your world?”

“Sure,” Jason said. “We’re slowly phasing it out in favour of wealth-based oligarchy, but it’s still around.”

“Uh, alright.”

“So, what’s so bad about the second method that people would use these cores?”

“Because it requires danger and hard work.”

“I bet it isn’t the danger that stops them,” Jason said. “It’s the hard work, right?”

“Probably,” Rufus said with a chuckle. “The other path to developing your abilities, the real way, has three elements.”

Rufus raised three fingers, counting them off as he explained.

“The first element is training. You have to practice pushing your body to its limits, and not just the physical ones. You have to strain against the boundaries of what your four attributes are capable of. Exhaust yourself, body and mind. Pushing yourself to the limits prepares you to go beyond them.”

“So... exercise?”

“Yes, but not just physical exercise. You have to train the mind, as well. Perception is part of your spiritual strength, and we will teach you how to exercise it.”

“How?”

“Observation training, which is a practical skill as well as a good training technique. Memory games, puzzles. Anything that tests the mind can work.”

“That actually sounds a little fun.”

“That’s good,” Rufus said. “Training, done right, will leave you feeling satisfied and empowered. The second element is also about pushing yourself, but in a much more dangerous way.”

“Fighting monsters?” Jason guessed.

“Fighting monsters,” Rufus said. “To truly break through your limits, you must truly push up against them. Only with genuine danger can you go further and do more than you ever thought possible.”

“That’s simple enough to understand, if mildly terrifying. What’s the third part?” Jason asked.

“Meditation,” Rufus said.

“Meditation? As in... just sitting there?”

“Yes,” Rufus said. “Meditation is crucial. The other two elements are about breaking through your own limits. Meditation is about consolidating that gain. It’s where you take the fleeting moments in which you were better than you’ve ever been before, and making that your new normal.”

“Is there a mantra, or something?” Jason asked.

“The key is concentrating on the magic flowing inside you. You can feel it, right?”

“I can,” Jason said.

“It feels unruly, doesn’t it? Like some wild creature inside you.”

“Yeah, it kind of does,” Jason said. “Using an ability feels like throwing out a piece of meat for it to run out and devour.”

“That’s the sensation after you reach a new rank,” Rufus said. “You’ll slowly bring that beast under your control as your abilities grow. Then you’ll reach a new rank and have a new beast to contend with, more powerful than the last.”

“How does that work with core users?” Jason asked.

“For them it’s like feeding the beast drugged meat to make it compliant. The beast still has its strength, but the owner can’t make use of it properly.”

“So core users aren’t just hampering their future, but also making themselves kind of crappy in the present.”

“That’s exactly what they’re doing,” Rufus said.

Rufus directed Jason to sit cross-legged, looking out over the landscape. He spent the remaining daylight guiding Jason through his first meditation, until the sunset lit up the sky with orange and gold. Jason opened his eyes to watch.

“You know,” Jason said, “I think I’m starting to like it here.”

That night, as he lay in the small bed in their assigned accommodation, Jason checked his character screen.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: Iron.
- Progression to bronze rank: 0% (0/4 essences complete)

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Iron 0].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Iron 0].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Iron 0].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Iron 0].

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Interface].
- [Quest System].
- [Inventory].
- [Map].
- [Astral Affinity].
- [Mysterious Stranger].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (3/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 0] 04%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 0] 02%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 0] 00%.

Blood [Power] (4/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 0] 01%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 0] 01%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 0] 01%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 0] 01%.

Sin [Recovery] (3/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron 0] 01%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 0] 00%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 0] 02%.

Doom [Spirit] (1/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 0] 01%.
-

Looking over his abilities he saw they had barely increased. Some he hadn't even used yet.

"I have to try out that shadow teleport."

Chapter 32: Minster Hunting For Beginners

An hour after they left the walled town, Rufus stopped. He took a piece of paper from his pocket, looked it over, then turned his gaze to the desert landscape around them.

"This is it," he said and walked off, leaving the road behind.

"What's going on?" Gary asked as they followed, and Rufus handed him the paper. Gary glanced over it.

"Nice," he said, handing the paper to Jason. It was a monster notification, with details and directions. Jason had seen something similar back in the waterfall village, but there was apparently a noticeboard for them in every town and village.

"Did you take this from the town we just went through?" Jason asked.

"That's right," Rufus said.

"Are you allowed to just take them?" Jason asked.

The location was listed by landmarks that Jason spotted by looking around their current location. A series of distinctively shaped rocky outcroppings.

"You can make copies," Gary said. "When you kill the monster you mark the copy and it gets rid of the original. Then you just have to report next time you're at an Adventure Society branch."

"What if someone just makes a copy and destroys it without killing the monster?" Jason asked.

"Why would anyone do that?" Gary asked.

"Because people are terrible," Jason said.

"Is that what you think?" Farrah asked. "I'm starting to worry about your world."

"Really?" Jason asked. "Because when I came to your world people kept trying to eat and/or kill me."

"He has a point," Gary said.

"To make proper copies you need an Adventure Society badge," Rufus said. "The Society can use that to track down who made the copy."

"The badge also tracks the monsters you've killed," Farrah said.

"And they can use it to find your body when you die," Gary said.

"Very comforting," Jason said. "So why are we going after this monster?"

"We're not," Rufus said. "You are."

"I am?"

"You are," Rufus said.

New Quest: [Adventure Notice: Giant Desert Maw Spider]

Local townsfolk have spotted a monster in the area that matches the description of a giant desert maw spider. Slay the creature before it becomes aggressive and starts attacking travellers.

- Objective: Defeat [Giant Desert Maw Spider] 0/1.
 - Reward: Quintessence.
-

Jason took another look at the sheet of paper, which named the same monster as the quest.

“Giant desert maw spider,” he read. “How giant are we talking?”

“About Gary’s size,” Rufus said. “The size isn’t what you need to watch out for, though.”

“They have a huge mouth full of the nastiest teeth you’ve ever seen,” Farrah said. “It has a barbed tongue that will whip out, grab your limbs and try to drag them into that mouth.”

“Sounds delightful, but why are we doing this?”

“I haven’t seen you fight yet,” Rufus said. “I need to see what kind of level you’re at.”

“I can save you some time there,” Jason said. “My level is low. Very, very low.”

“You say that,” Rufus said, “but it could just be modesty.”

Jason cast his blood harvest spell and the remnant life force of the dead monster flowed into him, healing his wounds. The spell was strong, but not enough to completely recover his injuries. His wounds had closed but he felt carved up like a smallgoods platter. He tapped a finger on the remains.

-
- Would you like to loot [Giant Desert Maw Spider]?
-

He limped in the direction of the adventurers as the monster dissolved into rainbow smoke behind him.

-
- 10 [Spider Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.
-

The others had been watching Jason’s fight from a distance. His clothes were in bloody tatters, his body painted red.

“So,” Rufus said as Jason drew close. “Not being modest, then.”

Quest: [Monster Notice: Giant Desert Maw Spider]

- Objective complete: Defeat [Giant Desert Maw Spider] 1/1.
 - 10 [Earth Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

"I'm running out of intact clothes," Jason said.

"You do seem to go through them," Gary said.

Farah drew her stone chest from the ground and took out a bottle of clear liquid with a glass stopper.

"It's called crystal wash," Farah said, pushing the bottle into Jason's hands. "Strip down and then pour this over your head. I don't have a lot, so be appreciative."

Jason stripped down to his underwear.

"All the way," Farah said.

Jason pulled off the silk boxer shorts he had taken from the Vane manor. Past caring, he didn't even glance over to see if the others were looking at his naked body. There was enough blood on him anyway that it was effectively body paint. He pulled out the stopper and tipped it over his head. A clear, viscous liquid poured out and rapidly started spreading itself over him, thinning as it worked its way down. It excised the blood and filth from his body, cleaning it with an intimate thoroughness. An odd expression crossed his face as it cleared out the hard-to-reach nooks and crannies. He could smell a fresh fragrance coming off his body as the liquid evaporated into nothingness, its job done. He felt cleaner than he ever had in his life.

"It's perfumed?" he asked.

"No, crystal wash is completely odourless and clears off everything," Farah said. "If there's any stink left behind, that's just you."

Gary walked over and sniffed at Jason.

"Why do you smell like flowers?"

The other two crowded around Jason and started smelling him.

"Still naked," Jason said, boxed in by the trio.

"We've seen Rufus naked," Farah said. "No one cares about your scrawny body."

"Hey..." Rufus and Jason said together.

"You do smell like flowers," Farah said. "What's up with that?"

"I think it might be an outworlder thing," Rufus said. "I knew an outworlder who smelled quite similar."

“Did you now?” Gary asked.

“Did someone have a little outworlder fling?” Farrah asked.

“Still naked,” Jason said.

“It wasn’t like that,” Rufus said. “I was young and she barely even looked at me.”

“WILL EVERYONE BACK OFF SO I CAN PUT ON SOME CLOTHES?”

“We’re right here,” Gary said. “You don’t have to shout.”

“If you had that bottle of cleaning stuff the whole time...”

“Crystal wash,” Farrah said.

“Right,” Jason said. “If you had the whole time, why didn’t you give me some after I purged all those toxins?”

“Purging your toxins is like a rite of passage,” she said.

“So you didn’t use any when you went through it?”

“Absolutely not,” Farrah said, unconvincingly.

“She had a whole case of bottles on hand,” Gary said.

“If you didn’t learn the value of crystal wash, then you wouldn’t appreciate it,” Farrah said.

“Meaning you thought it was funny that I smelled so bad,” Jason said.

“It was pretty funny,” Gary said. “I’ve never seen that much sludge come out of a person. It’s like you were keeping extra in your storage space.”

They passed through another village near the middle of the day. Its astral space aperture was small, producing only a large pond. It had a quarrying operation, but much smaller than the waterfall village.

“Are apertures the only water sources around here?” Jason asked.

“No,” Rufus said, “but more of the green stone appears around the apertures. The bigger the aperture, the higher grade stone you’ll find.”

They only stopped long enough for Rufus to select another notice from the village’s adventure board.

“We’re on track to reach the river by nightfall,” Rufus said. “We have time for another one. Hand me a blank sheet from that box.”

Jason spotted the box of blank paper under the noticeboard, taking out a single sheet and handing it to Rufus. Rufus took a bronze medallion out of his pocket and touched it to the notice on the board. The medallion started glowing faintly until he touched it to the blank sheet Jason had retrieved. The glow faded and text started appearing on the paper, matching that of the notice.

“This is the Adventure Society badge,” Rufus explained. “You’ll get your own when you join.”

“I would have thought you got enough from the last monster,” Jason said. “Wasn’t I underwhelming enough?”

“There are always more lessons to be learned,” Rufus said, handing over the paper.

New Quest: [Monster Notice: Lesser Earth Elemental]

Local townsfolk have spotted a monster in the area that matches the description of a lesser earth elemental. Slay the creature before it becomes aggressive and starts attacking travellers.

- Objective: Defeat [Lesser Earth Elemental] 0/1.
- Reward: Crafting material.

“Earth elemental,” Jason read. “That’s like a pile of rocks and dirt that roams around and punches people?”

“That’s the one,” Gary said. “They have those in your world?”

“Just stories,” Jason said. “So let me guess. I fight the thing and find out my abilities don’t work on it because you can’t poison or bleed out a pile of rocks. I get the snot kicked out of me, you step in to save me and I learn an important lesson about failure and picking your battles. Is that more or less the idea?”

“I think he’s got your number, Rufus,” Gary chortled.

“Um, yes,” Rufus said, reaching to take the paper back. “It’s fine; you don’t have to do it.”

“No, I’m doing it,” Jason said, keeping the paper. He marched off in the direction of the village gate.

“I know you want to teach him to be a proper adventurer,” Farrah said to Rufus, “but I don’t think he’s like the spoiled rich kids at your family’s school.”

“That’s becoming clear,” Rufus said.

The earth elemental looked like a snowman made of packed earth and sand, but with thick arms instead of frail sticks. It was only around two thirds of Jason’s height, throwing off dust and dirt as it slowly moved. Jason rammed his dagger into its head.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Lesser Earth Elemental].
 - [Lesser Earth Elemental] has no motive spirit and is immune to curses.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - [Lesser Earth Elemental] is does not have living tissue and is impervious to necrotic damage.
 - Additional necrotic damage from special attack [Punish] does not take effect.
-

As expected, Jason's abilities had no effect. What he hadn't anticipated was that even the hole from the knife closed up as soon as he pulled it out. He stabbed it again and again, being struck in turn by the elemental's crude, heavy arms. The elemental showed no signs of waning. For every chunk of earth he dislodged with his knife, more entered the hole to fill it

Desperate, Jason crouched down and wrapped his arms around the elemental, gripping it tightly as he heaved back with all the might he could muster. His strength may have paled in comparison to Gary, but it was still improved over what it had been just a few days ago. With a wild roar of effort he strained to raise his legs, staggering, but successfully standing up.

The creature was lifted completely off the ground. He staggered as he leaned back for balance, but managed to stay upright under the weight. He clenched the monster with one and a half arms, stabbing at it with as much force as just his forearm would allow. It wasn't powerful but he kept stabbing, with the repetition of a sewing machine. As he did, the creature brought its crude limbs down on Jason's shoulders and back. He tucked his head in, shielding it as best he could.

Dirt crumbled away under Jason's knife as he struggled to stay upright under the creature's weight and the pounding blows it rained down on him. He stumbled, almost collapsing, but more and more of the creature crumbled away in larger and larger chunks. Jason's breathing was a death rattle as earthen fists hammered force through his back and into his lungs. His arms burned as they barely kept the creature in their air, his shoulders beaten until they felt like pulp. Finally, the creature crumbled away all at once, spilling though Jason's arms in clumps.

-
- You have defeated [Lesser earth Elemental].

Quest: [Adventure Notice: Lesser Earth Elemental]

- Objective complete: Defeat [Lesser Earth Elemental] 1/1.
 - 10 portions of [Pure-Heart Sand] have been added to your inventory.
 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Jason collapsed onto all fours, air escaping in hacking coughs that spat droplets of blood onto the ground. The others all ran up.

“I’ll get you a potion,” Farrah said, but Jason held up a hand to stop her, then put it back down so he wouldn’t fall.

“No,” he croaked. “Familiar... heals.”

“It heals slowly,” Rufus said.

Jason turned to look at him, slowly pushing himself to his feet. He staggered, legs almost giving out again, but he stabilised, defiant. His breathing slowly lost its wheeze, each breath no longer agony. He crouched down and ran his fingers through the dirt.

- Would you like to loot [Lesser Earth Elemental]?
-

He walked up to Rufus as the dirt behind him dissolved into smoke with a sizzling hiss.

- [Monster Core (Iron Rank)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Earth Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“If the familiar heals me, that ability gets better, faster, right?”

Jason’s voice was still raw and gravelly.

“Yeah,” Rufus said.

Jason nodded and started a stumbling walk back in the direction of the main road. Gary followed behind Jason as the other two looked at each other.

“What was all that about?” Farrah asked.

“Jason has a lot of lessons to learn,” Rufus said. “This was him pointing out that I do too.”

“Like what?” Farrah asked.

“Like determination. That being in a losing position doesn’t mean you lose, so long as you’re willing to pay the price of victory. In that sacrifice chamber, Jason was the weakest of all of us, collars or no. But he was the one who kept beating the odds.”

“He had some luck on his side,” Farrah said.

“My grandfather says the great adventurers are the ones who turn luck into fortune. And adventurers don’t come much greater than him, so he’d know.”

Farrah shook her head.

“The whole thing smells of male posturing, to me,” she said. “Why can’t you have a conversation, like normal people?”

“You may be right,” Rufus acknowledged, “but I think some things we can only show with our effort.”

Farrah made a distasteful groan.

“Little boys and their posturing.”

Jason was sorely meandering back toward the road when Gary caught up at a jog.

“How did you know to get it off the ground?” Gary asked.

“There’s a myth from my world,” Jason said hoarsely. “There was a guy who was invincible while he was touching the ground, so the guy who killed him did it by lifting him into the air. I thought maybe the elemental was healing itself by taking in more earth from the ground, so it seemed worth a try.”

“You know,” Gary said, “once we train you up a bit, you might actually be good at this.”

Chapter 33: Mistrun River

Back on the road, Rufus explained the local geography to Jason as they travelled. Inland, to the east was the inland veldt; a flat, sprawling scrubland. The desert they were passing through was similar to parts of the Australian outback, and it sounded like the veldt was as well.

“Is everywhere in your homeland a dry, desolate waste?” Gary asked.

“They call it the sunburnt country,” Jason said. “It’s very big, and the central region is very dry. Most of the population lives on the coast.”

“This place is the same,” Rufus said. “The western region here, which runs along the coast, is a place of contradictions. Most of it is lifeless desert; great dunes that seem to go on forever. But right in the middle is a vast river delta, where dead sand gives way to fertile soil. The delta is full of life and heavily populated. The city of Greenstone is on the coast, at the midpoint of the delta.”

“You seem to know this place pretty well,” Jason said, “given that you’re not actually from here.”

“Rufus likes to over-prepare,” Gary said. “He was studying everything about this place for weeks before we left.”

“Better too much preparation than not enough,” Rufus said.

As they followed the rough trade road they eventually spotted some green in the distance.

“We’re getting close to the river,” Farrah said.

The green grew wider in their vision until it covered the horizon. As they moved closer to it, the hard, red earth underfoot gave way to softer, brown dirt. The sporadic, yellow wasteland grass became thicker, even showing hints of green. The packed earth of the road became too soft for the heavy wagons that used it and had been paved over with rough desert brick. The grass became denser until it carpeted each side of the road, with a haze hanging over it that bore the promise of water.

“There’s magic in that haze,” Farrah said. “It comes from the river, bringing the water magic that makes all this growth possible in the desert.”

Dirt gave way to rich, dark soil. The road took them between orchards burgeoning with brightly-coloured fruit and fields of tall crops. The haze thickened to a cool mist in defiance of the burning sun, moisture like sparkling diamonds in the air. Drifting through

the fruit-laden trees, the mist created an ethereal fairy playground. A hidden Shangri-La within the unforgiving desert.

“Welcome to Verdant Fields,” Rufus said. “The name really says it all. The farms here and on the other side of the river feed every town and village in the central region.”

They started passing pickers in the trees and farmhands in the fields, shielded from the sun by the ubiquitous mist. Much of the heat still got through, but without the parching dryness that made the desert air so unforgiving.

Jason and the others followed the road through the rich farmlands before they finally approaching a wide river. There was a town covering the near-side bank, shrouded in fog rolling of the water. The town bustled as they made their way down wide streets built expressly for the passage of wagons.

“There’s always work for anyone who wants it in a town like this,” Gary said.

The riverside was a mess of docks and warehouses, teeming with people. Boats and barges came in and out, wagons were loaded and unloaded. Magic lamps were in heavy use to cut through the fog, even with hours of daylight left. Jason noticed magic being used in an oddly workman-like fashion, powering cranes or propelling watercraft. He saw rivermen and dockworkers drawing runes that glowed as they took effect. There were two bridges that arched away into the mist on thick columns, high enough that boats could sail comfortably underneath. The fog hid the far bank from sight.

A busy dockmaster promised them passage downriver in the morning on the condition that they showed up on time. The organised chaos of the docks waited for no-one, even fancy adventurers. They found lodgings for the night; a hostel for teamsters with no more amenities than a barrel of water. A roomful of unhappy wagoners discovered that Gary was a snorer.

The next day they were on a barge heading down river. Jason was surprised to realise that most of the watercraft were built not from wood or metal, but green stone. Farrah explained that the local stone had a strong water affinity, making it easy to craft a magic-driven boat from.

Rufus did his best to stay out of the crew’s way, while Gary happily helped out. His overwhelming strength was a more than welcome addition. Farrah took the time to show Jason how the magic propulsion pushed the barge along. There was a dedicated member of the crew whose sole job was to manage the magic. He was happy to find someone taking an interest, letting Jason and Farrah see the various ways magic was used throughout the ship.

Jason was impressed with the nuance with which magic was integrated into the barge, obviously the result of lengthy design iteration. Like other examples of magic he had seen, from lighting to indoor plumbing, it raised his estimation of the world's technology level. It seemed this world's reliance on magic placed it on a completely different technological track to his own.

"Boating engineer is a profession that uses little bits from various kinds of magic," Farrah explained. "They don't really understand anything outside of their job. They're professionals with skill, but a very narrow focus. As adventurers, we're better off with more breadth than depth when it comes to magic. We never know what we'll come across."

As the barge sailed downriver it left Verdant Fields behind. The mist coming from the river was thicker or thinner in various places as they sailed through, the surrounding terrain reflecting its life-giving power. When it was thin, the desert came right up to the river banks. Where it was thick, the river was bounded with life. It might be a patch of wet forest, or a long, gorgeous valley of lush green.

"This is where they grow Mistrun tea," Rufus said as they passed through the valley. "One of the finest teas in the world. Costs a lot, back home."

Mistrun was the name of the river they were sailing down, unimaginatively named for its signature mist. According to Rufus, the source of the river was the largest water aperture in the desert.

"It's not a natural river?" Jason asked.

"It depends on what you think of as natural," Rufus said. "There's an oasis with the aperture at the bottom of a lake. All this water flows from there."

The most exciting point of the journey came when the river reached a deep gorge. The river should have spilled into the gorge, but instead flowed into a humungous aqueduct that spanned over the lengthy gap. A hundred metres wide and three hundred metres across, the aqueduct carried the river and those who sailed it over the gorge to continue along on the far side. The entire aqueduct was built entirely from green marble.

"This is crazy," Jason said as they crossed over. Even at a hundred metres wide, the aqueduct was thinner than the river. This noticeably sped up the flow of the river and the speed of their barge. Jason looked out at the gorge, but they weren't close to the edge and he couldn't see much over the raised lip of the aqueduct. All that was visible was an unnerving expanse of sky.

"Sky River Gorge," Gary said enthusiastically. "I tried to get them to go closer to the side so we could look over, but they said no."

“How deep is this gorge?” Jason asked. “The pillars holding this thing up must be huge.”

“Interestingly,” Rufus said, “this aqueduct has no structural support other than the two ends.”

“That doesn’t sound safe,” Jason said.

“Rufus, I think you were wrong,” Gary said. “You did make too much preparation.”

“You do kind of sound like a tour guide,” Jason said.

“What’s a tour guide?” Rufus asked.

“Someone who gets paid to stand near interesting things to tell people about them,” Jason explained

Farrah laughed.

“Rufus, I think you missed your calling,” she said.

“What’s wrong with teaching people about interesting places?” Rufus asked. “It sounds like a noble vocation. If there was one here, for example, they could point out that no one knows who built this aqueduct.”

Gary groaned.

“Why would you learn that?” he asked. “How does it help us with missions?”

“You carry on, Rufus,” Jason said. “I’d like to hear it.”

“Thank you,” Rufus said. “The aqueduct was already here when people first moved to this region, some three and a half centuries ago. At least, that’s when it was permanently settled. There is some evidence of people being in this region before, but no historical record of who or when.”

“Except for that old order of assassins,” Gary said.

“Yes, Gary,” Rufus said. “Except for that old order of assassins we very specifically aren’t meant to be talking about yet.”

“Sorry.”

They sailed downriver all day and into the night. Come morning, the predawn light started casting out the dark, revealing four figures sitting perfectly still. Atop the blocks of stone stacked on the barge, Jason and the three adventures were seated in a circle. Eyes closed, they slowly breathed in and out the moist river air. Rufus had stopped guiding Jason’s meditation, leaving him to find his own way forward.

-
- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 0 (100%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has advanced to Iron 1 (00%).
-

Jason threw up his hands, letting out a triumphant whoop.

Rufus opened his eyes to look at the laughing Jason.

“You seem pleased with yourself,” he said.

“One of my abilities went up,” Jason said happily. “Just like you said it would. Makes sense that it was my vision power, since I’m always looking at things.”

“You’re certain it improved?” Farrah asked. “The strength of your abilities is a nebulous thing, and self-deception is easy.”

“No worries there,” Jason said. “One of my outworlder powers lets me track the progress of my abilities.”

“Really?” Farrah said, fascinated. “That sounds like something the Magic Society would be interested in. When we get to the city you should let me examine you with some of their specialised implements.”

“Uh, no thanks,” Jason said. “I have a strict ‘no specialised implements’ policy.”

He noticed their surrounding had changed in the time the group was meditating. They had been passing through the desolate sand dunes of the western region when night fell, but now they were surrounded by wetlands. The morning light was still dim, but Jason’s now slightly advanced power to see in the dark made everything clear. He could see a couple of villages in the distance, paddy farmers and herds of some large lizard the size of a cow. The docile creatures seemed perfectly happy wallowing in shallow water. Above everything was the familiar magical haze.

“The Mistrun Delta,” Rufus said. “We should reach the city by late morning or early afternoon.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Jason said. “You three are kind of a big deal there, right?”

The three adventurers all answered at once.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

Rufus glared at the other two.

“Rufus is the big name,” Gary said. “We’re just an afterthought.”

“What’s your concern?” Rufus asked, still shooting Gary a look.

“I was thinking that if I rock up to town with you lot,” Jason said, “I’ll be operating under expectations that I’m unlikely to meet.”

“He has a point,” Farrah said. “If he arrives under your wing then people will be expecting some kind of highly-trained expert. Not the kind of pressure a freshly-minted adventurer needs to be working under.”

“Pressure’s good,” Gary said. “Makes you strong.”

“In moderation,” Farrah said. “This time last week he didn’t know magic existed, let alone adventurers.”

“She’s right,” Rufus said. “Also, from the moment I arrived the aristocratic families were trying to foist their scions onto me for training. They’ll realise I’m training Jason sooner or later, but later is definitely better.”

“That settles it, then,” Jason said, getting to his feet, the others following suit. “I’ll get off early and we can meet up in the city.”

“Good,” Rufus said. “Find the Adventure Society and register; we’ll find you from there. There are plenty of towns and villages here in the delta. You can disembark somewhere closer to the city.”

“Actually,” Jason said, “I was thinking of having a look around, and there’s no time like the present.”

He ran and leapt into the air, the starlight cloak manifesting around him. He landed on the surface of the river, turned around and gave the adventurers a goodbye wave.

“See you in a few days!”

Chapter 34: Waving the Flag For Secular Morality

As best as Jason could tell, the delta was a mixture of natural wetlands and farmland that made the most of the ample water supply. There was a much greater abundance of trees compared to the desert, but they were mangroves or narrow palms; far from enough to sustain a lumber industry.

Jason wandered along paved roads that were set atop artificial embankments that divided the delta up into segments. Lush shrubbery and staggered brickwork ran down the sides to work against erosion, while small bridges allowed water and the occasional dinghy to float between sections. The roads themselves were the lifeblood of trade between towns and villages.

The care and time that had gone into the ways the farmland and artificial embankments fit into the natural ecosystem were clearly the product of many years. Jason thought back to what Rufus said about the Vane Estate and how it wastefully violated the existing environment. The delta was the exact opposite; a sustainable arrangement that balanced industry and nature.

The first town Jason arrived at was a farming community. Wandering into town, he experienced a strange confluence of familiar elements. Between the wide main street, the desert stone buildings and the surrounding terrain, it was like someone recreated a town from the American old west in South-East Asia, using North-African materials. Stone storefronts lined a main street where he half-expected old-timey piano music to come drifting through the swinging saloon doors.

Jason was actually able to find a saloon, although with disappointingly ordinary doors. They didn't swing and, wood being a rarity, were made from woven reeds. It was fronted by plenty of windows, none of which had glass, allowing light and air flow inside freely. Walking in, he saw quite a few people eating at scattered tables, as well as a long bar. A short breakfast menu was chalked onto a board, most of which was fried things he didn't recognise the name of.

After a pleasant breakfast of rice porridge with nuts and dried fruit, Jason left to meander down the main street. He wanted to look around, and also needed directions to the city. The people were olive-skinned with dark hair, which was normal for the other places Jason had seen. Only Rufus, with his chocolate complexion and Farrah, with her light skin and pixie features had been different amongst the humans Jason had met. As for the aggressively Aryan Anisa, he had no other elves for comparison.

There were a number of people going about their business in the main street, on foot or using carts and wagons. There were plenty of heidels, either yoked to wagons or tied to hitching posts. Like the wagons Jason had seen before, the carts and wagons here used bamboo for their construction, with a few wooden parts to supplement, like the wheel rims.

As he made his way down the street he came across two people standing in the middle of it, talking loudly. It was a young man and a middle-aged woman halfway yelling at one another.

“If you can’t wait until the healer comes through at the end of the month,” the man said, “then take him to the city.”

“That’s what I want to do,” the woman said “but money’s tight, now. Ratlings ate half our crop and we can’t afford a healer in the city.”

“No more loans,” the man said sharply, then his face softened. “I sympathise with your position, but monster attacks are a part of life. Look, I’ll ask my father about extending your terms, but that’s the best I can do.”

The woman was about to keep pressing her case when they turned to Jason who had walked right up to them.

“G’day,” Jason said. “I, and pretty much everyone couldn’t help but overhear. If you’d like, I can give it a go.”

“Give what a go?” the man asked.

“Someone’s crook, yeah? I might be able to sort him out.”

“You’re a healer?”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Jason said. “I can’t heal injuries, but I might be able to knock-off a disease. I’m heading for the city to sign up as an adventurer, and one of my abilities deals with disease. Full disclosure; I haven’t actually tried it out, yet, but I can give it a go.”

“You’re an adventurer?” The woman asked.

“Prospective adventurer,” Jason corrected. “I’m Jason.”

“We can’t afford to pay you,” the woman said. “Monsters tore up our fields, ruined most of our crop.”

“That’s rough,” Jason said. “But no worries; this one’s on the house.”

“Does that mean free?”

“Sure does,” Jason said. “I can’t promise results, though. I’ve never tried this ability before, but I’ll do my best.”

“This sounds shady,” the man said. “Listen to the way he talks. Look at him. He’s clearly not from anywhere near here, and he doesn’t have any eyebrows. Are you going to trust a man with no eyebrows?”

"I don't have a lot of choices," the woman said.

She moved to a nearby cart, Jason and the other man following. The inside of the cart had been filled with bedding, to give as soft a ride as possible to the sick old man laying in it. His skin was clammy and pale, beaded with sweat.

"You shouldn't have brought him here," the healthy man said.

"Makes it convenient for me, though," Jason said. "G'day, old bloke. I'm Jason."

The old man tried to speak, but only managed a wracking cough.

"No worries, mate," Jason said. "You just hold on a bit."

Jason held his hand out over the old man and chanted a spell.

"Feed me your sins."

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability circumvents any resistance or immunity to cleanse effects. This ability cannot be used on self.

The blood-red glow of life force light emerged from the old man's body. It was far less potent than what he had seen from monsters, even dead ones, wavering as if ready to collapse. Inside the red light were flashes of unhealthy green, like algae in a stagnant pool. There were other colours, although not as prominent; a dirty white and a bleak, pale purple. Jason's aura sense could feel them tainting the life force. The unhealthy colours immediately started moving, rising up and out of the red glow to be absorbed by Jason's waiting hand.

-
- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Green Mud Fever] from [Human].
 - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Arthritis] from [Human].
 - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Osteoporosis] from [Human].

 - Your stamina and mana have been replenished.
 - Stamina and mana cannot exceed normal maximum values. Excess stamina and mana are lost.

 - Cleansing afflictions has triggered [Sin Eater]. You have gained an instance of [Resistant] for each instance of affliction cleansed.
-

“I can cure arthritis? Is osteoporosis actually a disease?”

The glow of the old man’s life force was still unsteady, but clearly more vibrant after Jason’s efforts. The other colours were gone, leaving only vibrant red. As the spell faded, the glow retracted into the old man’s body.

“There we go,” Jason said. The old man pushed himself down to the end of the cart to get out.

“Dad, don’t push yourself,” the woman said.

“Don’t worry,” the old man said in a croaky voice. “It’s like a fresh breeze has blown through me.

Weak, but smiling he got himself out of the cart with his daughter’s help, then shook Jason’s hand. It was a hard, calloused hand, reminding Jason of his great uncle who worked mines his whole life.

“No worries, mate,” Jason said.

Although his spell only took moments, it attracted the attention of several people, and a short time later Jason found himself inundated with requests for healing. Soon after, a man wearing a badge pinned to his shirt arrived to see what the commotion was. This turned out to be the solitary town constable, who helped Jason get things in order.

“Alright,” the constable said to the growing crowd. “I’m going to take this man over to my office, where he has agreed to heal everyone that turns up for the rest of the day, just like when a regular healer shows up. So go home, bring in your sick. He says he can get to everyone, but he can’t heal injuries, only sickness.”

“Also poisons and curses,” Jason told the constable.

“And if anyone got bit by something venomous,” the constable continued, “you can go ahead and bring them in too.”

The crowd didn’t disperse until the constable took Jason inside his small office, where he took a bottle of juice from a magic cooler box and poured them a glass each.

“You sure you’re good for everyone?” the constable asked.

“No worries,” Jason said. “I could do this all day.”

“You will,” the constable said. “Half of them we’ll be turning away, though. I may have said you don’t do injuries, but they’ll bring them in regardless. You from one of the churches?”

“Definitely not,” Jason said.

“Then why are you helping all these folk for nothing?”

“Well,” Jason said, “since the gods are apparently real, here, I feel like I should be waving the flag for secular morality.”

“Friend, the gods are real everywhere.”

“That’s what people keep telling me.”

Chapter 35: Greenstone

“Anything?” Rufus asked as Gary walked in. They were renting a three-bedroom suite for their stay in Greenstone. Rufus and Farrah had been waiting for Jason in the sprawling lounge with the huge glass windows overlooking the ocean. The doors to the balcony outside were open to let in the sea breeze.

“Nothing,” Gary said. They had been checking daily to see if Jason had registered with the Adventure Society.

“It’s been a week,” Farrah said. “Do you think it’s time to make some discrete inquiries?”

“Not yet,” Rufus said. “Remember, everything is new to him. He’s probably just taking his time to look around.”

Jason was riding on a wagon along the embankment roads of the delta. The wagon was filled with crates containing all kinds of plants, only a few of which were fruits and vegetables. Jason was riding shotgun next to the driver, a man in his mid-twenties. The driver reached back, grabbing a plant with a celery-like stalk. With one hand on the reins, he snapped the stalk in half with the other, a practised gesture. He offered one half to Jason.

“Not medicinal, this one,” the driver said. “I just picked some up because I like it.”

The driver, Jory, was technically an adventurer, although he was the first to admit he rarely went on adventures. His true calling was alchemy, the brewing of potions and elixirs. He went out to the towns and villages looking for materials he couldn’t find in the local markets.

“Or at a price I can afford in the local markets anyway,” he’d cheerfully explained.

Jory had found Jason in a village, swamped by people looking for healing. It was something Jason had gotten used to as he slowly closed in on the city, through eight towns and villages in as many days. Jory had offered him a ride for the final leg of the journey.

Jason was never shy about filling a silence, but that was far from necessary with Jory, who talked so much he kept having to wet his mouth from a canteen, even in the humid delta air. He started telling Jason about his alchemy lab in Old City.

“Old City?” Jason asked.

"You really must be new to the region. Greenstone is split into two sections. Old City is the original city of Greenstone, situated on the original harbour. The other part of Greenstone is the Island. Originally it was meant to be a massive breakwater when the ports of what is now Old City were expanded. Somewhere along the way, they turned it into a haven for all the rich people to leave the rest of us behind."

"Alchemy doesn't rake in the money?" Jason asked.

"Not the way I do it," Jory said.

"So, they made an island, and called it the Island?" Jason asked.

"Unimaginative, right?" Jory asked. "You do want to live there if you can afford it, though. It is very nice. Old City is where the money is made, but the Island is where the money goes."

Jory explained that adventurers could afford to live on the island, so long as they were actively working. Most of them had been born rich anyway, which was how they got their essences in the first place. Jory's own family lived there, but he himself lived in Old City. Everything he earned was sunk back into his alchemy research.

"Most alchemists drive their work forward by pushing the boundaries of what alchemy can achieve at its strongest," Jory said. "The most elaborate techniques, the rarest and most expensive materials. I go the exact opposite way, trying to make things cheaper and simpler. If I can make alchemical products affordable to everyone, not only can it help a huge number of people, but it will open up huge new markets."

Jason had seen for himself that medicine in this world was essentially just whoever had the healing magic. Both ritual magic and alchemy had ways to heal, but the cost and expertise required placed both out of the reach for most people.

Most healing was done through the church of the Healer. From what he'd been told, their god supplied the essences and awakening stones that gave them their healing abilities. They could be sought out for a fee, but also sent people around the delta to heal people at more reasonable prices. It sounded good, but Jason had seen firsthand that there was always more demand for such services than supply. Jory hoped to rectify that with easy and affordable medicines.

"That's a noble goal," Jason said. "How's it going?"

"Reasonably well," Jory said. "The advantage of researching cheap and plentiful materials is that they're cheap and plentiful. I've even started a clinic out of my laboratory, selling some of my early successes. It helps pay for my research, although the margins are thin to keep it affordable. That was the whole point, after all."

"Maybe you should talk to the church of healing," Jason said. "They might be willing to fund your research."

"I had the same thought," Jory said. "As it turns out, they see who gets healed and who doesn't as theirs to choose. The poor, in their uneducated ignorance, don't get the chances the wealthy do to understand the glory of the gods. As such, they need suffering to wash clean their souls."

"That sounds familiar," Jason said, shaking his head. "You get that kind of thing where I come from, too."

Moving closer to the city, the embankment roads that crisscrossed the delta gave way to flat ground. All vegetation had been dug out or cut down, leaving a wide-open space in front of the city wall. The wall itself was red-yellow stone, a dozen metres high. Roads leading from all around the delta led up to the high gates.

"Those are some big walls."

"There are only a few secure towns in the delta," Jory said. "Most of the population comes into the city during monster surges."

"This clear space is to see the monsters coming?" Jason asked.

"That's right. It's a lot of work to keep land this fertile clear. Back in the day, they used to try and spoil the ground, stop anything from growing."

"I wouldn't think that would be hard," Jason said. "I mean, magic is a thing, right?"

"That might work somewhere else," Jory said, "but not here. There's an inherent magic to all the water coming down the Mistrun River. It has a strong life vitality, so you can't stop the growth here. The best you can do is beat it back. After a surge, they let it go until the next one is due. They've been keeping it clear for more than a year now. The last few surges have all taken longer than expected to arrive."

"Aren't longer gaps good?" Jason asked.

"Yes and no," Jory said. "Think about the logistical costs of a surge. Whole populations shift, herds have to be culled and moved. Being in a state of readiness for years at a time is expensive."

"I can imagine," Jason said.

"Haven't you seen it for yourself? You would have been, what? Ten, twelve when the last surge hit?"

"They don't have monster surges where I come from," Jason said. "They don't have monsters at all."

"They don't have monsters?" Jory asked. "Where are you from, exactly?"

“I was living in a city called Melbourne,” Jason said. “A long, long way from here. Very lean on monster activity.”

“It must have an absurdly low magic density,” Jory said. “Even compared to here, and that’s saying something.”

“Oh, there’s definitely less magic there,” Jason said. “We’re pretty isolated from anywhere with real magic.”

“How did you get here, then?”

“Not entirely sure,” Jason said. “Some kind of magical accident out in the desert reached out and dragged me right out of my bed.”

“Must have been some accident. I have heard about long-distance teleport experiments with shaky results.”

“It was something like that,” Jason said. “I was lucky enough to run into some adventurers who helped me get my bearings.”

“Not to mention a full set of essences,” Jory said.

Jory was iron rank, like Jason. He could sense the essences in Jason’s aura as easily as Jason could sense his. Jason was still new to aura sensing, but he was getting a handle on it. Ordinary people were faint, barely detectable, while those with essences were much clearer. Most villages had one or two people with an essence, while anyone who had reached iron rank with a full set radiated out like a beacon.

Monsters had an aura strength similar to those of an essence user, but their auras had a different feel to them. Rufus, Farrah and Gary had powerful, bronze-rank auras, but Jason had only caught glimpses. They could all suppress their auras, hiding them from Jason’s senses. Farrah had told him that higher-ranked essences users were expected to contain their auras.

“I kind of stumbled into those essences,” Jason said. “They came quick, but they didn’t come easy.”

They joined a queue of wagons at one of the city gates. The line moved quickly, the guards barely glancing at the contents of his wagon.

“You’re not carrying anything restricted are you, Jory?” a guard asked.

“Just the usual, Hugh,” Jory said, then turned to Jason. “You’re not restricted, are you?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” Jason said.

“You have a good day, Jory,” the guard said. “I’ll bring my mother to the clinic, now you’re back. Her leg again.”

“Always welcome, Hugh.”

Jory drove the wagon through the gate and into the city proper. Most of Old City was built from the same red and yellow stone Jason had seen in the desert, although many buildings were painted in colourful whites and greens. They were mostly one or two levels high, but three wasn't uncommon. Over the rooftops, he could see the occasional building that jutted five, six or even seven storeys high. The streets were teeming with people, even right in front of the gate. The air was filled with voices and the smell of spice.

"What's that I'm smelling?" Jason asked as Jory let the wagon confidently into the street, people flowing around it like water.

"It's called chittle," Jory said. "It's cheap, strong and grows all over the delta, so the street vendors all use it. It can take some getting used to."

"No, it smells good," Jason said. "I'll have to do some wandering around."

They reached Jory's combination home, alchemy lab and medical clinic; a large, three-story building. A sign above the door proclaimed it as the Broad Street Clinic. Although the street was crowded, the building was given a wide berth as two people brazenly vandalised the front of the building in the middle of the day. Rather than hooligans, however, they were wearing bright white robes hemmed with blue, yellow and green. They both had ceramic pots of red paint and were writing the word 'HERETIC' across the door. There was a small crowd of passers-by who had stopped to watch the show.

"Ah, dammit," Jory said wearily, pulling the wagon to a halt.

"Who are they?" Jason asked.

"They're from the church of the Healer," Jory said.

The two men spotted him on the wagon, putting down their pots and brushed to march over and confront him.

"So the heretic is back," one of them said. They were both young, around eighteen or nineteen.

"Is this really necessary?" Jory asked, still atop the wagon.

Jason could sense from their auras that both men were essence users. Iron rank, like Jory and himself.

One of the two opened his mouth for a sneering remark but was pre-empted by Jason.

"Who are these pricks?" Jason asked loudly as he hopped down off the wagon. Walking around the two men, he picked up one each of the pots and brushes they had put down when Jory arrived. Jory and the two men watched him, unsure of what he was doing.

"Who are you?" one of the men asked.

"I asked first," Jason said. "Is it a local custom to write what we think of people with paint? I'm not sure I can fit 'self-important turd nugget' on your robes. Do you have a smaller brush?"

Still sitting on his wagon, Jory groaned, running a hand across his face. The two men turned red with fury, lunging at Jason. He threw the contents of the pot over the first one and threw a fist at the other. The paint landed but the punch did not. A short time later Jason was curled up on the ground. He could have tried using abilities, but he knew both men were iron rank. He was afraid pulling out powers would be like pulling a knife in a bar fight, escalating things to the point of genuine danger. The clean one was satisfied with having laid Jason out with a punch, but the one splattered with paint was still getting kicks in.

"Come on," the other one said. "We came to send a message, and the message is sent."

The painted man gave Jason a final kick, picked up the other pot of paint and tipped it over Jason.

"Now it's sent," he said, and the two started walking off. The crowd of onlookers hurriedly parted to let them through, but the pair stopped when a voice called out to them.

"Hey!" Jason called out. The pair turned to see Jason, barely back on his feet, doubled over, but flashing them a bloody-toothed smile.

"You guys kicked the crap out of me pretty good," Jason groaned. "I don't suppose you can point me to a church of the healer?"

The man covered in paint lit up with fury, his face almost matching the red paint splashed on him. Sprinting back with thundering steps, he brought a fist down on Jason's head. Barely able to stand, Jason's only defence was a bloody-toothed grin. The fist came down and he crumbled, out cold before he hit the ground.

Chapter 36:

The Island

Jason regained consciousness on a cushioned table, like an examination table in a doctor's office. He'd been stripped down to his boxer shorts and his skin was covered in healing unguent.

"I think I'm weirdly getting used to this."

"To getting knocked out?" Jory asked. He was at a sink, washing out empty potion vials and placing them on a drying rack.

"It's been a rough couple of weeks," Jason said.

"Two acolytes of the god of healing, beating someone unconscious, though," Jory said. "That's unusual."

"Not for me," Jason said. "It's mostly been cultists, but generally religious figures of one stripe or another."

Jason groaned as he shoved his legs off the table, pushing himself up to a sitting position. He looked around what he assumed was the inside of Jory's clinic, which was surprisingly similar to a medical exam room from his own world. Tiles and cabinets; clean, white surfaces. There was a plain chair next to the exam table, with his clothes folded neatly on it, along with a towel.

"Is that for me?" he asked.

"I put the ointment on you," Jory said. "You can wipe it off yourself. You know, goading those two into kicking the snot out of you was the single dumbest thing I've ever seen. But what really impressed me was that you immediately topped it by standing up and doing it again. They weren't mucking about that second time, either. The one you dumped paint on kicked you square in the head."

"I don't remember that," Jason said.

"It was kind of a passing shot as they left," Jory said. "I think you were already out."

"Harsh," Jason said. "I've been knocked out a lot this last week."

"I believe you," Jory told him. "You owe me for the healing potion I tipped down your throat, by the way. And two tins of healing ointment I used for the bruising."

"No worries," Jason said. "That's actually why it wasn't a stupid thing to do."

Jory placed the last potion vial on a drying rack.

"This I want to hear," he said, turning around to face Jason.

"Well, if someone beats you up, there's healing potions," Jason said.

"If you have the money," Jory said.

“Valid point,” Jason acknowledged, “but in my case I do. Which means I can take a beating and the repercussions don’t last so long.”

“I don’t know about the rest of it,” Jory said, “but I will admit you can take a beating.”

“If you stay quiet when you wished you’d said something,” Jason said, “that regret builds up. Starts eating you from the inside, and there’s no potion for that.”

“Sure there is,” Jory said. “It’s called liquor. Another alchemist friend of mine has a distillery not too far from here.”

“That’s not a cure,” Jason said. “That’s setting yourself on fire to ward off the cold.”

“I’m not sure you’re the guy I’m going to for advice about consequences,” Jory said.

“Probably for the best,” Jason said with a laugh. “Are you going to catch any blowback because I took those blokes on?”

“It’ll be fine,” Jory said. “I’m a member of the Adventure Society and the Alchemist Association. They’re only low-level acolytes making trouble, so there’s only so far they’ll take things. If you’d actually given them a beating instead of the other way around, though, their higher-ups might have gotten involved. I don’t have the influence to push back against that. I’m just glad you weren’t stupid enough to use your essence abilities.”

“I figured it was bar fight rules,” Jason said. “It’s all fun and games until someone pulls a knife.”

“I’ve never been in a bar fight,” Jory said.

“Me either,” Jason admitted. “I just heard that somewhere.”

Jory shook his head.

“You’re a crazy person,” he said.

“The odds are pretty good, yeah.”

“Luckily, they got to stomp you into the ground, which should make them feel like they’ve accomplished something. Hopefully, they won’t be back for a while.”

“That’s why you didn’t step in to help me?”

“Help you? I almost stepped in to help them.”

Jason chuckled.

“Lovely. Those two both had iron-rank auras. Were they part of the Adventure Society?”

“Maybe,” Jory said. “The Adventure Society doesn’t put restrictions against membership in any other legitimate organisation.”

“Religions count as legitimate?” Jason asked.

“What is wrong with your head?” Jory asked.

“The bit on the front is too handsome,” Jason said. “I don’t suppose you could point me in the direction of the Adventure Society? I came here to sign up, after all.”

Jason wandered through the streets of Old City, stopping every now and again to buy something from a street stall.

-
- Food [Chittle Kebab] has inflicted [Food Poisoning] on you.
 - You have resisted [Food Poisoning].
 - [Food Poisoning] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

“Food poisoning?”

Combat Log

- You have been afflicted with normal-rank poison [Food Poisoning].
 - Iron rank gives you increased resistance to normal-rank afflictions.
 - Ability [Sin Eater] gives you increased resistance to all afflictions.
 - You have resisted [Food poisoning].
 - Resisting an affliction has triggered ability [Sin Eater], granting you an instance of [Resistant].
-

“Sin eater. I’m really starting to like this ability.”

Jason looked at the food in his hand, then at the resistant buff icon, then back at the kebab.

“You are pretty tasty.”

His gaze drifted back to the resistant buff.

“Why not? It’s kind of like training the power.”

He bit into the kebab again.

-
- Special attack [Chittle Kebab] has inflicted [Food Poisoning] on you.
 - You have resisted [Food poisoning].
 - [Food Poisoning] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

There was now the number two next to his resistance buff indicator.

“Loving this power.”

Eventually, he passed through a busy warehouse district that gave way to the city ports and he caught sight of the water. After the desolation of the desert, even the dark green lushness of the delta didn’t compare to a grand stretch of cerulean. It was not the

open sea, however, as there was a far shore some two kilometres distant, making it seem more like a lake.

The ports were a bustle of activity, forcing him to step carefully or get run down by a wagon. He finally reached a bridge that reached up and over the water in a gentle arc. Constructed entirely from green marble, it exuded wealth compared to the sandy yellow stone of Old City.

There were three lanes across the bridge, managed by an inspection point with armed guards, high metal gates and a large guard station. These guards wore the same uniform as the ones at the city gate, but he could see at a glance these were more fastidious in their duties. There were eight of them, and Jason could feel from their auras that some had essences. Only one had a full set of essences, the one who looked to be in charge.

Passage to the Island was clearly more regimented than that to Old City. Of the three lanes, the two smaller ones were for goods and service transport to and from the Island. They were intensely busy, with rigorous inspections slowing progress. The wider third lane was for a privileged class, with space to spare. Most of the traffic was wealthy-looking carriages, which caught Jason's attention by not being drawn by animals. Their wheels had the glow of engraved magical symbols.

Jory had been kind enough to explain the basics to Jason. Travel to the Island was restricted without a valid reason for entry. Trade and work permits would get someone into the trade lanes. Aristocrats, adventurers and residents were free to come and go using the wide lane. Members of the various guilds, societies and associations headquartered on the Island were likewise free to enter. Anyone else with valid business on the Island could buy a permit for entry for one day's entry, daylight hours only. What constituted valid business was at the discretion of the guards, who were town constables under the city's ruler, Duke Greenstone.

A day's entry to the Island cost an iron-rank spirit coin. Fortunately, anyone willing to pay up had access to the privilege lane. Jason had been around enough to get a handle on the currency, of which the lesser spirit coin was the basic unit. It was a full hundred lesser coins to one iron-rank coin, after which denominations went up in multiples of ten. It was ten iron to the bronze, ten bronze to the silver and so on, all the way up to diamond. The gold-rank coins in Jason's possession were each worth a hundred thousand lesser coins.

At the entry gate, Jason didn't have to queue for long. There were long lines for the trade lane, where every person and vehicle was thoroughly checked. In the privileged

lane, most of the carriages were waved straight through, while others went through after simply showing a permit. Most of the people in front of Jason were given permits after a short chat with the guard and handing over a coin. Jason noticed each person needing to touch their thumb to a stone the guard took from his pocket.

The bored, but still-diligent guard looked Jason up and down.

“Reason for permit application?”

“Applying to the Adventure Society,” Jason said.

The constable looked Jason over again, then nodded.

“Wait here.”

He went to exchange a quiet word with the one Jason pegged as being in charge.

That man looked Jason over and gave a brief nod to the guard, who came back.

“Looks like you’re all good. Just hand over your coin and put your thumb on the tracking stone.”

“Tracking stone?” Jason asked.

The guard raised a suspicious eyebrow.

“You don’t know what a tracking stone is?”

The officer in charge wandered over.

“Is there a problem?” he asked.

“This guy doesn’t know what a tracking stone is,” the guard said.

“Where are you from?” the officer asked Jason.

“Casselton Beach, originally,” Jason said. “It’s a small town, a long way from any real magic. Melbourne, the last couple of years, but I doubt you’ve heard of it. I’ve come a long way, and there’s still a lot I don’t know.”

The officer looked Jason over for a few moments, then fished a stone from his pocket. The palm-sized, glassy object looked similar to an awakening stone, except faceted instead of smooth. It had a dark blue-green colouration.

“This is a tracking stone,” the officer said. “This lets us find you, wherever you are on the Island.”

Jason had an ability that prevented him from being tracked. He couldn’t be sure if that would have an affect on the stone, and he decided to not mention it.

“If you make us come looking,” the guard continued, “it won’t be us coming for you, understand?”

“It’ll be someone much worse,” Jason said.

“Smart,” the officer said. “Smart is good.”

“I think your bar for smart might be a little low,” Jason said.

“Too smart is maybe not so good,” the officer said. “If you want to stay on the Island past sunset, find lodgings. That’ll qualify you for a temporary residence permit. Find good lodgings and they’ll register it for you, instead of making you come back and do it yourself.”

“Thanks,” Jason said. He handed over his coin and pressed his thumb to the stone. Either the stone was stronger than his ability, or the stone gave no warning that it couldn’t track him. Shortly after, Jason was through the gate and walking across the bridge.

The main thoroughfare was for carriages, with those on foot like Jason following a path at the edge of the bridge. That was fine by Jason as the rising arc of the bridge gave him an increasingly good view of the city.

Back the way he had come was the yellow sprawl of Old City. Below the bridge, the sun reflected off the deep blue water, busy with water traffic. The Old City shoreline was a massive port, the full length of the city. The ships were large, crammed into docks that seemed strangely high. He wondered if that was something to do with what two moons did to the tides.

There were three other bridges like the one Jason was on. Engineering marvels that spanned kilometres of water, they were the equal of anything from his own world.

Ahead was the Island, seeming opulent even at a distance. Compared to the clustered Old City, it indulged in the luxury of space. Where the Old City ports were occupied with large trade ships, the Island’s widely spaced marinas were occupied entirely by what looked like pleasure craft. Many of them didn’t have sails, presumably being propelled by magic.

The marina buildings all looked like yacht clubs, and beyond that were large houses with expansive grounds. Trees and grass abounded, and the streets he could see were wide and sealed. The buildings were all combinations of green marble and variously coloured tiles.

Eagerly heading along the bridge, Jason got a better look at the wide boulevard at the end of the bridge. Colourful plant beds separated carriageways and footpaths. Trees lined the streets, shading them with a leafy canopy.

The inspection station at the end of the bridge was just a small booth with no gates. The security was fastidious with those entering the Island, while disinterested in those leaving. The security guard looked a lot more relaxed, in his middle years with thinning hair and a paunch his uniform did not flatter. He came out of the booth, giving Jason a friendly smile as he checked his permit.

Although the guard looked casual, he took his time to check the permit thoroughly. As he did, Jason took a deep satisfying breath. The air was clean and fresh, without the wet

mugginess of the delta, the dry aridity of the desert or the crowded scents battling it out in Old City.

“I think I’m going to enjoy wealth inequality.”

Chapter 37: A Good Adventurer and a Great One

After leaving the walls of the city on the back of a heidel, Rufus rode at a casual pace along the embankment roads that divided up the delta. They were busy with traffic, mostly carts and wagons shuttling back and forth from the city. He could have urged his mount to move faster, instead enjoying a leisurely ride that took him to the gates of the Geller family estate. A thick, high wall marked the boundary, spanning off in both directions. The estate beyond was so vast that monsters were as likely to manifest inside the walls as out.

Approaching the open gate, he was let in by a pair of guards who took his mount. Rufus could sense the iron-rank auras of both men. That might have been normal in his home city, but locally was the exception. To his knowledge, only the Duke of Greenstone's household guard used iron rank essence users for basic troops. Knowing the Geller family, he expected these guards were family members on some kind of punishment detail or being taught the value of diligence.

At the guards' direction, he started walking up the wide, gravel-covered thoroughfare. The main house could be seen in the distance, a series of low buildings whose design seemed more interested in fitting the surroundings than lording over them. Rufus nodded to himself, finding it very much to his taste.

The grounds on both sides of the central approach were bursting with life. Palm trees, tall shrubbery, and bamboo stands. Paths disappeared through vine-covered archways and behind flowering bushes. The promise of canopy shade and the sound of trickling water enticed strollers to explore.

Rufus continued up the central path toward the manor house. Moving closer he saw the low buildings were interconnected with open walkways of wood, stone, and bamboo. As he arrived in front of the foremost building, someone emerged to meet him. A beautiful woman with dark olive skin and black hair, she looked around thirty, which Rufus knew to be twenty years shy of the reality. The age-defying power of her silver-rank essences kept her looks just as they were when he first met her as a boy.

"Lady Geller," Rufus greeted.

"Little Rufus Remore," Danielle said with a smile. "I didn't think you would still be so adorable."

Rufus cleared his throat awkwardly and Danielle laughed.

"You know, Mr Remore," she said, "many of our family's young ladies are arriving ahead of the monster surge. Perhaps if I set up a little soiree..."

“Thank you, Lady Geller, but I have quite enough to be going on with, without romantic entanglements complicating my affairs.”

“Oh? The young men would be there too.”

“Gracious,” he said, “but my answer remains the same.”

“Such a shame,” she said.

“I’d like to compliment you on your home,” Rufus said. “It makes one want to wander off and explore.”

“Then shall we?” Danielle asked with an inviting gesture. “I imagine we can discuss the reason for your visit just as well amongst the gardens.”

“I would very much like that,” Rufus said.

Danielle picked a path under an archway overgrown with flowering vines, leading him deeper into the grounds. Rufus soon discovered them to be every part the equal of their promise.

“Your estate grounds truly are a joy to experience,” Rufus said.

“Thank you. My family came here as the region was first being settled. The walls of our estate are older than the walls of Old City. Last I heard, we even have a member of that generation still around somewhere.”

“Oh?”

“She reached diamond rank a couple of centuries ago. Not so good at keeping in touch, though. You know what diamond-rankers are like.”

“Agelessness engenders an unusual perspective, I imagine,” Rufus said.

Danielle smiled.

“Let us hope we both go far enough to see for ourselves,” she said. “What brings you out here today, Mr Remore?”

“Seeing the ancestral home of the Geller family isn’t reason enough?” Rufus asked. “I’m a little surprised to find you in residence.”

“We call most of our bronze and silver-rankers home when a monster surge is imminent,” Danielle said. “The family has placed me in charge of defending the estate, this time, and my husband and daughter will be back sometime in the next few months. Really, though, I’m back to overlook my son’s final training.”

“You really train all of your family members here?” Rufus asked.

“We do,” Danielle said. “Our facilities might not be the Remore Academy, but we’re proud of it, nonetheless.”

“And rightly so, by all accounts,” Rufus said. “I have heard my grandfather express his respect on more than one occasion.”

“High praise indeed,” Danielle said.

“If I may ask,” Rufus said, “why here? I know this is where your family first rose up as a power, but now you’re established in major cities around the world. Why send people born in high magic areas to train here?”

“We send everyone to train here,” she said. “Those high magic areas are just the problem. Before you came here, did you ever go out on an expedition without at least a silver-ranker to watch your back?”

“No,” Rufus said darkly, “which led to a recent mistake on my part. Overconfidence led to insufficient caution. It almost cost my people everything.”

“That is precisely the reason we still use this place,” Danielle said. “The low magical density makes the monsters weaker. The dangers smaller; the consequences, less severe. Not to say there aren’t real dangers, but we can send out our iron-rankers to face them alone. No-one to rely on but themselves and each other.”

“You let them make their mistakes when those mistakes are less likely to kill them,” Rufus said.

“Exactly.”

“In light of my own hard-learned lesson,” Rufus said, “I cannot see that as anything but an excellent practice. There may be a lesson for the way my own family does things.”

“That’s very flattering,” Danielle said. “You really are a Remore, aren’t you? You’re all obsessed with improving your academy’s training methods.”

“Speaking of training,” Rufus said, “that is the reason I’ve come today. I’ve heard that your family’s training facility includes a mirage chamber. I was hoping to borrow it from time to time during my stay here.”

Danielle gave him an apologetic smile.

“Indeed we do have one,” she said. “Sadly, as much as I would like to accommodate you, I cannot. As I mentioned, the local magical density is quite low. We can only operate our mirage chamber at a bronze-rank level for limited periods, and I can’t take that valuable training time away from my own family.”

“Actually, it isn’t for me,” Rufus said. “I’ve found a person in rather desperate need of training and have taken it upon myself to give him a rush-course.”

She gave him a sideways glance, eyebrows arched.

“From what I hear,” she said, “every aristocratic family in the Greenstone has been asking you to guide their young hopefuls. Including ours. I have to wonder how someone managed to catch your eye.”

Rufus let out a self-deprecating laugh.

“I mentioned my mistake,” he said. “It would have gotten me killed if not for a rather unusual man.”

Rufus shook his head.

“I grew up surrounded by adventurers. I was raised not just to be one of them, but to be so good I could teach others. Everyone around me, as long as I can remember, told me I was going to be a great adventurer. It got to the point that I never even doubted it. The only exception was my grandfather. He said you never learn who you are when everything goes right. It’s in your darkest hour that you understand what it is to be an adventurer.”

They stopped walking at the edge of a pond, Rufus looking down at his own reflection.

“In my darkest hour,” Rufus continued, “I met a man who had never even heard of the Adventure Society. One essence, no combat abilities. He didn’t even know how to use spirit coins. But when all seemed lost, he showed me, like my grandfather said, what it means to be an adventurer. That when all your training and powers fail you, you have to find something inside yourself you never knew was there. Then you can do things you never thought possible. It’s the difference between a good adventurer and a great one.”

“That’s a valuable lesson,” Danielle said. “It seems your time here wasn’t wasted.”

“It hasn’t been,” Rufus said. “Having received such a valuable lesson, I want to impart what I know, in turn.”

“Well,” Danielle said, “If what you are looking for is some time in our mirage chamber running at iron rank, I can accommodate you. I would appreciate a little reciprocity, however.”

“Oh?”

“I mentioned my son and his final training. The time has come for him to join the Adventure Society, and I’d like you to do his field assessment. I’m sure the Society would be happy to accommodate.”

“I won’t show your boy any favouritism, if that’s what you’re looking for,” Rufus said.

Danielle laughed.

“Oh, I’d hardly need you for that,” she said.

“You’re not suggesting the Adventure Society is subject to corruption?” Rufus asked.

“You have to realise, Mr Remore, this isn’t Vitesse. The Adventure Society is a major force in Greenstone, but the isolation means the local branch is more reliant on local powers. Compromises must be made.”

Dark clouds appeared in Rufus’ expression.

“The neutrality of the Adventure Society is one of its central tenets,” he said.

"I agree," Danielle said. "However, if the core branches want to export their values to remote branches like Greenstone, they need to export sufficient resources along with them. Ideals are well and good in the heart of a kingdom, Mr Remore, but here we are more-often overlooked than not. In the provinces, we all have to deal with the realities."

Rufus looked rather dumbstruck.

"I'm not sure what to say to that."

"There's nothing to be said, Mr Remore. Welcome to the wilderness."

"Surely it can't be that bad," Rufus said.

"Oh, it's not," Danielle said. "Especially with the new branch director. She worked her way up from the bottom, so she knows what it is to fight through the influence of families like mine. Remarkable woman actually, but there is no getting around the fact that the Adventure Society here is reliant on local powers."

"Is that why the adventurer standards are so low here?" Rufus asked.

"That's precisely the reason," Danielle said. "Exceptions have a way of being made for those whose capabilities are not the equal of their connections. Eventually, standards just declined in general. That is why I want my son assessed to your standards, Mr Remore. He doesn't need help; he needs to be challenged."

"Then I would be happy to assist you," Rufus said. "Challenge, I can do."

Jason was standing at the edge of the bridge, having just arrived on the Island. The security guard handed back Jason's permit after checking it.

"Everything's in order, sir," the man said. "First time on the Island?"

"It is," Jason said. "I don't suppose you could point out the quickest way to the Adventure Society?"

The guard gestured down the boulevard that followed straight out from the bridge.

"Head up this way and you'll find the transit terminal. Big building; you can't miss it. That'll get you where you need to go."

"Thanks, mate."

Jason started walking up the street, past houses with gardens and grounds secured behind green brick walls and artfully wrought metal gates.

"Transit terminal," Jason muttered to himself as he walked along the street. "Do they have magic trams or something?"

Soon Jason came to some kind of local shopping district dominated by eateries and boutique stores. Jason wanted to stop and chase some of the enticing smells, but it was

already afternoon. First, he needed to find the Adventure Society, then somewhere to stay before sundown so he could stay on the Island.

The shopping area was dominated by a large building with a sign declaring it the NORTH MARINA TRANSIT TERMINAL. He went inside, finding it to be set out like a train station. He found a large sign that showed the routes; a pair of loop lines going in opposite directions.

According to the map, Jason could reach the Adventure Society from platform B. There didn't seem to be any place to buy tickets, so Jason took the stairwell marked for platform B, descending to a below-ground level. The stairwell was long, around two storeys worth of switchback stairs before coming out on a platform.

It immediately reminded him of a subway platform in layout. The floor walls and ceiling were combinations of green stone and tile mosaic, with cool, clean light coming from magical stones fixed into the ceiling. There were benches around the walls with people sitting patiently, while others stood.

The difference from a subway station was that in front of the tunnel was a glass wall, with water behind it like an aquarium. Three circular metal frames in the glass wall had doors that looked like airlocks. Moving closer to take a look, he saw the tunnel extended beyond both sides of the platform, like a subway tunnel. On the other side of the tunnel, he could see another glass wall with the same three doors, with another platform beyond that.

The lights illuminating the platform started dimming in a gentle strobe. It was apparently some kind of signal; the other people at the platform started getting up from benches and moving toward the glass wall. Shortly thereafter, a bullet-shaped capsule floated down the tunnel and affixed itself to the wall with clamps that gripping the three metal circles and pressed tightly into the doors. With a hiss of air, the doors slid open and people came out. The people on the platform then boarded, Jason among them.

The interior of the capsule was more like a bus than a subway car, with pairs of seats on each side. The seats were soft and plush, more like a luxury coach than cheap public transport. Jason found a window seat and watched the tunnel go past as the capsule took off. The ride had a floaty feel to it and Jason couldn't stop himself from grinning like an idiot.

"Submarine subways," he murmured to himself, shaking his head in disbelief. "I love magical cities."

The tunnel outside his window was decorated in tile mosaic and lit with different coloured lights. It seemed to be telling some kind of myth, with monsters and heroes

locked in epic battle. He became so engrossed in the images going past that he was disappointed to arrive at his destination.

The Adventure Society terminal was two stops from where he started and turned out to be one of several buildings in the extensive Adventure Society campus. Jason followed a sign labelled ADMINISTRATION out of the building onto what looked like a prestigious old university, all stone buildings and sprawling grounds. Jason took what he guessed was the right path and only had to ask directions once before finding the administration building.

He found himself in a large lobby fully appointed in wood, from the various sets of double doors to the three separate stairways. In terms of construction materials, Jason had seen plenty of mudbrick, stone, tile, bamboo, even reeds. The sudden preponderance of wood was a sufficiently stark contrast to make clear the importance of the building.

It was a vast space which fortunately contained what looked like a reception desk, at which Jason presented himself. Behind the desk was what looked like the same paunchy, balding bridge guard who had given him directions. Only the clothes were different, the guard uniform replaced with a more civilian-looking outfit. It had a prominently-stitched emblem of a sword and rod crossed over a shield. Jason had seen that emblem several times since arriving, recognising it from Rufus' Adventure Society badge.

The uniform had a loose fit Jason had seen on most of the locals, although the man's hefty midsection rather minimised the looseness. Jason noted there was a pencil tucked atop of one of the man's ears.

"Do you have a brother?" Jason asked.

"Just come over the bridge, sir?"

"I did."

"That was my brother, Bertram, sir. I'm Albert, but feel free to just call me Bert."

"No worries, Bert. Is this where I apply to join the Adventure Society?"

"Certainly is, sir," Albert said brightly. "I can get you started right away if you'd like."

"That'd be great," Jason said.

He pulled out a form and sat it on the desk, then started fishing through drawers.

"Not looking for a pencil, are you?" Jason asked.

"I am, sir. Had it around here somewhere..."

Jason tapped his own ear and a look of grateful revelation came over Albert's face as he plucked the pencil from its resting spot.

"Thank you, sir," Albert said. "How about we start with a name?"

"Jason Asano."

Instead of writing it down, Albert gave Jason a curious look.

“Do you know an adventurer named Gareth Xandier?”

“Gareth Xandier?” Jason asked. “Wait, do you mean Gary? Big, leonid bloke.”

“Yes,” Albert said. “The good-looking one.”

“I knew it,” Jason said, shaking his head in disgust.

“I’m sorry?” Albert asked.

“Never mind,” Jason said. “Why do you ask about Gary?”

“He’s been coming in and asking after you for the last couple of days,” Albert said. “Is it alright to tell him you’ve registered?”

“Sure,” Jason said, “although I’d rather tell him myself. Do you know where he’s staying?”

Chapter 38: Just Another Adventurer

The guild district was the region of the Island that contained the Adventure Society campus, along with many other guilds and societies. Occupying the north-west region of the island, the guild district also contained the bulk of the Island's visitor accommodations. Staying on the Island was a relatively expensive prospect, but with price came quality. Rufus, Farrah and Gary had secured a three-room suite in Sailor's Watch, an inn at the very edge of the island, with exceptional ocean views.

Having returned from the Geller Estate, Rufus ran into Farrah outside their lodgings as she returned from her own business.

"How did it go?" Farrah asked.

"Well enough," Rufus said. "Now we just need Jason to finally arrive."

Farrah sniffed at the smell of fresh baking wafting out of the inn.

"Smells good," she said. "Should be just about time to get some supper."

"It should," Rufus agreed, and they went inside.

Walking in, they headed in the direction of the dining room. There was a doorway leading directly to the kitchen, from which they heard a familiar voice.

"Now, it's equal parts sugar and water, then flavour to discretion, and I do mean discretion. You don't want the flavour of the syrup to overpower the cake. Once the syrup is soaking in, there's no getting it back out again. Unless you can extricate the syrup with magic, somehow. I need to get my hands on a cooking magic skill book."

Farrah snickered at the exasperation suddenly on Rufus' face.

"Jason?" Rufus called out.

"Rufus! Excuse me for a moment, ladies."

Jason wandered out of the kitchen wearing an apron marked with flour.

"G'day," he greeted them. "Nice little place you've found. A bit exxy, but I picked up a decent bit of coin during our misadventures at the Vane Estate. Fighting cannibals is lucrative. I forgot to loot that woman, Cressida, though. Probably missed out on a good bit of coin, there."

"I still have your share from looting the manor," Farrah said. "They filched all the really good stuff before running off, but they left enough behind to be worth splitting up."

"Oh, nice," Jason said.

"What took you so long?" Rufus asked.

"I took the scenic route through the delta," Jason said. "I had a good time."

"There was some talk about someone roaming around healing people," Farrah said.

"Did you hear about that?"

"How did you hear about it?" Jason asked.

"What we heard was that he was doing it for free," Farrah said. "The church of the healer wasn't happy. Did you see the guy?"

Jason looked about shiftily.

"Um... yep."

"Seriously?" Rufus asked. "It was you?"

"I have that cleansing power," Jason said.

"What happened to splitting up to prevent drawing attention?" Rufus asked.

"What did you want me to say? 'Sorry, Miss, but while it may seem that healing your father's horrifying illness would cost me nothing, someone might notice.'"

"Surely there's a middle ground between doing nothing and walking the earth, healing the sick and lame," Rufus said.

"And where do I draw the line?" Jason asked. "Should it be where people aren't sick enough, or where they aren't impoverished enough?"

"He does have a point," Farrah said. "Who looks at the poor and sick and tells them they aren't poor and sick enough?"

"The church of the healer, from what I've heard," Jason said darkly.

"I've seen this kind of thing before," Farrah said. "The Healer likes to give his worshippers the freedom to make the right choices on their own. The church of the healer is really important in isolated areas like this, though, and more than one church leader has been known to go a bit power mad."

"The god's real, right?" Jason asked. "Doesn't he step in?"

"I've heard they do, if they take it too far," Rufus said. "You always hear stories about churches who lose their way. I've never seen it reach the stage where their god intervenes."

"I have," Farrah said. "Rufus is a big city boy, but it normally happens places like this, where there's less to keep them in check."

"Did you at least go to the Adventure Society before getting to the kitchen?" Rufus asked Jason.

"Yeah, I did the paperwork," Jason said. "I have some kind of assessment tomorrow."

"That's just to clear you of things like restricted essences," Farrah said.

“Once that’s done you’ll need to go through a field assessment,” Rufus said, “Which they do at the start of each month. The next one is in nine days, but you can take yours the following month.”

“What’s wrong with this month?” Jason asked.

“You won’t be ready this month,” Rufus said. “Training you up to an acceptable standard by the end of next month will be rushed enough. Nine days from now, you wouldn’t come close to passing.”

“You don’t know for sure,” Jason said.

“I’m administering that field assessment myself,” Rufus said. “So I can speak with an amount of confidence.”

“You’re doing it?” Jason said. “Fair enough, then. Having you assess me wouldn’t exactly be ethical. Conflict of interest and all that. Well, I’ll see you at dinner; I have to get back to my cake.”

Rufus and Farrah watched Jason retreat into the kitchen.

“He thinks he’d fail because of ethics?” Farrah asked.

“He’ll figure it out once the training starts,” Rufus said.

The guild district was different from the north marina district in which Jason had first arrived on the island. Rather than the large private residences, it was occupied by various organisations, with smaller permanent residences serving the people that worked for them. Other than that, there was a large number of storefronts that seemed to be extensions of the various societies and associations headquartered around them.

Two sprawling campuses dominated the guild district. One was the Adventure Society, and the other was an organisation called the Magic Society. Jason knew Farrah was a member, but only had a vague idea of what they did. From what he could gather, they were something between a magic university and a magic utility company.

By size and centrality, the Forge Society and the Alchemist Association were clearly second to the Adventure and Magic Societies, but still occupied impressive chunks of real estate. Other organisations in the district ranged from occupying large buildings to being clustered into one space with other groups. Some were trade organisations, while others were adventuring guilds; private organisations of adventurers banded together for varying purposes.

Rufus had warned Jason against joining any of the local adventuring guilds. According to Rufus, they were all small-time affairs that took more from their members

than they offered, although Jason wasn't entirely convinced. He'd learned enough about Rufus' background to realise Rufus looked down from a very great height.

Arriving at the Adventure Society's administration building, Jason was shown through to a waiting room. There was one other occupant, a young man Jason estimated to be in his mid-to-late teens. He had the usual olive skin and dark hair of the local population, at least the human part of it. The young man was handsome, tall and broad-shouldered. If that wasn't bad enough, there was a puppy in his lap receiving a scratch on the tummy.

"G'day, mate," Jason said, sitting down next to him. "I like your dog."

"His name is Stash," the young man said. "Mine is Humphrey, Humphrey Geller."

"Jason Asano," Jason said, shaking Humphrey's offered hand. "Nice to meet you, Humphrey. Stash is an unusual name."

"It's short for Velitraxistaasch," Humphrey said. "He likes 'Stash,' though."

"Velitraxistaasch?" Jason said. "What is he, a shape-changed dragon or something?" Humphrey's eyes went wide.

"How did you...?"

"Wait, he actually is?"

Jason burst out laughing, then reached over to scratch the puppy's tummy.

"Who's a good little dragon? You are, yes you are. Good boy."

The puppy transformed into a canary, flying out of Humphrey's lap to settle on his head, where it twittered away merrily.

"That's impressive," Jason said. "I take it he's still a baby dragon."

"Yes," Humphrey said. "Our mothers arranged him becoming my familiar. Or me becoming his person, depending on how you look at it."

"Your mum knows dragons," Jason said. "I guess mine does too, although it's more of a metaphor. Great Aunt Margaret doesn't literally breathe fire."

Humphrey laughed.

"You're here to be assessed for the Adventure Society, I take it?" he asked.

"Yeah, I did all the paperwork yesterday," Jason said. "Any idea of what to expect?"

"They'll just check to make sure you don't have any restricted abilities. There'll be an official from the Adventure Society, of course, but they're only there to oversee things. The actual checking will be done by a priest from the church of knowledge. Don't try to slip anything past them, because there isn't any point."

"Because a god's involved?"

"Exactly. Then there'll be someone from the Magic Society to record your essences. They'll imply you have to let them record all your individual abilities, but you actually don't.

I'm told that the trick is to let them know that you know you don't have to and then do it anyway. Getting on the good side of the Magic Society is always a good idea."

"Thanks for the advice."

"If you've awakened any of your racial gifts, though, keep those to yourself," Humphrey advised. "They're very big on those at the Magic Society and you can trade the details in exchange for favours down the line."

Jason recalled Farrah telling him that humans all had dormant racial gifts that awakened unique powers based on their essences. He assumed the same advice would hold true for his outworlder abilities. More so, if anything.

"Good to know," Jason said. "Much appreciated, mate."

"I hope you don't mind me saying," Humphrey said, "but your manner of speech is a little unusual. Are you using a translation power?"

"I am," Jason said. "I'm not local; I just arrived in town yesterday."

"Where do you hail from, originally?" Humphrey asked.

"Australia."

"Never heard of it," Humphrey said. "Best not tell Mother or she'll harangue my geography tutor. Does everyone there shave their eyebrows?"

"I didn't shave them," Jason said. "I lost them."

"How do you lose your eyebrows?" Humphrey asked.

"It's been an odd couple of weeks.," Jason said.

A door opened and the canary on Humphrey's head morphed back into a puppy, its front paws dangling over his forehead. Humphrey lifted it down as a man entered the room. He was wearing what Jason had come to recognise as local business attire, quite different from the equivalent in his own world. The local fashions all went for loose, hanging designs that were more practical for the hot climate.

"Young master Geller," the man said to Humphrey, not so much as glancing at Jason. "This is, of course, a formality for you, but the formalities must be observed."

"I'm just another adventurer," Humphrey said, getting to his feet. "I only expect the same treatment you would give anyone."

"Of course," the man lied transparently. "This way, please."

Left alone in the waiting room, Jason absently tapped his feet.

"I need to do some clothes shopping," he said to himself. All his current outfits had been looted, and most of them hadn't travelled well.

"Rufus dresses nicely," he mused. "Maybe he knows a place."

Humphrey wasn't gone long before coming back with Stash, still a puppy, tucked under one arm. Humphrey looked rather disconcerted and was a full shade redder than when he left.

"You alright?" Jason asked.

"The priest," Humphrey said breathlessly. "She was a priestess."

"Pretty?" Jason guessed.

"Oh, gods, yes," Humphrey said. "I'm sure I made an idiot of myself."

"You don't have to worry," Jason said, scratching Stash behind the ear. "You've got this little guy."

"She did seem to like him."

"Of course she did."

"I didn't know what to say."

"I'm sure it was fine."

"I didn't even get her name."

"No worries," Jason said, slapping Humphrey on the shoulder. "I'll get her name; you hang about in the lobby for a few minutes and we'll grab an early lunch. Sound good?"

"You'd do that for me?"

"Mate, I'm going in there anyway. It's not exactly out of my way."

Jason sent the still-flustered Humphrey back in the direction of the main lobby.

Shortly after, the man who had come for Humphrey then came out to get Jason.

"Mr Asano?" he asked, all smiles.

"That's right."

"Do you know Young master Geller well?"

"We just met here."

Friendliness sank from the man's face like a torpedo had struck it.

"Oh," the man said flatly. "Well, come on, then. We haven't got all day."

The man marched off, not bothering to look if Jason was following.

"Wow."

Jason trailed the man through a small antechamber, then into another room where two people were waiting. The woman was wearing flowing robes of blue and white, with a sigil of a book sewn prominently into them.

He saw what had gotten Humphrey so bothered as she was quite pretty, although still with the rounded edges of youth. She was around Humphrey's age, maybe sixteen or seventeen, and Jason guessed Humphrey would have to move quick or in a couple of years, he'd have a small army of rivals.

Jason hadn't seen any evidence of cosmetics in this world, but he was beginning to suspect essences were taking up the slack. Except for himself and the blood priest, Darryl, every essence user he'd seen ranged from moderately good-looking to stupidly attractive.

The man next to the priestess was in his mid-thirties, also in a robe. Where the priestess' garment draped down her body with grace and elegance, his looked like a sack held in place with a rope belt. He had stubble, not the sexy kind, and his hair was an unruly mess. Even then, Jason recognised the handsome bone structure underneath. He looked like the hapless man who gets a make-over from the love interest in act two.

The third person was the man who led Jason in. He looked to be around thirty, with the generic handsomeness of a guy who had a supporting role on a teen drama a few years ago, but didn't break out and is really bitter about going back to his catering job.

"So you'll be the Adventure Society guy," Jason said to him. He had the aura of a bronze ranker, although not as strong as Rufus, Gary and Farrah. They were all near the top end of bronze, where he felt more like Anisa, who had only recently moved past iron rank.

"And you must be the priestess," he greeted the young woman. "Jason Asano, lovely to meet you. May I have your name, or do I just call you 'your worship,' or something. The last priestess I met was bit of a stickler. She did like to keep things formal, but mostly she just didn't like me."

She shook Jason's hand with a laugh. Jason mused over a handshake being common across worlds when it wasn't even universal to his own.

"My Name is Gabrielle Pellin," she introduced herself, "and I'm just an acolyte, not a full priestess. You can call me Gabrielle."

"Is it alright just to have an acolyte?" Jason asked. "What if I'm really good at hiding how evil I am?"

"It is unusual," Gabrielle said, "but my Lady directed me specifically to be here today."

"Your Lady?"

"The goddess, Knowledge."

"Is that her actual name? Knowledge? I suppose it would be weird if she was called Beryl or something. Especially if your name was Beryl. It'd make church service confusing, although, I imagine quite flattering, as well."

He turned to the last person as the other three looked at him strangely.

"You must be from the Magic Society," Jason said. "Not sure what they do, yet, but they seem very important, so well done, there. Jason Asano; nice to meet you, mate."

“Er, I’m Russell,” the man said, warily shaking Jason’s hand. “You don’t know what the Magic Society does?”

“I’m not local,” Jason said.

He noted that the priestess, Gabrielle, was holding what looked like a crystal ball, while Russell had a clipboard.

“So how do we do this, then?” Jason asked. “She waves the thing at me and you write down what she sees?”

“That’s more-or-less the process,” Russell said.

“Great,” Jason said. “Fair warning, my essences might come across as a bit sinister, but they weren’t on the restricted list. Not when I checked, anyway.”

“You don’t know what the Magic Society does,” Russell said, “but you know enough to check the restricted list?”

“It’s been an odd couple of weeks,” Jason said. “I’m picking things up as I go.”

“Can we please get started?” the man from the Adventure Society asked, impatiently.

“Yes, sorry,” Gabrielle said. She held up the crystal orb in front of Jason. She frowned at it, giving it a small shake.

“Miss Pellin?” Russell prompted.

“It seems Mr Asano is impervious to the aura reader,” Gabrielle said.

“Just call me Jason. Don’t worry, I’m not evil. I’ll cop to naughty, but that’s as far as it goes. Of course, that’s what an evil guy would say, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure that’s what anyone would say,” Gabrielle told him. “I think you might be a rather unusual man.”

“No,” Jason said. “Common as muck, me.”

“That I believe,” the Adventure Society official said.

Gabrielle tilted her head as if distractedly listen to something.

“After we’re done here,” Russell said to Jason, “could I convince you to discuss the power that shields you from the aura reader?”

“Got lunch plans, sorry.”

“Sorry,” Gabrielle said, refocusing on the group. “The essences were dark, blood, sin and doom.”

The other two turned to look at Jason.

“What?” he asked. “I said I’m not evil, although that could be part of my cunning ruse. Still, not on the restricted list, yeah? It’s not like I can make zombies or something. Kind of played out, where I come from, zombies. Same with vampires. Not as many werewolves, but they haven’t been done well in a while. Probably need the moon essence if I was going

to make werewolves, though. My friend Rufus has the moon essence, but he's more of the swordsman type."

"Would you please stop talking for five seconds," the Adventure Society official said.

"Sorry about that... whatever your name is, I didn't catch it. Is this your only job, or do you do catering on the side?"

"What? Shut up. Russell, record this idiot's essences so we can get him out of here."

"Just a moment," Russell said. He was looking over a blue and white marble tablet of a kind Jason had seen before. Farrah had checked an identical one when they were looking up Jason's essences.

"Here we are," Russell said. "Dark, blood, sin and doom. Affliction specialist, no restriction. You're all good to go, Mr Asano."

"Thanks, mate."

"Very well," the official said, writing on his own clipboard. "You're cleared for field testing. Should you successfully complete field testing, you will be allowed to take up membership with the Adventure Society, with all privileges and responsibilities that entails. Field testing takes place at the start of every month and you can sign up at the administration desk."

"There is the matter of registering your individual essence abilities," Russell said.

"I'm going to give that one a miss, sorry mate," Jason said. "I would, but I have a friend waiting outside. Lovely to meet you Russell, Gabrielle..."

He turned to the official.

"...guy."

"How did you know my name was Guy?" the official asked.

"Seriously? I'm on a roll, today. Bye, all."

Jason sauntered out of the room.

"What an unusual man," Russell said.

"I thought he was fun," Gabrielle said.

"I thought he was on drugs," Guy said. The other two looked at him, then nodded.

"That would make sense," Russell said.

"Will that be a problem for his membership?" Gabrielle asked.

"No," Guy said. "If we banned that kind of thing, we'd have to kick out half the alchemists."

Chapter 39:

Training

“As you hopefully recall,” Rufus said, “there are three elements to improving your abilities.”

“I’m pretty sure the middle step was to eat a delicious sandwich,” Jason said.

“Could you take this at least a little seriously?” Rufus asked.

“I’m about to learn magic kung fu, so... probably not.”

Jason had rented a suite room on the same floor as the others, right across the hall. It was smaller, or more accurately, less large. Being on the other side of the building, it didn't have the same ocean view, and he spent much of his time in their suite. They were having iced tea out on the balcony, overlooking the ocean.

“There’s nothing wrong with having some fun along the way,” Gary said. “As long as the work gets done, why be so serious about everything?”

“He says that sipping ice tea on a balcony,” Farrah said. “He turns into a slave driver once the training starts.”

“Even I think it’s a bit much,” Rufus said.

“No you don’t,” Gary said.

“No,” Rufus said with a malicious grin. “I don’t.”

“What’s kung fu?” Farrah asked. “I don’t think your ability translated it.”

“It means a skill developed through discipline and hard work,” Jason said. “Anything can be kung fu if you're diligent about it.”

“Actually,” Rufus said, “that’s a good attitude.”

“See?” Gary said. “You’re not at Very Serious Academy now, Rufus. Hard work is easier to get through if you find a way to enjoy it.”

“Gary may have fun,” Farrah said, “but you probably won’t. Don’t get carried away, Gary.”

“When do I ever get carried away?” Gary asked.

“Remember Angelina?” Rufus asked.

“Are you ever going to let that go?” Gary said. “How was I meant to know she was evil?”

“The first time we met her she tried to sell us poison,” Farrah said. “We were in a church. And not one of the bad ones.”

“I think we should keep our attention on the task at hand,” Rufus said. “Tomorrow we'll do everything together, just for the first day. After that. we'll split up. You won't be able

to keep up with us when we're pushing ourselves. Gary will be in charge of your basic physical training, I'll be working on your combat skills, and Farrah will help you with mental training and meditation."

"We had to go out so you could get more clothes today," Gary said, "but normally we'll begin bright and early. For the first week, I'm just going to run you until you can't run anymore."

"I figured it would be something like that," Jason said. "I was thinking we could run over the bridge and into the Old City."

Gary looked over at Rufus, who shrugged.

"Works for me," Gary said. "Doesn't really matter where you run to, as long as you run."

All four of them ran from their lodgings to the bridge in the early light. They weren't the only ones out, with others also running on the Island's wide, well-paved streets.

"Adventurers?" Jason asked.

"Those are the good ones," Rufus said. "As with most things, the best results come through diligent effort."

"On the other hand," Farrah said, "If you use magic cores to advance, you get to sleep in."

"Don't tempt him into bad habits," Rufus scolded.

There was very little early-hours traffic on the Island, although some tradesfolk were making their way with carts and wagons. These, like expensive carriages Jason had seen, were propelled by magic rather than pulled by animals.

"Not allowed to have drawn vehicles on the island," Rufus explained. "Makes it more expensive for working people, but they make up for it in prices. On the Island you'll pay twice, maybe three times the price you would for the same thing in Old City."

At the bridge, they had to show their access permits. Jason had taken lodging at the same inn as the other three, which earned him a temporary residence permit for the Island. The guard checking their permits turned out to be a familiar face.

"Bertram, right?" Jason said.

"You can call me Bert," Bertram said. "You meet my brother at the Adventure Society?"

"He helped me with my adventurer registration."

Crossing the bridge, the streets of Old City were considerably busier. The four stood out, weaving through teamsters and merchants as they maintained a running pace.

By the time they reached their destination, Jason was exhausted. He leaned against a wall, dragging in heaving breaths. The others looked up at the sign over the door.

“Broadstreet Clinic,” Rufus read out loud. “Shouldn’t Broad Street be two words?”

“One word,” Jason said. “It’s the actual name of the street.”

“It’s called Broadstreet Street?” Gary asked.

“Broadstreet Esplanade,” Jason said. “How am I telling you this? You’ve all spent much more time in this city than me.”

“We don’t spend a lot of time in Old City,” Farrah said. “The Island is just nicer.”

“You know someone here?” Rufus asked, nodding at the clinic doors.

“Met him on my way into the city,” Jason said. Having recovered his breath a little, he stumbled in through the doors, the others following after. Inside was a waiting room crowded with people and a reception desk with a young woman sitting behind it. Jason leaned onto the desk, using it to keep himself upright.

“Sir, if you require emergency treatment...”

“I’m Jason Asano,” Jason panted out.

“Ah, right,” the woman said. “Are you alright?”

“I will be.”

The alchemist Jason had entered the city with, Jory, emerged from the back room. He was leading an elderly lady who was carrying a small bag.

“Now, only take the medicine right before bed,” Jory said.

“So I should take it with dinner?” the lady asked.

“No, you’ll pass out at the table. Right before bed. Seriously, right before you climb into bed.”

“So, when I sit down for my evening wine...”

“No, right before bed.”

“Would it be easier if I took it during the day?” she asked.

“I’m just going to take that, for a moment,” Jory said, retrieving the small bag from the lady.

Jory spotted the bedraggled Jason, giving him an odd look as he passed, leading the woman to a middle-aged man quietly waiting in one of the seats. Jason couldn’t hear them talk, although he did hear the man say something about dinner as Jory’s arm, held rigidly at his side, clenched into a fist. Soon after, the pair were on their way and Jory came over to Jason.

“You showed up, then,” Jory said.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “These are my friends, by the way. Gary, Farrah, Rufus. Meet Jory.”

“This is a medical clinic?” Gary asked. “Just alchemy?”

“So far,” Jory said. “I met Jason the other day and he offered to help out.”

Jory led Jason into a back room, then started bringing patients in, one after the other. For each one, Jason chanted out his spell.

“Feed me your sins.”

Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.
- Current rank: Iron 1 (19%)

- Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons, holy afflictions and unholy afflictions from a single ally or enemy. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability circumvents any resistance or immunity to cleanse effects. This ability cannot be used on self.

Jason used his feast of absolution power to remove their diseases, along with a few other toxins like alcohol, which registered to his ability as a poison.

“That’s a good cleansing ability,” Gary observed between patients. “Good way to practice it, too. It really gives you stamina back?”

“Mana too,” Jason said. “Can’t use it on myself, though.”

“I knew there had to be a pretty rough restriction, with a power that good,” Gary said.

“I’m surprised people aren’t a bit more wary, with an incantation like that,” Rufus said.

“These people don’t care what you chant,” Jory said. “If there’s free healing going, they’ll cheer you on as you praise the god of woe.”

With each patient, Jason’s mana and stamina were replenished, until he was back at full strength.

“You alright?” Gary asked. “You look a lot better, but a bit down.”

“It’s just...”

Jason sighed.

“My world doesn’t have magic. We don’t have a way to get rid of some of the diseases I’ve just casually taken away from people today. I cured a dozen people of cancer. Do you know what cancer does to a person?”

“Er, no,” Gary said.

“Exactly. I think about what I could do if I took this power home with me.”

“You’ll get there,” Gary said. “Maybe it’ll take a while, but you’ll get there.”

“You think?” Jason asked.

“When you have some time, go over to the temple district,” Gary said. “Maybe the goddess Knowledge will help you. She probably won’t straight-up tell you how to get home, but she might put you on the right path.”

“You think?”

“Probably,” Gary said. “She makes you work for it, but guiding people to knowledge is kind of her whole purpose for being.”

“Not today, though,” Rufus said. “Today is for training. You’re ready to get back to running, right?”

“If we’re done here,” Jason said.

“You are,” Jory said. “We’ve run out of sick people. There’ll be more tomorrow, once word starts getting around you’re doing this for free.”

“Not a problem,” Gary said. “I’ll be dragging him along every morning.”

Rufus and an exhausted Jason were standing on a training field on the Adventure Society campus. At least Rufus was standing, with Jason sprawled out on the grass. Farrah was nearby, leaning against a tree as she read a book. There were other people around, sparring or practising martial arts forms. Gary had wandered off and was sparring against a pair of locals.

“I don’t suppose there’s a bunch of sick people around?” Jason asked, too weary to stand.

“Afraid not,” Rufus said.

“Should I eat a spirit coin?” Jason asked.

“No,” Rufus said, “Replenishing yourself is good when you need to keep pushing, but you also need to let your body restore itself naturally. Your recovery attribute needs training, just as much as your speed, power and spirit.”

“I don’t feel like I’m ready to learn martial arts right now,” Jason said.

“You’re not,” Rufus said. “Actual technique you can pick up from a skill book.”

“I can?” Jason asked, raising his head. “Great. Let’s do that.”

“Not yet. At my family’s academy...”

“Drink,” Jason said.

“What?”

“I’ve come up with a drinking game,” Jason said. “Every time you say ‘my family’s academy,’ everyone has to take a drink.”

Farrah burst out laughing.

“Is this the ‘fun’ you were talking about?” Rufus asked, disapproval wrinkling his brow.

“Sorry,” Jason said as he got to his feet. He dropped to a half-crouch, hands on his knees. “I think I’m going to throw up.”

“Good,” Rufus said. “It means you’ve been pushing yourself hard enough. At my family’s academy...”

Rufus glared at Farrah, who was looking innocently off into the distance.

“...we have been refining methods of combat training for centuries, including training with skill books.”

“Isn’t the whole point of skill books to just use them and you’re good?” Jason asked.

“It isn’t that simple,” Rufus said. “For a practice that is knowledge-based, that is more-or-less true.”

“No, it isn’t,” Farrah chimed in. “Knowing isn’t the same as understanding. You’ve used a ritual magic skill book, but knowing practical applications isn’t the same as grasping the theory.”

“There’s a similar issue with physical skills,” Rufus said, “but even more exaggerated. The mind might know what to do, but the body still has to learn. First, I will teach you to be receptive to the skills you will learn. How to stand, how to move.”

“A solid house needs a solid foundation,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Rufus said happily. “I’m glad you understand. Learning to fight through skill books is ultimately faster than training from nothing because you save yourself years of repetition to ingrain the skills. There is a danger, however, of not fully comprehending the techniques. By preparing well before using a skill book, then consolidating well after, you avoid developing flaws in your skillset.”

“Plus, I imagine there’s quite a gap between learning technique and learning to fight,” Jason said.

“It’s good you realise that,” Rufus said. “It’s the first thing we have to beat out of skill book users at my family’s academy.”

Rufus pressed his lips thinly together as he heard a snort of choked off laughter. Flashing a glare at Farrah, he let out a weary sigh.

“Stand up straight,” he said to Jason. “We begin with footwork.”

Jason had joined Farrah in reclining against a tree. Gary was still sparring against all comers, currently going one against three. Rufus had sat down to meditate.

“You did well with Rufus’ training,” Farrah told Jason. “I was amazed you didn’t complain when he just had you taking funny steps the whole time.”

“I’m not sure how my translation ability will handle the term ‘kung-fu movies,’ but we have these stories in my world. About learning to fight. You always start with what seems weird and pointless, but ends up being the most important of fundamentals. There’s usually a life lesson in there somewhere, as well.”

“Rufus is going to hate teaching you. You are nothing like the students at his academy.”

“Is his school actually that big deal?” Jason asked.

“It really is,” Farrah said. “Kings and Queens have studied there. Some of the best adventurers in the world, too.”

“Did you and Gary train there?”

Farrah laughed.

“Definitely not. Our origins are a bit too humble for that. We all met on the job.”

“Right,” Jason said. “the zombies.”

“We worked together well, and I think Rufus’ grandfather quietly pushed things along. Rufus puts more pressure on himself than anyone else does, and I think his grandfather was hoping we would lighten him up.”

“How’s that going?” Jason asked.

“You should have seen Rufus when we first met,” she said. “He was like a string, constantly pulled taut. It was only so long until he was going to snap.”

She looked around, with a smile.

“Coming out here has been good for him,” she said. “Getting away from everything.”

“He blames himself for you getting captured, though,” Jason said.

“Mistakes are inevitable,” Farrah said, “but it was good they happened so far from home. He doesn’t have to feel like people are looking over his shoulder as he makes them.”

Farrah was wearing the loose, draped clothes in the local style, including a long, coat-robe that made her look a bit like a Jedi. She reached into it and pulled out an awakening stone that she tossed casually to Jason. It was like dark glass, shining with a faint radiance of moonlight. It was cool in his hand.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Omens] (unranked, epic)

- *An awakening stone containing the power of destiny. (consumable, awakening stone).*
- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.

- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
 - You have 9 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Omens]. Absorb Y/N?
-

“What’s this for?” Jason asked.

“We haven’t forgotten that you saved us back in that ritual chamber,” Farrah said.

“We’ve each gotten you a gift, something to help you start your adventuring life.”

“You saved me too. Even if I’d gotten away, I probably would have died in that desert.”

“Maybe, but saving us took courage and heroics. Saving you took a basic sense of direction. Use the stone; it wasn’t easy to find.”

“High rarity stones tend to be more specialised, right?” Jason said.

“That’s right.”

“This one is epic. What are you expecting me to get?”

“With luck, an aura ability, although maybe not. That was the rarest stone I could get my hands on that is known for aura powers. Every good adventurer should have a perception power and an aura ability, and the perception power you already have. Once you have an aura ability you can learn to control your aura.”

“And that’s important?”

“Very. Anyone who hits bronze rank and can’t manage their aura is a second rate adventurer, and you can’t do that without an aura ability.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” Jason said. The stone sank into his hand.

- You have awakened the sin essence ability [Hegemony]. You have awakened 4 of 5 sin essence abilities.
-

Chapter 40: Eyebeams and the Ethics of Adventuring

After finding out Jory had an unused courtyard behind his clinic, Rufus moved the daily training there. It was really just a walled-in dirt yard, but was sufficient for their needs. The day would begin with Gary, who would run with Jason to Jory's clinic. After replenishing his stamina by draining the sickness from Jory's patients, Jason was ready for more physical training.

The approach to physical training was startling in its familiarity. Farrah had left a set of barbells from her magical chest in Jory's yard, covered with a tarp. Gary would alternate between strength training with weights and more agility-based training, leading Jason through all kinds of flexibility exercises.

While instructing Jason, the normally relaxed Gary became a harsh task-master, brooking not even the slightest amount of slack. As he watched Jason's form during push-ups, sit-ups or lunges, he would lecture on the importance of training.

"When your speed attribute reaches bronze," Gary said, "you will be faster than you ever were before. If you don't know how to use that speed, that agility, those reflexes, then you will die to someone that does."

Sometimes Gary would take Jason out of the clinic's yard and into streets and alleys of Old City. He taught what Jason was startled to recognise as parkour. Climbing, roof running, acrobatics; in spite of his huge body, Gary was astoundingly proficient.

Jason voiced concern, given the generally busy state of Old City and his own lack of expertise. Gary insisted on a learn-by-doing approach, telling Jason what he did wrong as he did it. Jason voiced them again after he fell from a rooftop and had to pay for the crushed contents of a fruit cart.

"Sorry about that Herbert," Jason said as he handed over the coins.

"I look at it this way," the balding, paunchy fruit seller said. "I just sold a full cartload of fruit and it's barely daylight. And please; call me Bert."

"I'm not sure this is working out," Jason told Gary.

"You don't just start off good at difficult things," Gary said. "You have to begin at bad and work your way up."

"That I get," Jason said. "I'm just not sure about the methodology. Maybe I should try somewhere less crowded until I'm better?"

"The ability to move with speed and confidence, always aware of your surroundings is essential to an adventurer," Gary said. "Sometimes you have to run, sometimes you

have to chase. You rarely get to choose when or where. You must always be ready always aware. Whatever you're doing, wherever you're doing it."

Once Gary was done with him, Jason would replenish himself again with clinic patients. On the first day, Jason noticed Jory giving him a wary look.

"What?" Jason asked.

"I know you're helping people and all," Jory said, "but you're literally feeding on the misery of others."

"You want me to stop coming in?" Jason asked.

"Gods, no," Jory said.

"Alright then," Jason said. "I don't suppose you want to help me stitch a body together from dismembered corpses and animate it with lightning?"

"That would be disturbing," Jory said, "if you didn't so obviously know nothing about actual necromancy."

Word of Jason's free healing started getting around, so there were always people waiting each time he arrived. By the time he cleared out the patients, Rufus would arrive for more training.

The training with Rufus was the most tedious part of Jason's day. Footwork and balance, footwork and balance. Sometimes it was moving around with a forced gait, feeling awkward and inefficient. Other times it was balancing in strange stances on pegs Jory let Rufus hammer into the dirt yard. Whenever Jason's form was wrong, Rufus would sweep his legs out from under him, or kick him from what he was balancing on.

"You're breaking your body line. Anyone with even rudimentary skills would put you on the ground in a moment."

"It feels awkward to move like that," Jason said.

"That is because you don't walk, run, stand, lean or sit properly. When it stops feeling awkward, you will be ready to use a skill book."

"So, I could just lie and we move onto the skill book?" Jason asked.

Rufus' leg swept Jason's out from under him with such force that Jason went horizontal in the air, followed by a savage downward chop smashing him into the ground. Rufus stood over him as Jason curled up in the dirt, choking and coughing.

"There will be a test," Rufus said.

In the afternoons, Farrah would take over. This was the part of his training regimen Jason enjoyed the most. Gary and Rufus' instruction was classic montage material, while Farrah's training was something altogether different.

The spirit attribute, Jason learned, governed not just magic strength, but also perception. Farrah subjected Jason to an array of unusual, but often interesting and fun exercises. They would play memory games with cards, or she would make him taste-test things while blindfolded.

“I have no idea what you just put in my mouth,” Jason said, “but you need to tell me what it was. I want to try baking it in a pie.”

Some perception exercises trained practical observation and memory skills. One of the most common was watching people go past Jory’s clinic, with Jason memorising everything he could as fast as he could. He would then close his eyes as Farrah tested him. Other times she would have him read from the Magic Society’s monster records, collected on a magical tablet. She gave him only a short time to read, testing his comprehension afterwards.

The second aspect of Farrah’s training was meditation. Jason and his siblings had been spoon-fed meditation techniques by their mother, and while Jason had long-ago rejected them, it at least gave him a grounding to work with. Those techniques were quite different to what Farrah taught him, but there was enough commonality to pick things up quickly. She soon stopped guiding him, leaving him to take it up in his own time.

The final part of Farrah’s training was aura manipulation. He had gotten lucky, the stone Farrah gifted him awakening an aura ability.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy)
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are suffering from.

Jason was happy with the aura effect, which would make his abilities more reliable while protecting his allies from someone like him. He was also fascinated by it being both a holy and unholy ability at the same time. Sadly, he couldn’t think of a good way to passive-aggressively let Anisa hear about it. He knew she was in the city somewhere, but it was probably for the best they hadn’t run into each other.

As Farrah instructed Jason on the basics of aura use, he discovered that for training purposes, the specifics of his aura didn't matter. The fundamental aspects of auras were all the same, which she introduced him to in the clinic yard as they sat on woven mats.

"By getting your hands on an aura power," Farrah told him, "you've gained the capacity to manipulate your aura. Like any other skill, it takes practice to do it right. Controlling your aura is important for many reasons, starting with the fact that as you get stronger, your aura will become increasingly energetic. Eventually, enough to be dangerous to the people around you. If you reach gold rank and can't control your aura properly, you can hurt normal people just by going near them."

"So, if you hit gold rank and can't control your aura," Jason asked, "do you have to hide so you don't hurt people just by walking down the street?"

"There are magic items you can use to suppress your aura," Farrah said. "People in that situation are required to use them."

"Do you get a lot of people who get to gold without any aura control?" Jason asked.

"No," Farrah said. "Usually your chances of getting to gold start with a good foundation, which means aura powers and aura training. It does happen, though. I once saw the aftermath of a gold ranker who forgot to put on an aura suppressor before going to a market. People were passed out, bleeding out their ears."

"That's not good," Jason said.

"No it isn't," Farrah said. "Which is why the training is important. There are other reasons, too. Anyone with a perception power will eventually be able to see auras clearly, so if yours isn't under control, they'll read you like you're holding up signs. Not just your location, either. If you can't restrain your aura, they'll read your emotions, know when you lie."

"Can you see my emotions right now?" Jason asked.

"No," Farrah said, "but my perception power doesn't improve my aura sense until silver rank. Neither does yours, by the way. I looked it up."

"So, what does your perception power do?" Jason asked.

"It looks good," Farrah said as her eyes turned into glowing embers. "It also lets me see through smoke and mist."

"Nice," Jason said. "Wait, what about my clothes-changing ability. That hides me in smoke. Can you see through that?"

"That's an interesting question," Farrah said, not answering it. "You know, if I ever get to diamond rank I can shoot fire out of my eyes."

"That doesn't answer my... wait, you're going to get eyebeams? That's awesome."

"I know, right?" Farrah said. "There aren't a lot of abilities where we know what happens at diamond rank. Rufus thinks that if I actually get there it will be overshadowed by what my other abilities can do."

"Then Rufus sucks," Jason said. "He thinks eyebeams won't be useful? The intimidation factor alone would be amazing. Who's going to meet your eyes when you can shoot heat-beams out of them?"

"That's what I said," Farrah agreed. "More or less. I didn't say heat-beams."

"Eyebeams are sweet," Jason said.

"I think we may be getting off-topic," Farrah said.

"Alright," Jason said. "So what do I do?"

"Broadly speaking, you can control your aura in three ways, and I'll teach you them in order."

"Sounds good," Jason said."

"The first two uses are the easiest," Farrah said. "They are, broadly speaking, projecting your aura and restraining it. Which is exactly what it sounds like. Projecting is pushing your aura out to affect people, and restraining it is used drawing it in, whether to hide it, or just not be rude."

"Or make people's ears bleed," Jason said.

"Exactly," Farrah said.

"What about the third one?" Jason asked.

"That's using your aura to suppress the auras of other people. It's harder than the others, and you should leave it alone until you reach a certain level of proficiency with aura manipulation."

"Fair enough," Jason said.

"We start with projecting, because you're doing it already."

"I am?"

"You are. Everyone is, until they learn not to. It's what makes people with no aura control easy to read. I'll also be teaching you how to hide your emotions even as you're projecting your aura to affect people."

"Can monsters manipulate their aura?" Jason asked.

"Higher-rank monsters can," Farrah said. "At your level, even mine, really, the most you'll find is a few stealthy monsters that restrain their auras to hide better."

"I think stealth is going to be my thing, too," Jason said. "I'd best learn to restrain my aura properly."

“You’re meant to be learning everything properly,” she said. “I’ll teach you all the fundamentals. Expanding your aura, narrowing it down onto some people and not others. Once I’ve taught you, though, it’s your responsibility to keep practising. Diligence makes the difference between crudely tossing around your aura and deft manipulation.”

“Then I won’t make my neighbours bleed out their eyeballs?”

“You’re a long way from needing to worry about that,” Farrah said. “A long way. But eventually, yes. More immediately, the skill with which we control our auras is how adventurers make their first impressions on one another. If you can’t do it properly, people won’t take you seriously. Excellent aura manipulation marks you as an adventurer of training and distinction.”

“So, you’re saying if I don’t control my aura properly, I won’t get invited to the nice parties,” Jason said.

“Something like that,” Farrah said. “When the rich and powerful bring contracts to the Adventure Society, they add bonus rewards to entice the best adventurers. At your rank, these contracts are usually first-come, first-serve. Once you go higher, clients start requesting specific adventurers. That’s when your reputation matters, and if your aura control is sloppy, you won’t get a second glance.”

“Good to know,” Jason said.

“You’re not expected to have the skills at iron rank, of course,” Farrah said. “That’s the time you’re meant to be mastering the basics, after all. But if you don’t have a handle on it by the time you reach bronze, you’ll find a lot of doors closing in your face.”

“Rufus told me that just being an adventurer opens every door.”

“Yes, well Rufus may not be the best authority on what life is like for the average adventurer.”

“The ones not born with talent, looks, wealth, privilege and influence?” Jason asked.

“Exactly. He grew up in one of the most prestigious adventure-preparatory schools in the world, with kings and the children of heroes as friends. He’s a great guy, but he’s oblivious to what the rest of us go through, sometimes.”

“So, to him, adventuring is just a parade of people telling you how great you are and handing you sacks of cash,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “I’m not saying the rest of us can’t get there, but Rufus never even saw the low rungs of the ladder. The things we’re teaching you now, he was learning from the womb.”

“Then if I’m going to catch up, we should probably get back to the lesson,” Jason said.

"I like the ambition," Farrah said. "First, let me take you through the process. As I said, we start with projection to learn the basics, then move on to restraining. Once you can do both of these to an acceptable level, we introduce more sophistication. Things like focusing on one person, or hiding aspects of your aura while projecting. That culminates in projecting and restraining at the same time."

"How does that work?"

"Well, for example, just say you've hidden yourself, but you want to use your aura. So you blanket the area with your aura ability, but hide your presence within it."

"Sounds like a good intimidation tactic," Jason said. "They know you're around, stalking them, but can't find you."

"Or you could just blow one of them up," Farrah said. "I find that intimidates the survivors just fine."

"You're a very aggressive person," Jason said.

"There's nothing wrong with enjoying your work," Farrah said.

"There is when your work is killing people."

"I was talking about monsters," Farrah said, her tone lowering with disapproval. "They're just globs of magic."

"But they can still feel fear and pain," Jason said. "They still suffer."

"So do the people they kill once they've been around too long and gone berserk," Farrah said. Her relaxed mediation pose was becoming rigid.

"You haven't seen a truly berserk monster," she said. "It's like they can feel their inevitable demise and want nothing more than to take as many living things with them as they can. Putting them down before they reach that state is a mercy."

"But mercy shouldn't be fun," Jason said.

Farrah normally kept her feeling hidden behind a veil of amusement, but Jason's attitude had stripped it away.

"It's easy to moralise when you aren't even an adventurer yet," Farrah told him, pointing her finger. "You don't understand the price of what we do. I want to see how you feel a year from now. How many monsters will you have killed with those powers of yours? How many people? Your abilities are all about slow, horrible death."

She got up, glaring at Jason as she brushed down her pants with her hand.

"That's enough training for today," she said. "Put away the mats."

She marched out of the yard through the gate in the wall, leaving Jason sitting alone.

"That turned heavy, fast," he told himself. "Good job, idiot."

Chapter 41: Vulnerable and Exposed

Jason apologised to Farrah the next day when she arrived at Jory's clinic for his training.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't realise until afterwards that I was accusing you of being callous. I can sometimes let my mouth run off on me without thinking it through, or considering the other person's perspective."

"That's very clear," Farrah said. "You weren't completely wrong, I guess. Mostly, but not completely. You do have to be a little callous, to do what we do."

"Maybe," Jason said, "but I shouldn't be judging you when I don't know what you've been through. The one thing I do know about this world is that I'm ignorant about all of it. It's just that... in my world, I'm not a person of consequence. Being one of the faceless masses isn't terrific, but there is one luxury the powerful don't enjoy."

"Oh?"

"When you're just a face in the crowd, then you can hold an ideal without being required to live up to it. But here, my decisions can be life and death. My principles are being put to the test, and I'm forced to confront what it means when they bend, or even break. Like anyone, I liked to think of myself as someone who would stand tall under the pressure. Now I'm really under it, standing up is harder than I thought. I have my own values, from my own world. They're the only thing I was able to bring with me. And sometimes, most times, it feels like this world wants to eradicate them. But if I let it, then what do I become?"

"I can't answer that for you," Farrah said. "Being good is easy when the choices are easy, but adventurers don't sign up for easy choices. Being a good person means being good when the choices are hard, and there's a price to that."

"Rufus told me something very similar."

"He might have his blind spots," Farrah said, "but his family have never been shirkers. When the time comes to stand, they stand at the front."

"Again, I'm really sorry," Jason said. "You were right that I don't know the things you've seen."

"I was, wasn't I?" Farrah said. "But I sometimes I forget how adrift you must feel, in a world you don't know."

"Adrift is about right," Jason said. "All I have to anchor myself is who I am. It feels like if I lose that, then I might never find a way home."

“You realise that doesn’t actually make sense, right?” Farrah asked.

“I’ve been in this world for three weeks,” Jason said. “I’ve been getting by on throwing myself into everything like a maniac, because if I stop moving I’m going to completely lose it. I’m one bad day from cracking like an egg.”

“So you cling to whatever you can,” Farrah said. “I can understand that. But the world isn’t going to stop and wait for you to get ready for it.”

“I know,” Jason said.

“For now, concentrate on the training,” Farrah said. “Perhaps some routine will help you keep it together.”

Even before Farrah’s prompting, Jason instinctively understood that staying busy would keep him from flying off in every direction. He threw himself into training, from early mornings with Gary to afternoons with Farrah.

Every afternoon, when his training with the others was done, he would make his way to the balcony of his personal suite. Every day he would practice the one essence ability that he was most excited to master, yet had yet to successfully use. Each power he awakened brought with it the instinctive knowledge of how to employ it, but something about this one ability was holding him back.

Ability: [Path of Shadows] (Dark)

- Special ability (teleport)
- Cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Teleport using shadows as a portal. You must be able to see the destination shadow.

The ability to teleport fired his imagination in ways his other abilities couldn’t match, yet it eluded him, day after day. Every afternoon he would sit under the awning on his balcony, trying to disappear into its shadow. His instincts screamed that it should be easy and natural, but there was something alien about that instinct. That feeling came from his essences, which were part of him now, but a new part. They didn’t entirely feel like a true part of him yet, and every day the sun would end on another failure.

His personal suite wasn’t on the ocean side of the building, so his balcony instead overlooked one of the guild district’s wide boulevards. Sitting cross-legged in the shadow of the awning, he would try and sink into it, for hours on end. As time went on, he became

more frustrated. He could feel success was tantalisingly close, as if it brushed against his fingers, only to slip away.

As days rolled on, it felt like was moving in the wrong direction, further from success than when he first started practicing. He pulled out his starlight cloak, letting it wrap itself around him for comfort. That ability had come so easily.

“Essence abilities should come naturally,” Rufus told him, when Jason asked for advice. “This kind of problem you’re having usually appears when people are getting in their own way. In your world, abilities like this aren’t possible, are they?”

“Definitely not.”

“It may be there’s a part of you still thinks it’s impossible,” Rufus said. “Your new instincts, conflicting with your old ones. A teleport power affects you more than your other powers; it consumes you, in a way. Perhaps you feel that and instinctively draw back, like flinching from a hot stove.”

“So, what do I do?” Jason asked.

“Instead of focusing on yourself,” Rufus said, “focus on your surroundings. Farrah has been teaching you to project outside of yourself with your aura. Use that. Probe the shadows. Instead of trying to use them, just try and understand them. What they are, what you can do with them. Right now, you have this idea of what shadows are in your head, but a power telling you something different. Until you resolve that conflict, using that power will remain out of reach.”

“You picked the basics of aura manipulation up quickly,” Farrah told Jason. “You’re slow and somewhat crude with it, but that’s to be expected. The only way to smooth the rough edges is with experience. There’s no substitute for practice.”

Jason nodded. They were Jory’s yard, sitting face-to-face on meditation mats.

“Now you have a grasp of the fundamentals,” Farrah said, “it’s time to show you the last aspect of aura manipulation.”

“I didn’t think it would be this quick,” Jason said.

“The basics of aura manipulation are exactly that,” Farrah said. “Like all essence abilities, there’s an instinctive understanding. The real difference between the capable and the incompetent is keeping up the practice. Practice is the only real secret to mastery.”

“No shortcuts,” Jason said.

“No shortcuts,” Farrah agreed. “Now we moving on to the third aspect of aura manipulation. You can perform projection and restraint to acceptable levels, so next comes suppression. Like the other aspects, the description is right there in the name; you use

your aura to suppress the auras of others. It really only works against people weaker than you, but it can be useful when you need to show dominance.”

“Alright,” Jason said.

“This is a little trickier to pick up,” Farrah explained, “because there isn’t anyone weaker than you to practise on. Even normal people won’t be far below your aura strength until your spirit attribute gets stronger. At this point I’m really just showing you, rather than teaching you. It’s something you need to know about, if only to be prepared when others use it on you.”

“So, you’re going to suppress my aura?” Jason asked. “Let me get a feel for it?”

“Exactly,” Farrah said. “I can be a disconcerting experience, so it’s best you learn what you’re in for.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Hit me.”

“Here I go,” Farrah warned. She expanded her aura, clamping onto Jason’s and suppressing it, pushing it forcefully into his body. She looked at Jason, watching for reactions. He pulled out a small paper bag, popping a few glazed nuts into his mouth.

“Is that it?” he asked.

“Um, yes,” she said. “You are feeling that, right?”

“Yep,” he said, holding out the bag. “Want some? I don’t know what they put on these nuts, but it’s really good.”

With a confused expression, Farrah reached out and took a couple of nuts from the bag.

“They are good,” she agreed. She looked at Jason, still under the effect of her aura suppression.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

“Feels normal,” Jason said.

“Most people find having their aura suppressed to be supremely unnerving,” Farrah said. “It leaves them feeling vulnerable and exposed.”

“Yeah, I noticed that,” Jason.

“I thought you said it feels normal?”

“That is normal,” Jason said. “I arrived in this world with no idea where I was, how I got there or why. I was literally trapped in a maze, naked, fighting monsters and dodging cannibals. Compared to how vulnerable and exposed that left me, you think giving me the evil eye will put me off my knitting?”

He let out a low chuckle.

“Ever since that day,” he said, “the more I learn, the more I realise that everything I knew or believed was either woefully incomplete or flat-out wrong. I’ve almost died several times, and there’s no telling when something will come along to finish the job. I’ve been dragged into circumstances before which I am both impotent and insignificant. I have precious-little understanding the world around me, and even less control. I’ve been living with that for every waking moment since I arrived here. So you making me feel vulnerable is like throwing sand on the beach. I only noticed the change because I watched you do it.”

One of luxuries of the suite Farrah shared with Rufus and Gary was the balcony terrace overlooking the ocean. There was enough outdoor furniture to serve as a private dining area, so Farrah carried a large tray of food from the dumbwaiter out to the table where Rufus and Gary were already seated.

“What about Jason?” Gary asked.

“Still trying to get his shadow teleport to work,” Farrah explained as she sat down.

“I’ve seen this kind of problem before,” Rufus said. “He’ll work past it, sooner or later.”

“I think it’s possible we may have overlooked some of what he’s going through,” Farrah said.

“Really?” Gary asked. “It seems like he’s doing fine.”

“He does throw himself into things like he’s looking for a distraction,” Rufus said. “You were going to suppress his aura today, right? Did he react badly?”

“He didn’t react at all,” Farrah said. “Working for the Magic Society, I’ve taught a lot of people to use their auras, but I’ve never seen that before.”

“You think there’s something behind it?” Rufus asked.

“He said it didn’t affect him because that’s how he feels all the time,” Farrah said. “He’s isolated and alone to a degree that I’m not sure I can get my head around.”

“He has us,” Gary said.

“But from his perspective,” Farrah said, “we’re another part of the strangeness. We can propel his boat, but we can’t be his anchor.”

“Have we been pushing him too hard?” Gary asked.

“No,” Rufus said. “If anything, I suspect the structure we’ve given him is what’s propped him up for this long.”

“Then what do we do?” Farrah asked.

“What we have been doing,” Rufus said. “The stronger he becomes, the more in control he will feel. You both know what I’m talking about; that feeling of power as your

abilities grow. Normally you have to stop people from running off like they're invincible, but hopefully it makes Jason feel more secure."

"Maybe we should start showing him around a bit," Gary suggested. "Let him see this world isn't all cultists and monsters. Remember the villages we passed through? He seemed a lot more relaxed around normal people, so maybe a little dose of ordinary is exactly what he needs."

"Are you saying we aren't normal?" Farrah asked.

"I'm normal," Gary said. "You two can be kind of intense."

"It's a good idea," Rufus said. "I'll be administering the field testing for next month's Adventure Society intake. I'll need to start preparing in a few days, and then I'll be gone for a week. Relax the training while I'm gone."

"Done," Gary said.

"Not too much," Rufus said, "but give him time to explore the city. This island is surprisingly impressive for a provincial city."

"If you have the money," Farrah said.

"Which he does," Rufus said.

"You did give him a cut from the blood cult job, right?" Gary asked. "If it weren't for him we would have failed and died."

"I did," Rufus said. "The church of purity made some noise about the completion bonus, after how things went with Anisa. The contract was through the Adventure Society, though, and the job did get done. They paid up."

"Wait," Gary said. "Did I get a cut? I don't remember getting the money for that."

"Because I gave it to Farrah," Rufus said. "You know; the person who stores all your money?"

"Oh, yeah."

Because they were on the balcony, they were able to hear a sudden commotion from outside the other side of the building. There was a yell of surprised panic, followed by a crashing sound and the shouts of several people.

Unable to see the source of the commotion, the three left their own suite and entered Jason's unlocked room across the hall. The balcony he should have been practicing on was empty. Going to the edge and looking down, they saw the outside dining area of the eatery across the street. The evening patrons had been disturbed by Jason landing heavily on a table in their midst, collapsing it to the ground. All the customers had stood up, while Jason still sprawled out in the remains of someone's supper.

He groaned, moving feebly to pluck a healing potion out of the air, tipping it into his mouth where he lay. Regaining strength as the potion took effect, he pushed himself off the table, staggering as he found his feet. He looked at the people standing around him.

“Sorry about your dinner,” he said, looking down at the food smeared on his clothes. “Smells good.”

“Jason?” Rufus called down.

Jason looked up at Rufus and gave a sore, but cheerful thumbs up.

“I got the ability to work!”

Moments earlier, sitting on the roof, Jason had been pushing his senses out and into the shadow of the awning. In defiance of what little he knew of physics, he had come to sense that shadows were more than just an absence, but something that existed in their own right. He could feel something there as he reached out with his aura. There was a depth to the shadow, an ephemeral, but very real substance. He could almost rub it between his fingers.

He felt a call from the shadow, to something that existed inside him. The power he had tried so hard to use, yet never could. He quieted his excited mind, resisting the urge to push. He relaxed, letting the substance of the shadow and the power inside him intermingle. Gently they connected, becoming one. It felt natural, and right. Then something changed.

As if dragged by a giant vacuum cleaner, Jason felt himself get sucked through shadow. As he did, he had the flashing realisation that in all the time he'd been working on the ability, he's never given much thought to a destination. He emerged from the shadow of the building across the street, reason giving way to panic as he started to fall.

Chapter 42: This is the Pits

As Farrah and Gary walked along, Jason would step into a shadow on one side of the street and reappear on the other.

“He seems to like that ability quite a lot,” Farrah said.

“I remember someone who was quite excitable when she got her fire jump power,” Gary said.

“Shut up.”

“He can use it in quick succession,” Gary observed. “Seems cheap on mana, too; he’s been at it for a while.”

“The benefit of being restricted to shadows,” Farrah said. “Regular teleport may use more mana and be available less often, but I still think I’d prefer it. If you get caught without any handy shadows, Jason’s ability is useless.”

“I don’t know,” Gary said. “Normal teleport you have to pick your moment so it isn’t wasted. This shadow-jumping business you could use enough to make it a centrepiece of your combat style.”

“Too reliant on the environment,” Farrah said. “How often do you get to pick your battles as you like?”

Jason emerged from a nearby shadow and joined them, wincing with a low-mana headache.

“It’s still taking me too long to activate the ability,” he said.

“Are you sure that’s not just how long it takes?” Gary asked.

“It should be almost instantaneous,” Jason. “I can feel it.”

“Keep practicing,” Farrah said. “You’ll get there.”

“How far can you go?” Gary asked.

“As far as I can see, I think,” Jason said. “As long as I can spot the shadow and it’s big enough, I can jump through it. I tried going through a small one, but it didn’t work.”

A wagon rumbled past, filled with manure. Farrah turned up her nose at the stench.

“Remind me why we aren’t shopping on the Island?” she asked. “I became an adventurer to get away from the smell of dung.”

“The markets on the Island are just trying to rip off rich people,” Jason said. “Besides, I promised Jory I would swing by the clinic.”

In the grimy heart of Old City's warehouse district was a huge stone building called the Fortress. Older even than the city walls, it had been built to last. In the earliest days of the city it had been where Greenstone's residents would take shelter during a monster surge, but those days were long past. Now it served as Greenstone's largest den of iniquity; its rooms and halls contained all manner of illicit behaviour, delights and horrors both.

The city authorities paid little attention to the goings on in Old City so long as the business interests of the city elite remained secure. That made Old City's three biggest crime lords its de facto rulers, who made sure that the Island elites had no reason to look any closer. So long as the money kept flowing, the Big Three were free to divide Old City between them.

The Fortress was neutral ground. It was the one place where the Big Three shared operation, dividing both responsibility and profit. It was also the best place in Old City to glimpse the Island elites. Whether to secure their interests or indulge their appetites, they would receive only the best of treatment in the Fortress.

Of the many itches one could have scratched in the Fortress, the fighting pits offered the greatest spectacle. Some were literal pits, others cages. At night, even adventurers could be found battling it out inside. Some sought challenge, others to pay off debts for their own costly indulgences. Some decided a life fighting monsters wasn't for them and sought to earn a spot working for the Big Three. The top enforcers of the crime lords were paid in not just coin, but also monster cores.

Among the seating arrangements at the fighting pits were a number of enclosed viewing rooms with glass fronts. These were more recent additions to the centuries-old building. Some were available to anyone with the coin, while four were permanently reserved. The Big Three each possessed one of the boxes, where they conducted much of their business. The fourth belonged to the Fortress' most frequent and prestigious patron.

Lucian Lamprey was an elf whose muscular frame was uncommon for his people. Expensive clothes aside, he would not look out of place in the fighting pits himself. He was not a member of the local elf families, instead having been banished to Greenstone for previous improprieties. He was director of Greenstone's branch of the Magic Society, a vaunted position within the city, but one for which Lucian held no respect. They could make him king of the isolated desert city and he would still yearn for what he viewed as true civilisation.

The Fortress was Lucian's consolation; a paradise to openly indulge the vices for which he was sent to Greenstone in the first place. His viewing box was more of an office

to him than the one at the Magic Society campus. He even managed to get work done, as the lower-card fights rarely drew his attention.

While the pits might operate all hours, only the essence users of the night fights got Lucian's blood boiling. Magic displayed any active fights on the giant window of his viewing box, but in the early afternoon he gave only them occasional glance. This time of day had single-essence fighters, only escalating to full-blown, iron-rank fights after sundown. Lucian would have preferred to see bronze-rankers as well, but they were too valuable to risk in the pits under any but the rarest of circumstances.

Only a precious few bronze-rankers lowered themselves to work for the Big Three, and were their most valuable assets. If they ever appeared in the pits, it was to settle grudges between the Big Three without spilling blood on the streets. Gang war meant drawing the attention of the Island authorities, which all of the Big Three knew to avoid.

Lucian's ability to use the Fortress as his office was largely due to his deputy director. Pochard Finn maintained things at the city campus while frequently travelling to the Fortress himself. He was also an elf, in his case, a local. Both elves enjoyed the relationship, as Lucian had his workload lightened, while Pochard was the de facto director of Greenstone's Magic Society. They had quickly moved from colleagues to friends as Pochard also came to enjoy the pleasures of the Fortress.

"Standish was looking for you," Pochard said, pouring himself a glass of wine. He gestured with the bottle invitingly, pouring a second glass at a nod from Lucian.

"Can't you deal with it?" Lucian asked. "He's always up in arms about something."

"He insisted on seeing you," Pochard said. "Something about spirit coins, I think."

"Tell him if he wants to see me, he can come here," Lucian said.

"I did," Pochard said, drawing a snort of laughter from Lucian.

"I would love to see that gangly moppet in the Fortress," Lucian said, then stared out the of the window-wall. "And now I have."

"You're kidding," Pochard said, following Lucian's gaze.

"He actually came," Lucian laughed. "Good for him."

Pochard groaned.

"I hope he doesn't make it a regular occurrence."

Lucian chuckled at Pochard's reaction as they watched the long-limbed Clive Standish navigate the fighting pit's viewing stands. It wasn't crowded in the early afternoon, yet the awkward man in the wildly out-of-place scholar's robe seemed to get in the way of every person he passed. Finally he reached the viewing room, opulent in its

wooden construction. Lucian and Pochard looked at each other as they heard a polite knock.

“Shove off!” Pochard yelled, prompting a belly-laugh from Lucian.

“Uh, sir?” a voice came through the door.

“Don’t just stand out there, Standish!” Lucian bellowed, and the door was pulled nervously open. Clive Standish was rather tall, but his narrow frame and hunched posture made him seem lanky and awkward. He wore voluminous scholarly robes, possibly to make him seem less narrow, but they dangling off him like they’d been hung out to dry. In the fighting pits of the Fortress, he looked as out of place as any man Lucian had seen. This was good for Clive, as it left Lucian in a better mood than Clive normally found him.

“Pochard tells me you have some kind of spirit coin problem,” Lucian said.

“Not exactly a problem, sir,” Clive said. “More like a curiosity that I believe warrants further inquiry.”

Clive rummaged through his robes to produce an iron-rank spirit coin.

“This coin, and several other like it have been found in circulation over the last couple of weeks. You’ll note the unusual embossing of a man holding up his thumb,” Clive said. Pochard leaned over to peer at the coin in Lucian’s hand.

“On the back,” Clive continued, “there is an inscription. Thus far, we have failed to identify the language.”

“Don’t you have a translation ability?” Pochard said.

“I do,” Clive said, “although that only tells us what it says, not the language in which it says it.”

“So?” Lucian asked, impatiently. “What does it say?”

“It reads, ‘product of Jason,’ and ‘good day, friend.’ The second part is contextualised as a greeting.”

“It’s certainly odd,” Lucian said. “It’s a real coin?”

“I’ve had every coin we’ve found tested, sir,” Clive said. “They’re all real.”

“You checked it against the registry?”

Clive nodded.

“It definitely didn’t come from a registered spirit coin farm,” Clive said.

“You think someone’s set up an unregistered farm?” Pochard asked.

“It’s possible,” Clive said. “Certainly worth looking into. But we haven’t seen a lot of these coins, and most shady coin farms try to imitate a registered imprint. Given the idiosyncratic nature of these coins, and the fact that we’ve only found a few, I think there is an alternative explanation.”

“Oh?” Lucian asked.

“You are, of course aware, that some essence users develop an ability to loot monsters without the use of the usual harvesting rituals,” Clive said. “Usually the prosperity essence is responsible, often in conjunction with a human awakening one of their racial gifts. Such abilities are known to produce spirit coins.”

“What’s the legality of that?” Pochard asked.

“If it’s an ability, then it’s perfectly legal,” Clive said. “Fascinating, but insignificant on an economic scale. That’s just conjecture, however. If it does turn out to be an unregistered spirit coin farm, then it obviously needs to be found and shut down.”

“Alright, Clive,” Lucian said. “You came all the way here, dressed like that, so I’ll go along with it.”

“This is how I always dress,” Clive said.

“Oh, I know,” Lucian said. “Pochard, put up a contract with the Adventure Society to look into an off-the-books farm. Try and get them to put it up as a three-star contract, so we get someone who’ll actually do the work. Adventurers get lazy with open-ended contracts.”

“If it involves the spirit coin farms, the Adventure Society will make it three-star,” Pochard said.

“Good. As for you, Clive, I’ll authorise you to use Magic Society resources to pursue your other idea. If these coins are just some guy with an ability, find him, so we can put the issue to bed.”

“Thank you, sir,” Clive said.

“You want some wine, Clive?” Lucian asked.

“Ah, no, sir. Thank you. I’d best get back.”

“You’d better shove off, then,” Lucian said. “Anyone staying here has to drink.”

Chapter 43: Nightingale

“This is nice,” Jason said.

“Certainly better than meditating in a dirty back-lot,” Farrah said.

The Island was divided in various districts, all connected by the subterranean, submarine transit line. The locals called it the loop line, or the loop, but Jason thought it deserved something more impressive. His thinking had gone as far as naming it the sub-sub way when he realised the loop wasn't so bad a moniker.

Farrah and Jason had taken the loop to the park district, which as the name suggested, was dominated by parkland. It was like someone had curated the delta, with paths and gardens winding around ponds and streams. Palm trees and vibrant tropical flowers punctuated open spaces of lush grass, while pathways vanished into shady areas of dense bushes.

Almost everywhere in the park district was open to anyone on the Island. The only private space was the walled-off residence of the city's ruler, the Duke of Greenstone. Jason and Farrah picked out a pleasant spot for their afternoon training. Farrah had suggested a more tranquil environment for meditation than Jory's back yard.

“I still need to go in to the clinic, though,” Jason said. “I promised I'd come in again this afternoon.”

“You realise that once you're an adventurer you won't have as much time for that,” Farrah said.

“I know,” Jason acknowledged, “but I'd like to make time, where I can. The idea is to help people, right? Killing some monster can do that, but so can turning a room full of sick people into a room full of healthy ones.”

“You know,” Farrah said, “Maybe there are some things worth holding onto in those values of yours.”

“Good to hear,” Jason said. “Does this mean you're going to stop trying to make me kill people?”

“We're not trying to make you kill people,” Farrah said. “We just want to prepare you for the inevitable. You make it sound like we're drugging random strangers, stashing them in a hidden location, handing you a large axe and locking you up with them, promising not to let you out until one of you is dead.”

“That was weirdly specific and detailed.”

“Shut up and meditate.”

Underneath the Old City fight pits in the ancient Fortress were a series of hallways and chambers. Fighters and other interested parties used them to prepare for upcoming fights. This included a large number of enforcers to make sure the enthusiasm of would-be participants didn't suddenly wane before their match.

One such chamber contained two women, one of whom was getting ready to fight. Instead of loose, cool clothes, she wore a form-fitting outfit that mixed protective treated leather with tough, but flexible fabric. She had one foot up on a stone bench as she wrapped a cloth around her knuckles.

Her skin was chocolate, her hair shining silver. Her sharp eyes reflected the colour of her hair exactly, the matching metallics a giveaway trait of the celestine race. Normally shoulder length, her shimmering hair was tied back in a simple and practical ponytail.

"Do you want me to knot it?" the other woman asked, glancing at the hair.

The fighter shook her head, saying nothing. Her gaze was locked on the wall in front of her as she put herself in the headspace to fight. Her companion looked on with disapproval. She was a human, with short, scraggly hair and cute features. Her mouth pouted as she glanced at the door.

"I can't believe she's making you do this," she said.

"Lindy," the fighter said, her voice firm. "We knew we wouldn't like it going in. But without her protection, we'd be in a worse situation than this."

"But putting you back in the pits?" Belinda complained. "Soph, you already earned your way out of this place."

"Under Silva's father," Sophie said. "Now that he's gone, the most important thing is staying out of Silva's hands. This is the price we pay for that."

"Except that you're doing all the paying," Belinda said.

"Ventress doesn't care about the fighting," Sophie said. "She just cares about provoking Silva by showing me off. Once that's done, she has no reason to keep us here."

"Will Silva even know?" Belinda asked. "You still only have the one essence. Does anyone pay attention to these low-card fights?"

"He'll know," Sophie said. "Sooner, rather than later."

The door to the chamber was pushed open by a huge leonid. Coming in behind him was a woman with dark, cascading hair and a walk so sultry she was almost swerving. Clarissa Ventress only looked a few years older than the two women she was walking in on, but command clung to her as tightly as her satin dress.

“Are we just about ready, ladies?” Ventress asked. Belinda opened her mouth to respond, but was silenced by a gesture from Sophie.

“Good,” Ventress said. “I’ve arranged a match up that Silva should hear all about. Put on a good show and we might only need the one.”

“What’s the match up?” Sophie asked.

Ventress had the smile of a snake who just found a nest full of eggs.

“Fire Fist,” she said.

“Are you kidding?” Belinda burst out.

“It’s fine,” Sophie said, voice flat and calm.

“Do you know what he does to people?” Belinda asked, wheeling on her friend.

“I know,” Sophie said.

“He does have a reputation,” Ventress said. “That works in our favour. And this is fun; it turns out he always wanted to fight you. You got out of the pits right when he was getting started, and apparently he views it as a missed opportunity. Seeing how enthusiastic he was, I just had to go and arrange a cage match.”

Sophie put a hand on Belinda’s shoulder to stop her from erupting again.

“You want a show?” Sophie asked. “You’ll get one.”

Ventress gave another serpentine smile.

“Precisely what I wanted to hear. Belinda, dear, why don’t you come and watch from my viewing box?”

“Go with her,” Sophie said. “I need to get my head in the right space.”

“Soph…”

“I’ll be fine,” Sophie said with grim determination. “You just watch.”

Lucian arrived at his viewing room with a contented sigh. Trailing behind him was Cassowary Finn, the son of Lucian’s deputy, Pochard. Cassowary spent much of his days working as a go-between for the two men, a key role in allowing Lucian to work out of the Fortress. Some tasks could only be done in person, however, which forced Lucian from his preferred habitat.

“I’m glad that’s over with,” Lucian said. “Maybe there’ll be a good fight on.”

“I did see them bringing out the cage,” Cassowary said. Always lurking near his father and Lucian, Cassowary was picking up on their taste for vicarious violence.

“Might be something interesting,” Lucian said. “Put it up on the window.”

Each private viewing room was fronted with a solid sheet of glass, enchanted to project images from the various fighting pits. It could show several at once, or focus on

one, all controlled by touching runes set into the wall. Cassowary did so, bringing up the image of Fortress personnel bolting together the walls of a large metal cage.

“Any idea what this is about?” Lucian asked. One of Cassowary’s tasks was to keep abreast of fights that might interest Lucian.

“If they’re bringing out the cage at this time of day,” Lucian said, “It’s probably the Fire Fist.”

“Fire Fist?”

Lucian rarely paid attention to the early fights, relying on Cassowary to dig out any worthwhile nuggets.

“I think you’ll like him,” Cassowary said. “He usually fights in escape the cage matches, which don’t end until one fighter leaves the cage. Fire Fist likes to toy with his opponents before he leaves.”

“Sounds fun,” Lucian said. “Why haven’t I heard of him before?”

“He doesn’t appear very often,” Cassowary said. “As you might imagine, they have trouble finding people willing to go up against him. They tried forcing people for a while, but that didn’t make for interesting fights.”

“So, this should be a good one,” Lucian said.

The fighting pits were, as the name suggested, a series of shallow pits in a wide area surrounded by tiered seating. Because the pits were shallow for people to see in, there would occasionally lead to casualties in the audience. It could be from an essence ability gone astray, or the crowd pleasing spectacle of a competitor trying to escape through the audience. The organisers had taken no steps to redress the issues in the many years the pits had been operating.

Lucian looked on as an announcer walked into view with a voice-projecting stone in hand. The viewing window picked up sound as well as vision, and those in the viewing rooms could hear the fights better than audience members at the edge of the pit.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer proclaimed. “Today we have a very special match. As you may have very well surmised from the cage behind me, we will have the pleasure of welcoming a favourite back to the arena. Please join me in welcoming the savage, all-consuming Fire Fist!”

There were stairwells leading down to the chambers below, placed to allow fighters to emerge and parade before the audience on the way to their chosen fighting stage. Fire Fist was tall and lithe, with red and yellow streaks of hair that was either dyed or the result of some essence power. He wore only a pair of red silk pants with a yellow flame motif, his

muscled chest bare. His hands, held leisurely at his side, were wreathed in flames that danced up his arms as he strutted through the open door of the cage.

“Fire Fist, ladies and gentlemen!”

Fire Fist held up an arm to acknowledge the crowd, which was large for the time of day. Word of the match-up had clearly gotten around. The announcer waited for the audience to quiet down before his next introduction.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer said. “For those true aficionados among you, there is a yet greater treat in store. Years ago, this arena was graced with the sweet flights of a beautiful bird. Sadly, she winged away from us, but today, ladies and gentlemen, she had returned. I give you the grace and beauty of... THE NIGHTINGALE!”

A dark beauty with silver hair marched up and out of the stairwell, without so much as a glance at the crowd. She stopped by the announcer, looking up and over the crowd to glare at one of the viewing rooms before heading into the cage.

In his own viewing room, Lucian stood up so fast he knocked over his chair. He walked around his desk and down to the window where he stroked his fingers over her face.

“Who is she?” he asked.

“I’m not sure, Mr. Lamprey. “I’ll find out.”

“See that you do.”

Chapter 44: Complimentary Ointment

“I always wanted to fight you,” Fire Fist said to Sophie as they faced one another in the cage. “I was just starting out when you left. You were a legend.”

Sophie knew what he was doing. The audience like some banter before a match. Not the crowds who couldn't really hear, but the big names in the viewing rooms would. They were the ones he wanted to impress.

“They don't schedule legends to fight just after lunch,” she said. “You're overestimating our value to them.”

“I'm going to earn more essences,” Fire Fist said. “I'm not a debt-slave like you were.”

“I'm no-one's slave,” Sophie said.

“No?” Fire Fist asked. “Then why are you back here? Two years and no more essences than when you left.”

“Because the guy looking to enslave me doesn't want me for fighting.”

“I can understand that,” Fire Fist, eyes roaming over Sophie's body. “We have some time together, once I put you on the ground. Until I leave the cage, we can have all the fun we want.”

“I was just going to beat you,” Sophie said. “For that, I'm going to hurt you.”

“Think you have the skills, little girl?”

“I've seen you fight,” Sophie said. “It won't take that much skill.”

Fire Fist lunged forward, leading with the burnings fists from which he took his name. Sophie swayed around his straight punch and grabbed him by the wrist. The flames on his arm seared into her hand but she ignored the pain, yanking his arm and forcing his balance onto his forward leg. He yelled out in pain as her palm smashed into his elbow, trying to bend his arm the wrong way. The yell became a scream as her boot tried the same on the side of his knee. He collapsed to the ground, where a swinging leg smashed him in the face. Disoriented, he rolled with the blow, trying to scramble to his feet. Halfway up he found a hand on either side of his head, pulling it down into a rising knee.

Sophie dragged Fire Fist to the side of the cage by the hair.

“You realise they call you Fire Fist because that's all you have going for you, right?” she said. “You're a mediocre fighter with a gimmick that makes people flinch. I don't know what kind of ambitions you have, but I wouldn't bother. This is the highest stage you'll have any real accomplishment, and your reputation is about to take a big hit.”

The cage had both vertical and horizontal bars, like a mesh, with gaps barely large enough to fit a hand or part of a foot. That was to slow down climbing, so a downed opponent had time to recover and prevent an escape. Sophie hoisted Fire Fist up, forcing his hands through a pair of the small gaps before dropping him again. He was left dangling by the wrists as they caught on the bars. She raised an elbow up and smashed it down on one of his forearms, producing a loud crack and horrifying shriek of pain. She did the same to the other arm, then left him hanging as she climbed out of the cage.

The Adventure Society campus had a marshalling yard where larger groups could assemble. Rufus arrived to find a large group waiting for him. He had two employees of the Adventure Society with him; the paunchy functionary, Albert, and an official who, like Rufus, was bronze rank. Originally Rufus would be administering the field test alone, but the Society had assigned another person to assist. Seeing the almost twenty participants, he now understood why.

“Are the groups normally this large?” Rufus asked Albert.

“No, sir, they are not,” Bert said, handing over a clipboard. Good luck sir, although I’m sure you won’t need it.”

“Why so many?” Rufus asked the Adventure Society official. He was a man in his late twenties, of rather distinctive appearance. He wore practical wear for the delta, tough but loose and breathable fabric. He had a bronze brooch in the shape of the Adventure Society emblem, which was standard for upper-tier officials. His practical clothes were topped with an impractical hat, broad-brimmed with an ostentatiously colourful feather. Overshadowing even that, however, was a moustache unlike anything Rufus had ever seen. Glistening with wax, it twirled its way out past the sides of the man’s head.

The official’s name was name was Vincent Trenslow. His appearance gave Rufus pause, but his manner in their short acquaintance had been nothing but professional.

“It seems there was some manner of grand administrative error,” Vincent explained unhappily. “More than half of these people already passed the field assessment and were admitted to the Society, but the records of their assessment were lost. Despite multiple copies of such records having been made and kept separately. It was decided that they should undertake the field assessment again.”

“In my experience, the Adventure Society is meticulous with their records,” Rufus said. “Even if they weren’t, what kind of solution is this?”

“The kind of solution you get when the error in question disproportionately affects members of the aristocracy,” Vincent said. “The kind aristocracy looking to make a connection with an important adventurer visiting from distant lands.”

“I see,” Rufus said darkly.

“The Director asked me personally to extend her apologies,” Vincent said. “She is new to the role and has a long way to go when it comes to purging outside influence. She made rather a point of inviting you to assess these applicants with, and I quote, ‘punishing rigour,’”

Rufus grinned.

“And what are your thoughts on this, Mr. Trenslow?”

“I may have a few suggestions that would interest you.”

“Thank you so much,” the woman said, still shaking Jason’s hand.

“No worries,” Jason said, extricating his digits from the woman’s grip.

“Make sure you drink a lot of water when you go home,” Jory told her. “Eating some fruit would be good as well.

“Oh, I’ll be drinking, alright,” she said as she left the clinic.

“That’s not the kind of drinking I meant,” Jory called out. “And she’s gone.”

He sighed.

“Well, that’s the last one. How about you and I have a drink?”

“Sure,” Jason said.

“You have a good night, Janice,” Jory said to his teenage receptionist.

“See you tomorrow, Mr. Tillman. Mr. Asano.

“Goodnight, Janice.”

They wandered into Jory’s office, sitting down on either side of Jory’s desk. He pulled out two bottles, and two glasses. He poured a bright green liquid into a glass and pushed across the desk to Jason.

“This stuff is a bit more potent,” he said, “so it should get past that poison resistance of yours. It’s also horrifyingly sweet, the way you like it.”

“Thanks.”

He took a sip, nodding appreciatively, at the taste.

-
- Special attack [Plime Fruit Liqueur] has inflicted [Alcohol] on you.
 - You have resisted [Alcohol].
 - [Alcohol] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
-

Jason sighed.

“No?” Jory asked.

“No,” Jason said. “Tastes good, though.”

“That’s not what booze is for,” Jory said, pouring himself something amber from the second bottle.

“You look kind of tired,” Jory said “I thought feeding on the sick freshened you up. Which is still creepy, by the way.”

“I’m not tired,” Jason said. “Or creepy. Weary, maybe. That woman had cancer, and I just took it away like it was never there.”

“Isn’t that a good thing?” Jory asked.

“Of course it is,” Jason said. “But back where I come from we don’t have essences. Or alchemy, for that matter, although we have something similar, I guess. We just call it pharmacology.”

“You don’t talk about where you’re from, much,” Jory said. “I remember you said there wasn’t a lot of magic. No monsters, right?”

“Never even heard of a monster surge until I came here,” Jason said.

“That’d be nice,” Jory said. “Like most things, the poor take the brunt of a monster surge. What happens when people get sick in your homeland?”

“We have medicine,” Jason said, “but without magic it has limits. Recovery can take a long time, and a lot of the options are bad. Take cancer, for example. Now I can just suck it out of people, but back home it isn’t that easy. They slice people open, try and cut it out of them. Poison them and hope the cancer dies before they do.”

“That sounds barbaric.”

“We don’t have better options,” Jason said. “I think about what I could do with the power I have now. All the people I could help.”

“Are you going back?” Jory asked.

“If I can,” Jason said. “Home is very far away, and I have no idea how to get there.”

“How did you get here?” Jory asked. “You said something about a magical accident?”

“A summoning spell went awry,” Jason said. “It reached into my magically desolate home and plucked me right out of it. That’s how I met Rufus, Gary and Farrah. I got dumped right into the middle of their mess.”

“Have you tried the goddess of knowledge?” Jory asked. “If anyone knows the way home, she does. There’s no guarantee she’ll tell you, but anyone can go to her temple and ask questions.”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I’m not really the religious type.”

“Even if there might be a way home?” Jory asked. “What will it cost you to try?”

“That’s the sort of question someone asks right before you they bury you in debt.”

Jory laughed.

“That’s fair,” he said. “But give it some thought.”

“I will,” Jason said. “Thanks.”

“I can’t believe you hid it from me,” Belinda said.

“It’s not a big deal,” Sophie said. “I had gloves on.”

“Heat goes through gloves. Your hand is the wrong colour.”

“It does feel a bit weird.”

They went through the door of the Broadstreet Clinic to find the receptionist packing up to go.

“Didn’t this place used to be full of people?” Belinda said. “I remember coming in here of an evening and was still packed to the door.”

Janice looked up at the pair.

“Since Mr. Asano started coming we get through everyone quicker,” she explained, “even with the all extra people.”

“Why are there extra people? Belinda asked.

“We just need some healing unguent,” Sophie said.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Janice said. “I’ll go see if Mr. Tillman is available.”

After a few moments they heard a voice loud with drink.

“Janice, why are you still here?”

“I wanted to finish up the records before I went home,” they heard Janice reply as she led Jory out from the back. His unsteady gait and expression of general bewilderment said he’d was well on his way through a bottle.

“I should pay you more,” Jory told his receptionist.

“You just started paying me more, Mr. Tillman.”

“Yeah? Good on me, then.”

He looked up at the two women.

“Ladies!” Jory greeted. “It’s been a while. Hello, Lindy. What brings you to my door?”

“Sophie’s fighting again,” Belinda said.

“Well, that’s no good,” Jory said.

“It is what it is,” Sophie said.

“Then I suppose I’ll be seeing more of you,” Jory said, beaming at Belinda. “That’s nice.”

“We just need some ointment,” Sophie said.

“Here,” a voice said. A tin was sailing through the air, Sophie reaching out to catch it. The man who threw it was human, but neither woman recognised his ethnicity, meaning he was unlikely to be local. His frame was narrow and his features were a little too sharp to be handsome. His dark hair had a silkiness to it, but it was hard to see cropped short as he had it.

“That’s not one of mine,” Jory said to the man. “Where did you get that?”

“From a monster,” the man said.

“You can’t just give random monster goo to two beautiful women.”

“It’s healing ointment. I’ve used a lot of it myself.”

“Sounds sketchy to me,” Jory said. “Janice, find me a jar of the good ointment.”

Sophie pulled the lid off the tin and sniffed at the contents.

“It’s fine,” she said, putting the lid back on. “What do we owe you?”

“On the house,” the man said. “It lets Janice go home instead of updating the inventory.”

Sophie nodded and back out the door.

“Soph, wait...” Belinda said. “And she’s gone. Bye Jory. Thanks, person I don’t know.”

“Bye Belinda!” Jory called out with a wave as the door closed behind them.

Chapter 45: So Much For Atheism

Jason had not explored many of the Island's districts. He took the loop to one he had never visited before; the temple district. His new world had no shortage of gods, which as a long-time atheist was more than a little disconcerting. He had been assured that gods existed, but he'd been hearing much the same from his Great Aunt Marjory for years. He wanted to see for himself.

Walking out of the loop terminal, he immediately saw a sign with directions to the Divine Square. Following it, he walked down a street where temples lined both sides of the road. Looking at the prominent signs and banners, Jason quickly gained a sense that gods had hierarchies of their own. The Temple of Roads, he saw, was nestled behind the larger and more impressive Temple of Journeys.

Soon the street opened up onto the square itself. It was a huge, crowded space. Green stone was prominent everywhere in the Island, but in the Divine Square even the flagstones were made from high-grade material. The square was filled with booths and tents, most of which seemed to be hawking religious paraphernalia to the faithful.

"Kind of the same, wherever you go," Jason mused to himself.

There were people proselytizing to anyone who would listen, and street thieves cutting purses. Jason had originally kept a small pouch of coins hanging from his waist so he didn't draw attention by plucking coins out of thin air. After the second time it was stolen in as many days he stopped bothering. Even if using his inventory drew attention, there were enough people with similar abilities around that it wasn't a lot.

Jason bought a sandwich from a street vendor, some kind of meat with cheese and a spicy sauce. Food was one of the ways in which Jason was most reminded he was on a different world. While the preparation was often similar, like bread, soup, sandwiches or cake, the ingredients were more often different than the same. Farms raised different animals and grew different crops. Trees sprouted different fruit. The bread was heavier than he was used to, the beer lighter. The meat was all different. Most of it came from the large lizards Jason had seen roaming in the delta. Even the crossovers, like apples, were not varieties he recognised.

He realised he was stalling, distracting himself with little details instead of following his actual purpose in coming to the temple district. Confronting a challenge to long-held beliefs wasn't easy. His objective wasn't the throngs of people in the square, but the temples around the outside. The buildings immediately abutting the square were the most

prominent houses of worship in the city, and the effort put into their designs seemed to reflect it. They seemed to be competing in grandiosity, each clearly an achievement in architecture and engineering.

There was a towering cathedral, a columned temple and other buildings the likes of which Jason had never seen. Oddly, there was one building that forwent the ostentation of the buildings around it, looking more like a public school library. It was a square, grey block, with the only ornamentation a picture of a scroll over the double-doors.

“I wonder if that’s what I’m looking for.”

While each building competed to catch the eye, in Jason’s opinion there was a clear winner. It was a huge tower in the shape of an arm thrusting into the sky. Most buildings in the city topped out at five storeys, and while it was not the only temple to breach this limit, the giant arm more than doubled it. At the end of the arm was a fist clenching a giant, bearded head. The head gazed down on the square, fiercely glaring at any with the courage to meet its stare.

“Well, that’s only completely horrifying.”

With all the people around it was easy to ask a passer-by about the unusual temple. The man Jason talked to was short and stocky, with skin of such a deep blue it was almost black. He had no hair at all and was covered in what looked like tattoos of various colours, which glowed faintly. Jason knew the markings were actually natural, a feature of the race known as the runic. They were a rarity in Greenstone, and while Jason had seen them around, this was his first chance to speak with one. Going by his clothes, the man was more likely a local than a visitor.

“That’s the temple of Dominion,” he explained as Jason pointed out the strange temple.

“Dominion over what?” Jason asked.

The man looked at Jason curiously.

“Over everything,” the man said. “Dominion issues the divine right to kings and nobles. It is he who determines who rules, and who serves.”

“Oh. That explains the creepy, overbearing temple.”

“You seem very easy with blasphemy,” the man said warily.

“I am,” Jason said absently. “Mostly to annoy my Aunt Marjory, but also recreationally. Does this world have little cartoon booklets that explain you’re going to hell if you eat between-meal snacks or whatever?”

The man shook his head in wonderment.

“What do you get out of that?” he asked. “Does it make you feel better to disrespect things others find meaningful?”

“Sorry,” Jason said, feeling like an idiot. “Where I come from, the gods aren’t real.”

“The gods are everywhere in this world.”

“So I’ve heard,” Jason said. “I find that a bit disturbing, to be honest. I mean, look at Dominion. I don’t like the idea of an infinitely powerful being whose job is to make sure people know their place.”

“Then venerate a different god,” the man said. “No deity is absolute. If you dislike the message of Dominion, seek out Liberty. They don’t get along.”

The man flashed Jason a cheeky grin.

Jason held out his hand and the man shook it.

“I’m Jason.”

“Arash,” the man introduced himself.

Jason was asking Arash if the plain-looking building was the Temple of Knowledge when a glorious light appeared in front of one of the temples. All through the square people started falling to their knees, Jason’s new friend included. Looking over, Jason saw a towering figure that looked human, but stood twice as tall as Gary. He looked rather like an adventurer, clad in light armour with a sword at his side.

Up to that point, the strongest aura Jason had encountered was that of a silver-rank adventurer he had seen at the Adventure Society. He had sat next to the man on the loop line and found the presence of his aura overpowering. He realised at the time why Farrah said that containing one’s aura was good manners.

The aura from the far side of the square made that experience inconsequential; it was comparing a candle to the blazing light of the sun. Jason had no doubt if the aura of that towering figure were truly unleashed, everyone in the square would drop dead.

“So that’s a god,” Jason said. “Honestly, I was hoping to be less impressed, but that is something to see. So much for atheism, I guess.”

“Get down!” Arash hissed, kneeling next to Jason. Looking around, Jason certainly stood out as the only person still standing. The god turned to Jason. Not knowing what else to do, Jason gave him a casual wave. It was hard to tell from across the square, but he thought he saw a smile tug at the god’s mouth.

“What’s he the god of?” Jason asked.

“That’s Hero,” Arash said. “Get down!”

“I think that ship has sailed my friend,” Jason said. “So, the god of heroes is called Hero. They really stick to that straightforward naming convention, don’t they?”

“Such a shame,” a melodious voice came from behind Jason. “I was hoping to be your first.”

Jason looked around, but didn’t see where the voice came from. He caught a hint of perfume in the air, fresh and clean like a sea breeze. Within it he sensed a fleeting, put potent aura, every bit the equal of the god across the square.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Jason muttered.

At this point Arash was yanking on Jason’s sleeve, trying to get him to kneel. The other people around them were looking at Jason with disdain.

“Calm down,” Jason said, tugging his shirt free of Arash’s grip. “Did you hear that woman?”

“What woman?” Arash said. “Get on your knees and show your respect for the god!”

“Just me, then. Kneeling isn’t how you show respect, Arash. That’s how you show obedience.”

“Obedience to a god is respect!”

“They say that where I come from, too,” Jason said. “Never really got onboard with the idea. I think I’m going to head off, Arash. All the people here are giving me the evil eye.”

“You are a fool!” Arash hissed after him.

“I can’t argue with that,” Jason said with a laugh. He started making his way across the square, but all the people who had dropped to their knees made for something of an obstacle course.

“Sorry. Pardon me. Excuse I.”

One of the people near Arash leaned over as he watched Jason wander off.

“Do you know that man?” the person asked.

“Absolutely not,” Arash said.

As Jason had guessed, the Temple of Knowledge was the plain, blocky building.

“Is there actually a public library in there?” he wondered. “That would make sense.”

The double doors in front of him were pushed open from the inside as he approached, revealing a pretty young woman. It the same acolyte who had tested his essences during his Adventure Society intake.

“Good day, Mr. Asano.”

“Gabrielle, right?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” she said. “It’s lovely to meet you again.”

“Likewise.”

Jason thought he should catch up with Humphrey, curious if the young man had made an overture since Jason gave him Gabrielle's name. Then he remembered Humphrey was off with Rufus for the field assessment.

"Why does it feel like you were waiting for me?" Jason asked Gabrielle.

"My lady told me you were arriving and sent me to guide you."

"Your lady?"

"The goddess. Follow me, please."

She led Jason inside and he felt an aura wash over him. It was unlike the aura of a person, more like an undercurrent that belonged to the building itself. It wasn't overbearing, but he could feel a vast power behind it. It also had the flavour of the fleeting aura that accompanied the disembodied voice he heard in the square.

They were walking between row after row of books, occasionally passing someone reading at a table. Some of the shelves, instead of books, held ornate tubes.

"Scrolls," Gabrielle explained, seeing Jason's curious glance. "The manuscripts here in the library are all copies. The originals are preserved in the archive."

"So, does your boss talk to you a lot?" Jason asked.

"My boss?"

"The goddess."

"Of course," Gabrielle said. "I may be only a junior member of the clergy, but I am a member, nonetheless. I see and hear my lady every day."

"That must be reaffirming. It doesn't work that way where I come from."

"Your world must be very strange. People serving gods that do not exist. How does that work, if I might ask?"

"Not really sure," Jason said. "They seem to lean heavily on metaphor. You know I'm from a different world?"

"The lady has imparted some knowledge. It is her nature."

"Her nature could use a privacy disclosure agreement. Where are you guiding me to, exactly?"

"The temple has a room for questions. Ask, and the lady will answer or not, as she chooses."

"She'll answer in person?"

"Answers come in many forms."

"Sounds like she's leaning on heavily metaphor, too."

Gabrielle gave Jason a confident smile.

"You will soon see for yourself," she said.

She led Jason to a set of double doors. They were larger than the ones that were the entrance to the temple, but just as plain. They were carved from wood, aged and unadorned but for a simple handle on each. Jason had the strange feeling they were older than the building in which they were affixed. Gabrielle pulled open the heavy doors with an ease that belied her small frame.

“This is as far I take you,” she said, gesturing for Jason to continue on. He passed through the doors and she pushed them closed behind him.

Chapter 46: Blatant Manipulation

The chamber was large and circular, a single room rising up five storeys to a glass ceiling. Light spilled in from above, reflecting from crystal mosaics that lined the walls to bathe the room in rainbow colours. This innermost chamber was the exact opposite of the temple's plain exterior.

"That is certainly impressive."

Jason walked into the room as Gabrielle closed the doors behind him. He looked at his arms as the light played over them. In the centre of the room there was a life-sized statue of a woman holding an open book. Jason walked around it, looking it over.

"Ask, and she shall answer or not, was it?"

Jason meandered around the room, looking at the crystal mosaics that ran from the floor, up five storeys to the ceiling. They depicted what he took to be various knowledge keepers; scribes, teachers, librarians. Rendered in colourful crystal and washed with light, they looked vibrant and bathed with glory.

He remained silent as he examined the artwork on the walls. He had always been prone to talking to himself, but the idea of expecting an answer back was disconcerting. He wondered if it was a little too close to prayer for his liking, then realised it actually was prayer.

"The idea," a female voice spoke from behind him, "is that I choose whether to answer your questions, not whether you choose to ask them."

It was the same voice he had heard in the square. He didn't turn from where he was looking at the wall mosaics.

"And you're in charge?" he asked.

"Definitively," the voice said. "It is my temple."

Her voice was melodious, with a hint of amusement. There was an undercurrent within it, an aura with the force of a tidal wave. It was somehow distant at the same time, like a photograph of a wild storm.

"Your house, your rules," Jason said. "My mother had a similar attitude."

"And you left," the voice said. "You have the same option here."

Jason turned around to find the statue had been replaced with a woman. She looked much the same as the people outside in the square, at least the human ones, with colourful clothes and Mediterranean features. She was beautiful, yet there was something

detached and untouchable about her. Jason noticed that, unlike the statue, she wasn't holding a book.

"So, were you the woman, or were you the book?"

"Neither."

"Misdirection," Jason said. "That's a magician's trick."

"I'm not the Wizard of Oz, Jason."

"You know my world?"

"I am Knowledge. Everything that is, or ever was known in this world. You brought your knowledge with you when you arrived."

"What about the other gods?" Jason asked. "Knowing everything they know would be a bit overpowered."

"We deities are of this world, but do not exist within it. Therefore their knowledge is not mine."

Jason looked the goddess up and down.

"It looks like you exist within it," he said.

"If you look at a pond and see a moon," she said, "is that moon within the pond, or is it a reflection of something much greater, very far away?"

"Nice metaphor," Jason said. "Classic religious imagery, but I suppose that's part of the job. You say you're not the man behind the curtain, but for all I know, you're just some pretty lady with several judiciously-placed mirrors."

"You think I'm pretty?"

"Well that's just blatant manipulation," Jason said. "If you already know everything, then asking me questions is just pantomime."

She laughed, a pleasant, tinkling sound. It gave Jason the sense of a country stream on a warm summer's day.

"You're quite fun," she told him. "You've felt my aura. And Hero's."

"A month ago I still thought auras were made up," Jason said. "Who knows how many ways there are to trick someone like me."

"I do, as it happens," she said. "What about all the people outside when Hero appeared? Do you doubt them all? Do you think we hired actors?"

"Argumentum ad populum?" Jason said. "If you're going to convince me you're a god, you'll need to do better than a second rate apologist."

"Have you considered how well the banana fits in the human hand?"

Jason burst into laughter.

"You've got jokes," he said. "I like that."

“If it makes you feel any better, just think of me as a vastly powerful, immortal entity. No need to use the G word.”

“Then what’s the difference between a god and some crazy-powerful super-being?”

“From your perspective? Very little.” she said. “The nature of transcendent beings are not bound up in physical reality. God and goddess are mortal words.”

“It doesn’t matter until I hit the level cap, is what you’re saying.”

“Something like that.”

“Can you read my mind?”

“In a way,” she said. “My knowledge of this world is absolute. So long as you know what you are thinking, I know what you are thinking.”

“So you know what I’m going to ask?”

“I know that which is, and that which was, but not that which is yet to come.”

“I bet you make some bloody good guesses, though.”

She laughed again, the sound flooding his body with pleasant feelings.

“I know everything in this world,” she said, “yet you mortals are a constant source of surprise. I did not expect, for example, that you would turn back and save the people in that sacrificial chamber.”

“That one surprised me too,” Jason confessed. He looked the goddess up and down.

“Why do you look like a local?” he asked.

“To appear requires an appearance, and this is as good as any. When I show myself to people looking as they do, it helps form a connection.”

“Then why don’t you look like someone from my world right now?”

“Because you didn’t come here for a connection. You came in wondering what happens when an atheist meets a god, so I met you as I would anyone else here. But now we have met, and the questions you came in with were not about me.”

“Yet I can’t seem to help myself,” Jason said. “Why would a goddess even bother to answer any of my questions?”

“I am Knowledge. It is my nature.”

“That feels like a lie.”

The corners of her mouth twitched up in a slight smile.

“Call it an incomplete truth.”

Jason laughed.

“You have your own agenda,” he said

“Don’t we all?” she said. “But whatever my motivations, you still have questions, and I still have answers. If it makes you feel better, know that you are insufficiently consequential to be worth manipulating.”

“That’s a little hurtful, but kind of reassuring, I guess. Can you actually smite me down?”

“We transcendent beings are limited in our ability to affect physical reality. We can affect magic, creating essences and awakening stones. We can also affect our area of influence. I am Knowledge, therefore I can bestow any knowledge I have at will.”

“And you have all the knowledge.”

She smiled.

“So, can the god of the oceans or whatever create tsunamis and such?”

“Yes, but direct intervention is antithetical to our nature, other than to redress an imbalance. More often we work through our followers.”

“So if you wanted to smite me, you could just find the nearest silver rank on the membership rolls and point in my general direction.”

“More or less,” she said. “Of course, another god could send their own agents to intervene. It is something akin to a matter of etiquette to let our followers determine the outcome of a conflict between deities.”

“Who doesn’t love a holy war?” Jason asked. “I suppose I should get on with the actual questions I came in here with, shouldn’t I?”

“Please do,” she said.

“Alright, then. When I was brought to this world, was I chosen?”

“No, it was happenstance. While your world is magically barren, this one is magically rich. That magic builds up over time, finding various forms of release.”

“Is that why the monster surges happen?” Jason asked.

“Indeed it is,” she said. “The magic can also be released by flaring out from this world, sometimes coming into contact with another. If conditions are just right, that contact forms a connection; an inadvertent bridge across which someone can be drawn.”

“If it’s just random chance, where do my outworlder abilities come from? They feel designed.”

“They are designed,” she said. “By you. The journey between worlds altered your body, flooded it with magic. Outworlders like yourself unconsciously shape that magic into a form they can understand, to help them navigate this world using the rules of their own.”

“So, I gave myself powers?”

“It would be more accurate to say that when the power came upon you, you chose its form. A way of framing this world through your own in order to make it comprehensible. As is so often the case when dealing with the dark depths of the mind, the results are more intuitive than practical. But what I am describing isn’t what really happened to you. It is simply the closest I can get to an explanation you could understand. Trying to explain the true forces at play would be like explaining mathematics to a rock. You fundamentally lack the capacity to perceive what I would need to show you.”

The goddess held her hands in a show of helplessness.

“If you were one of my followers,” she said, “I could do better. Imbue the knowledge directly into your mind.”

“No thanks,” Jason said. “I’m all about that self-determination.”

“Our followers are free to act as they will,” she said. “We are not tyrants.”

“Of course you don’t think that. To you, being all-powerful seems natural. If you know everything I know, then you know I’ve heard all that ‘freedom within faith’ nonsense before.”

“But the gods of this world are not remote entities that never show themselves or take action.”

Jason laughed.

“And you think that makes it better?” he asked. “I never abdicated my moral responsibility to an absentee sky wizard in my world, and I’m not doing it now that the wizard’s shown up to enforce it.”

The goddess chuckled.

“I didn’t think so, but I had to try,” she said.

“I get it,” Jason said. “Got to get those bums in pews.”

“You’re stalling,” she said. “Going off on tangents to avoid the question you’re not sure you want the answer to.”

“That’s a go-to move for me,” Jason said.

“I know. You won’t find me easy to manipulate.”

“I didn’t think so, but I had to try,” Jason said.

“We are both beholden to our natures,” she said. “Ask your question. The only real question you came in here with.”

“You already know the question,” Jason said.

“Yet you must ask it. Only then will the responsibility for hearing the answer be yours.”

Jason nodded.

“Is there a way for me to go home?”

“Do you want there to be?”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I mean, that should be the goal, right? But there isn’t a lot waiting for me back there. Here, I see potential. What I can become. The wonders waiting over the next hill.”

He looked at the goddess.

“You know everything, right? You tell me if I want to go back.”

“That is a question only you can answer. That is why I asked it.”

“Is it possible?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said.

“How?”

“You have possessed the means from the beginning, but you are not ready to use it.”

“From the beginning?”

Jason thought back to the day he first arrived. The first time he opened his inventory there was an object inside. An object his ability couldn’t, or wouldn’t identify, and had been sitting in his inventory ever since.

“The world-phoenix token,” he said.

“Yes. I would advise against trying to learn more about it. Anyone who would actually recognise it would be unwilling to leave it in your hands.”

“Why do I have it?”

“I am possessed of every piece of knowledge in this world,” she said, “but that is a question to which I do not know the answer.”

“That’s only mildly terrifying,” Jason said. “You said I wasn’t ready to use it?”

“Choosing to use it would require an act of faith,” she said.

“And faith is very much not my thing,” Jason said.

“of that, I am very much aware,” she said. “When circumstances dictate, the token will use itself.”

“Even if it’s my magical void storage thing?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re not going to tell me the trigger conditions, are you?”

“You were warned that I would answer or not, as I choose. In this case, I choose not.”

“So I could just be walking along the street and whoosh, back home I go?”

“If you decide that that you do not wish to return to your world, then discard the token.”

“So I have to choose if I want to stay,” he said. “Either I throw this thing away, or hang about until these mysterious circumstances to come about. What do I do in the meantime?”

“Get stronger” she said. “You will need that strength for what is to come.”

“You told me you couldn’t see the future.”

“I’ve been known to make some bloody good guesses,” she said

Jason laughed, and the goddess smiled.

“You know,” he said, “I didn’t know what to expect from a goddess. I figured, if you were real, that I wouldn’t handle it very well.”

“You could have done worse.”

“Yeah, but that’s the thing, though; I should have. When I came to this world, the magic changed me. I’m not even human, now. Did it change the way I think? Is that how I’ve been getting through all this without losing my mind?”

“No,” she said. “Your mind remains your own.”

“Really? I don’t feel like the same person I was before I came here.”

“You aren’t,” she told him. “Circumstances change, and people change with them. That is as true in your world as it is in mine. Not everything is a matter of magic.”

Jason nodded to himself.

“Alright,” he said. “Then I guess I just have one last question.”

“I do not know if the gods of your world are real,” she answered, not waiting for him to ask. “No one from your world who knows that particular truth has ever come to this one, and I only deal in knowledge. That being said, from what I do know of your world, it lacks the magic to sustain a divine entity.”

“That seems rather definitive.”

“You may interpret that as you will,” she said, “but I do not make interpretations. I deal in knowledge, and knowledge alone.”

“Wait, you said no one from my world. Are there other outworlders from my world?”

“There have been, in the past. Not for centuries, now. Those that came before either died or returned home.”

“But essence users can live for centuries,” Jason said. “Are there essence users running around my world?”

“I do not know,” she said. “Perhaps you should go back and see for yourself.”

Jason took a deep breath.

“You know,” he said, “you really dropped some bombs on me, lady.”

“People do not come to the goddess of knowledge for recipes, Jason.”

"Is that an option?" he asked.

"No."

"I guess that's everything, then," Jason said. "Do I just go, now? Is there a donation box or something?"

As the goddess laughed, the doors were pulled open from the outside by Gabrielle. The acolyte gave a curious glance at the mirthful deity.

"My lady," she addressed the goddess.

"I'm sure you can find your own way out, Jason," the goddess told him.

"You're going to talk about me behind my back, aren't you?" Jason asked. "Gabrielle, try and explain privacy to your boss. I think she might have trouble with it, given her inherent nature."

"Go away, Jason," the goddess said, and he wandered off with a chuckle and a wave.

"I think it was this way," they heard him say as he disappeared among the bookshelves.

"He seems like an unusual man," Gabrielle said.

"Yes, but also a dangerous one," the goddess warned. "Take care in your future dealings."

"He never seemed that way," Gabrielle said.

"It isn't his powers or his appetites that make him dangerous," the goddess said. "It's his ideas. He'll have you question your faith, just because it's faith. He'll have you question everything, if you let him."

Chapter 47: Mirage Chamber

Rufus looked up as Gary emerged from his room, stretching his long arms and yawning.

“You’re not breakfast,” Gary said.

“You’re just getting up?” Rufus said.

Farrah emerged from her own room, rubbing her eyes.

“Oh, welcome back, Rufus. No breakfast?”

“Why would I have bought breakfast? I told you to relax the training, not give it up entirely. Jason needs to develop good habits now.”

“Forget that guy,” Gary said.

Farrah nodded her agreement.

“He went to see the goddess of knowledge few days ago,” she said. “Since then he’s been like a monster. All we wanted was a few relaxing days before you got back, but he won’t stop. The closest he comes to taking a break is having a drink with Jory down at the clinic, and I’m pretty sure that’s only because it lets him train his resistance ability.”

“Turns out booze is poison,” Gary said. “I’m not going to stop drinking it, but it makes you think.”

“Did you at least show him around the city?” Rufus asked.

“Oh, we showed him,” Farrah said.

“Now he does an evening run each night around the Island,” Gary complained.

The door opened up and Jason pushed in a trolley containing two rows of covered food trays.

“Rufus, you’re back,” Jason said happily. “You can join us for breakfast.”

“From what these two were saying, I thought you’d be training.”

“Yeah, I ate a spirit coin this morning, ran into the clinic and did some weight training. Then I ran back and got to work on breakfast. These two have been slacking off while you were away.”

As he talked, Jason transferred food from the tray to the dining table. Gary and Farrah sat down, Gary rubbing his hands together.

“I’m starting to get a handle on the local food,” Jason said. “I’ve been checking out the markets when I’m taking a break. But we can crank up the training intensity now that you’re back, yeah?”

Gary’s hands stopped moving.

“What do you mean by crank up the intensity?” he asked.

“We can stop slacking off. I’ve been slacking off a bit, cooking, making my way through Jory’s liquor cabinet.”

“Rest is an important part of training, too,” Rufus said.

“Exactly,” Gary mumbled around a mouthful of sausage.

Gary and Farrah were already tucking in as Jason poured out glasses of juice from a large pitcher.

“Have something to eat,” Jason told Rufus, pushing a laden plate his way. “Tell us how your field assessment thing went.”

Rufus picked up his cutlery.

“It does smell good.”

“So, I know this guy Humphrey,” Jason said to Rufus. “He was part of your group, right?”

“Humphrey Geller?” Rufus asked. “You know him?”

“We went in for induction on the same day,” Jason said. “Nice guy. How’d he do?”

“He failed,” Rufus said. “His skills are solid and he has a good grasp of his abilities. The ones he’s awakened, at least. His problem is one of mindset.”

“What do you mean?” Jason asked.

“Humphrey’s confluence essence is dragon,” Rufus said.

“Makes sense,” Jason said, thinking of Humphrey’s familiar. “I have to imagine that’s a good one.”

“They’re all good, if you use them right,” Farrah said.

“And there’s the problem,” Rufus said. “Humphrey is considerate, thoughtful, cautious and humble. Does any of that sound like a dragon to you? He needs to be confident, bold. He knows how to use his abilities, but he’s too indecisive about doing so.”

“I get it,” Jason said. “He’s a nice guy with the powers of an arrogant prick.”

“Actually, that’s exactly it,” Rufus said. “He wasn’t alone, though. There were nineteen people and we passed six.”

“Ouch,” Jason said.

“That’s a big group,” Farrah said.

“Some of the local aristocrats were looking to make a social connection,” Rufus said darkly. “Some of the records of their recently accepted adventurers were mysteriously lost, forcing them to re-take the assessment.”

“That sounds shady,” Farrah said. “The Adventure Society let them get away with that?”

“You haven’t seen what it’s like in these outlying branches,” Gary said. “They don’t the same funding, so they have to compromise with local powers.”

“Corruption,” Jason said.

“It’s easy to call it that,” Gary said, “but sometimes compromises have to be made. You pay adventurers with money, not principles.”

“Is there going to be any backlash?” Farrah asked.

“Probably,” Rufus said. “The ones who’d passed before their records mysteriously vanished had already been working as adventurers, but after I failed them, their membership was revoked. They won’t get it back until they pass another field assessment.”

“I bet they loved that,” Farrah said.

“The Duke of Greenstone’s nephew is part of that group,” Rufus said.

“You flunked out the city ruler’s nephew?” Gary chortled.

“I did,” Rufus said. “I suspect the people I failed will have an easier time with their next assessor.”

“Have you considered that you might not be the one to take the pain for this?” Farrah asked. “You might have dropped the local Adventure Society officials right in it.”

“Actually, the branch director was urging me on. Seems she’s trying to flush out at least some of the external influence.”

“Oh,” Farrah said thoughtfully. “Good for her.”

“So, what about Humphrey?” Jason asked. “You’re all about training up adventurers, right? I bet you have plenty of ideas to get him on track.”

“Humphrey’s mother is a family acquaintance,” Rufus said, “so I’ll help him out a little. I know exactly what he needs.”

“Oh?” Jason prompted.

“I’ve seen almost every kind of would-be adventurer there is,” Rufus said, then looked at Jason. “Almost every kind. Back at my family’s academy...”

He trailed off as Jason, Gary and Farrah all picked up their glasses of juice, draining them dry simultaneously.

“What was that?” Rufus asked as Gary refilled their glasses from the pitcher.

“What was what?” Jason asked.

“Never mind,” Rufus said. “Back in my family’s academy...”

Again all three picked up their glasses and chugged back the contents.

“What is happening right now?” Rufus asked. “Wait, are you playing that drinking game?”

The other three erupted into laughter.

“What is wrong with you people?”

“It’s just juice,” Gary said, as he started refilling the glasses again. “It is just juice, right?”

“Fresh-squeezed,” Jason said.

“So, now every time I mention my family’s-”

“Hold up,” Gary said, waving his hand at Rufus. “I can only refill these so fast.”

Rufus panning his glare around the table drew fresh peals of laughter.

“I hate you all.”

“This is where you grew up?” Jason asked as they walked through the verdant grounds of the Geller ancestral home. Jason and Rufus were being guided by Humphrey Geller and his mother, Danielle. Jason’s comment came as they walked through a tunnel of leafy vines grown into a tunnel on a bamboo framework. Splashes of sunlight stabbed through the foliage, punctuating the shade with beams of light.

“I would have loved this when I was a kid,” Jason said. “Who am I kidding? I love it now.”

“Thank you, Mr. Asano,” Danielle said.

“Jason is fine,” Jason told her.

“You’ll have to forgive Mr. Asano,” Rufus apologised. “He’s not well-versed in formality, in spite of any quite-thorough explanations he may have received earlier in the day.”

“Yes,” Jason said, “I’m not very smart and simple formalities are super-hard to figure out. It’s definitely not that I find them to be a set of arbitrary behavioural norms that serve as a tool of exclusionary tribalism and that eschewing the rituals of cultural performance facilitates the fostering of new relationships by having both sides step out of their preconceived societal modes.”

Danielle laughed while Rufus glared at Jason.

“I’m not sure how my translation ability handled that one,” Jason said.

“I should have left you in the desert,” Rufus muttered.

“Mr. Remore did mention you were an unusual man,” Danielle said. “I’m delighted to discover he was right. Please feel free to call me Danielle.”

Danielle Geller demonstrated that at silver rank, the beautifying effect of essences reached the realms of the supernatural. In addition to looking far too young to be Humphrey’s mother, she was stunningly perfect. Neither women nor men used cosmetics

in this world, but Jason realised there was little point. All the people that could have afforded it used essences, which was like air-brushing real life.

“So, have you spoken to Gabrielle, yet?” Jason asked Humphrey, who turned white and started shaking his head to silence Jason.

“Gabrielle?” Danielle asked. She may have looked too young to be Humphrey’s mother, but that tone of having latched onto a weakness was unmistakable.

“It’s nobody,” Humphrey said.

“Danielle,” Jason said, “as Rufus pointed out, my grasp of the local etiquette is limited. How does one go a-courting in local aristocratic circles?”

“Please stop,” Humphrey begged.

“That would depend on the relative status of the parties involved,” Danielle said.

“Then let me present a hypothetical, then.” Jason said. “Let’s take someone of roughly your social standing. A young member of your family, perhaps. How would they approach, say, an acolyte of the church of knowledge? I imagine there would something of a tangled nest of social, political and religious entanglements that would make it rather difficult.”

Jason and Danielle were happily walking side-by-side, with Rufus and Humphrey behind. Humphrey had his head buried in his hands, while Rufus just shook his head.

“Indeed there would be social complexities,” Danielle said. “The best approach the young man could take – I assume it is a young man in this example?”

“Why not?” Jason said.

“The best thing this young man could do,” Danielle said, glancing back at her son, “would be to inform his mother. Someone who can arrange things without youthful enthusiasm causing a political incident.”

“Oh, but you know how young people can be,” Jason said. “I bet he’d rather cut off his own arm than talk about this with his mother.”

“If only he had a friend to step in for him,” Danielle said.

“Jason and I can do some sparring, right?” Humphrey asked Rufus.

“I’ll make sure to schedule it in,” Rufus said.

“That,” Danielle said, “is the mirage chamber.”

It was a huge dome rising out from the trees and plants, segmented like the eye of an insect. If the pathways of the estate weren’t mostly shaded by canopy, the bulging edifice would be visible from most of the grounds.

“So, what is this thing, exactly?” Jason asked. “Rufus wasn’t very clear.”

“It creates false images of monsters,” Humphrey explained, “and a false image of your body with which to fight them. Everything feels completely real.”

“That sounds fantastic,” Jason said. “Do I get a go?”

“Another day,” Rufus said. “This time you’re just here for a look. Today we set Humphrey on the path to passing the next field assessment.”

“Didn’t you say that they’d just wave everyone through next month?” Jason asked Rufus.

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” Danielle said. “I was speaking with the branch director yesterday morning, and she’s very happy with how things went. That said, some kind of compromise is probably necessary.”

Getting closer to the dome, Jason saw that there was a complex of buildings adjoining it.

“That’s the viewing hall over there,” Danielle said, pointing out the largest building other than the dome itself. “We try and set up scenarios our family trainees can learn from, then get them all in to watch. Rufus tells me you’re an affliction specialist, which might be interesting to work with.”

“He’s a long way from any example but bad,” Rufus said.

“Rufus,” Danielle lightly scolded.

“No, he’s right,” Jason said.

“I heard you acquitted yourself quite well at the Vane Estate incident,” Danielle said.

“Then you might want to check your sources,” Jason said. “I got laid out multiple times by a guy with a shovel.”

She raised an eyebrow in Rufus’ direction, who nodded with a wry smile on his face.

“Rufus was saying you train family members from all around the world here,” Jason said.

“We have branch families spread far and wide,” Danielle said proudly. “They all come here at age fifteen, and stay until they reach bronze rank. We also take in some non-family.”

“Our family members have a habit of picking teams even before they get their essences,” Humphrey said. “We take the team members in as well.”

Danielle led them into one of the buildings, which turned out to be a large single room. The back wall had a long glass window through which was only darkness, but Jason’s power let his eyes penetrate the gloom. Beyond the glass was the empty interior of the dome. The dome itself was made of segments; irregular metal pentagons carved with magical symbols.

Underneath the window was a rectangular stone block. Carved into the top were numerous runes and sigils, made up of sophisticated patterns. The last feature of the room were low wooden platforms the size of single beds. They lined the left and right wall, a half-dozen to a side. More mystical symbols were engraved into their surfaces.

“This is the control room,” Danielle explained. “From that panel under the window we can control everything that happens inside the chamber.”

She turned to Rufus.

“So what do you have for us?”

Chapter 48: An Endless, Inescapable Nightmare

In the control room of the mirage chamber, all eyes were on Rufus. He walked over to the stone block under the window, which had a dizzying array of runes, sigils and intricate magical diagrams carved into it. He spent a few moments looking it over.

“Standard arrangement,” he observed. “Jason, hand me that crystal.”

Jason took a long, faceted crystal from his inventory, something Farrah had created using Magic Society resources. It looked rather like a long, narrow diamond, the facets catching the light and reflecting out flashes of rainbow colour. He handed it to Rufus, who looked around one side of the stone block, then the other, finding a hole into which he pushed the crystal.

“So, what’s with the crystal?” Jason asked.

“A mirage chamber projects things from these platforms along the walls,” Danielle said. Jason glanced again at the wooden platforms lining both sides of the room.

“If it doesn’t have direct access to something through the platforms,” Danielle continued, “you need to give it a magical imprint to replicate instead.”

“And the crystal is a storage device for the imprint,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Danielle said.

Rufus, having inserted the crystal, was now looking over the top of the stone block.

“This mirage chamber has an impressive array of monster imprints,” Rufus said, “but Humphrey needs something a little different to a basic combat scenario. What I’ve just added in should help him climb the next wall in his development. Humphrey, you can go on in, now.”

Humphrey lay down on one of the wooden platforms. The runes under him lit up and he went still as death. Suddenly Jason spotted him through the window, standing under the centre of the dome. He glanced back down at Humphrey’s still body on the platform, then up at his other body inside the dome, which turned to look at the window.

“That’s an illusionary body?” Jason asked.

“That’s right,” Danielle said. It can only affect or be affected by other illusions created by the mirage chamber. To him, though, everything feels completely real.”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “Right now it feels completely real to him, but nothing he suffers will affect his real body.”

“What if something happens to his body here while he’s out there?” Jason asked.

“Then he’ll be snapped awake,” Rufus said. “The illusion feels completely real, but it’s just a projection. Being unexpectedly taken out is disorienting, but harmless.”

Rufus used a finger to trace out some of the lines of the stone slab in front of him. They lit up under his finger, but the real change was on the other side of the window.

The inside of the dome went from darkness to bright and wild illumination. Segmented panels blasted the interior with a maelstrom of rainbow lights, moving and flashing from one colour to the next as the interior of the dome became a shifting kaleidoscope. Humphrey's figure looked tiny In the vast, empty space, like the flood of colour would sweep him away. Rainbow light spilled through the window and over the observers.

“That’s certainly impressive,” Jason said. “Has this ever given someone a seizure?”

“Once,” Danielle said. “It turns out they had some kind of brain sickness. We had a healer remove it.”

“Of course you can casually cure epilepsy,” Jason muttered.

“There is nothing casual about maladies of the mind,” Danielle said. “You need to remove the sickness, then restore the damaged portions of the brain with healing, like a wound. After that, it often takes them time to recover. Especially if the condition had been with them for a long time. They can lose memories, even physical skills.”

“Oh,” Jason said. “It’s oddly comforting to know magic isn’t just the instant solution to every problem.”

“Magic is a tool, like any other,” Danielle said. “Delicate tasks require care and expertise.”

As Jason and Danielle talked, Rufus' hands moved over the engravings on the stone block like he was playing a theremin. On the other side of the window, the chaos of light was slowly moving towards order.

“Is he alright in there in there?” Jason asked.

“He has experienced this many times,” Danielle said.

“Sorry this is taking so long to get in place,” Rufus said. “I need to get a handle on the nuances of your chamber design.”

“What exactly are you planning for Humphrey?” Jason asked.

“We need to motivate Humphrey to act boldly. I have an exercise designed to instil that mindset”

“You think this new addition to our mirage chamber will do that?” Danielle said.

“In my family’s academy,” Rufus said, “I’ve seen plenty of people with Humphrey’s issue. Good people, heroic, even. You can’t motivate them with glory or power, not if you want to really move them to action. It has to be with consequence.”

The light inside the dome suddenly vanished. Even Jason’s dark sight power couldn’t penetrate the sudden darkness. Then daylight lit up the space beyond the window, which was no longer the inside of the dome. It was a wide desert gorge, with Humphrey standing at the bottom, near a shallow stream. Sunlight came down from a clear blue sky. Humphrey looked around, finding a small, adorable child standing next to him.

“Holodeck,” Jason whispered in awe.

Rufus tapped a rune on the control table.

“Humphrey,” he said. “Can you hear me?”

“I can,” Humphrey said, his voice emerging from the control table. “Why is there a little girl, here?”

“That’s Ellie,” Rufus said. “You have to protect her from the monsters.”

Rufus’ hands moved over the runes again. A half-dozen monsters appeared from further down the gorge, running toward Humphrey. They looked and moved like leopards, but were the size of full-grown tigers. Behind them, their tails were long and thick, ending in a huge, talon-like claw.

As Humphrey took a stance in front of little Ellie, armour formed around his body from thin air. It looked to be made of scales, mostly sandy yellow but flecked with other colours, like rainbow droplets. In his hands, a huge sword appeared. Absurdly large and shaped like an extended dragon wing, Jason couldn’t help but question the practicality.

Staying close to the little girl and shielding her with his body, Humphrey awaited the monsters. As they arrived he started swinging his huge sword. Jason was startled at the ease and expertise with which he wielded the massive weapon. It was clearly heavy, but his footwork seamlessly shifted to manage the weight and momentum. Each blow was the end of a monster, but he couldn’t take down all six quickly enough. Two of the nimble monsters skipped around Humphrey as he dealt with the others. By the time he fought past them, Ellie’s corpse was being pulled apart in a tug-of-war between two monsters.

Even watching from a distance, Jason felt viscerally sick at the sight. Rufus tapped a rune, causing the monsters and the child to vanish. Humphrey looked at the now-empty ground in horror, the huge sword falling from his hands and vanishing.

Danielle reached over the console and tapped the rune to close communication with Humphrey.

"Are you trying to traumatise my son?" she asked Rufus, her tone a clear warning that his answer had best be a good one. Rufus calmly turned to face her as she stepped forward to confront him.

"Yes," Rufus said. "I am trying to traumatise your son. During the field assessment, I could see clearly the training he had been through. His skills are exceptional, but it was equally evident you have coddled him to the point of a critical deficiency. The reason I failed him isn't that he lacks the ability. It's because he doesn't understand the duty of being an adventurer. You taught him to handle killing, but not how to handle failure. He hesitates in critical moments because you've taught him to be too perfect."

Jason watched Humphrey's forlorn figure through the glass. He agreed with Humphrey's mother that Rufus' training was essentially emotional abuse, and thought Rufus' speech sounded suspiciously like a pot critiquing a kettle. From what he could tell, Rufus and Humphrey had similar upbringings. He wondered if Rufus had been through the same exercise himself.

"He'll stop to look for the optimal path when what he needs to do is act," Rufus continued. "If you want Humphrey to act quickly and decisively, he needs to understand the price of not doing so. I can let that slide with the other adventures in this city, but you wanted him to meet my standards. These are my standards."

Danielle was a head shorter than Rufus, but she got right up into his space, tilting her head back to glare at him.

"Is this how you treat people in your famous academy?"

"Yes," Rufus said. "It is."

Rufus turned back to the control table and reopened communication.

"Get ready, Humphrey," Rufus said. "We're going again."

Jason watched Danielle, seeing she was on the edge of stepping in to stop it. In the end, she took a step back. Inside the dome, a small boy appeared next to Humphrey.

"What about Ellie?" Humphrey's voice came from the control table.

"Ellie's dead," Rufus said coldly. "She was torn apart by monsters. This is Ben."

Jason winced, looking once again at Danielle. She was looking sternly at Rufus but didn't say anything.

Humphrey's real body stirred on the wooden platform, the runes under him fading. He swung his legs off the side and sat up, face pale, eyes wide and shaking. He had failed to protect every new child Rufus had placed with him.

“How was that?” Rufus asked.

“A nightmare,” Humphrey said weakly. “An endless, inescapable nightmare.”

“Not inescapable,” Rufus said, devoid of sympathy. “You had the power to protect those children. It was your hesitation and doubt that doomed them. You need to understand that sometimes the best action is the immediate one. You’ll do better tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” he asked weakly.

“And every day, until you stop getting the children killed.”

“I... I don’t know if I can do that.”

“Yet you think you’re ready to do it when the people are real?” Rufus asked.

“Adventurers aren’t hunting monsters recreationally, Humphrey. We are the shield for those who can’t protect themselves. Yes, there are adventurers who only care about money and status. But the real ones, and I know you want to be one of the real ones, care about duty. You have the heart for it, but until you have the mindset to match, all you’re going to do is fail.”

Rufus placed a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder.

“Only you can decide how much you’re willing to go through to do the right thing.”

Rufus and Danielle sat in the shade with a pitcher of iced drinks on a picnic table. Danielle had suggested Humphrey lead an enthusiastic Jason in the direction of the orchards.

“I’m sorry if you feel I went too far,” Rufus said. “You’re a good adventurer. You know the things he’ll be facing sooner or later.”

Danielle nodded.

“My father always said I shield him too much from the realities,” Danielle said. “But he was always such a good boy. It’s like there’s something inside him that makes him want to help people. I didn’t want to break that.”

“Did you consider something for him other than adventuring?” Rufus asked. “There are other ways to help people.”

“Not in our family, there isn’t. Gellers are adventurers, with all the good and bad that comes with it. And he has talent.”

“He does,” Rufus said. “If he can get past this obstacle, he could be one of the greats one day.”

“You have similar hopes for your friend, Jason, yes?”

“I’m sorry about him,” Rufus said. “He has a habit of saying whatever pops into his head.”

“No he doesn’t,” Danielle said. “You should pay more attention.”

“What do you mean?”

“Haven’t you noticed the way he seizes control of a conversation? The way he provokes people out of their comfortable patterns? He has a very political mind, but he applies it quite unlike anyone I’ve met. I do hope Humphrey can learn from him, a little.”

“You want Humphrey to be more like Jason?” Rufus asked incredulously.

“Humphrey is too straightforward a thinker for that,” Danielle said. “I’d just like him to understand that things are more complicated than he realises. Social survival training, if you will.”

“I think you may be overestimating Jason. You might be conflating unpredictability with cunning.”

“Perhaps,” Danielle said. “I will acknowledge he’s hard to predict. You know, I heard an interesting thing while you were off doing the field assessment.”

“Oh?”

“A god appeared in Divine Square.”

“They do that all the time,” Rufus said.

“There were a couple of interesting quirks in this particular instance.”

“Which god?” Rufus asked.

“Hero,” Danielle said. “Interesting god. Did you know he’s the only core deity not to have subordinate gods?”

“I did, actually.”

“That’s right,” Danielle said. “Your uncle is a member of Hero’s clergy, isn’t he? How is he doing?”

“Very well. I’ll tell him you asked after him.”

“Please do. What really caught people’s attention about Hero’s appearance, though, was that when everyone kneeled before the god, one man did not.”

Rufus put a hand over his eyes, groaning wearily.

“Jason has something of an issue with religion,” he said.

“I did hear some rumours about that priestess you were working with,” Danielle said.

“She has some unkind words about you, by the way. But you can see why I wasn’t startled at Jason’s lack of formality. What is the deference due an aristocrat when you won’t bow to a god?”

Rufus narrowed his eyes at Danielle.

“You seem to know a lot about Jason for someone who just met him,” Rufus said. “It’s hardly a surprise for someone of your influence to hear about the Divine Square incident, but you were certain it was Jason. You’re investigating him, aren’t you?”

“I am,” Danielle said. “At your father’s request.”

Rufus groaned.

“Thousands of miles away, and he still can’t let me chart my own path.”

“He’s concerned about the man arresting so much of his son’s attention,” she said. “A man who seemingly fell out of the sky. Imagine my surprise to discover he did almost exactly that.”

“You know he’s an outworlder.”

“I do,” Danielle said. “Very exciting.”

“How?”

“It was a fanciful guess until I met him. He’s so obviously a man out of place. The way he talks, the way he thinks. The way he looks at things. He doesn’t fit.”

“The way he looks at things?”

“Like a man who doesn’t expect to recognise anything.”

“Have you told my father what he is?”

“I did,” Danielle said. “It won’t be hard for anyone to put the pieces together once people start looking for them. Which they will, when they realise you’re training him.”

“It’s inevitable, I know,” Rufus said. “I wanted him to reach the point where his skills at least weren’t an embarrassment. Jason doesn’t seem to embarrass, though.”

“Oh?”

“He can be frustrating to teach,” Rufus said. “He’s driven, but he has this habit of already knowing the lessons he was meant to learn through hardship.”

“How do you think he manages that?”

“I advise strongly against ever asking him to explain. Something about an old man making a boy put wax on a carriage, then take it off again, because people were mean to him at his school. I think Jason’s world must be a very strange place.”

“Sounds rather intriguing,” she said.

“Then feel free to ask him about it,” Rufus said. “Just do it when I’m somewhere else.”

Danielle laughed.

“When will he find his way into the mirage chamber?” she asked.

“Sooner, rather than later. I want him to use a martial arts skill-book first. I’ve been holding that off to prepare him as best I can, but he’ll need at least a few weeks to

consolidate before his field assessment. So, in a few days, most likely. In the meantime, do you need me to keep coming for Humphrey?"

"No, our family has trainers enough with the stomach for it," Danielle said. "When you bring Jason by, we can have them spar a little."

"I will," Rufus said. "But first, I need to have a talk with my father."

Chapter 49: A Voice From Home

The Adventure Society offered a limited, if valuable, array of services. The Magic Society, by contrast, provided all manner of magical amenities to anyone with the money to pay for them. The main lobby of the Magic Society services building was quite large, with many comfortable chairs. Those who could afford their services were accustomed to luxury.

An elven man in expensive clothes approached. Rufus noted a brooch in the shape of hand inside a circle, the Magic Society emblem.

"Lord Remore," the man said. "Such a pleasure. I'm Pochard Finn, deputy director of the Magic Society here in Greenstone."

Rufus stood up and shook his hand.

"It's just Mr Remore," Rufus said. "One of my ancestors made rather a point about refusing title, and it's become something of a family stance."

"Very principled, I'm sure," Pochard said. "Please, allow me to be your guide to our humble branch. Not as magnificent as what you are used to, I'm sure."

"I wouldn't want to trouble you," Rufus said.

"No trouble at all," Pochard said. "If the director were not indisposed off-campus, I have no doubt he would greet you himself. He certainly wouldn't want you waiting out here with the ordinary people. Title or not, I can comfortably assert that you are far from an ordinary visitor."

"I'm just here to use a communications channel," Rufus said. "I wouldn't want to miss my father because I was socialising."

"Your father," Pochard said. "Will he be visiting our fair city?"

"He will not," Rufus said firmly.

"A shame," Pochard said. "At least allow me to guide you to our speaking chambers."

"Very well," Rufus said. "Lead on."

The speaking chambers were accessed from a long hallway, where a series of doors led into each chamber. Pochard showed no hesitation in explaining how excellent they were

"A man of your background is naturally familiar with speaking chambers," Pochard said, "but were you aware the very best chambers are constructed from watergreen marble? We may just be a remote branch, but our speaking chambers are a point of pride."

“Watergreen marble?” Rufus asked.

“Watergreen marble is one of the higher-grade stones quarried right here in the Greenstone region. It has a strong water affinity, which makes for an excellent connection.”

Rufus thought that Pochard was just talking up his facility, but when he stepping into his assigned speaking chamber, it really was grander than he anticipated. It was larger than others he'd seen, although the layout was normal. Half the room was covered in a pool of water, the dry half with a low, circular platform to stand on. Rather than the usual surfaces, the floor was covered in blue and green tiles, the marble walls had lush plants set into alcoves, while the roof was a colourful mosaic in shades of green and blue. The light in the room was shimmering blue-green, the source of the light being located under the water pool. The air was moist, but fresh and pleasant, with the scent of the sea. Walking into the room felt like stepping onto the ocean floor.

"Mr Pochard," Rufus said. "I must confess, I didn't give much credence to your claims about your speaking chambers. Consider this my apology for doubting your words."

“Gratifying to hear, Mr Remore. I will leave you to your call.”

Rufus turned and shook Pochard’s hand before the elf departed.

“Thank you,” he said with a smile.

Pochard left, closing the door to the chamber behind him. Rufus stood on the circular platform on the floor and waited, enjoying the pleasant atmosphere. He'd spent enough time in plain, cramped, humid speaking chambers to genuinely appreciate the difference.

Finally, the pool of water started stirring, indicating the connection was being made. The light coming through the pool started wildly shimmering. The water rose up from the pool, surging into the shape of Rufus’ father. Colour appeared in the water as if someone had tipped dyes into it, fleshing out the image to a rather excellent facsimile of his father’s features.

Pochard hadn’t been understating the quality of the connection. The image of Rufus’ father, Callum Remore, was startlingly lifelike. When the image shifted from water statue to animation, it replicated his expressions and body language with startling accuracy.

“Son,” the water representation of Callum said. “Good to see you.”

“Father,” Rufus said.

“I know that tone,” Callum said. “What did I do?”

“You’ve been spying on me.”

“Of course I have,” Callum said. “You almost died out there on some nothing contract.”

“Which you only knew about because you were spying on me!”

“It wasn’t spying,” Callum said. “I was only having a few updates sent back. Then you almost got yourself killed and I started spying. I’m surprised Danielle told you.”

“She didn’t tell me,” Rufus said. “I figured it out.”

“Son, if that woman doesn’t want you to know something, you’ll be as ignorant as a newborn babe. If you figured it out, it’s because she led you to water. You only think it was your idea to drink.”

“Well, you need to stop.”

“Of course, son.”

“Did you just lie to me?”

“Of course, son.”

Rufus let out a weary groan.

“So,” Callum said. “Tell me about this outworlder of yours.”

“He’s a bit odd,” Rufus said.

“They’re all odd,” Callum said. “What’s he actually like?”

“Do you remember the first time you told me about outworlders?”

“Hmmm. Wasn’t it when we had that one stay with us at the academy? The pretty one that you-”

“I remember the one, Dad.”

Callum’s water image let out a gleeful chuckle.

“This is a good connection,” Callum said. “I can see you scowling.”

“Dad, do you remember when you told me there were two kinds of outworlders?”

“I do,” Callum said. “The ones that die immediately, and the ones that survive and thrive.”

“Jason is definitely the die immediately type,” Rufus said, “but he survives and thrives anyway.”

“That is odd,” Callum said. “Sounds like trouble.”

“Are you telling me to back off?” Rufus asked. “Because I won’t.”

“Of course you won’t,” Callum said. “Heading for trouble is the whole point of being an adventurer. Otherwise, what’s all the training for?”

“Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that,” Rufus said. “I have a proposal for the academy.”

“Oh?”

“Not having someone looking over my shoulder has been an education,” Rufus said. “As an adventurer, I’ve gone from thinking I knew everything to realising how much I don’t.”

“That’s good,” Callum said. “A few close scrapes, some costly mistakes. It’ll turn you into a real adventurer.”

“That’s exactly my point,” Rufus said. “It wasn’t until you released me into the wild that I realised how far I have to go. It’s why the Gellers keep training their family here at the south end of nowhere. They can let them loose to make their own mistakes.”

“So, you’re proposing we start sending people there?” Callum asked.

“I am,” Rufus said. “We could establish a graduate station here. The Geller family facilities are well developed, and we could arrange an exchange. They help us get off the ground, and we help them refine their training programs.”

“Have you put this to the Gellers, yet.”

“No,” Rufus said. “I wasn’t going to reach out before clearing it with Grandad. Not to mention that I’d also need specifics to take to them. I’d never make an approach without knowing what I could and couldn’t offer.”

“Good lad,” Callum said. “Alright, I’ll float it to the family. For now, you and I can start having weekly meetings. Being our man on the ground will be a good chance for you to step up in the academy. A project like this won’t be small or quick.”

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be here,” Rufus said. “Emir could arrive any day. I suppose could extend my stay; I don’t have to go back with him when he’s done.”

“Oh, uh...,”

Callum started sheepishly rubbing his chin.

“I was meant to tell you,” he said. “Emir won’t be there for a little while.”

“How little a while are you talking about?” Rufus asked. “And why? We found what he was after.”

“Well, we know you think you found it,” Callum said. “But can you really be certain? One of his other teams found something really promising in the Godspear Islands, so he’s heading there to check it out. So... two months?”

“Two months!”

“Three, at the absolute most,” Callum said. “Well, maybe not the absolute most. And that’s from when he leaves here, obviously. Call it four months.”

“Four months,” Rufus said incredulously.

“Well now you have your project, that works out,” Callum said.

“He doesn’t know that. Did you say he hadn’t left Vitesse yet? What is he doing?”

“There’s been a lot going on,” Callum said. “It’s a busy time.”

Rufus narrowed his eyes at his father’s projection.

“Isn’t it time for the flower wine festival?”

“Is it?” Callum asked, innocently. He wouldn’t meet his son’s eyes, even through the projection.

Rufus ran a hand over his face.

“Alright, Dad,” he said wearily. “Weekly meetings?”

“I’ll send you a message with the times.”

“No, I’ll send you a message. You can work around my schedule.”

“Son...”

“Give my love to Mum. See you next week, Dad.”

Rufus stepped off the circular platform and the image of his father broke apart, splashing into the pool.

“Four months,” he muttered to himself. “Alright, then.”

Rufus stormed through the back gate into Jory’s courtyard. Jason was seated in a meditation pose on a mat while Farrah sat on a chair reading. Gary was cooking meat skewers on a grill fuelled by magic fire.

“Farrah,” Rufus said sharply, “get the book out.”

She glanced at the book in her hands.

“Not that book,” Rufus said. “I mean... the book.”

“The *book* book?” she asked.

“Yes,” Rufus said. “The book book.”

“What’s the book book?” Gary asked.

Jason opened his eyes.

“Why is everyone making chicken noises?” he asked.

“It’s time for you to get your hands on a martial art skill book,” Rufus told him.

“Ooh, nice,” Jason said, getting up and brushing his legs with his hands.

“Wait, that’s what you want the book for?” Farrah asked.

“What book?” Gary asked.

“You know,” Farrah said. “The book. From under the lake.”

“Didn’t we decide to give that to Emir?” Gary asked.

“We did decide that, yes,” Farrah said.

“The contract from Emir wasn’t to find a book,” Rufus said.

“Giving it to Emir was your idea,” Farrah said to Rufus. “You talked us into it.”

“That’s true,” Gary said, prodding at the cooking meat with a fork. “We wanted to sell it.”

“Well, Emir won’t be here for four months, so he’s missing out,” Rufus said.

Gary, poised to shove a whole skewer in his mouth, stopped to look at Rufus.

“Four months?” he asked.

“From when he leaves,” Rufus said.

“He hasn’t left?” Farrah asked.

“Flower wine festival,” Gary mumbled around a mouthful of meat. “You weren’t kidding about this marinade, Jason.”

“One of the others teams has a promising lead,” Rufus said. “He’s going there to check it out first.”

“Which team?” Farrah asked.

“Godspear Islands.”

“Are you kidding me?” Farrah asked. “Mirabelle and her army of idiots? Of course, they think they found it.”

She got up from her chair and started pacing.

“That isn’t the place,” she said. “This is the place. We found the place.”

“I know,” Rufus said.

“What place?” Jason asked.

“It isn’t like we’re just confident this is the place,” Farrah continued. “This is the place.”

“It is,” Rufus said.

“Then why is Emir sailing off in the wrong direction?”

“Well,” Rufus said, “they know we *think* we found it, but...”

“I hope his boat sinks,” Farrah said.

“That’s pretty unlikely,” Gary said.

“So the book?” Rufus asked.

Farrah’s stone chest erupted out of the ground. She opened the lid, reached in and came out with an absurdly large book. It seemed like she should be staggering about, but her small body contained a powerful strength. She slammed the lid of her storage chest down and dropped the book onto it with a resonating thud. It was almost as large and thick itself as the stone chest lid on which it was resting. Bound in thick leather, embossed into the front of the book were the images of two scythes crossed over a skull.

“That’s a hefty and sinister tome you’ve got there,” Jason said, moving to look closer.

“We each agreed to give you a gift,” Rufus said, “as thanks for saving us. Farrah’s you’ve already received. If the others don’t object, I’d like this to be mine.”

"Works for me," Gary mumbled.

"Well, you were always going to get him a skill book," Farrah said. "I have to assume this one is better than most."

"It's obviously special," Jason said. "Where did it come from?"

"We can't tell you that yet," Rufus said.

"You're giving him the book," Farrah said, "but saying where it's from is where you draw the line?"

"The book wasn't in the contract," Rufus said. "Keeping our mouths shut was."

"So, can I use this?" Jason asked, reaching a hand towards the book.

"Not so fast," Rufus said. "Now that we'll be here for a while, we don't have to be in such a rush. I can make sure you're ready before letting you use it."

"And when will that be?" Jason asked.

"I told you when we started," Rufus said. "There's going to be a test."

Chapter 50: The Full Keanu

Rufus swung the staff horizontally, Jason swaying back so it passed in front of him. Rufus kept the momentum, bringing the staff up and over into a downward strike. Jason kept control of his balance, shifting to the side without disrupting the centre line of his body. Rufus kept pushing, not too swiftly, but relentlessly. Jason handled the pressure without tripping or stumbling, even as Rufus started ramping up the speed. Just as Jason thought it would be too much, Rufus stopped.

“Why am I happy?” Rufus asked, neither looking or sounding happy.

“Because you finally got me to learn a lesson the hard way?” Jason asked, turning Rufus’ gaze into a glare.

“What is the lesson?” he asked.

“That the all exercises you put me through; the balancing, the handstands, the footwork. They were never about making me faster, or more agile. It’s about being in full control of my body.”

A slight smile forced itself onto Rufus’ lips.

“Good,” he said.

“Good?” Jason asked.

“Good,” Rufus said.

Jason’s eyes moved over to the huge book still waiting atop Farrah’s stone chest.

“Does that mean I get the book?” Jason asked.

“You’ve clearly been working hard in my absence,” Rufus said. “Unlike some people I could mention.”

“I think he means you,” Gary mumbled at Farrah from around a meat skewer.

Jason walked over and reached out for the massive book.

“Wait,” Rufus said.

“What?” Jason asked.

“Before you use that book,” Rufus said, “you have to understand what it is. By which, I mean, you have to understand what it isn’t.”

“Okay,” Jason said.

“The thing you need to understand about the skill book,” Rufus said, “is that it isn’t going to teach you how to fight.”

“That sounds a bit dodgy,” Jason said. “Isn’t that exactly what the book is for?” Jason asked.

“No,” Rufus said. “It will teach you technique, not how to use it. It’s a shortcut that saves you years of repetitive exercise, but that isn’t fighting. Any martial system, at its core, is a method of effectively leveraging strength. That makes it a tool useful for fighting, but the one who does the fighting must still be you. Even the best hammer doesn’t push the nails in itself.”

“There isn’t a magic hammer that does that?” Jason asked.

Rufus gave him a disapproving look.

“Jason, there’s a time to be clever pendant, and a time to shut your mouth for once and learn something.”

“Sorry,” Jason said.

“So, martial arts are a tool,” Rufus continued. “Your physical attributes and essence abilities will impact how that tool is used, but only experience will teach you how to turn form into function. Only using it against actively resisting opponents will let you make it your own, instead of something a book gave you.”

Rufus walked over to where Jason was standing next to the book and placed a hand on it.

“The book will give you the techniques,” he said. “We will show you how, when and why to use them.”

“By beating it into me,” Jason said.

“That’s right,” Gary said from behind the cooker. “We’re going to beat you like a drum.”

“Suddenly I’m a lot less excited,” Jason said. “Couldn’t you just let me have my moment of happiness?”

“I just don’t want you to think learning martial arts from a book will magically make you good at fighting.”

“That’s a disappointment,” Jason said, “given its literal purpose is to magically make me good at fighting.”

“Like I said,” Rufus told him. “We’ll teach you to understand the difference.”

“With our fists,” Gary added. “And our knees, elbows, and such.”

“Can I just use the book, now, please?”

“Go ahead,” Rufus said.

Taking a deep breath, Jason reached out and placed a hand on the book.

Item: [Way of the Reaper: Five Forms I] (iron rank, legendary)

A magical book detailing the foundational techniques for all five forms of the Way of the Reaper (consumable, skill book).

- Requirements: Ability to use skill books.
 - Effect: Imparts iron-rank techniques of the Way of the Reaper's five forms.
 - You are able to use skill book [Way of the Reaper: Five Forms I]. Use Y/N?
-

Jason stood still, hand on the book, eyes closed. He took another deep breath.

"Something wrong?" Rufus asked.

"I'm just not rushing this," Jason said. "It's a big moment for me. I'll probably go the full Keanu."

"What does that mean?" Farrah asked.

"It means be quiet and let me have my magic kung fu moment."

"Kung fu is what they call punching people where Jason comes from, right?" Gary asked.

"What's happening?" Jory asked, wandering out from the clinic's back door.

"Jason's about to use a skill book," Farrah said.

"Will everyone please shut up!" Jason barked, taking his hand off the book and glaring at the others.

"Just give him his quiet moment," Rufus said. "He won't take the book in as well if he's agitated."

"That's true," Farrah said. "Sorry, Jason. Try clearing your mind, like you're going to meditate. It might help."

"Thanks," Jason said. He placed his hand back on the book, closing his eyes. He did as Farrah suggested, emptying his mind and calming his emotions.

"Do you think he's going to take long?"

"Shut up, Gary," Farrah said.

"I'm just wondering if I should grill some more meat."

There was a sizzling sound, followed quickly by a yelp of pain.

"What did I say about lava in the yard?" Jory asked.

Jason let the sounds drift away, letting only the rhythm of his breathing occupy his mind. He felt his body drift away from the world, floating through nothingness. All sensation left him, except for the leather of the book under his hand.

➤ You are able to use skill book [Way of the Reaper: Five Forms I]. Use Y/N?

He mentally assented and the huge book floated up off the chest to hover over Jason's head. The ponderous cover flipped open and text started rising from the page, disembodied runes turning from black to glowing gold. There was a sizzling sound, like meat on a grill as the text transmuted. The first page of the book turned itself over as the last of its text floated off and the second page began disgorging its contents into the air. With each page, the process grew faster and faster, the glowing jumble of text in the air forming a thick cloud. Even with the increasing pace at which the pages were beginning to turn, it was taking a long time to make it through the massive tome.

"Do skill books normally take this long?" Jory whispered to Farrah.

"No they don't," Farrah said, "although I've never seen a skill book that big before."

The cloud of text kept growing, spreading down until Jason was completely obscured. Finally, the sizzling stopped. They couldn't see the heavy book any more, but they heard it hit the ground with a thud. The cloud of golden text started darting about like a swarm of angry bees. Inside, they could hear Jason grunting in pain.

"Hold on," Rufus called out. "Try and last out the whole thing."

"Is he alright?" Jory asked.

"Using a skill book is strenuous," Farrah explained. "The more it's trying to teach you, the greater the strain."

"People often pass out while using them," Rufus said, "but the information isn't passed on as well once they're unconscious. It takes them longer to consolidate what they've learned afterwards."

The cloud shrank over time until they could once again see Jason. He was staggering in place, arms out to keep balance. They watched the golden text diving into his body.

"You're doing good!" Gary cheered him on.

"Hold on as best you can," Rufus encouraged.

Finally the last of the text sank into Jason, leaving him standing unsteadily, but still upright. He took in a sharp breath.

"Whoa," he croaked.

"Still standing," Rufus said. "You've done well."

"How do you feel?" Farrah asked.

Jason stood up straight, eyes gleaming in triumph.

"I know kung fueeeaaauugh..."

Vomit spewed out of him and he fell to his knees, coughing up more before toppling onto his side, unconscious.

“Is he alright?” Jory asked.

“For Jason,” Gary said, “this is actually pretty good.”

In the fighting pits of the fortress, two women were squaring off inside a steel cage. The first was Sophie Wexler, the Nightingale. The other was called the Queen of Thorns, for the thorny whip manifested by her power. It had length enough that no part of the cage was safe, and being a power rather than a weapon, the Queen had devilish control over it. Sophie was cut and bloody from numerous wounds, but the weakness of the whip was its inability to deal critical damage. So long as it failed to ensnare an enemy, it couldn't deal a finishing blow.

Sophie's ability was speed. Not only was she fast, but she could run up walls or even over water. She was boxed in by the cage, but she pushed her reflexes to the limit to avoid being entangled. She had suffered lashes, but the whip had never managed to tie her down.

Sophie ran up the side of the cage as the whip lashed under her, flipping off and into a kick, but her opponent jumped back out of reach. Having missed the kick, Sophie landed off-balance. Seeing her chance, the Queen flung the whip quickly, wrapping it around Sophie's forearm. Grinning triumph at Sophie, she only found resolution on her enemy's face. Too late, she realised she'd been baited.

Sophie shifted her seemingly-unbalanced stance, bracing her weight and yanking on the whip with both arms. The Queen stumbled forward and Sophie ducked behind, looping the slack whip around the Queen's neck to choke her with her own power. The Queen dismissed the whip and Sophie acted quickly before the Queen had a chance to conjure it up again.

Sophie swept the Queen's unbalanced feet out from under her, grabbed her by the hair and smashed her face into the floor. The hard-earth floor of the Fortress was practically stone and Sophie smashed the Queen's face into it a second time and a third, over and over until there was a sharp crack and the Queen's body went limp.

Skin painted red, silver hair matted with sweat and blood, Sophie left the cage without looking back.

“Your winner, ladies and gentlemen... the Nightingale!”

Three viewing boxes, normally empty in the early afternoon, all had occupants watching Sophie's match. In one as Cole Silva, the newest member of the Big Three crime lords of Old City. With his father's passing, the old man's protection could no longer keep Sophie from his grip. Just as he had been closing his fingers around her, she had run to Clarissa Ventress. Now Ventress had Sophie fighting ever more-dangerous opponents. There was every chance she would be ruined before he could snatch her back into his clutches. Watching her bloody form stride away from the cage, he slapped the fruit platter in front of him across the room.

In her own viewing box, Clarissa Ventress was happily imagining the look on Silva's face. She was less happy with Sophie's friend, Belinda.

"You can't keep doing this!" Belinda said. "You're going to get her killed."

Clarissa sighed, her good mood deflated. She responded to Belinda without deigning to look at her.

"The arrangement," Clarissa said, "was that dear Sophie would help me provoke Silva into the kind of rash action that his father always kept him from making."

She turned her head toward Belinda.

"The form that provocation takes is for me to decide," Clarissa continued. "How Sophie survives it is for her to figure out."

"You filthy..."

Belinda cut herself off as Clarissa's enormous bodyguard stirred. Darnell had the predatory features universal to leonids, and Belinda took a step back.

"That's what I thought," Clarissa said. "I don't want to hear your pitiful whining again. Go tend to your injured friend."

Belinda desperately wanted to tear a chunk out Clarissa's throat, but she was not the match of Clarissa or her bodyguard, two of the criminal underworld's rare bronze-rankers. She also knew Sophie would be awkwardly applying medicine right now and making a complete mess of it, so she turned and left.

The third box in which the match had been closely viewed belonged to Lucian Lamprey. Old City might be the territory of the Big Three, but as Director of the Magic Society, he might as well have been the sky above them. If nothing else, as a silver-ranker he could personally tear through Old City's strongest enforcers like they were mewling children.

Outside Lamprey's viewing box, Cassowary Finn hesitated before knocking on the door. As the son of Lucian's friend and deputy, Pochard, Cassowary had been installed as Lucian's dogsbody and normally enjoyed the man's favour. His lack of progress in finding

information on the Nightingale had turned that favour on its head. Hoping that was about to be rectified, he knocked on the door.

“Enter!” Lucian’s voice barked from inside.

Chapter 51: Song of the Nightingale

"Enter!" Lucian's voice bellowed, and Cassowary opened the door. Following him in was a nervous-looking, middle-aged man with a balding head and noticeable paunch.

"Cassowary," Lucian said, his forehead creasing into a frown. Elven features weren't well-suited to malevolence, but Lucian made it work.

"I take it," Lucian said, "that you're showing your face here because you have what I asked for."

"Yes, sir, Mr Lucian," Cassowary said quickly. "This man is a bookmaker here in the pits and has been for some years. He knows all about the girl."

The middle-aged man visibly gulped as Lucian looked him up and down.

"Name?" Lucian demanded.

"Hubert, sir. They call me Bert the Bookie."

"Not your name, imbecile. The fighter, Nightingale."

"Sorry, sir. Her name's Sophie, sir. Sophie Wexler."

"You just heard Cassowary tell me you knew everything about her which, for your sake, I very much hope is true. Tell me everything, Bert the Bookie."

"Everything, sir, yes, sir," Hubert said. "She wasn't born local but came over with her father, when she was real little, like. This was at the time of the monster surge before last. I remember that's when it was because her father was part of this merchant group. The head of their muscle. Seems they hadn't been doing so well and gambled big on a sailing run during the surge. There's a reason no-one sails during a surge, though, and they lost everything. Only a handful made it in on some dinghies, including the girl and her old man. She couldn't have been more than two or three years old."

"He took a little girl out to sea during a monster surge?" Cassowary asked. "What a prick."

"Shut up," Lucian said to Cassowary, then returned his gaze to Hubert. "You, keep talking."

"Well, the merchant group was done," Hubert continued. "No ships, not even the money for passage back after the surge was over. The girl's old man went to work for Silva. Not Cole Silva who's in charge now, obviously. His old dad. Good man, too. Tough, but fair, you know?"

"Get on with it."

"Sorry, sir. So, the girl's old man could fight, like, proper fight, and catches the old man's attention. Does well under Silva Senior for a lot of years, until there's a problem. Silva Junior takes an interest in the girl."

"Hardly a surprise," Lucian said. "He has eyes."

"She is a looker, sir. But she didn't want any part of Silva the younger, and none could blame her. He'd left more than a few professional women in no state to undertake their profession, if you catch my drift. Old man Silva, he knows what his son is, and likes the girl's father. So he tells his son that it's hands-off."

"I bet he took that well," Lucian said.

"About how you'd expect, sir, yes. He did as he was told, but didn't make things pleasant for the girl. Got to the point that her father decided to get her out. He just didn't go about it a good way."

"Oh?"

"The father takes out a loan from Silva the senior. A hefty one. Tries to start up his own trade expedition, but even without a monster surge, the man ain't got no luck with the sea."

"Monster attack?"

"Pirates. Was quite the excitement, from what I hear; father and daughter fighting pirates back to back. Managed to fight them off, too, but the father didn't last long after, and neither did the ship. For the second time in her life the girl arrives at the city in a dinghy, and this time she's got no father and a shipload of inherited debt. She would have been sixteen, seventeen back then. She had an essence her old man had bought, which had just made the debt all the bigger."

"That was when she started pit fighting," Cassowary contributed.

"Shut up, Cassowary," Lucian barked. "Carry on, Bert."

"Now, I knew the father and daughter going back to when her father was muscle here in the Fortress," Hubert said. "He was a hard man. No essences, but I'd seen him put down people who had one, even two. He never fought in the pits himself, but the fighters showed him nothing but respect. His girl, as it turns out, was even better. Run up walls, fly through the damn air like a bird."

"Nightingale," Lucian said.

"That's right," Hubert said. "She had a good run. Took some beatings early on, but she learned fast. Add that to the way she looks and she got some attention."

"She fights for Silva?" Lucian asked.

"She did back then, for Silva the elder," Hubert said. "He looked out for her, kept his son off her back, which Silva Junior did not care for. But the old man took a real shine to the girl. Eventually, she gave up the ring, found some other way to pay the old man back. High-end thieving was what I heard. She had a friend who made the plans and the tools, she did the second-storey work."

"Then why is she back in the pits?" Lucian asked. "And who does she fight for, now?"

"That goes back to when Old Man Silva died," Hubert said. "There was talk old man Silva wasn't going to pass the mantle down to his son," Hubert said. "Too impulsive, too beholden to his own appetites. Word is, the old man was going to step back and pass it to one of the old-guard before he passed. Someone who'd respect the old man's treatment of the girl."

"But he didn't pass it on to anyone else," Lucian said.

"No, he didn't," Hubert agreed. "Couple of months ago, the old man went in his sleep. There were rumours, of course, but nothing came of them. Since the old man hadn't said otherwise, the son stepped in. Damn near the first thing he did was go after the girl. As far as I know, she'd almost cleared the old debt, but now it's in the hands of Silva Junior. He made plenty clear the only payment he'll take. She and her friend have a skill-set, though, and made themselves scarce. Found their way to another of the Big Three, Clarissa Ventress. Cut a deal to protect them from Silva."

"So Ventress is making her fight again?" Lucian asked.

"Word is, she's only doing it to annoy Silva."

"What does she get out of that?"

"The transition from father to son hasn't been smooth for Silva's people," Hubert explained. "The old man was stable and reliable, while it's no secret his son is just the opposite. He ousted his father's old guard, put in his own people. That's left a lot of folks uncertain and nervous about Silva's position in the Big Three. There's been talk about the other two snatching away at of Silva's territory. Word is, the only reason they haven't moved is they don't want Island folk coming down here. Begging your pardon, sir."

"So Ventress is using the girl," Lucian said. "She wants to make Silva do something stupid."

"The Big Three know better than to rock the boat too hard," Hubert said. "They don't want folk like you, sir, coming in and dealing with them."

"But if Cole Silva does something loud and impulsive," Lucian said, "then Ventress steps in to settle it down. She claims new territory and makes good with the Island powers at the same time."

"You see it clear," Hubert said. "If I might say, sir, you're as smart as I've heard."

Lucian laughed.

"I usually detest sycophancy," Lucian said, "but I like you, Bert the Bookie."

He opened a drawer, taking out a pouch of coins and tossing it to Hubert.

"You're a good storyteller," Lucian said. "If you come across any others worth telling, you came and find Cassowary, here."

"Thanking you, sir, I'll be sure and do that."

Hubert departed the viewing box, coin pouch clutched possessively in both hands. That left Lucian and Cassowary alone, the younger man looking nervously at his employer. Lucian glanced at the younger man, his own face unreadable. Cassowary grew increasingly more unnerved as the silence extended.

"Adequate," Lucian said finally, sending relief spilling over Cassowary's face. "I want you to arrange a meeting with Clarissa Ventress. Can I rely on you for that?"

"Yes, Mr Lucian, sir."

Belinda arrived at the Broadstreet Clinic to find a notice on the door. It announced that Mr Tillman wasn't in for the day. Basic medical supplies could be purchased from the reception and Mr Asano would be in at the usual times, but strictly for emergency cases.

Inside, the waiting room was quite full.

"Sorry, Mr Asano," she heard Janice the receptionist say. "The notice said emergencies only, but of course, people ignore it."

"Or can't read," a man said, coming out from the back room. It was the same man who had given Sophie the free ointment. His sharp features and dark, clear eyes looked stern until a friendly smile lit up his face like a light.

"Who's next, Janice?" he asked.

Janice called up a young mother with her son, the man leading them into the back. Belinda then approached the reception desk.

"I'm looking to buy some more ointment and potions," Belinda told Janice. "And some crystal wash, if you have it."

The magic cleaning fluid was more expensive than a shower, but Sophie kept ending up drenched in blood. She knew Jory produced some to sell at the Adventure Society trade hall.

"All out of crystal wash, I'm afraid," Janice said. "Mr Asano keeps buying it all. He's very particular about cleanliness. He says there is tiny dirt that you can't see, but can make

you sick. Sounds like nonsense to me, but Mr Tillman says he's right, so there you have it."

"Who is this guy?" Belinda asked. "Another alchemist?"

"No, he's training to be an adventurer," Janice said. "He's always out back, lifting weights or meditating. He just pops in every once in a while to cure everyone lined up with his abilities. Does it for free, too."

"For free?"

"For free," Janice confirmed.

"Doesn't that hurt Jory's business?"

"Oh, he never makes much money off the clinic, anyway," Janice said. "Mostly he sells things at the trade hall or even takes the occasional adventuring contract. That's where he is today."

"So what does this Asano get out of it, if he's working for free?" Belinda asked.

"Doesn't that seem a bit suspect, to you?"

"No, Mr Asano isn't like that," Janice said. "He says it lets him practise his healing ability, and he is always practising so hard. But really, I think he just likes helping people."

"Still sounds suspicious to me."

"Oh, you wouldn't think so if you got to know him," Janice said. "It's also good that Mr Tillman has a friend. He used to spend all his time upstairs with his little experiments."

"Still, keep an eye on him," Belinda said. "You should never trust people who say they just want to help."

Chapter 52:

Pain

"I'm taking it up to five," Rufus' voice echoed through the mirage chamber. Jason stood waiting in his illusionary body. He was under the dome, but it was hidden by the false landscape. His senses told him he was standing on a desert hillside, ancient ruins all around him and dead enemies at his feet.

The mirage chamber was a strange experience. To Jason's senses, everything was real, including himself. He felt the impact of every blow and the pain of every wound, even as his body lay unharmed in the control room.

The wounds vanished from Jason's body and the fallen enemies around him vanished. In their place, five men appeared and immediately jumped to the attack.

Jason's new art was different in many ways from what he had expected, although in hindsight such differences were obvious. In his own world, martial arts were designed to fight other humans, operating within a fixed range of physical capability. Adventurers had to fight anything from people with superhuman attributes to shark-crabs to spiders the size of a delivery van. It was tricky to put a wrist lock on something that didn't have a wrist.

The Way of the Reaper consisted of five forms, which shifted the combat style's priorities to meet changing circumstances. They were not organised to confront specific challenges, but rather to meet challenges in specific ways. The form, Way of the Sage, for example, was the most mobile of the five stances. It was of equal use against multiple opponents in complicated terrain as it was against a giant creature with many legs.

The Way of the Hierophant form was direct and aggressive, while the Way of the Trickster was the exact opposite. Full of strange movements and unconventional attacks, it reminded Jason of drunken boxing. The Way of the Hunter offered debilitating attacks against the unaware victims, and methods to hone in on the weak point of a monster. Against human opponents, the Way of the Hermit put attackers off-balance to set up devastating counters. Against monsters, it was used to defend against unusual attacks from the most bizarre creatures.

All together, it made for a comprehensive style, incorporating strikes, grapples, even acrobatics. How to move quickly and quietly, or with swift, breakneck efficiency. All the things he had been learning came into play, from Rufus' footwork to Gary's movement training, even Farrah's situational awareness techniques.

Despite all of that, Rufus' proclamations about the nature of fighting came to pass. The result of his sudden martial skills reminded Jason of playing a video game for the first

time. His avatar may have an array of amazing abilities, but his fumbling efforts to use them left him beaten, battered and failing to live up to the potential. Boxed in by the five illusionary enemies,

He was pinned down and savagely beaten. Rufus took longer to end the simulation than Jason would have liked, but eventually he did and Jason woke up in his real body. He swung his legs off the platform he was laying on, letting out a groan as he rubbed his side.

“I swear I can still feel it,” he said.

“Phantom pain,” Rufus said. “You get used to it.”

“Five enemies was a little much,” Jason said. “I could barely handle four.”

“You want to go back down?” Rufus asked.

“No, the challenge is good.”

“That’s what I want to hear,” Rufus said.

“Still better five illusionary goons than one of Humphrey,” Jason said. “I’d call him a monster, but I’ve fought monsters. He’s worse.”

“Humphrey has been training since he was able to walk upright,” Rufus said. “He and I have that in common. A book won’t close that gap overnight.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said.

“What did your parents teach you when you were growing up?” Rufus asked.

“My dad’s parents came from another country,” Jason said. “My mum was very big on having us learn about it. The language, the culture. Dad himself couldn’t care less, and I was the same. It was really my brother’s thing.”

“Well,” Rufus said, “you can speak the language now.”

Jason tilted his head thoughtfully.

“Huh. I guess I can.”

Jason and Rufus left the mirage chamber and started back for the city. Rufus asking about his family had left him uncharacteristically quiet. Jason didn’t have a lot of contact with his family after they had fallen out. When he dropped out of university he didn’t move back from Melbourne. The only ones he saw regularly were his much older sister, along with her husband and daughter. Uncle Jason was the cheapest childcare in town, but for all his complaining, he loved that little girl. From literally a world away, conflicts that once seemed intractable now looked small and meaningless.

As they made their way from the grounds of the Geller Estate, Rufus looked over at Jason, locked in contemplation. He wasn’t used to be the one making conversation.

“How are your essence abilities coming along?” Rufus asked.

“What? Oh, good, yeah” Jason said. “I’m getting better with the shadow teleport. I’ve been testing its limitations.”

“Oh?”

“It needs a distinct shadow,” Jason explained. “I can’t just teleport around wherever I like in the dark.”

“So you need at least some light,” Rufus said.

“Yeah,” Jason said, “but I have a solution for that. Shadow jumping isn’t the only ability I’ve been working on.”

“Good,” Rufus said. “Mastering your essence abilities is crucial. What have you learned?”

Jason stopped and looked around. They were on a wide path through a grove of what looked like banyan trees. Like most of the Geller estate’s winding pathways, the vegetation shaded the path from the punishing sun.

“This’ll work,” Jason said. “You remember how my cloak can light up with stars?”

“I do.”

“Watch this.”

Jason’s shadowy cloak appeared around him like dark smoke. Stars started to appear upon it, lighting it up as Rufus had seen in the past. Then the stars started floating off the cloak, more and more of them drifting out, spreading their cool light under the shady trees. The lights weren’t overpowering, filling the area with shadowy nooks and crannies. Jason started moving around. but the star motes didn’t move with him, floating independently.

“So you can bring your own shadows,” Rufus said.

“That’s the idea,” Jason said. “I’ve been practising at night. Once I have it down, I should be a proper menace in the dark.”

“Well, keep at it,” Rufus said. “Ideally, you will have solid control of your abilities for the Adventure Society assessment. It’s only a couple of weeks away now.”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I’ve come so far since I was stumbling around that hedge maze with no pants, but it feels like there’s still so much further to go.”

“The only thing you can do with that feeling,” Rufus said, “is to get used to it. I’ve been going through one form of training or another for as long as I can remember, and I still feel like that.”

The interior of Lucian Lamprey's viewing box was spacious and split into two levels. The smaller, higher level was at the back. Behind Lucian’s heavy wooden desk was the

luxurious chair in which he spent most of his day. The larger space was a relaxed lounging area, with plush chairs and a comfortable couch. They were arrayed in a semicircle around the viewing window, with a low refreshments table in the middle.

Lucian had descended from his usual perch as a gesture to his visitor, awaiting her in one of the soft chairs in the viewing lounge. Respect was not the same as deference, however, and he didn't stand as he waved her to another of the chairs. The director of the Magic Society did not stand up to meet a crime lord.

"Thank you for your kind invitation," Clarissa Ventress said. Her bodyguard, Darnell, remained outside the door. He rarely was away from her side, but Ventress was at a rare disadvantage. The Fortress was the symbol of power in Old City, and she was one of its rulers. In front of Lucian Lamprey, however, she was reminded that Old City's power was only hers so long as the Island had no interest in taking it from her. Lucian Lamprey represented both danger and opportunity.

"You have been the Fortress' most important patron for some time now," Ventress said. "I'm delighted you've given me the privilege of a meeting."

Lucian nakedly ran his eyes over Clarissa. He could sense her bronze-rank aura, see the body sculpted into lithe perfection by the magic of her essences. She wore an exquisite green dress that both commanded and provoked. Lucian had heard the delta contained several breeds of snake that were beautiful in their colouration, but deadly to encounter. He had the same impression of Clarissa Ventress.

"The pleasure is genuinely mine," he told her.

Lucian's assistant Cassowary brought drinks brought refreshments, sitting them on the table as Lucian and Clarissa exchanged some more niceties.

"As you may be aware," Lucian said, "I am an enthusiast of the fights here in the Fortress."

"I have heard as such," Clarissa said.

"Normally it is the evening battles that interest me. Fighters with a full set of essences. But lately, I have found one of the lower-card fighters to be highly compelling. One of your fighters."

Clarissa smiled. The key to controlling a person was finding what they wanted. Now she understood what Lucian wanted, her concerns melted away.

"The Nightingale," she said.

It was hardly a leap of deduction. A certain kind of man took perverse pleasure in breaking the will of a strong woman. It was the reason Sophie made such a useful stick

with which to prod Cole Silva. Clarissa enjoyed such men, as she found them weak and easy to handle.

“Her real name is Sophie Wexler,” Clarissa said. “She came into my employ under the condition that I would protect her.”

“Give her to me.”

“Of course, I would like to do nothing else,” Clarissa said. “But there are complications.”

Lucian scowled.

“You must understand,” Clarissa said, “that my deal to protect her is widely known. That knowledge is no small part of where the protection comes from. I have gotten where I am in no small part on the strength of my reputation. If I make a deal to protect a person, then hand them over to someone else, I am no longer able to vouchsafe any agreement on the strength of my world alone.”

“And if I just decide to take her?” Lucian asked.

“Then no one in Old City could stop you,” Clarissa said. “But if Old City was all you had to worry about, you already would have. The Director of the Magic Society can’t just go around kidnapping women for his own pleasure, and that kind of thing has a way of getting around. What you need is to have her placed under your power in such a way that will not be given a second glance.”

“Go on,” Lucian said.

“I think, perhaps,” Clarissa said, “there is a way in which we can have both of our needs met. It will take some effort on my part, but the conclusion should be mutually satisfying.”

“Explain,” Lucian demanded.

“You must understand that one's word is not something that can be repaired. Once broken, it stays broken. I made an agreement to protect the girl from external influences, in return for certain services. Should something befall her in the course of providing those services, I cannot be expected to protect her from herself. You may or may not be aware, but she is a professional thief. If she were caught through lack of ability in her chosen trade, then I could hardly be blamed. Once she was in the hands of the legal system, I have no doubt a man of such staggering influence as yourself could take charge of the matter from there.”

“I do believe I could,” Lucian said thoughtfully. “But can you get her there?”

“It will require me to take some pains,” Clarissa said. “But what’s a little pain in service to a man such as yourself?”

Chapter 53: Nightlife

With Jason's Adventure Society field assessment looming closer by the day, Rufus, Gary and Farrah pushed him harder than ever. As a release, they would spend their evenings exploring the night time entertainments offered by the city. Danielle Geller acted as their guide to local society, usually with her son, Humphrey, in tow.

The symphony was a revelation to Jason. The concert hall was situated in the guild district, conveniently close to their lodgings, and they enjoyed the view from the Geller's private viewing box.

The instruments weren't what he recognised, although many were similar, at least in appearance. It was the magic they contained that made the performance as magnificent visually as it was musically. As they played, dancing streamers of light rose up from the instruments, galloping out over the audience to frolic in consonance with the music. Harmony of light and sound came together to transfigure the performance into something unlike any Jason had experienced before.

"How often do they put this on?" Jason leaned over to ask Danielle.

"The full symphony? Once per month, although smaller performances happen all through the week."

"Is there a membership or something I can get?"

"There's a patronage program with the Musical Society," Danielle said. "I can introduce you to some people from the Musical Society if that is of interest to you."

"Please and thank you."

At an evening of ballroom dancing, they encountered the young acolyte of knowledge, Gabrielle Pellin.

"Fancy that," Danielle said innocently.

When Humphrey failed to muster up the courage for an approach, he was left watching in horror as Jason taught her a dance from his own world. After Jason slipped the string quartet a few coins, they claimed the floor to demonstrate it in full, to the applause of the gathering.

Afterwards, Jason escorted her in the direction of Humphrey, Danielle and Jason's friends.

"You're quite the spirited dancer," Gabrielle told Jason as they walked leisurely around the dance floor. "You never did tell me the name."

"It's called the tango," Jason said.

"Is it well known, in your world?" she asked.

"It's probably the most famous dance there is."

"It was my older sister, who taught me to dance," Jason said. "I wasn't very interested until my father gave me some sage advice. He told me that if I wanted to be successful in love, I needed to learn three things. How to dance, how to cook, and how to keep my damn mouth shut."

"How did that work out?" Gabrielle asked.

"Well, Jason said, "I can dance and I can cook. Gabrielle, you'll remember Humphrey Geller."

"Of course," she said. "I haven't assessed that many people for the Adventure Society, but of those I have, I think he may have been the most talented."

"You realise you assessed me right after?"

"I do," she said primly.

"Ouch," Jason said, turning his gaze to Humphrey. "It seems this rose still has her thorns. Humphrey, I think I'll leave this next dance to you."

They both looked to Humphrey, who was looking nervous. His sheepish embarrassment could not hide the broad shoulders and chiselled features, however. He was another in a long line of annoyingly attractive people Jason was getting to know.

"I think that would be delightful," Gabrielle said, taking mercy on him.

"What do you say, Humphrey?" Jason asked.

"That... you... I would like that very much."

Unlike most society hotspots, the theatre district was actually located in Old City, quite close to the Fortress. It allowed members of high society to seem like they were heading to a play instead of the less-savoury delights of the city's chief den of iniquity. Leaving a private viewing box, Jason and his companions discussed their opinions of the play.

"The stage combat was actually rather impressive," Rufus said. "I found the plot to be a little slight, however. I like a performance with something to say."

"It did have something to say," Gary said. "That sword fights are great. The good guys win, the bad guys lose, the end. I liked it."

Jason was shaking his head.

"You disagree?" Danielle asked him.

"I'm probably just misreading it because of the difference in culture," Jason said.

"It's not like you to be diplomatic," Rufus said. "Just say what you really think."

"I think it did have something to say," Jason said. "I think the main characters weren't the heroes; they were the villains. I think the whole play was a critique of hereditary power structures and by overcoming the antagonists, the central characters were restoring a state of oppression."

"You think the main characters were the villains?" Rufus asked.

"I do," Jason said.

"I don't see it," Rufus said.

"Don't you have a childhood friend who's a member of some royal family?" Jason asked.

"He does," Farrah said.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Rufus asked.

They exited the theatre through the doors reserved for private box holders, where members of society were reboarding their carriages. Jason noticed a woman with the same silver-rank aura and physical perfection of Danielle. She broke away from her own group of ladies, making a beeline for Danielle.

"Danielle," the woman greeted. "Always lovely to see you. Young Master Humphrey. And you must be Rufus Remore, with your erstwhile companions, of course."

"Lady Thalia Mercer," Danielle introduced the lady.

Thalia's eyes settled on Jason.

"We haven't had the pleasure," she said. "You must be the young man people are getting so curious about."

"I'm no one important," Jason said.

"Yet, you keep important company," Thalia said.

"I do?" he asked. "I don't really know these people. I'm only here because I won a raffle."

Farrah snorted a laugh, while Rufus ran an exasperated hand over his face.

"Wait, there was a raffle?" Gary asked, only to be shushed by Farrah.

"This is Jason Asano," Danielle introduced, a smile playing over her lips. "He will be taking his field assessment for the Adventure Society when Humphrey retakes his. I assume your son will be there as well?"

"He will," Thalia said unhappily. "I tried to convince my husband that Thadwick would benefit from additional training, but he was quite adamant."

Thalia turned to Rufus, the man who had failed her son during the previous assessment.

"You know, Mr Remore," she said, "you rather overturned the fruit cart with how you conducted the last assessment."

"I'm sorry if you feel your son was treated unfairly," Rufus said, "but since he had previously passed, perhaps it would have been better not to put him forward for reassessment."

Thalia laughed.

"I couldn't agree more," Thalia said, to Rufus' surprise. "However, my husband cannot seem to help poking his fingers into things best left alone."

"It's a shame you weren't here when Thalia's daughter was tested," Danielle said. "Thalia oversaw her training personally, and I have no doubt she would have passed. Where is Cassandra, this evening?"

"Out in the delta somewhere, on a contract," Thalia said. "I do look forward to introducing you, Mr Remore."

After some more niceties, Thalia excused herself and the group boarded the Geller family carriage. It was one of the ones drawn by magic rather than animals and was larger than the equivalents from Jason's own world.

"I do believe Thalia is trying to set you up with her daughter," Danielle told Rufus.

"He's used to it," Farrah said.

"If she's anything like her brother," Rufus said, "I'd rather she didn't. I've never seen anyone that incompetent undertake a field assessment before. I'm convinced the other members of his group passed because they honed their abilities covering for that idiot. It was to the point that it could be a whole new training methodology. The trick would be finding people so aggressively incapable."

"You'll find her daughter to be a very different prospect," Danielle said. "Cassandra is a remarkable woman, and right about your age. Actually, she rather reminds me of Jason."

"You're kidding," Rufus said.

"Oh, at a glance, they seem different," Danielle said. "She's more of a knife to Jason's hammer, but they both seem to enjoy provocation as a social tool."

"On second thoughts," Rufus said, looking warily at Jason, "I might prefer to deal with the brother."

Sophie and Belinda were summoned to Clarissa Ventress' home instead of the Fortress; a sprawling manor in Old City's canal district. The canal district had its own internal city wall. It was a legacy of time before the Island, when the district was home to

the city elite. It had been left to those who had wealth but lacked in prestige, preferring to stand tall in Old City than go underfoot on the Island.

The two women were led through the compound, past various thugs standing guard. Centuries ago, Clarissa's residence had been the seat of the Mercer family. The grounds were quite expansive, with more than one canal flowing through it.

Inside the house itself, they were guided by Clarissa's hulking leonid bodyguard, Darnell. Clarissa was waiting for them in a parlour, sitting at a table with morning tea set out. Hers was the only seat in the room.

"Ladies," greeted them. "I have good news for you."

"I don't suppose it's that Sophie's done with the fighting pits," Belinda said sullenly.

"Actually, it is," Clarissa said.

Sophie and Belinda both looked up sharply.

"Really?" Belinda asked.

"Yes," Clarissa said. "She's had her last pit fight."

"Then what is it you want me doing next?" Sophie asked, eyes narrowing as she looked at Clarissa.

"So cynical," Clarissa said.

"Just say it," Sophie said.

"You two were an excellent team," Clarissa said. "I suspect that even now, the two of you are the only ones who know exactly how many jobs you pulled for Old Man Silva. I just want you back to doing what you do best."

"The deal was that we help you provoke Silva," Sophie said. "Now you want us to steal from him?"

"Of course not," Clarissa said. "I would never put you in that position."

"Then what?" Sophie demanded.

"It is well known that for almost a decade now, the Silva family has enjoyed the services of a pair of excellent thieves. When those same thieves start robbing the social elite, right out in public, the pressure on Silva will be considerable"

"Are you crazy?" Belinda yelled, stepping angrily forward. Clarissa's bodyguard moved towards her, but Clarissa casually waved him back.

"This will be the last task I assign you," Clarissa said. "Naturally, stealing from Greenstone's wealthiest will get adventurers investigating. Once they realise that the Silva family's most capable thieves are the most likely culprits, the pressure on Silva will be immense."

“Are you really willing to risk bringing the powers from the Island down on your own head?” Sophie asked.

“It’s hardly a risk,” Clarissa said. “What they’ll find is that after conducting a series of expertly-carried out robberies, the thieves who have worked for the Silva family for years are no longer in the city. Because, having met your end of the deal, you will be far from here, as promised. With a goodly amount of money for your troubles.”

Belinda opened her mouth to snap back a response, but was silenced by a gesture from Sophie.

“Alright,” Sophie said. Belinda wrenched her head to look at Sophie as if she’d lost her mind. Sophie gave a slight shake of the head to keep her silent.

“Excellent,” Clarissa said. “Now, your first target-”

“No,” Sophie interrupted.

“Excuse me?” Clarissa asked.

“The goal is to draw attention down on Silva,” Sophie said, “not to undertake any specific robbery. So, it doesn’t matter what we take, or from who, so long as it’s high profile and it’s public. Belinda and I will choose the targets and the timing.”

“Choosing the targets,” Clarissa said, “means I can meet more than one objective at a time.”

“Our deal didn’t include any other objectives you may have,” Sophie said. “So you can sort them out yourself. You aren’t staking us out as bait for some other reason, are you?”

“Of course not,” Clarissa said.

“Then we choose the targets and we choose the timing,” Sophie said.

“Fine,” Clarissa conceded. “Just make sure I’m notified beforehand.”

“No, we’ll keep you out of it,” Sophie said. “We wouldn’t want people moving attention from Silva to you, after all. We plan and execute the robberies alone, and fence the goods through Silva’s people. We have connections enough for that.”

Clarissa’s mouth was smiling, but her eyes were spraying venom.

“Very well,” she said. “But I want jobs done quickly and repeatedly. If not, then you aren’t holding up your end, and there won’t be a place in this city you can hide from me. As for escaping it... if you could leave this city alive, then you wouldn’t have come to me in the first place.”

Sophie gave a curt nod, then strode away. Belinda followed in her wake, Clarissa’s bodyguard trailing them until they were out of the compound. They walked through the darkened streets of Old City at a rapid stride.

"What was that?" Belinda angrily demanded once she was sure they had cleared Clarissa's eyes and ears. "That whole thing makes no sense. Everything hinges on people figuring out that we're the thieves. And stirring up trouble with the Island people? They'll send adventurers after us. Is she trying to bring all that down on her own head?"

"You're right," Sophie said. "It doesn't make sense if this is still about provoking Silva. Something's changed, and somehow Island politics are involved. Ventress wouldn't risk provoking the Island unless she has some kind of backing to shield her."

"This whole plan is madness," Belinda said.

"Yes," Sophie agreed.

"Then why go along with it? She has to know how transparent she's being."

"You know how Ventress is about her reputation. She wants us to break the deal, even if everyone knows she pushed us into it."

"Why bother?" Belinda asked. "We aren't any use to her except as a stick to poke Silva with."

"I don't know," Sophie said. "Maybe she's looking for an excuse to hand us over to him. Whatever she's into now, we've somehow become leverage. But she can't be seen breaking the deal."

"Her vaunted reputation," Belinda said.

"If we break the deal, she can openly do whatever she wants with us," Sophie said.

"So you bought us as much time and freedom as you could," Belinda realised.

"We need to figure out our next move. Ventress is no longer our way out of the city."

"Dorgan?" Belinda suggested. The third member of the Big Three had been quiet since the death of Old Man Silva.

"We don't have anything to trade for protection," Sophie said.

"Then what?" Belinda asked. "Try and make our own way out?"

The reason they had gone to Clarissa in the first place was that escaping the city unnoticed by the Big Three was as good as impossible. They had an iron grip of the shipping trade, and there was very little overland travel.

"We may have to try the overland route," Sophie said.

Escaping the Greenstone region overland meant one of two routes. The first was to go river to the Mistrun Oasis, then keep going through the desert to the central veldt. From there, south, to the more fertile lands and a port where the Big Three had interests enough that they could easily be dragged back to Greenstone. The other way was to make for the Northern territories, which means crossing the dead sands, braving monsters and nomadic bandit tribes.

“We ruled that out for a reason,” Belinda said. “Our experience and expertise ends at the city wall. If we try the wilderness, it’s a pure gamble.”

“A gamble may be all we have,” Sophie said. “For now, we do enough to keep Ventress mollified while we figure it out.”

Belinda hung her head.

“Things just keep getting worse,” she said softly.

“I know.”

Chapter 54: Field Assessment

The layout of the Adventure Society campus reminded Jason of a university. One of the nice ones, with expanses of lawn, gardens and tiled pathways leading through impressive stone arches. The marshalling yard was like a small town square for larger expeditions to assemble. When Humphrey and Jason arrived together, a dozen people were already waiting. An entitled cliché walked out of the group to sneer at Humphrey.

“Here he is,” the young man said. “The pride of the Geller family. But that out-of-town prick failed you, just like the rest of us.”

Like everyone other than Jason himself, the person approaching them was somewhere in his mid to late teens. This made the assemblage of would-be adventurers young men and women, but Jason could only think of the sneering idiot as a boy.

“We all have areas in which we can improve,” Humphrey said. “There’s no shame in admitting that.”

“Shouldn’t your hair be more oily?” Jason asked.

“What?” the man asked, turning from Humphrey to Jason as if surprised to see him there.

“Your hair,” Jason said, pointing. “When the sneering idiot who will inevitably be humiliated comes out to do his sneering, his hair should be properly greased back. Clearly, you’ve overdone it with whatever goo you put in there, but I really feel like you could have slathered in some more.”

“Who are you?” the boy asked. He was looking at Jason with the same expression he’d give to furniture that unexpectedly started talking.

“I’m no one important,” Jason said.

“Clearly,” The boy said. “Do you have any idea who my father is?”

“Does anyone?” Jason asked. “Your mother’s a friendly woman.”

Humphrey winced, while the onlookers all looked shocked, none more so than the boy himself.

“Are you looking to die?” the boy asked.

“Is your father going to kill me?” Jason asked. “You don’t strike me as someone who fights his own battles.”

“Uh, Jason,” Humphrey interjected. “That’s Thadwick Mercer. His father actually might kill you.”

“You’re Thadwick Mercer?” Jason asked.

"That's right. Feel like apologising, now?"

"I do, actually," Jason said. "I shouldn't have said that about your mother. I have neither the knowledge nor the right to criticise how she conducts her personal affairs and I apologise unreservedly. I only met her briefly, but she struck me as a woman of style and intelligence. Now I've met you, I can see why people wonder how you turned out this way."

"What?" Thadwick asked.

"It was actually the first thing I heard about you," Jason said. "What was it Rufus said, Humphrey? The most incompetent person he'd ever seen attempt to join the Adventure Society? And Rufus grew up in a school, so he's seen the bottom-end of a lot of classes."

"I'm going to destroy you, you no-name little prick," Thadwick spat. "I'm going to scrape you off my shoe."

"Is that a challenge?" Jason asked. "Like a duel, or something? How do you want to do it; dance-off, or yo-mama fight? I'd prefer a dance-off because I actually like your mother. Also, I've got the moves."

"What?"

"You say that a lot," Jason said, "and you always look kind of confused. You're not the sharpest tool in the shed, are you?"

Thadwick raised a hand at Jason, flame crackling over it.

"THAT'S ENOUGH," a voice bellowed. Everyone turned to see a man wearing an Adventure Society pin approaching the group. Jason had never seen Vincent Trenslow before, although Rufus had described his glorious moustache. As promised, it extended past either side of his head. Behind Vincent was another official that Jason did recognise, as did Humphrey. It was Guy, the official present at their Adventure Society intake.

"Mercer," Vincent barked, "if I see you try to use an ability on a fellow candidate again, you will fail on the spot. And you, Asano, is it? I suggest you clamp that mouth shut before someone puts a fist through it. Which will be recorded in my report as a self-inflicted injury. Geller, do try and keep your friend in check."

"Yes, sir," Humphrey said. Thadwick flashed an insolent look but remained silent. Jason was barely listening, transfixed by the man's moustache.

Rufus had spent a week working closely with Vincent Trenslow during the last field assessment. After hearing Vincent would be taking Jason's assessment, Rufus told Jason what he could anticipate.

"There may be some level of corruption in this branch of the Adventure Society," Rufus had told him, "but Vincent Trenslow is exactly what I expect from a Society official. I

know you have your own ways of showing respect, but try and use mine, for once. Humphrey Geller will be there, so follow his lead.”

Jason respected Rufus’ judgement and intended to do his best, while acknowledging his best wasn’t that great. He also recognised that Rufus had very much undersold the magnificence of the man’s moustache.

Vincent explained the procedure for the Adventure Society field assessment. The group would depart for one week, during which time the candidates would attempt to complete postings from the adventure boards in towns and villages of the delta.

“For the duration of this assessment,” Vincent said, “you may refer to me as Instructor Trenslow and my fellow official as Instructor Spalding. For the second month in a row, we have extended numbers. We are taking a different approach this month and splitting the group in two.”

The other official, Guy, stepped forward.

“Last month there were problems finding enough postings for everyone on the notice boards,” Guy said. “Therefore, the groups will be assessed separately, taking different routes through the delta.”

“There weren’t enough monsters last month?” Jason whispered at Humphrey.

“There were plenty,” Humphrey whispered back. “Watch how they split the groups.”

Jason spotted that while he hid it well enough, Vincent had a hint of disdain around the eyes as Guy divided the group.

“My group,” Guy said, “will consist of those who have passed the assessment before, but their records were lost. I’ll be administering a specially-tailored program of reassessment for all of you that takes into account past achievement.”

“And now you see it,” Humphrey said softly.

“Yes I do,” Jason agreed.

There were seventeen candidates, ten of which went off with Guy for their special assessment. The remaining seven followed Vincent.

“So that’s how the Society came down,” Jason said. “The people who weaselled their way off the books weasel their way back on, while the rest of us pass an actual test.”

“Mr Asano,” Vincent called out sharply. “If and when you have passed this test and become a member of the Adventure Society, you can comment on how the Society conducts itself as much as you like. For the next week, however, you are a worthless flesh-sack nestled vulnerably in the palm of my hand. It would serve you well to disincline me at every opportunity from wanting to make a fist.”

“Uh, yes, sir,” Jason said.

Travel through the delta was mostly along the raised embankment roads. The group travelled in the back of an animal-drawn wagon, which didn't sit well with everyone. They were from wealthy and privileged families, unused to such rough treatment. A few complained loudly until browbeaten by Vincent, after which they restricted themselves to unhappy muttering. Others followed Humphrey's lead and took the conditions in stride.

Walking along a narrow embankment road, Jason glanced at Vincent, then at Humphrey. Both had crystals floating over their heads. The one over Vincent was silver-grey, while Humphrey's was a glowing blue.

"What's with the crystals?" Jason asked. "Should I have gotten a crystal from somewhere?"

"My crystal isn't a magic item," Humphrey said. "It's an essence ability that restores my mana. The one Vincent has is a recording crystal. You haven't seen them before?"

"I haven't," Jason said. "What do they record?"

"An image of whatever is in front of them, plus whatever they can hear," Humphrey said. "He's recording everything for later assessment. After the last time, Mr Remore took me through all the things I did wrong, in excruciating detail. He kept playing them, over and over."

"Where would I get something like that?" Jason asked.

"The Magic Society makes them," Humphrey said. "They sell them at the markets on the Island, and at a few stores in the guild district. You can get them at the trade hall in the Adventure Society, too. Assuming you pass and are allowed in."

The group was walking through an expanse of leafy, knee-high plants when Vincent quietly called for a stop. The plants were some kind of crop Jason wasn't familiar with, divided into fields by bamboo fencing. Vincent pulled out another crystal and tossed it into the air in front of him, where it started floating. In front of it, an image shimmered into being and Jason realised this new crystal worked like a telescope. It showed a distant part of the sprawling fields, where a pack of rodent-like monsters were gorging themselves on the crop.

The monsters were half as tall as a human but looked like oversized mice. They stood on their hind legs, hunching forward. Instead of forelegs, they had long arms that ended in eerily human-like hands. They used them to pluck leaves and stuff them into their mouths.

“Ratlings,” Vincent said. “Thirteen of them. They’ll run rather than fight, and if they reach their burrows, that’ll be it. They won’t surface again until they go berserk, at which point it won’t be crops they’re after.”

Vincent turned to look at Humphrey.

“Mr Geller, the only reason you failed last time was that you lacked decisiveness. So long as you can show me you’ve learned something in the last month, you’re the easiest pass in this group. Can you get all thirteen?”

“Yes, sir,” Humphrey said without hesitation.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Prove it.”

Jason watched as scaly wings appeared out of thin air on Humphrey’s back. He brought them towards the ground, pushing him into the air. The dragon wings sent him surging away at a rapid pace. Humphrey’s familiar, which had been sitting on his shoulder in the form of a bird, flew after him.

“Wow,” Jason said.

Jason and Humphrey had trained together several times over the last month. They had focused on martial technique, so each was yet to see all the other’s essence abilities. Humphrey’s martial art was called the Surging Storm style, an explosive and unrelenting combat art that was completely at odds with Humphrey’s personality. Thus far, Jason’s skill-book derived technique hadn’t come close to matching it.

The group watched Humphrey climb higher into the air as he grew smaller with distance. Suddenly he plunged out of the sky and all eyes snapped to the magnified image in front of Vincent. They saw Humphrey crash into the monsters like a meteor, a huge sword in the shape of a dragon’s wing appearing in his hands. He came down like a meteor, his boots landing on one monster and his sword on another. They died in a single, gruesome instant.

The other ratlings let out panicked screeches while Humphrey swung the huge sword in a low, horizontal arc. It ploughed through the monsters as if they weren’t there, severing three clean in half with a single swing.

The ratlings scattered, but instead of chasing, Humphrey dropped his sword, which vanished into the air. He took a deep breath, then a stream of fire sprayed out of his mouth like a human flamethrower. He walked the burning line over the fleeing ratlings, torching crops and monsters alike. Three ratlings escaped the flames, having run at different angles to the main cluster. One was being harried by Humphrey’s familiar, which had

turned into some kind of predatory cat, around the same size as the ratling. The other two were sprinting away in different directions.

Humphrey's wings had vanished after he landed, but they reappeared briefly to fling him forward through the air. They only appeared for a moment, in which they hurled him faster than he had been flying earlier. Another sword appeared in his hand, this one smaller, with a blade made up of metal feathers. He brought it down on a fleeing ratling as he landed, cutting it down with one strike. He vanished from the spot he was standing, reappearing in the path of the final ratling. His sword was held out in front of him and the startled ratling ran straight onto it. Humphrey yanked the blade up, spraying blood as the monster fell dead.

"He got teleport," one of the candidates next to Jason said as they watched Humphrey through the magnified image. "I bet they paid a lot for that awakening stone."

Humphrey glanced over to his familiar, who was sitting proudly next to a ratling, dead at his feet. As soon as it saw Humphrey notice it, it transformed into a dog and bounded over for Humphrey to scratch behind its ear. Humphrey walked back to the group through the field, his body drenched in monster blood. The others gave him a wide berth, except for Jason.

"You alright?" Jason asked. He knew Humphrey had killed monsters as part of his training, but also knew Humphrey was a kind man. Violence didn't come naturally to him.

Humphrey nodded. His normally friendly smile was macabre on his bloody face.

"That's what I like about you, Jason," he said. "You don't pretend that what we do doesn't affect us."

"I don't think being numb to it all makes you strong," Jason said. "Strong is accepting the choices you make and owning up to the consequences."

Like Jason, Humphrey had a dimensional storage space, from which he took a bottle of clear liquid and tipped it over his head. The crystal wash flowed over him, eliminating every trace of blood and filth.

"I'd like to be strong like that," Humphrey said. "You know, Jason, sometimes it's like you're from another world."

Jason had long ago realised that Danielle had figured him out, not realising she hadn't shared it with Humphrey. He decided to tell his friend all about it when they had the time. For now, they were surrounded by other people. Vincent looked Humphrey over, now clean, the crystal wash rapidly evaporating.

"You got them all," Vincent said.

"Yes, sir," Humphrey said.

“Burned a good portion of a farmer’s crop, though.”

“I thought the farmer would rather lose some harvest now than family later,”
Humphrey said. “I made a choice.”

“Yes you did,” Vincent said, putting a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder. “Good job.”

Chapter 55: Rune Tortoise

The routine for the field assessment was to stop in a town or village each night. In the morning they would collect monster notices from the adventuring board and set out to deal with them. Vincent took an approach where the would-be adventurers who met his standards were no longer called on for the monster hunts. Starting with Humphrey, the first three days saw four of the seven candidates move from participants to onlookers.

On the third morning, they were delayed in one of the towns Jason had passed through on his original journey to Greenstone. Vincent wasn't willing to turn away the quickly growing crowd of earnest sick people, so the town constable once again turned his office into a makeshift clinic.

Stopping to help the locals delayed the group's monster-hunting activities until the end of the morning. As Jason healed the sick, the grateful locals pulled out tables and benches, laying out a cornucopia of food for his companions. Some of the aristocratic candidates turned up their noses at a rustic feast until they started to smell the food. Once Humphrey started filling his plate with enthusiasm, the others followed his lead.

Liana Stelline was one of the adventurer candidates who was acquainted with Humphrey. Their families moved in similar circles, and they had both failed the previous assessment together. Like Humphrey, her family wanted her to pass on merit, rather than privilege. Sitting next to him on a bench, she asked Humphrey about Jason.

"How did you end up friends with him?" she asked. "Don't you find him insufferably smug?"

"He can be... challenging," Humphrey said. "He's a long way from home and I think he likes to put people off-balance because it's how he feels all the time. He can be difficult, and oblivious, but I think there's a kindness and generosity under it all. Look at what he's doing right now."

"Tell Thadwick Mercer about kindness and generosity," Liana said.

"That's fair," Humphrey said. "He can be mean and self-impressed when he's trying to prove how clever he is, which maybe isn't quite as clever as he thinks. He certainly won't get along with everyone. But look around us."

He gestured around at the villagers and all feast laid out for them.

"How many adventurers get this kind of reception?" he asked.

“He gets along with common people because he’s common, she said. “That, and he’s giving out free healing,” she said. “My sister has healing powers; she could do the exact same thing.”

“But does she?” Humphrey asked.

In the constable’s cottage, the last person shuffled out.

“That’s everyone?” Vincent asked.

“I think so,” Jason said.

“The constable nodded.

“You know,” he said, “it would make my life easier if you’d warn me you’re coming through instead of just turning up.”

“That’s on the boss man,” Jason said, jabbing a thumb in Vincent’s direction. “He sets the destination. Did I hear something about lunch being put on?”

That night they were stopped in another little town where they had taken up all four of the inn’s twin rooms. Humphrey and Jason were sitting on their beds because there wasn’t space anywhere else in the cramped twin share. Jason was going over the clothing in his hands, examining the ragged claw marks in the light of a magic lamp.

“This cloth armour doesn’t hold up so well,” Jason said.

“Well, it is cloth,” Humphrey said. “If you want real protection out of it you need to spend more on the magic. Or you could try something heavier.”

“I didn’t like the leather I was finding,” Jason said. “It was either too stiff and restrictive, or too expensive for what it did. I have a good amount of money, but that doesn’t mean I’m alright with being ripped off.”

“All the best armour is bought and sold at the Adventure Society trade hall,” Humphrey said. “Once we pass the test you can buy something there. How well does that cloak power of yours protect you?”

“I did some testing with Gary,” Jason said. “It doesn’t hold up to bronze-level attacks at all, which was no surprise. It’s really good against cutting attacks, so that’s a lot of swords, knives and claws.”

He looked down at the claw marks in his magically-treated cloth.

“So long as they actually hit the cloak, anyway. Stabbing attacks punch through a bit better, like those spines that monster shot at me yesterday.”

“And blunt attacks?” Humphrey asked.

“The cloak doesn’t cushion them at all,” Jason said.

“That’s a shame,” Humphrey said. “A lot of monsters are just big, tough, and try to batter you to death.”

“That’s where the unrestricted movement comes in,” Jason said.

“Maybe you can show that off tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “I went with Instructor Trenslow to take the notices from the board, and we’re going after a bark lurker.”

“Bark lurker?”

“I think it’s some kind of troll,” Humphrey said.

“I’ll look it up.”

Jason pulled a tablet of white and blue marble from his inventory. At Farrah’s suggestion, Jason had purchased the active monster registry from the Magic Society. It contained all the information the Magic Society had about monsters and was updated along with the Magic Society’s own archives. There was an index on the tablet, seemingly engraved in gold script, but the engravings shifted as Jason touched his finger to the inscribed letters.

“You’re right,” Jason said as he read from the tablet. “It is a form of troll. Less intelligent than most troll varieties, but has the usual troll resilience and rapid healing. Vaguely human-shaped, but stands twice as tall. Usually dwells in swampland. Has a hard, bark-like shell, but due to its thickness, the shell-plates leave exposed areas around the joints. Usually slow and uncoordinated, but can demonstrate bursts of rapid movement. It can breathe water and likes to hide near the water’s edge, mimicking a submerged log.”

“What about numbers?”

“Almost always manifests alone,” Jason read, “except during a monster surge.”

“There you are,” Humphrey said. “Big and slow, only one to deal with. Sounds perfect for an affliction specialist.”

“If I see it coming,” Jason said. “I’ll need to bait it out, somehow.”

“Maybe after this, Trenslow will finally pass you,” Humphrey said. “I don’t understand why he hasn’t already.”

“He’s not satisfied with my performance,” Jason said. “That’s easy enough to figure out.”

“You’ve done just as well as any of the others who passed,” Humphrey said.

“Except for you,” Jason said. “You’re head and shoulders above the rest of us, yet Trenslow kept pushing before he passed you. He was holding you to a higher standard.”

“You think that’s what’s happening?” Humphrey asked.

“Rufus came out of last month’s assessment with a pretty high opinion of the instructor,” Jason said. “Now that Rufus will be around longer than he thought, he doesn’t feel the need to rush me along so much. It wouldn’t surprise me if it turned out Rufus had a little talk with Trenslo, to make sure he fails me if I’m not up to the standard Rufus wants.”

“You think he’s going to fail you?” Humphrey asked.

“Probably,” Jason said. “You’ve seen Rufus’ standards.”

“You shouldn’t give up yet,” Humphrey said. “Go all out, give it everything. You might impress him so much that he has to pass you.”

The group of adventurer candidates were assembled on a huge, grassy field while one of their members fought a monster. There was enough neatly-cut grass for a good-sized sports arena, and it was just as flat. There were a few buildings around the edges, some of which looked to be good-sized barns. With the scarcity of lumber-worthy wood, they were primarily constructed out of mud-brick.

“What is all this for?” Jason wondered.

“What do you mean?” Humphrey asked.

“Every part of the delta that isn’t underwater is being put to efficient use,” Jason said. “Except for the parts some rich people walled-off for themselves, anyway.”

Humphrey gave him a side-glance but said nothing.

“This is good grass,” Jason said, crouching down and rubbing some blades beneath his fingers. “Real good grass, like a St. Augustine. Someone’s been taking care of it, too. Is this a turf farm?”

“What’s a turf farm?” Liana asked.

“The Island is an artificial island made of stone,” Humphrey said. “When people want to landscape their grounds, they have much the actual work done here in the delta, then transported over as slabs of earth. All that grass in the park district was grown in places like this.”

“I take it everyone cleared out when the monster showed up,” Jason said.

“They did,” Vincent said. “It isn’t the first time they’ve had monsters wander along. You seem strangely knowledgeable about grass.”

“My Dad’s a landscape architect,” Jason said.

“Is that what it sounds like?” Humphrey asked.

“Pretty much,” Jason said. “He designs big fancy gardens.”

“So he’s a gardener,” Liana said.

“Pretty much,” Jason said. “A well-trained, highly-paid gardener, but yeah.”

Vincent made an unhappy noise at the fight going on in the distance. It wasn’t going well.

Most monsters at iron rank did not boast exotic abilities. Some might shoot quills or rapidly heal, but they were largely reliant on their physical attributes. One of the rare exceptions was the rune tortoise, a creature with blue skin and a turquoise shell that was only around a metre long. The danger came from its shell, where every segment had a glowing rune, each of which could produce a different magical effect. The key challenge in facing a rune tortoise was that each one had a unique set of runes. The wide variety of potential abilities made it an unpredictable enemy.

As he had done with each of the more difficult creatures, Vincent took the time to explain the creature and the best way to fight it. In the case of the rune tortoise, its weakness was that after using an ability, it took time for that ability to become available again. The key to defeating it was baiting out the abilities, after which it was no more dangerous than a regular tortoise.

Looking out at the fight in progress, Jason saw several of its runes had dimmed after use. The tortoise had not spent them cheaply, however, as could be seen from the would-be adventurer trying to hunt it. His hair was blackened where it wasn’t burned-off entirely, his skin smeared and cracked. His armour had been shattered, his clothing reduced to rags.

“That’s enough,” Mobley,” Vincent called out. “If you go back in, it will probably kill you.”

“I can take it!” the bedraggled candidate yelled back.

Jason observed that the tortoise was possibly withdrawing from the fight. At the pace it moved, it was quite hard to tell.

“You probably can,” Vincent called out to Mobley, “but being an adventurer is about reliably dealing with monsters, not probably dealing with them.”

Mobley turned around to face Vincent and the onlookers.

“You’ll fail me if I don’t kill it, won’t you?” Mobley yelled miserably.

“I’m failing you either way,” Vincent called back. “Even if you kill it, I’ll fail you for the poor judgement of risking your life to do so.”

“Risk is what adventurers do,” Mobley yelled, pleadingly.

“Which makes accurately assessing risk the most important skill we have,” Vincent said. “Get back here.”

Of the three candidates yet to pass, one was trudging a bedraggled path back to the group. The others were Jason and a young woman staring uneasily at Mobley's charred state.

"Either of you care to volunteer?" Vincent asked. "Or do I send Humphrey?"

"I'm happy to go, unless you want it," Jason said to the young woman. "It's already gone through most of its abilities.

"No, you go ahead," she told him.

"Think you can handle it, Asano?" Vincent asked.

Jason set off toward the tortoise at a casual stroll, which was still outpaced the tortoise at full flight.

"I'll muddle through," he said.

Chapter 56:

Gary's Gift

Jason and Mobley passed each other as Jason walked in the direction of the rune tortoise.

"Sorry mate," Jason commiserated. The burned and blackened would-be adventurer just shot him a contemptuous look and kept walking. Jason wasn't sure if it was the immediate circumstances that drew the man's ire, or just general dislike. Jason had become an outsider to the group, for a couple of reasons.

The first was Jason's unusual mannerisms and general disregard for status and etiquette. The same traits that helped him get along with the people in every town and village they passed through didn't endear him to wealthy scions that made up his fellow candidates. For them, status was everything, and only someone like Humphrey, born at the very top of the pile, could disregard it.

The other reason they disliked him was his friendship with Humphrey. The Geller family stood at the peak of Greenstone society, and their local power was just a fragment of their world-spanning influence. On top of that, Danielle Geller was the strongest adventurer to come out of Greenstone in generations. Building a friendship with her son was a ticket to the top not just for an adventurer, but their entire family.

For some of the candidates, making a connection with Humphrey was more important than passing the field assessment. Having their chances monopolised by Jason left them increasingly rankled. Jason didn't much like those who shunned him for this reason, finding moments to tell him that he should know his place. He much preferred someone like Liana Stelline, who disliked him for himself rather than having an agenda.

Jason moved forward until he was just outside what he estimated to be the maximum range for the rune tortoise's powers, based on its battle with Mobley. He had a new wristband, which had a small razor that could be easily pushed in and out of a sheath. The tiny blade was in no way an effective weapon, but the sharp edge was perfect for quickly and easily drawing a shallow line of blood on the back of his hand.

Holding the cut away from him, leeches started spraying out of the wound like he'd knocked the side off a fire hydrant.

"Now I know what an emptying balloon feels like," he muttered. "Alright, Colin; fetch."

What came next was a slow-motion pursuit as Jason's sedately ambulating pile of leeches undulated in the direction the tortoise's soporific escape.

“I know there isn’t a strict time constraint,” Vincent called out, “but we do have other monsters to get to.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason called back. “Colin is just my stalking horse.”

The rest of the group looked on with varying reactions.

“Are those leeches?”

“Did he say Colin?”

“What’s a horse?”

Jason trailed well behind his familiar. His concern was that the tortoise had failed to notice it, so he pulled out a throwing knife. The skill book had given him proficiency with an array of weaponry, but Rufus had concentrated training on only a few. As Jason’s primary weapon was his poison dagger, Rufus had focused on various knife techniques, even throwing.

“They won’t deal any real damage,” Rufus had explained as he introduced Jason to throwing knives, “but they can offer some utility, or distract an enemy in a critical moment. Putting some poison on them wouldn’t be a terrible idea, either.”

Jason tossed the knife, but it was a long throw as Jason maintained distance, landing an embarrassing few metres to the left of the tortoise. He turned around to face the group.

“New knives,” he yelled at them. “I’m still getting used to them.”

As second attempt also missed, but the third bounced off the tortoise’s shell with a barely audible thud, rather than the satisfying clank Jason had been expecting.

“I think movie sound effects have given me unrealistic expectations for how cool the world sounds.”

There was a sharp crack as an arc of electricity erupted out of the shell in reaction. It didn’t reach Jason, instead blasting into his familiar, sending scorched leeches scattering about. On the tortoise’s shell, one of the runes dimmed away.

“Actually, that sounded amazing,” Jason said, looking at the burned and blackened remains of leeches. The pile was about a third smaller.

“You alright, buddy?” Jason called out. “Wobble to the left if you’re alright.”

The pile moved slightly left as it continued the pursuit. The tortoise slowly turned to face its new opponents. Jason observed there were only three runes still glowing on the tortoise, after which it would be no more powerful than an ordinary tortoise of its size.

Another rune faded as a huge globule of water shot into the air, then burst into mist. From the mist, bullets of water started shooting down into the leech pile, but the water didn’t seem to have a huge effect of the leeches.

In the wake of the water bullets' failure, the penultimate rune faded and the humid, delta air was suddenly stirred into motion. Directly over the pile of leeches, a small, but powerful dust devil formed, sucking up the leeches and scattering them to the wind. One even slapped into Jason's face, which he peeled off with a frown. As the wind faded, Jason looked around at the leeches cast as far as dozens of metres away.

"You did good, little guy," Jason said, moving the leech to the back of his hand where it disappeared into the cut. "You just gather yourself back together while I deal with the mean tortoise."

Jason looked over at the tortoise, which only had one remaining rune lit up. Confident he could handle one ability, he started closing in on the sluggish monster. The tortoise, for its part, made a very optimistic dash for freedom as Jason strolled in its direction. When Jason reached it, it ducked its head and limbs into its shell. The last rune dimmed as the tortoise's body took on a metallic sheen.

Jason crouched down to peer into the openings where the tortoise had disappeared into its shell. Some kind of plate had moved into place at each of them.

"I've seen this ability," Vincent said, startling Jason. He was sure he'd seen Vincent back with the others just moments earlier, and hadn't felt the approach of his aura.

"This is probably the strongest ability a rune tortoise has," Vincent said.

"How so?" Jason asked.

"It massively increases its defence," Vincent said. "It'll take a bronze-rank attack to break in, and a strong one at that. Even worse for you, it makes it immune to afflictions."

"How long can it keep it up?" Jason asked.

"Not sure," Vincent said. "Certainly long enough for its powers to come back. "I'll deal with it now."

"Hold on," Jason said. "You're the one who asked for a volunteer, so let me sort it out."

"You think you can get around this ability?" Vincent asked.

"Easily," Jason said. "There's a bunch of ways. It still needs to breathe, right? I don't know if it's aquatic, or burrowing, but we could bury it, or drown it. We could throw it off a great big cliff; I bet that'd crack it."

"I don't think there's a lot of cliffs in the delta," Vincent said.

"I'm just saying there's options," Jason said. "The one I'm going to go for is testing out a gift a friend gave me."

Jason drew a sword from his inventory. It was simple but elegant in design, not overly long, with a straight, double-edged blade. The hilt was red gold, the grip a dark, soft fabric. A short, simple tassel, of the same black fabric, dangled from the red gold pommel.

Other than knives, straight swords were the weapons Rufus had drilled Jason on the most, knowing Gary was already working on such a weapon for Jason. Taking it out, Jason smiled as he thought of the day Gary had presented it.

“We all wanted to give you something,” Gary had told him when handing over the sword. “Farrah gave you that awakening stone, and Rufus the skill book. I made you this and it turned out pretty well, I thought. It’s not a big deal, or anything.”

Despite Gary’s words, Jason could feel the care and effort that had gone into it. Magic items had auras of their own, and the aura of the sword was stronger than any other iron-rank items Jason had encountered.

Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).

- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a physical immunity to it, an instance of [Stone Cutter] is applied to the blade.
-
- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a magical immunity to it, an instance of [Spell Breaker] is applied to the blade.
- [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage; highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- [Spell Breaker] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage; highly effective against magical defences and incorporeal entities. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Growth Conditions (bronze):

- 1 kilogram of blood gold
 - 4 kilograms of low grade (bronze rank) star-fall silver
 - 100 bronze-rank iron quintessence gems.
 - 100 bronze-rank magic quintessence gems.
 - 1000 bronze rank spirit coins.
 - Ritual of bronze ascension.
-

Jason didn't read past the description before grasping Gary's huge, hairy body in a hug.

"I'm not really a hugger," Gary had said as he awkwardly returned the embrace.

"Well you should be," Jason told him. "You're really good at it."

Jason looked down at the bunkered tortoise, then back at his sword. He turned it over in his hand, watching the sun strike the clean edge.

"He's been secretly working on it for weeks," Rufus had told Jason later. "We don't really talk about it, but none of us thought we were getting out of that sacrifice chamber alive. We owe you a favour we can't ever repay."

Jason slapped him on the arm.

"Friends don't count favours, Rufus. They just show up when they're needed."

Jason looked down at the tortoise, hunkered in its shell.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Asano?" Vincent asked.

"Not at all."

Rather than bring the sword down on the shell, he casually stabbed the monster's side.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Rune Tortoise].
 - [Rune Tortoise] is immune to afflictions.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
-

"You may need a little more gusto to penetrate the protection," Vincent said.

"Actually," Jason said, "the key is persistence."

Jason stabbed out again and again. With each strike the sword became more powerful, until the first gouge appeared in monster's side. A section of flesh chipped off like stone under the monster's protection ability.

"I'm an affliction specialist," Jason told Vincent as he continued to chip away. "We don't do speed. We do inevitability."

Chapter 57: Rainbow Smoke

Jason looked at the dead rune tortoise.

“Sorry, mate,” he told it. “Can’t have you going berserk and wandering into town shooting lightning bolts at people.”

“You’re apologising to a dead monster?” Vincent asked.

“It might just be a congealed blob of magic, but it was still alive, and died trapped in its own shell. It might have only had an animal’s intelligence, but it could feel helpless and afraid. It’s a rough way to go.”

“You’re an affliction specialist,” Vincent said. “It’s always a rough way to go with you.”

“You know Humphrey breathes fire, right?” Jason said. “Burning to death can’t be great, either.”

Jason tapped a finger on the dead creature’s shell.

➤ Would you like to loot [Rune Tortoise]?

Jason walked away before mentally accepting the loot.

-
- [Monster Core (Iron)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Lightning Quintessence] has been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Wind Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Water Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Fire Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - [Intact Rune Tortoise Shell] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Shell-Skin Potion] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Behind him the rune tortoise started dissolving into rainbow smoke, rising up into the air. The colourful display was as beautiful as the stench of it was horrifying, which was why Jason had learned not to loot monsters until he was some distance upwind.

Having a power to harvest monsters, Jason discovered, was a rare and useful one. For most people, they had to use a specialised branch of ritual magic. It was something many learned, however, due to the lucrative rewards. Getting lucky and looting an awakening stone or an essence, even valuable materials paid out better than the contract to kill the monster in the first place.

“One of the candidates from last month had a looting power,” Vincent said as he glanced back at the rising smoke.

“Oh?” Jason said. “Is he in the other group this month?”

“Actually, he passed,” Vincent said. “One of the Mercer boy’s lackeys, unfortunately. Damn waste of talent.”

They reached the rest of the group, where Mobley had only partially healed up through potions. This group of candidates included a few with self-healing, like Jason, but no one who could help others in the group.

“You ready for the next one?” Vincent asked, as he and Jason walked back to the group.

“I am,” Jason said.

“Good,” Vincent said. “We’ve got a few more to get through, today.”

The mangrove swamp was wet and hot, the air full of tiny bugs. The mangroves were large and dense, shrouding the areas within in darkness. Passage through the swamp was either by shallow boat, or along Bridge Road; an extended chain of low, flat bridges, spanning the distance between sporadic patches of solid ground. Most of the construction in the delta was either mudbrick or yellow desert stone, but Bridge Road was built from the region’s signature green stone. It reminded Jason of the impossible bridge that carried the Mistrun River over the massive gorge on its way down to the delta. He wondered if it had the same, mysterious constructor.

They were crossing Bridge Road in their wagon, which Vincent drew to a stop at a seemingly random point in the middle of the swamp. He turned back to address the adventurer candidates in the back.

“Undeveloped areas like this can be some of the most dangerous in the delta,” Vincent explained. “There’s a lot of territory for monsters to go unnoticed until they hit the berserk stage. You won’t need to deal with that today, though. We have two sets of monsters in this area; one single monster and one pack.”

Vincent dropped down off the wagon and the group clambered out the back. After half a week, even the more spoiled members of the group had stopped complaining about the basic transport. Vincent gathered the group together on the side of the bridge.

“When you get a monster notice,” Vincent said, “whether from a notice board or the Adventure Society directly, it has three pieces of information, so long as that information is known. The name of the monster, or a description. The number of monsters, and the approximate location.”

He panned a stern eye across the group.

“What I am about to tell is you is the most important thing you will learn during this assessment. It is the single greatest contributing factor to adventurer death, bar none. It’s a simple thing, but if you disregard it, there’s a very good chance you will die. If you routinely disregard it, your death is inevitable.”

Vincent held the notice in his hand.

“This information is not reliable. It usually comes from local residents, with limited understanding of monsters and who run the moment they see them. They may well recognise monsters common to their area, but monsters are misidentified on a regular basis. Descriptions are wrong. Numbers are vastly inflated or grossly underestimated. People even get the place they saw them wrong.”

He waved the notice in their faces.

“Do not trust these notices. Prepare as best you can, not the best you can be bothered, and always be ready for everything to go horribly wrong. Most importantly, do not hesitate to run for the hills if something seems wrong. If you have any ideas about the dignity of an adventurer, or a noble, or whatever, then throw those ideas away or they will kill you. Your first duty as an adventurer is to come back alive. You can always come back with more people to kill the monster later.”

Vincent took a cleansing breath.

“It is the responsibility of an adventurer to understand what they are walking into, as best they can. In this case, our monster is a bark lurker. I know Geller warned you it, Asano. Are you prepared?”

“I am,” Jason said.

“Then you’re ready to go?”

“I am.”

“According to the notice,” Vincent said, “there should only be one, somewhere in the vicinity of bridge marker sixteen.”

He pointed to a stone marker on the side the bridge, on which the number 16 was inscribed.

“As that is all the notice says, that is all the information you’re getting. As I have just explained, however, that information is not reliable. Out in unclaimed territory, where the report was made by someone who fled off at first glance, there is every chance it is wrong. That said, most notices are fairly accurate. Which is why you have avoid becoming complacent.”

Vincent held something out for Jason to take. It was a crystal, like the one floating over Vincent’s head.

“A recording crystal?”

Vincent shook his head.

“A far-sight crystal,” he said. “As long as it’s active, we can see through it from here. It has a maximum range, but the monster should be well within it.”

“How does it work?”

“Just toss it in the air.”

Jason did as instructed and the crystal moved over Jason’s head. In front of Vincent an image appeared, showing the perspective from Jason’s crystal. The image looked a lot like the interface screens that appeared for Jason’s ability. Vincent adjusted the image with a flick of his hand, panning back for a wider view.

“Off I go, then,” Jason said, walking to the edge of the bridge. His cloak of shadows and stars appeared around him as he stepped off, drifting gently down to the water. He started walking over the surface of the water, his footfalls landing with a ripple.

Standing on the water, he concentrated on the auras around him. The strongest were on the bridge, Vincent’s bronze rank aura, the iron rank auras of the others. He moved his focus to the weaker auras around him. The swamp was teeming with life, inundating Jason with normal-rank auras. Animals were sensitive to auras and avoided him, even the ones that would normally view a human as potential prey.

Jason moved further from the bridge, still concentrating on the auras. He was looking for an aura dead zone, knowing the ordinary animals would give the unnatural monster a wide berth. He was out of sight of the bridge when he found what he was looking for. The normal auras, were avoiding something, much as they avoided Jason himself. He wasn’t close enough to pinpoint the source, as his aura sense was still limited.

Jason walked over to the mangroves at the edge of the water. He picked a spot where the trees weren’t too tightly packed, but still provided enough cover to make solid shadows. From his inventory he took out a slab of meat, something looted from a monster several days ago. He wedged it in between the mangrove roots, just under the surface.

The night before, Jason and Humphrey had pored over the monster archive entry for bark lurkers, looking for the best approach. What they had come up with was baiting the creature out with meat. Its ability to sense auras was weak, a trait common to humanoid monsters. Its sense of smell, on the other hand, was excellent, especially in water. Using monster meat made it less likely to attract normal creatures.

Jason waited, well away from the bait. He stood stock still in the shadows of another set of mangroves, his aura retracted as best he could. He sensed the monster beneath the dark water before he spotted the ripples on the water as something large moved within it.

He could see the monster barely broach the surface of the water; if it wasn't moving he would have mistaken it for a log. It moved slowly at first, before splashing wildly as it lunged onto the submerged bait.

It rose up out of the water, lifting the meat up in triumph as it let out a wild roar. It looked like a giant wearing armour made of swamp logs, water pouring off the pocked and craggy shell. Jason vanished into the shadows, emerging from those right next to the creature. His snake-tooth dagger easily found the gap between the thick sections of shell, cutting deeply into the flesh beneath. The creature's roar of triumph became one of startlement and pain.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Bark Lurker].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Bark Lurker].
 - Aura [Hegemony] reduces the resistances of enemies for each instance of [Sin].
-

Jason danced away across the water, his boots moving lightly over the surface. The monster wheeled on him, wading sluggishly in pursuit. It was twice Jason's height, but it was waist deep in water, leaving them face to face. The slow creature was impeded all the more by having to wade through the swamp. Jason knew it would move faster if it swam underneath, but it was too enraged and too stupid to think tactically. He led it toward another patch of mangrove trees.

Jason's back came up against the trees and the monster thought it had him. It lurched forward with a sudden burst of speed as Jason stepped back into the shadows of the mangrove trees. The monster crashed into the space he had just vanished from, becoming entangled in the trees. Jason emerged from the shadows just to the monster's side, again finding a gap in its bulky shell.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Bark Lurker].
 - Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Bark Lurker].
-

The trees were little impedient to the monster's strength, whole root systems wrenched from the water as it thrashed about. It failed to find its attacker as Jason was already gone, emerging from the shadows of another patch of mangroves. The monster cast its gaze about, spotting Jason and resuming pursuit. As it did, Jason calmly watched its approach as he chanted a spell.

"Your fate is to suffer."

➤ Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Bark Lurker].

With the spell taking hold, Jason's victory became inevitable. The poison from the dagger would necrotise the creature's flesh, while the sin curse would make the necrosis even worse. The spell would cause both curse and poison to accumulate over time. The combination resulted in exponentially escalating damage that would inexorably overwhelm the monster. It did have a rapid healing ability, but the bleeding effect Jason inflicted would absorb at least some of that. He could have unleashed his familiar, but wanted to see what his abilities could do against a tough enemy.

Jason led the creature along the edge of the mangroves, back in the direction of the road bridge. The creature continued its furious pursuit, slow wading interspersed with rushing bursts. Jason strolled casually over the surface of the swamp, shadow-hopping through the shady mangroves as necessary to stay ahead. The road bridge was in sight when the monster was finally overwhelmed and fell dead. Jason went back to loot as it sank into the water.

The candidates gathered on the bridge watched Jason, cloak of stars swirling around him on a breeze no one else could feel. He walked lightly over the water as a patch of swamp roiled behind him, disgorging rainbow smoke into the air.

Chapter 58: A Man of Malevolent intellect

With the bark lurker dealt with, the group completed the crossing of Bridge Road and mangroves gave way to marshland. Once again they were riding atop the embankment roads that were the main thoroughfares of the delta. Sitting in the back of the wagon, Jason looked out at the sun getting low over the wetlands, golden light shimmering on the water. The hour was fairly late, the summer causing the sun to linger in the sky.

Jason took out a red marble tablet from his inventory, the image of a bird etched into it in gold.

“What’s that?” Humphrey asked.

“Something I have to decide whether to keep or throw away,” Jason said.

“Why?” Humphrey asked.

“Probably best I don’t say,” Jason told him. “You know, Humphrey, my experiences in your little stretch of reality have been pretty extreme. I’ve had some rough moments.”

He looked out again at the sun setting over the wetlands.

“Some good ones, too. Whatever complaints I may have had, things being bland isn’t one of them.”

“Shut up, Asano,” Mobley said. “No one wants to hear your winsome prattling. You’re not profound.”

Humphrey was about to say something, but Jason waved him down with a gesture. Jason looked at Mobley but didn't say anything either, shaking his head as he returned the tablet to his inventory.

Vincent pulled the wagon to a halt at a junction where two embankment roads crossed one another.

“There’s a good size town beyond the marsh,” he told them, turning to look at the group sitting together in the wagon. “There’s a dedicated accommodation for adventurers on the road, so you can expect the nicest night you’ll have during this trip. Before that, though, there’s one last notice for the day.”

He panned his eyes slowly over the group. Humphrey and the three others who had already passed, Jason and the young woman who could still go either way. His gaze stopped at Mobley, the one member who had ostensibly failed.

“I won’t lie,” Vincent said. “This is a rough one. I’m willing to let any or all of you participate; you can sort that out amongst you. Mobley, you make a good showing, here, and I’m willing to reconsider your position.”

Mobley had been sullenly slumped in the wagon since his encounter with the rune tortoise that morning. Potions and ointments had healed him up, but his hair was still largely burned away. Jason had offered Mobley some hair-growth ointment Jory had given him, but he wanted nothing to do with Jason. On hearing Vincent's offer, however, his head jerked up, hope lighting up his eyes.

"What's the monster?" Humphrey asked.

"Trap weavers," Vincent said.

Humphrey and some of the others took on serious expressions, recognising the monster by name. The others waited for the explanation, but Mobley was the first to speak.

"Are you trying to get me killed?" he asked wildly. "Did someone put you up to this? It was the Kilgane family, wasn't it? They paid you to make sure I didn't come back."

The other candidates went as still as the suddenly frozen expression on Vincent's face. There was a long period of icy silence before Vincent spoke.

"Mr Mobley," Vincent said. "I am willing to take that accusation in the manner I believe it was made, which is to say, thoughtlessly. So long as I have your apology, I am willing to consider it an outburst made in a moment of surprise, that we can put behind us and speak no more about."

Mobley visibly gulped. Jason could hear something dangerous lurking behind Vincent's words as if his audibly controlled enunciation was trying to keep it from getting loose. Suddenly the man with the outrageous moustache didn't seem silly at all.

"You have my apology, sir," Mobley said.

"Good," Vincent said. "Mr Geller, please inform the members of our group who are not aware as to the nature of trap weavers."

"Perhaps we should disembark from the wagon first," Humphrey suggested.

"Good idea, Mr Geller."

Leaving the tense air of the wagon seemed like an escape. The marshland was vast, reeds and copses of trees punctuating expanses of water. The air was heavy, wet and warm, even as the sun ducked out of sight. The sky was a mixture of dark blue and orange-gold, reflected on the still mirror of marsh water.

"Instructor Trenslo," Humphrey said. "When you were collecting notices, I didn't see one for trap weavers."

"It came from the Adventure Society directly," Vincent said. "They have provided the location of the nest."

"Sir," Humphrey said, "trap weavers are dangerous, and this half-light will favour them strongly. Perhaps it would be best to come back in the morning."

"I asked you to inform the group of what trap weavers are, Mr Geller," Vincent said. "I did not ask your opinion on how I conduct this field assessment."

"Sorry, sir," Humphrey said. "Trap weavers are a kind of giant spider. Their main body is around the size of a man's torso, but they stand as tall as a man with their long legs. They can produce webs that are very strong and hard to see in certain light conditions, which is why they are most active during the pre-dawn and twilight hours. The webs can be used to create traps that can ensnare a person, or to directly attack and entangle. They are highly stealthy, and can hide their aura better than most monsters."

Humphrey gave Vincent an uncertain glance as he kept talking.

"Trap weavers roam in search of prey but return to a nest, usually in environments with water and dense trees. They use their webs to create traps that make invading their nests extremely difficult. This is especially true at the cusp of daylight where their webs are the hardest to spot."

Humphrey's face went hard.

"Trap weavers usually spawn in groups, at least two or three and as many as twelve or thirteen. There have been some occurrences of higher numbers, although I'm not sure of the record."

"Nineteen," Vincent said. "Outside of a monster surge. No one's counted the size of the swarms during a surge, but dozens of them."

"Using environmental and numerical advantages," Humphrey said, "trap weavers are responsible for more iron-rank adventurer deaths than any other monster in the Greenstone region. There is a standing advisory that they should be dealt with in groups, during daylight."

"Very comprehensive, Mr Geller," Vincent said.

"I'm not done, sir," Humphrey said. "Instructor Trenslo has asked us to decide for ourselves which of us will deal with the trap weavers. I strongly recommend we choose no one. Fighting these creatures, especially now, is a danger I don't feel to be appropriate. There is a strong likelihood of some of us dying too quickly for instructor Trenslo to intervene."

"I didn't ask for that, Mr Geller," Vincent said.

"With respect, Instructor Trenslo," Humphrey shot back, "you instructed us to decide for ourselves who will participate. This is my contribution to that discussion."

Vincent looked at Humphrey, his expression unreadable.

"What about you, Mr Asano?" Vincent asked.

Jason gave Vincent a long, assessing look before amusement crossed his face.

“Probably best I don’t say anything either way,” he said.

Humphrey looked at Jason, about to speak, but stopped at a slight shake of the head from Jason. Confusion crossed Humphrey’s face, but he stayed silent.

The other candidates who had already passed the assessment joined Humphrey in declining, leaving Mobley and the young woman who, like Jason, was yet to pass or fail. They looked at each other and also declined. Humphrey turned to Vincent.

“There’s our group,” Humphrey told him. “We choose no one.”

“Very well,” Vincent said, his face betraying nothing. “then I guess you should all get back in the wagon.

As promised, the town at which the group rested for the night had a large building for adventurers, with a common room, dining hall, and bedrooms enough for a dozen people. It was situated on the edge of a pond, with a covered terrace. They didn’t arrive until after dark, and most of the group were gathered in the common room.

Jason explored the sizeable kitchen, but the cupboards and cooler box had no food, only crockery and cutlery. Jason made a salad with ingredients from the market towns they had passed through. He left a stack of bowls and forks next to the big salad bowl, filling two and taking a fork for each.

He made his way through the common room, where the other candidates were discussing the day’s events. In the end, Jason had killed both monsters, aside from the trap weavers they had left alone. He had no interest in the circle of unwelcome looks, instead making his way out to the terrace. The night lit up by a bright pair of moons, shining high over the surrounding wetlands.

There was patio furniture on the terrace, Vincent casually reclined as he looked out into the night. Jason put a bowl and fork down on the table next to him, before taking a seat himself. He pulled a couple of glasses from his inventory, along with a bottle. He poured a little bit of blue liquid into each glass.

“I think you’ll like this,” Jason said. “It has a fresh, crisp flavour that should go nicely with the salad.

“Thank you,” Vincent said.

“For being so handsome?” Jason asked. “It’s attached to my face, so I had to bring it with me.”

Vincent shook his head.

“Rufus told me you’d be trouble,” Vincent said.

"He told me you were worth showing respect," Jason said. "Sounds like disparate treatment, to me."

Vincent nodded at the door Jason had emerged from.

"What are they doing in there?"

"Talking about the trap weavers," Jason said. "Humphrey's idea, of course."

"He's a diligent young man," Vincent said. "Have they figured it out, yet?"

"That we were never meant to fight them? They might get there, they might not. The rest are more interested in clamping onto the Geller family's leg."

"You haven't given them much of a chance," Vincent said. "He seems to value your judgement, for reasons that escape me."

"My judgement is excellent, thank you very much," Jason said. "Also, I think his mother wants him to learn something from me."

"Why?"

"You mean 'what.'" Jason corrected.

"No, I meant 'why.'" Vincent said. "Has she actually met you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, she has. You really do think my judgement is suspect, don't you?"

"You tried to start a fight with Thadwick Mercer the first time you met him."

"If I tried to start a fight," Jason said, "then there would have been a fight. What I was doing was getting you to prevent a fight."

"For what conceivable reason would you do that?"

"Social advancement," Jason said. "If I get into it with Thadwick Mercer, then people see me as someone who operates at that level."

"Doesn't wandering around with Geller do that for you?"

"No, that makes me look like a hanger-on."

"I'm not sure outwitting Thadwick Mercer puts you any higher," Vincent said. "He's not one of the great minds of the younger generation."

"The point was to engage with Thadwick Mercer. Just that much puts me above a certain threshold, socially speaking," Jason said. "As for how far above, what do people see when they look closer?"

"They see you standing next to Humphrey Geller," Vincent said, realisation dawning.

"Rufus has been very good to me," Jason said, "but he takes a somewhat top-down view of society. Due to his upbringing, from what I understand. He wants me to reach a level of basic capability as an adventurer before certain facts come to light, but he's rather oblivious as to building social standing."

"I'm not sure your approach is the best way either," Vincent said. "In fact, I'm confident it isn't."

"Is that so?" Jason asked. "Less than two months ago, I walked into Greenstone with no name and no background. Two weeks ago, I watched the symphony from the private viewing box of one of the city's most prominent families. Two days ago, aristocrats were giving me death stares for my friendship with the son of the city's most powerful adventurer. Two minutes ago, you and I started discussing my conflict with the nephew of the city's ruler."

"I'm not really sure what to say to that," Vincent said. "You realise there will be consequences for the way you're going about things."

"Of course," Jason said, "but nothing is more impressive than handling the consequences of one's actions with grace and aplomb."

"And you can do that, can you?" Rufus asked.

"I have absolutely no idea," Jason said with a laugh.

"Rufus warned me about you," Vincent said. "He said you were a man of malevolent intellect."

"That may be the nicest thing anyone has ever said about me."

"That's the nicest thing?"

"What we find complimentary is often subjective," Jason said.

"You are a very strange man."

"That's just cultural differences," Jason said. "Where I come from, I'm perfectly ordinary."

"And where is that, exactly?" Vincent asked.

"Maybe it is possible that I'm slightly unusual," Jason conceded, instead of answering the question.

"Well," Vincent said. "Thank you, in any case, for not interfering when I told you to go after the trap weavers," Rufus said. "Pointing out what I was doing would have been easy points for you, socially speaking."

"No worries," Jason said. "It's not the easy points that win the game."

"You know why I haven't passed you, yet, don't you?" Vincent asked.

"I don't care what you tell us," Jason said. "You won't pass or fail anyone until the assessment is over."

"True enough," Vincent said, "although I don't see Humphrey dropping down this time. He did well, taking leadership today. He had a similar chance last month and second-guessed himself into silence."

“Did Rufus ask you to fail me?” Jason asked. “Or did he just ask you to set the bar high?”

“If I was going to fail you arbitrarily, I wouldn’t have brought you along,” Vincent said.

“Professionalism,” Jason said. “I can’t ask for more than that. Wait, yes I can. What is it going to take to get a pass?”

“You’re an affliction specialist,” Vincent said. “Something like the bark lurker would be trouble for most adventurers, but you handled it easily.”

“So why put me up against it?” Jason asked.

“You tell me,” Vincent said.

Jason thought it over.

“To make sure I can actually use my own specialty?” he ventured.

“There you are,” Vincent said. “So what will it take before I pass you?”

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Affliction specialist is a niche role,” Jason pondered out loud. “Just the thing to deal with a certain flavour of monster, but against ordinary ones, I’m just a slower version of any middle-of-the-road adventurer.”

He glanced over at Vincent, whose expression gave away nothing.

“If I want to pass then,” Jason reasoned, “it isn’t about beating the unusual monsters, because that’s basic stuff for my ability set. It’s about showing I can dominate the ordinary ones as well as any other adventurer. Am I close?”

“You’ll find that out when the assessment is over,” Vincent said.

The door from the common room burst open.

“Jason,” Humphrey said, striding out onto the terrace. “We were never meant to fight the trap weavers, we were meant to refuse! The whole thing was a test of leadership and judgement.”

Shock and disappointment crossed Jason’s face.

“Is that true, Instructor?” he asked, turning on Vincent. “Is something that devious even ethical?”

Chapter 59: Falling Short

The adventurer accommodation had a dozen bedrooms, with three bathrooms shared between them. Jason found the bathrooms strange in their familiarity, tiled surfaces and magical plumbing. Jason was fresh out of the shower, with a towel around his waist. He was standing over a basin, looking into the wall mirror as he washed cream off his face.

“Stash!” Humphrey’s voice yelled from the hall outside. It was followed by the door handle turning, the bathroom door opened from the other side by some kind of chimp-like creature. It then turned into a bird that flew up and perched atop Jason’s head, chirping triumphantly at its reflection in the mirror.

“Sorry,” Humphrey said from the door.

“No worries,” Jason said. “Just so long as the bird he turns into is a small one.”

“What’s that on your face?” Humphrey asked, standing outside the half-closed bathroom door.

“Shaving cream, kind of,” Jason said. “You just leave it on for a few seconds, then any hair washes right off with the cream. An alchemist friend gave it to me. You want to try?”

“I have a magic crystal that you rub on your face,” Humphrey said. “Anyway, I shaved yesterday. I don’t need to do it every day.”

Jason frowned. In the midst of a monster-hunting expedition, it was easy to forget that his fellow candidates were all sixteen or seventeen years old. Jason was only a half-dozen years their senior, but the idea of killing and dying at that age made him grateful he wasn’t forced to grow up young.

“Seems like it would be easy to accidentally take off hair you wanted to keep,” Humphrey said, oblivious to Jason’s thoughts.

“I have some ointment that causes hair to grow,” Jason said. “That’s the one you want to be careful about applying. It works everywhere, whether hair is meant to grow there or not.”

“That makes sense,” Humphrey said. “I was wondering why you didn’t have eyebrows when we met, but a couple of days later you did.”

In the final days of the field assessment, some of the candidates began to realise the results weren’t as decided as Vincent may have implied. Recognising that coasting on what they thought was a done deal wasn’t the best strategy, there was increased

competition for each new monster they went after. Jason didn't push himself forward as the others vied for additional chances to prove themselves, as he was still considering his approach to fighting monsters.

Compared to even the most mediocre of his fellow candidates, Jason's abilities were slow and weak. A fire blast or magical sword strike could take down an ordinary monster in a fraction of the time it took Jason to apply his various afflictions. Worse was that in the time it took them to overcome the afflicted monster, it could well have ravaged any companions Jason had with him in the fight.

His first thought was of his eight unawakened essence abilities, but they would not help him in the remaining days of the field assessment unless he stumbled on a cache of awakening stones. Even if he did, his new abilities would likely be similar to those he already possessed.

Jason's revelation came while watching Humphrey dispatch a group of monsters. They were dog-headed humanoids, with physiques like bodybuilders heavily into steroid abuse. Their jaws could produce a powerful bite, but their most dangerous feature was the sickle-like claws at the end of their arms. Combined with the crude clothing they fashioned for themselves with the flayed skin of their victims, they were an intimidating sight.

The monsters were called margolls. Despite their appearance, they were not very dangerous individually, at least to a fully trained and equipped adventurer. The problem was that they always appeared in groups. As many as a dozen could appear at once, and they were highly aggressive, even for monsters. They were one of the monsters most dreaded by normal people. Every resident of the delta heard stories of a margoll pack descending on a farm or ranch, or even attacking villages.

Humphrey had not put himself forward often since the early days of the field assessment, but he didn't hesitate to step out for the margolls. Rather than rely on his abilities, he used his combat skills to deal with the group. His martial techniques were most useful against humanoid enemies, and beyond summoning his sword and armour, he fought the monsters without powers.

Jason was reminded of the way combat styles of his new world differed from those in his old one. Brazilian jiu-jitsu might be practical in an MMA fight, but have limited application against a crab the size of a delivery van. An acrobatic kick may get punished by a skilled human fighter, yet perfectly deliver a special attack to an inhuman monster.

In all the time Rufus and the others had been training Jason, they devoted very little time to Jason's essence abilities. Outside of aura training, they largely left him to practise them on his own. Instead, they worked on his physicality, mentality and skill; everything

but essence abilities. Rufus had been especially unrelenting in driving Jason to master the martial techniques that came from the skill book he used.

Jason had sparred many times with Humphrey over the last few weeks as part of Rufus' ruthless regimen, and as he watched Humphrey dismantle the monsters, he realised that he had been far too focused on his essence abilities during the assessment. What worked perfectly against a bark lurker was pushing a square peg into a round hole against a small, quick ratling.

The last day of the field assessment would close their looping path through the delta, arriving back at Greenstone in the evening. They had spent the night in a barricade town, whose high walls and expansive lodgings were designed to be a safe-haven during monster surges. Jason had stayed in a similar town in the desert with Rufus Gary and Farrah, except this one had a sprawling stockyard in which to keep herds.

Jason made his way out of the mudbrick cabin he had shared with Humphrey, looking and feeling weary. His plan to put aside his slow essence abilities in favour of martial abilities hadn't worked as well as he had hoped. He was still able to put down the monsters, but not in the domineering fashion he was aiming for.

"Just give it time," Humphrey advised. "I've been training my whole life for this. You've been training for two months."

The group was assembling around the wagon when another wagon came bolting into town, drawn by a four heidels that were panting from how hard they'd been driven.

"Is it just me," Vincent said, "or do those look like some people in need of an adventurer? Everyone form up!"

Vincent approached as the driver pulled up the wagon.

"You need some assistance?" he asked.

A bedraggled driver glanced back into the wagon before dropping down, looking over Vincent. Most people, whether in Greenstone or the delta, wore loose-fitting, breathable clothes because of the heat. Adventurers, at least while on the job, wore more fitted outfits, often with overt protective properties. They carried arrays of weapons and other useful gear. This was also true for the candidates, making their occupation obvious. To dispel any doubt, Vincent wore his brooch bearing the Adventure Society emblem.

The driver explained that his family had escaped their nearby farm after a pack of margolls arrived. The only reason they got away was the margolls were caught up slaughtering their herd, giving the farmer time to load his family in the wagon and flee. This would make the fourth group of margolls the group had encountered in three days.

“Margolls again,” Mobley muttered. “Do you think it’s a sign the monster surge is starting?”

“Possibly,” Humphrey said, “but not likely. There hasn’t been an increase in overall activity or a sharp rise in pack numbers. The first sign is usually when solitary monsters start appearing in groups.”

After getting details from the man, Vincent addressed the group.

“We’re looking at a large pack,” Vincent told them, “somewhere around ten to twelve margolls. Geller, are you comfortable handling that many?”

“I want it,” Jason said before Humphrey could answer.

Mobley looked derisively at Jason.

“We’ve seen you fight, Asano,” he said. “You can’t handle twelve. You can’t handle half of that.”

Vincent looked contemplatively at Jason.

“Why?” Vincent asked him.

“Because I know I’ve been falling short, even if I’ve been muddling along. If I’m going to break through, I need to be pushed harder. Put myself in more danger.”

Vincent considered it for a few moments.

“Geller,” he said finally. “You be ready to get him out when it goes wrong.”

“You mean ‘if’ it goes wrong,” Humphrey said.

“I know what I said, Geller.”

Rufus, Gary and Farrah had spent hour after hour, day after day pounding Jason's fighting skill into a usable state. He had come further in just a few weeks than he would have imagined possible, but it wasn't close to matching a dozen monsters. As for the essence abilities he had been relying on in the early days of the assessment, nothing had changed. They were still too slow for a fast-paced battle.

“You don’t have to do this,” Humphrey told him.

“Let him,” Mobley said. “I’d love to see that smug look frozen on his corpse.”

Humphrey glared at Mobley.

“What’s so great about him?” Mobley asked. “Sure, he handled the bark lurker and the rune tortoise, but against anything the rest of us could walk over, his powers are useless. So he gives up on the powers and starts just fighting them straight up? Sure, he’s got some skills, but how long is an adventurer going to last when he fights without using his abilities? He’s not even going to pass if he can’t use his abilities and his combat skills together.”

Jason's eyes shot open.

Was it that simple? Had he really been that stupid?

Jason's mistake came to him as a revelation. Somewhere in his head, he had been putting his martial arts in a box belonging to his old world, and his essence abilities in one belonging to the new. He had been crippling both by subconsciously separating the two.

"I'm an idiot," he said.

"I know," Mobley agreed.

Jason spent the rest of the ride with a grin on his face, eyes flashing as a floodgate opened in his mind. He could suddenly see with perfect clarity how badly he had been hamstringing himself. By the time the wagon turned off the embankment road and down a slope towards the farm, he was itching to begin. He was the first to vault out the back of the wagon.

Vincent had stopped the wagon on the outskirts of the farm. In the distance they could see a clutch of mudbrick farm buildings, past fields of a low, leafy crop. Vincent, still in the driving seat of the wagon, tossed Jason a far-sight crystal.

"We'll watch from here," Vincent said. Margolls had poor vision and aura sense, but their smell and hearing were highly sensitive. The group would see everything through the crystal without interfering with Jason's fight.

As Jason marched away without pause, Humphrey followed. He maintained enough distance that he wouldn't interfere either, but could still intervene if necessary.

Jason neared the farm's largest building, a big, square barn. As he did, a margoll came wandering out, chewing on the remains of what Jason looked like the family dog. Somehow, the idea of a dog-headed monster eating a dog made it even more disgusting. The monster sniffed the air, then turned to Jason, dropping its meal in the dirt.

Jason had never been this close to a margoll before. It had the face of a pit-bull and the body of a power-lifter, with sickle-claw hands. Its arms were drenched up to the elbows in blood, as was its wide mouth. It threw its head back, letting out a wild howl.

Chapter 60: Making Music

Jason and the margoll faced off outside the mud-brick barn. The margoll's howl called out more, who emerged from in and around the building to join it. As they assembled, Jason and the first one remained where they stood, gazes locked. Jason was the first to move, walking closer to the wall of the barn.

That first step was like a starter's pistol, the monsters lunging into a sprint. Jason kept walking casually as the creatures closed the distance, pounding over the dirt. When they were almost upon him, he dropped into the shadow of the building like falling through a manhole.

He rose up from the ground behind the monsters, silently emerging from one the margolls' own shadows. In the brief but crucial moment of confusion, Jason noticed the margoll in front of him had loose skin at the back of its neck, like a dog. He grabbed a fistful of skin and yanked back, pulling the monster off-balance.

The creatures were already wheeling on Jason, so when his dagger tore the throat out of the monster in his grip, blood sprayed over the others.

-
- You have defeated [Margoll].
 - Would you like to loot [Margoll]?
-

He shoved the dead monster forward as it dissolved into rainbow smoke. The stench was horrifying, but bearable for Jason, but he lacked the powerful sense of smell the margolls had. For them, the smoke was like tear gas, the closest ones staggering away with dog-like yelps of misery.

The group of margolls was large enough that those furthest from Jason weren't disabled, although they were scattered and distracted. Jason moved right into their midst, making full use of his martial skills in the chaos. Another margoll dropped dead, throat slashed open. A forceful kick to the side of the knee dropped sent one dropping to the ground. Jason's flashing dagger inflicted more injuries, non-lethal, but distracting enough to keep the monsters off-balance while they were still reeled from the smoke.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Margoll].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Margoll].
 - Aura [Hegemony] reduces the resistances of enemies for each instance of [Sin].
-

The margolls started to recover from the stench. Jason moved out of the encirclement he had placed himself in but was only a step away from the reach of those razor claws. One such claw swiped at him and he lifted a forearm to take the strike. The claw raked through his cloth armour like it wasn't there, cutting deep gouges in his arm. Then, like a burst balloon, leeches erupted from the wound to spray out over the margolls.

The monsters panicked, yelping in horror as leeches dug into any available patch of exposed skin. Leeches buried themselves into the monsters' arms, bodies and even faces. The margolls scrambled to tear them off, but every leech tossed aside took with it a chunk of flesh in its lamprey-like teeth. One margoll pulled a leech from its eye, which burst into goo as the leech came away.

-
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Margoll].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Margoll].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Margoll].
-

The leeches that didn't land directly on the margolls started accumulating in a pile, lurching toward the margolls at the back who had been missed in the initial spray. Jason raised his arm at the margoll that had cut into him and chanted a spell.

"Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast."

The margoll's life force started glowing dark red from within its body, before siphoning off in a stream toward Jason's extended hand. As it sank into Jason's skin, the claw marks on his arm closed. It didn't heal completely, but open wounds become bright red welts. By the time the margoll's life force retracted into its body, it looked weak and pale. Jason kicked it into its fellows and once again launched himself into the stricken pack of margolls.

Jason danced through the chaos, dagger flashing, elbows and feet lashing out.

-
- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Margoll].
 - [Bleeding] already in effect, [Bleeding] is refreshed.
 - Special attack [Leech Bite] has drained health and stamina.
-

He did not go for quick kills, instead working to keep the large group distracted and panicked. Yelps and wails came from the margolls as they thrashed about. The stench of the smoke was still in the air and leeches dug into their flesh. Afflictions turned their blood black with poison, even as it leaked from their bodies.

Through it all moved Jason, like a demon conducting an orchestra of the damned. The margolls followed his direction, their screams of misery his music, until the last monster was dead and the air fell silent. Every part of Jason not shrouded in his cloak of

shadows was painted red and black with the tainted blood. At his feet, the leech swarm surged, gorged to bursting. Jason reached down, slicing his hand on a claw for the leeches to clamber back into his bloodstream.

Humphrey watched as Jason walked back Behind him, the rainbow smoke of a dozen monsters drifted into the sky. It also rose up from his body as the blood of his enemies burned away.

The rest of the trip back to Greenstone was almost entirely silent. Although a bottle of crystal wash had cleaned away the residue of the fight, it was as if the other adventurer candidates could still see the blood painted over Jason. Through the far-sight crystal, they had watched him play the creatures to a screaming, suffering demise.

Even Humphrey was shaken. He could tear through a pack of monsters better than any of them, but the worst he could do was burn a creature to death with his fire breath ability. He had never seen anything like Jason's symphony of horrors, shrieks of despair made into unholy music.

As for Jason, he was eerily still in the back of the wagon, staring out at the delta landscape. The horrors he had wrought played out again and again in his mind, but they did not horrify him. For the first time since arriving in his strange new world, he didn't feel like a helpless pawn of fate. He was in control. He had the power. What troubled him wasn't that his moment of catharsis was marked by the screams of the dying. It was that he couldn't ignore the part of himself that wanted more.

The sky grew darker as the wagon passed through cut-down flatland around the Old City wall and through the city gate. After the sprawling delta, everything felt pushed together in Old City, from the narrow streets to the buildings crammed against one another. The wagon rolled through up Broadstreet Esplanade which, in spite of the name, would barely pass as a laneway on the Island. Stalls were packed away and storefronts were closing with the setting sun. Jason noted Jory's clinic as they passed it by.

The Broadstreet Bridge was the same one Jason had crossed on his first day in Greenstone, the wagon getting waved straight into the rich people lane. The pace picked up one the wide and the wagon soon pulled up at the Adventure Society's marshalling yard.

The sun was completely gone by the time they arrived, but Jason's mood had lightened. He hopped free of the wagon feeling a different man than the one who climbed on a week earlier. He had a sense of power about him, of control over his own fate.

“And here we are,” Vincent said as the candidates decamped from the wagon. “Results of the assessment can be collected from administration individually as of tomorrow afternoon. If you wish to challenge or query the results, you may do so with administration at the time you collect them.”

The marshalling yard was thoroughly illuminated by magic lamps, and a small crowd was awaiting their arrival. The other group had apparently just arrived as well, already being greeted by waiting family. Humphrey spied his mother, fending off several would-be social climbers, and headed in her direction. Jason spotted Rufus standing next to her, but also spied Thadwick Mercer. From the body language, he guessed Thadwick was being met by a household servant rather than a family member.

Jason walked over in that direction, calling out Thadwick’s name.

“What do you want, Asano?” Thadwick asked, warily.

“I wanted to apologise,” Jason said. “There are some flaws in my character that sometimes lead me to be smug, childish, and a little too impressed with myself. Last week, I subjected you to all three.”

Jason held out a hand.

“I’d like to apologise, and start fresh.”

“You think I’d even touch your hand?” Thadwick asked. “You went out of your way to make me look like a buffoon, and now you think I’ll take your hand? You aren’t worthy to breathe my air.”

Thadwick stormed off, leaving Jason standing there, holding out his unshaken hand.

“Ah, well,” he said and turned in the direction of Rufus, Humphrey and Humphrey’s mother. Vincent had already moved to join them, and they were all looking in the direction of Jason’s encounter with Thadwick.

“Danielle!” he called out with a wave as he approached. He flashed Humphrey a grin, and Humphrey’s shoulders lost some of the tenseness they had been carrying since Jason’s fight with the margolls.

“Nicely done with young master Mercer,” Danielle replied with a smile. “I do hope you’re paying attention, Humphrey, dear.”

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“Jason,” Rufus scolded, “stop making a spectacle of yourself.”

“Oh, do leave him alone, Mr Remore,” Danielle said. “He knows what he’s doing.”

“I think I might have missed something,” Humphrey said.

“Same here,” Rufus said unhappily.

Danielle sighed, giving Jason a sympathetic look.

"You're wasted in this city, you know that?" she asked him.

"I do," Jason said, shaking his head with mock sadness. "But you can't help where some lunatic cultist summons you to."

"What?" Vincent asked.

"Would you please not provoke Thadwick Mercer?" Rufus asked.

"Or weirdly flirt with my mother," Humphrey added.

"Humphrey, dear. Mr Remore." Danielle said. "You have to remember that Jason wasn't born on top of the pile like you two. He has to make his own place in society, which is why he's playing around with poor Thadwick."

"Then why humble yourself in front of him?" Humphrey asked Jason.

"Because then I'm the reasonable one," Jason said.

"But he stormed off," Humphrey said. "Doesn't that make you seem below him?"

"It isn't about what Thadwick thinks," Jason said. "It's about all these nice people here. The people who saw me seem perfectly reasonable in front of a member of the Mercer family, then wander over here to where I'm on a first name basis with Danielle Geller herself. Where does that put me, in their eyes?"

"Right at the top," Rufus realised. "But why bother? You're already appearing in high social circles."

"As an adjunct to you," Jason told him. "What all this is really for is the people who recognise what I'm doing and why."

"Wait, Humphrey said, "I thought it was about all the people here. You're manipulating Thadwick, and all these people, for the benefit of the ones who see through it all anyway."

"Now you're getting it, dear," Danielle said happily.

"I'm fairly certain I'm not," Humphrey said.

"Dear boy," she said to him. "The people who know what he's doing recognise and respect his ability to do it. That's how you earn a place in the backrooms, not just the ballrooms."

"I still don't follow," Humphrey said.

Danielle sighed.

"Sometimes I think you and your sister are a little too much your father's children. Come along, everyone; I have a carriage waiting and dinner prepared. You will join us, won't you, Mr Trenslow?"

"It would be my honour, Lady Geller."

Chapter 61

TRADE HALL

Jason looked at the various suits of cloth armour draped over the balcony. He had taken three with him on the field assessment, and each had come back covered in rents and tears. Gary was standing next to Jason, also looking them over.

“I’m going to need some new armour before I take any contracts,” Jason said.

“I told you that you needed something heavier,” Gary said.

The armour was all heavy fabric with a few reinforced sections. A combination of magical construction and alchemical treatment of the fabric made it tougher than it looked, but the effect was limited.

“I don’t want to lose the flexibility,” Jason said. “My powers are better suited to speed and mobility, healing up the occasional hit.”

“Then if you won’t increase the bulk,” Gary said, “you’ll need to increase the quality.”

“Meaning something more expensive,” Jason said.

“That’s right,” Gary said. “It’s not like you don’t have the money, and can you really put a price on not dying?”

“That’s certainly hard to argue against,” Jason said. “And I do still have a decent amount of money.”

“You should definitely buy something good,” Gary said, “but don’t take it too far with iron-rank armour. Just find something reasonably protective and save up for bronze rank. What you really want is something that has a self-repair enchantment, which will save you a good lot of money on repairs.”

“Do you know where to find something like that?” Jason asked. “I looked around at the guild district markets, and these were the best I found.”

He pointed out the bedraggled suits of armour.

“There’s only one place to go for the really good stuff,” Gary said. “You’re an adventurer, now, so you can start enjoying the perks.”

Jason hadn’t been allowed entry to the Adventure Society trade hall, but he had seen it from the outside. It was a huge complex of buildings just off the loop line station, with several annexed structures connecting off a massive central building.

It was a huge bazaar restricted to members of the Adventure Society, along with traders who received dispensation to operate there. It was where Adventurers could trade away any valuables, sell off old equipment and buy gear and supplies for their adventures.

Jason was yet to receive his Adventure Society badge, gaining entry with a temporary permit he received with the results of his assessment.

Inside the main hall, Gary led the way as they merged into a crowd as packed as any Old City street market. It was a vast, open room, three storeys high, with two mezzanine levels. Light poured in from a series of skylights that made up the bulk of the ceiling.

The ground level was a boisterous mix of stalls, ranging from the semi-permanent to the very temporary. Some were just an open tent with a few items laid out on a table. Others were essentially stores, constructed from artfully dyed and woven reed panels, complete with signage. Most fell somewhere in between, but all were swarmed with people almost shoulder to shoulder.

“I didn’t realise there were this many adventurers,” Jason said, speaking loudly over the din of people.

“A lot of them aren’t active adventurers,” Gary said. “Mostly they’re essence users from the aristocratic and wealthy families who joined the society for the benefits. Like the right to come here.”

“But they had to pass the field assessment, right?”

“Not all field assessments are alike,” Gary said. “Just ask Rufus if you want to hear him complain for an hour. The problem is worse here than in most places.”

“What about monster surges?” Jason asked. “They have to front up for those, right?”

“They do,” Gary said, “but most places have what’s called a reserve program.”

“Meaning they get to stand at the back?” Jason asked.

“That’s the one,” Gary said.

Gary led him to the side of the hall, where arcades led toward other buildings in the complex, but instead of leaving the main hall, they took one of the broad stairways leading up.

“The main floor is all iron rank stuff,” Gary said. “Next floor up is bronze.”

The second and third floor were mezzanine levels. Gary didn’t pause at the second, leading them up to the third.

“The third floor is silver rank?” Jason guessed.

“No, there isn’t the market for it here,” Gary said. “Apparently there’s only forty or so silver rankers in the whole city, and they aren’t very active. The magic level here is too low, so silver-rank monsters are rare. Any silver rankers here permanently are semi-retired at best. People like Danielle Geller and Thalia Mercer are only here in anticipation of the monster surge.”

“So what is the third floor for?” Jason asked.

“Brokerages,” Gary said. “Most adventurers can’t be bothered with the trouble of renting a stall and waiting around for people to buy whatever random pile of loot they have. Brokers buy almost anything of value and sort it more effectively for sale. For a percentage, of course.”

“That’s fair enough,” Jason said.

“Brokers also organise the auctions,” Gary said. “In a smaller city like this, they’ll usually hold on to the valuable stuff, like essences and awakening stones. Then the brokers will work together to hold a big auction event. Once we finish that shield, that’ll sell at auction.”

The most valuable item Jason looted during the field assessment was the shell of the rune tortoise. Finding an intact one was rare and lucrative, as they could be turned into magical shields. Gary and Farrah were going to work on it together, then split the profits three ways with Jason.

“Most brokers also do money-changing services,” Gary said. “If you want to split a coin, say bronze down to iron, they’ll do it for free. If you go the other way they charge ten percent. That’s standard everywhere, so if they ask for more, just go somewhere else.”

Gary led them into a brokerage office, where they were greeted by a receptionist. They were quickly led into a room where they were met by an item assessor, who would value the items so they could get paid. They just had to put out everything on a table for the assessor to go over.

Jason put out the various items he had looted from monsters. There was bark-lurker hide, monster cores and a variety of loose quintessence gems. On Gary’s advice, Jason kept certain items, but most of it was cleared out to make room in Jason’s increasingly full inventory. Even if many items stacked into a single slot, he was getting close to filling all forty spaces. Jason had a strange moment as he took out the magical robes he had taken from Landemere Vane.

Landemere was the very first person Jason met in his new world. He was also the first person Jason killed. It had been less than two months, but he felt like a completely different person from the concussed, panicked idiot in the Vane family basement.

“Something wrong?” Gary asked, and Jason realised he was staring into space, the robes held in his hands. The blood had long since been cleaned off of them.

“I’m fine,” Jason said, putting the folded robes on the table.

With fresh coins added to the currency counter in his inventory, they headed back downstairs and into the main hall. Making their way through the throng as they looked at the goods on offer, Jason spotted a familiar face. Jory’s stand wasn’t one of the permanent

stalls, but it was one of the larger ones. At the front was a glass counter lined with colourful bottles and vials, behind which stood Jory himself. Most of the stall was storage space, hidden behind a curtain. While Jory was selling a woman a bottle of perfume, Jason perused the chalkboard beside the counter listing the available products.

“Crystal wash,” he read out loud.

“Seriously?” Jory asked, as his customer rejoined the crowd. “I can only make so much of it, and there are other people who want to buy it. People who don’t get the friends discount.”

“You realise I had to trudge through a bog marsh, right? To protect the poor, innocent people of the delta?”

Jory groaned.

“I can give you one crate, but that’s it for the week.”

“Twelve bottles?” Jason said. “I can’t get by on twelve bottles.”

“You do know about showers and baths, right?” Jory asked.

“He cleans his teeth with it,” Gary said.

“What?” Jory said.

“It leaves my mouth feeling fresh,” Jason said.

“Well, if you want more,” Jory said, “I’m not the only alchemist here.”

“What about those assistants you were talking about getting from the Alchemy Association?” Jason asked.

“Expanding my operations isn’t something I can just do on a whim, you know. I have a lot of demands on my time.”

“I thought that’s why you wanted the assistants,” Jason said. “Someone to take over the grunt work.”

They paused for Jory to sell an adventurer a bundle of potions.

“It isn’t that simple,” Jory said, resuming their conversation. “If I’m going to do it properly I need to put together a whole new facility. Extra space, new equipment. Wages for the assistants. You know the kind of margins I work under.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “Have you considered investors?”

“You offering?” Jory asked.

Jason held up a hand, three gold coins stacked between his thumb and forefinger.

“Something like this get you started?”

The basic coin of the realm was the lesser spirit coin. Iron spirit coins were worth a hundred lesser coins, used by bulk traders, adventurers and other members of the wealthy elite. After that, it was ten iron to the bronze, ten bronze to the silver and ten silver to the

gold. The gold spirit coins in Jason's hand was worth three hundred thousand units of the basic currency.

"You're not serious?" Jory said, to which Jason placed the coins down on the counter. Jory hesitantly picked them up, peering at them nestled in his palm.

"Do you know how many people I can help with this kind of money?" Jory asked.

"It doesn't matter how many people you help," Jason said. "What matters is if this gets me another crate of crystal wash."

"I still can't believe you gave him all that money," Gary said as they made their way through the crowd.

"It's an investment," Jason said.

"In what? That guy spends all his money on helping sick poor people."

"But imagine a world where everyone gave money for things like that," Jason said.

Gary thought it over for a moment.

"Then there'd be more healthy poor people?"

Jason allowed himself to be led by Gary's expertise as they looked at various armour for sale. They checked out large stalls selling armour in job lots and small stalls with expensive, handcrafted work. The main hall was only the beginning of the grand bazaar. Side corridors led to sprawling arcades lined with boutique shops. Jason spotted one with a sign so long it threatened to encroach on the abutting storefront.

GILBERT'S RESILIENT ATTIRE FOR THE DISCERNING GENTLEMAN

Jason walked inside, which was a large open space lined with armour of the lighter variety Jason preferred, largely cloth and leather. Most of the wares were draped over mannequins to demonstrate the hang of the garb. Several customers were perusing the wares, along with the proprietor in a frock coat that bulged heavily in the middle. Jason recognised middle-aged man's paunchy frame and balding head.

"Bert," Jason said.

"Indeed I am, sir. Gilbert, of Gilbert's Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman. For fine men as yourselves, however, I invite and appeal upon you to call me Bert. I take it from that glint of recognition in your eye that you are familiar with one of my brothers? Please tell me it isn't Filbert, of Filbert's Fine Leather Emporium."

"Uh, no," Jason said. "I'm Jason, and this is Gary."

Gary waved vaguely from where he was already inspecting the merchandise.

"I've met Bertram and Albert and Robert, but not Filbert," Jason said. "You're quintuplets?"

“Actually, it’s octuplets,” Gilbert said.

“There’s eight of you?”

“Indeed there are,” Gilbert said. “There’s Herbert, who sells fruit with Robert, but on the Island instead of Old City.”

“Selling the same fruit, but charging three times as much?” Jason asked.

“I knew you for a gentleman of discernment,” Gilbert said. “There’s also Hubert, but we don’t really talk about him. Got caught up with a criminal element. That just leaves Bertrand. He’s the handsome one.”

“You aren’t all identical?”

“No, we are.”

Jason was about to inquire further when Gary jostled his arm.

“There’s some quality stuff here,” Gary said. “Take a look at this.”

“Ah,” Gilbert said. “Trap weaver silk, alchemically treated for maximum resiliency. Leather panels carefully placed to provide additional protection without compromising flexibility. The magic in is integrated right down to the weaving pattern of the cloth. Tricky and laborious work, but the results speak for themselves. It also allows for the loose, flowing design, which is quite unusual with protective wear.”

Just as Gilbert said, the armour was almost a robe, in shifting shades of dark grey. The more fitted parts around the torso, arms and legs had black leather panels, but the layered garment was also draped with flowing cloth. It was a strange combination of tactical armour from Jason’s world and some kind of wizard robe. Jason was immediately taken with it.

“There’s a mythological order of dark warrior mystics where I come from,” Jason said. “They dress like this. I don’t suppose you know where I can get a sword with a blade made of red light?”

“Not in this city,” Gary said. “I’ve seen some gold-rank weapons like that.”

“Nice,” Jason said. “I have to start ranking up.”

“You’re a long, long way from gold rank,” Gary said with a laugh. “You should keep your eyes on what’s in front of you, for now.”

Gilbert smelled a sale and continued his spiel.

“The mix of shades and the flowing lines are of value to clients who value stealth,” Gilbert said, continuing with his sales pitch. “While not assisted by magic, the drape of the fabric breaks up the lines of the body, making it harder to recognise in the dark.”

“That does actually work,” Gary said, “although it doesn’t really matter with that cloak of yours.”

Jason reached out to run his fingers over cloth, which felt smooth and sleek.

Item: [Trap Weaver Battle Robe] (iron rank, epic)

A full body armour, carefully hand-crafted from the silk and leather of trap weavers. (armour, cloth/leather).

- Effect: Increased resistance to damage. Highly effective against cutting and piercing damage, less effective against blunt damage.
 - Effect: Repairs damage over time. Extensive damage may require external repair.
 - Effect: Absorbs blood to prevent leaving a blood trail.
 - Effect: Increases resistance to bleed and poison effects.
 - Effect: Resistant to adhesive substances and abilities with adhesive effects.
 - Effect: Adapts fit to the wearer, within a certain range.
-

“Well?” asked Gary, familiar with Jason’s ability to examine items.

“I like it,” Jason said. “I like it a lot.”

“It’ll probably cost more than you should really spend,” Gary said, “but you should always spend a little more than you want to on armour. It’ll keep you alive.”

“No wiser words have ever been spoken within the walls of my establishment,” Gilbert said.

Gary took on the job of haggling the price down, both he and Gilbert seeming satisfied with where the number landed. The price was in bronze coins, unusual for iron-rank equipment, but Jason had no issue for the quality of the product. He had only seen a handful of epic-quality armour in all their browsing, none of which met his needs so well as the one he finally purchased.

After paying for the armour, Jason placed it into his inventory. He pulled up the outfits tab, slotting the armour into a new outfit. He then tapped the equip button and obscuring smoke suddenly surrounded him. It cleared a moment later, his clothes gone and the armour in their place.

“Very impressive, sir,” Gilbert said, without apparent surprise. “And might I say, it suits you well. Please, do see for yourself.”

Gilbert pointed Jason to a standing mirror in the corner, where Jason admired himself in the dark combat attire.

“I think I’m having a chuunibyou moment,” Jason said.

“My apologies sir,” Gilbert said, “but I’m not sure I grasp your meaning.”

“We find it’s better not to ask,” Gary said.

Jason’s shadow cloak appeared around him, merging well with flowing lines of dark armour.

“I’m definitely having a chuunibyou moment.”

They left Gilbert’s Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman with Jason back in his street attire.

“I like how loose it feels,” he said. “I wasn’t sure about all the really loose clothes they wear here, but once I started wearing armour I really missed it.”

Jason had long ago bought fresh clothes, discarding those he looted from the Vane Estate. Daywear in Greenstone wouldn’t look out of place at a tropical resort, with bright colours and loose fits. Eveningwear was more fitted and formal, with flaring frock coats in dark, sober colours.

“I like it too,” Gary said. “Finding clothes comfortable over fur can be a pain. You should see what they wear where I come from. It’s basically just underwear and a bunch of belts strapped over everything.”

They were making their way through the crowds in the direction of the exit when Jason stopped when he spotted a stall.

“What is it?” Gary asked.

It was a large stall selling recording crystals. Jason’s eyes fell on a box of crystals being sold in bulk, which he pointed out to the bored-looking woman behind the counter.

“How much?”

Chapter 62: Have Some Damn Adventures

“Hello,” Jason said, waving at the crystal floating in front of him. “I’m not sure if, or when you’ll be seeing this, but I didn’t die, or whatever you think happened to me. You probably know that, since the only way you’re likely to see this is if I give it to you.”

He let out a dissatisfied groan.

“Maybe I should have scripted this. Oh, well. Where should I start? It’s been about two months since I arrived here. Where is here? That’s complicated. I’ve made some friends. I just got a new job, although I haven’t started yet. They’re meant to be sending my ID over today. The application process involved sort of a week-long retreat, which I got back from a couple of days ago.”

He took a deep breath.

“I suppose I should start with that complicated question of where I am. Right now, as you can see, I’m in an expensive hotel suite. It isn’t actually mine; that’s across the hall. This one belongs to some of those friends I mentioned. They went three-bedroom, which came with this nice, open living area.”

Jason had purchased recording crystals that gave him a lot of control about how they moved. He got up and led it out to the balcony, where he panned it over the ocean view.

“Nice, right? One of my new friends is kind of a big deal, so he got the best room in the house. We’re on an artificial island, which is pretty crazy, given the size. At some point I’ll do a tour video. The subways here are amazing.”

“Jason,” Farrah’s voice called out from inside. “Who are you talking to?”

Jason went back inside. Although he hadn’t been out on a job yet, having passed muster with the Adventure Society prompted Rufus to declare Jason ready to guide his own training. Although he and the others would provide occasional guidance, the hours of intensive oversight was a thing of the past, leaving the others with more time for their own pursuits. Farrah and Gary had been working on the rune tortoise shield they were going to sell off, while Rufus was preparing to expand his family’s interests into Greenstone.

“I’m talking to my family,” Jason said as he walked back inside. Farrah and Gary had just returned.

“Your family?” Farrah asked.

“It’s a recording stone,” Jason said. “I’ve decided to make a record of my time here. Something I can show them, if I ever get home. Family, this is Farrah and Gary.”

“Er, hello,” Farrah said, giving the awkward, home-movie wave that apparently transcended realities.

“Hey!” Gary said, waving enthusiastically. “Hello, Jason’s family!”

“Didn’t the goddess of knowledge tell you that you definitely would get home?” Farrah asked.

“I’m not wildly trusting of authority figures,” Jason said, deactivating the crystal. He took a carousel out of his inventory, full of recording crystals in little trays. He stowed the crystal away in an empty slot and returned the carousel to his inventory.

“You do realise the Adventure Society you just joined is a world-spanning organisation, right?” Farrah asked. “A global authority.”

“I’m anticipating the odd bit of friction,” Jason said. “I know I’m not to everyone’s taste, but coming to this world is a chance to be who I am, take it or leave it.”

“Even if it kills you,” Gary said cheerfully. “You decided to keep the thing that’ll randomly send you home, then?”

“I did,” Jason said. “I could always change my mind, but being here has given me some perspective on what’s really important. I hadn’t seen most of them in a long time.”

“What happened between you?” Farrah asked.

“The love of my life cheated on me with my brother, then they got married and my mother basically told me to shut up and take it like a man.”

“Harsh,” Gary said.

“We never really got along,” Jason said. “My brother is everything she ever wanted in a son. It was kind of the other way around with Dad. It was always him and me, but after the way things were, I didn’t see him so much.”

There was a knock on the door and Gary let in Vincent. They all sat down in the lounge area and Jason put out a tray of snacks he took from his inventory.

“You just had those ready?” Gary asked, picking up a candied grape.

“Turns out my storage space maintains freshness and temperature,” Jason said. “Which is lucky, because I had that tyrannical pheasant meat in there for almost two months.”

“You mean, the meat I had the other day?” Gary asked.

“That’s the one,” Jason said.

“Is that why you didn’t want any? Were you testing it out on me?”

“It wouldn’t worry me,” Jason said “I resist poison.”

“But I don’t,” Gary said.

“You’re bronze rank,” Jason said. “It’d be fine. If you’re worried about the food I make, you don’t need to eat any of these snacks,” Jason said.

Gary looked at the candied grape in his fingers, then put it into his mouth.

“We don’t have to go that far,” he mumbled.

Vincent watched the exchange with raised eyebrows.

“Are you two quite finished?”

“You sound like Rufus,” Gary said.

“I don’t think Rufus could pull off that moustache,” Jason said.

Jason liked Vincent. He was a very serious man with a very outrageous moustache, which Jason appreciated.

“There’s been a slight problem with your Society badge,” Vincent said.

After receiving confirmation that he had passed the assessment, Jason had undergone the final process of becoming an Adventure Society member. Each member had a badge that served various functions beyond proof of membership. It let members claim adventure notices and allowed the Society to track members in case they went missing. It also let the Society know immediately when a member died.

Badges were managed by the Adventure Society’s Member Logistics Department, of which Vincent was one of the chief officials. In addition to the assessment and induction of new members, their responsibilities included the dispensation and monitoring of membership badges.

Although the badges were managed by the Adventure Society, it was the Magic Society that created them. Jason had been sent to the Magic Society so they could take an aura imprint from which to make his badge. It was a simple process, just standing in the middle of a magic circle for about a minute.

“Every time a badge is made,” Vincent said, “it’s paired with a tracking stone. It tells us if your alive or dead, and lets us find you if you go missing or die. Yours doesn’t work, though. The stone can’t track your the aura imprint.”

“I’ve seen this before,” Farrah said. “Some people have abilities that block magical tracking.”

“That was the Magic Society’s assessment as well,” Vincent said.

Farrah turned to Jason.

“You have the dark essence, right?” she asked him. “A lot of hiding abilities can protect you from location effects.”

“It’s not the dark essence,” Jason said. “It’s one my other abilities. My, uh, out of town abilities.”

Ability: [Mysterious Stranger]

➤ Immunity to identification and tracking effects.

“It seems that I’m completely immune to tracking effects,” Jason said.

Vincent nodded.

“That’s fine,” he said. “Just as long as we know there isn’t someone messing with our membership systems.”

“So what does that mean about getting my badge?” Jason asked.

“There’s not much we can do,” Rufus said. “Your badge will still work fine for your adventuring activities. It just means we can’t track you if you go missing,” Vincent said. “Or find your body, if you die alone.”

“I can live with that,” Jason said. “Tracking everyone seems a little dystopian, anyway.”

Vincent plucked an object out of thin air. Many essence users had abilities to store objects in dimensional spaces, like Jason’s inventory, or Farrah’s bottomless stone chest. Vincent handed a square, leather object to Jason. It was a badge wallet, which Jason flipped open to see the badge inside. It was a circular medallion made of iron, embossed with a sword and rod crossed over a shield; the emblem of the Adventure Society.

“Congratulations,” Vincent said. “As of this moment, you are officially a member in good standing of the Adventure Society. That badge represents your membership, and the authority that represents.”

“I have authority?” Jason asked, flipping open the wallet like a TV cop flashing his badge.

“Not really,” Vincent said. “There is a certain level of prestige that comes from membership, but any actual authority comes from the contract you are carrying out. A common example is when the city puts out a contract to capture a wanted criminal. Whoever is assigned that contract has the power to investigate and arrest bestowed by the city, but only so long as they are on that contract. You don’t have the rank to take on a contract like that, however.”

“I have a rank?” Jason asked.

“Your rank can be seen on your medallion,” Vincent said. “One-star, iron rank.”

Jason looked down at his new badge. On the iron medallion, underneath the Adventure Society emblem, was a single star.

“The ranking system of the Adventure Society has two parts,” Vincent explained. “The first element is not assessed at all, being a reflection of your rank as an essence user. You’re iron rank, so you’re an iron rank member.”

“Simple enough,” Jason said.

“The second part is not an assessment of your power, but your judgement. That’s the star ranking, and is wholly determined by the Adventure Society. Everyone begins at one star, with the maximum number of stars being three. The number of stars determines the kinds of contracts you can take. One star contracts are pure monster hunts, with no complicated elements to deal with.”

“What’s your star rating?” Jason asked.

“Society officials operate outside the rating system,” Vincent said. “It helps us to work with members, irrespective of their rank.”

“Makes sense,” Jason said. “If you’ve got a two-star official running an operation with three-star members, they might start taking things into their own hands.”

“Precisely,” Vincent said.

“So what about you two?” Jason asked Gary and Farrah.

“Two star,” Farrah said. “Rufus, as well. We were kind of hoping to get bumped up to three after the Vane contract, but that didn’t work out.”

“Rufus gave an honest report,” Gary said. “We didn’t come out looking great.”

“Ironically, you did,” Vincent said to Jason. “I saw that report.”

“I don’t suppose that counts for my promotion chances?” Jason asked.

“Not directly,” Vincent said, “but it may be taken into account in the future. Once other achievements have the Society considering you for promotion. Achievements made while actually a member.”

“So what do two and three stars actually represent?” Jason asked.

“In short,” Vincent said, “two and three stars represent a level of confidence in your judgement on the part of the Adventure Society. Two stars means the Society recognises your ability to undertake at least some level of actual, unsupervised responsibility. You’ll be able to take different kinds of contracts, such as investigating potentially dangerous situations or unknown phenomena. It also means you can lead small expeditions of one-star members.”

“We never got to two star at iron rank,” Gary said. “In the high-magic areas there isn’t a lot of chance to shine. You spend the whole time following more powerful adventurers so as not to die.”

“Three stars is much the same as two, but more so,” Vincent said.

“Three stars means they trust you to handle yourself when things get political,” Farrah said.

“That’s a fair assessment,” Vincent said. “Three star members are expected to anticipate and manage consequences at a higher level than other adventurers.”

“How do you go for promotion?” Jason asked.

“You can apply,” Vincent said, “usually on the back of some accomplishment. The Society prefers to choose for themselves, however. When they think you’re operating at a higher level than your current rank, they’ll do an assessment. We don’t like to see useful assets wasting themselves on work any idiot could do.”

“I think he’s talking about you,” Farrah said to Gary.

“You’re not any higher rank than I am,” Gary shot back.

“There is one important thing to be aware of,” Vincent said, ignoring the pair. “The stringency with which promotions are considered scales upward with power. What is good enough for two stars at iron rank is not the same as at bronze or silver rank, where the stakes are higher. As such, you can expect to drop a star rank each time you increase a tier in power. Unless you’re still one-star, of course. No one really expects anything from you if you’re stuck at that level.”

“He’s still talking about you,” Farrah said.

“I have two stars,” Gary said. “We’re the same rank,” Gary said.

“So, what now?” Jason asked.

“That’s easy,” Gary said. “You’re an adventurer, now. Go to the jobs hall, get a contract and have some damn adventures.”

Chapter 63: Sunk-Cost Fallacy

Jason was trying something new on his morning run to Jory's clinic. With his cloak of shadows around him, he used its ability to reduce his weight to accelerate his progress. It required careful control, kicking off each step with his full weight, then reducing it to let the force propel him. At first it didn't work at all as he hopped into the air or tripped and fell.

Slowly getting a handle on it, he developed an unusual stride. His steps came less frequently, but with a lunging power that sent him skimming almost weightlessly over the ground. The disadvantage was that the weight-reduction slowly consumed his mana. By the time he arrived breathlessly at Jory's, the little mana bar at the edge of his vision was as empty as his stamina. He was as exhausted mentally as physically.

When Jason staggered through the back door of the clinic, Jory quickly brought in someone for Jason to use his power on. The patient looked worse than Jason, pale-skinned and walking strangely. He was accompanied into the room by a deeply unpleasant smell. Jason held out a weary hand, mumbling the incantation for the spell.

"Feed me your sins."

-
- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Dysentery] from [Human].
 - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Syphilis] from [Human].
 - Your stamina and mana have been replenished.
-

Both Jason and the patient let out sighs of relief.

"Thank you sir," the man said to Jason as Jory led him out. "I couldn't really make it here without soiling myself a little."

"Oh, we noticed," Jory said.

"Did I hear him say something about sins?" the man asked Jory.

"Don't worry about that," Jory said. "You just go home and get yourself cleaned up."

Jory came back to find Jason leaning against the wall. The few afflictions he had drained from the patient weren't enough to fully restore him.

"What happened to you?" Jory asked.

"I'm trying a new thing with one of my abilities. Something to help me travel faster. I'm going to pick up my first contract today, and most of them will be out in the delta."

"Why not hire a heidel from the livery stable? That's what most adventurers do."

"They creep me out," Jason said. "They're like a horse, except horribly, horribly wrong."

"I don't know what a horse is, but why do you think heidels are creepy?" Jory asked.

"They are creepy."

"There's a leech monster that lives inside you, and you think heidels are creepy?"

"Yeah, well... actually, that's a pretty good point. Still, I can think they're creepy if I want; it's a subjective position. Can you help me out with some cheap stamina and mana potions?"

"That's not a problem," Jory said. "Making those on the cheap were some of the earliest results of my experiments. They won't as strong as the more expensive sort, though."

"That's fine," Jason said. "I just need something to top me off a little. I'll save the high performance stuff for combat."

"I have crate-loads of the cheap stuff," Jory said. "You can have them at cost."

"Thanks," Jason said. "I'll be spending more time out in the delta now. I probably won't be able to make scheduled appearances so often."

"Don't worry," Jory said. "The clinic got along just fine before you came along."

"I'm not saying I won't be here," Jason said. "It's just the timing might get a little erratic."

"Any time you can spare, I'll appreciate," Jory said. "Things will be a bit hectic once the expansion starts, anyway."

"How's that going?" Jason asked.

"I bought the building next door," Jory said. "I'm going to have the two buildings connected, using this one as the clinic and putting a huge alchemy facility in the other. Construction starts in a few days."

"Best bring on the next patient," Jason said. "I want to get through them and head up to the jobs hall."

"Not a problem," Jory said, heading for the door, then pausing, looking back at Jason.

"Having you been passing weird spirit coins?" Jory asked.

"Those one I gave you should have been legitimate," Jason said.

"Not those," Jory said. "Iron rank stuff. Janice said some Magic Society guy came in looking for you."

"Is that bad?" Jason asked.

"Not unless you've been passing counterfeit coins," Jory said.

"I don't think they're counterfeit," Jason said. "Just personalised."

"What do you mean, personalised?" Jory asked.

Jason took out a coin checked it was one of his and tossed it to Jory, who looked it over.

“Is that a picture of you?” Jory asked, peering at it.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Wait a second,” Jory said, heading for the stairs. He came back down with a stone plate, with six gems set into it. He sat it on a bench and placed Jason’s coin on it. The second gem immediately lit up with the blue-grey colour of an iron spirit coin.

“The coin’s fine,” Jory said. “They’re all like this one?”

“They are,” Jason said.

“Looting ability?” Jory asked.

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“No wonder you don’t mind healing people for free,” Jory said. “You can basically punch coins right out of monsters. I’m going to go get some more sick people for you.”

“Wait,” Jason said. “What do I do about the Magic Society guy?”

“The coins are the real deal,” Jory said, “so don’t worry about it. You’re an Adventure Society guy, now. There’s something of a friendly rivalry between the Magic Society and the Adventure Society, at least between people who aren’t members of both. If he shows up, feel free to stick it to him. Just do what you normally do to people.”

“What do I normally do to people?” Jason asked.

“Confuse them until they want to punch you in the face,” Jory said.

The jobs hall was an annex of the main administration building on the Adventure Society campus. Compared to the overbearing immensity of the trade hall, it was a small and discrete. Inside was a moderate sized room divided into rows by standing bulletin boards. There were a few adventurers amongst them, perusing the posted contracts. To the right of the entrance was a stairwell going up, while the left had a man behind a desk. The familiar looking man was leaning back in his chair, dozing lightly in the warmth of the afternoon.

“Afternoon, Bert,” Jason greeted.

He had learned that when it came to the Berts, the best way to identify them was to feel out their auras, which were almost, but not quite as identical as their faces. This was Albert, an Adventure Society functionary Jason had met before.

“Mr. Asano,” Albert greeted. “You’re not in for your first job, are you?”

“I am, as it happens.”

“You know, there’s another young fellow doing the same.”

“Oh?” Jason said, looking around. He spotted Humphrey emerging from behind a bulletin board.

“I thought I heard your voice,” Humphrey greeted.

After exchanging small talk, they started exploring the bulletin boards. It was the first visit for both of them, but Humphrey had been preparing to be an adventurer his entire life. He acted as a guide as he showed Jason through the various sections.

“This floor is all iron-rank contracts,” Humphrey explained. “It starts at one-star contracts down this end, with three-star on the far side of the room. That section is usually empty, though. Most iron-rank contracts are ordinary monster hunting.”

He pointed out the stairs.

“Upstairs is bronze rank. There isn’t a spot for silver rank, since there isn’t enough call for it.”

They started strolling through the rows, glancing over contracts.

“Contracts can be closed or open,” Humphrey explained. “A closed contract can only be taken by one person, on a first-come, first-serve basis. You take the notice, register it at the desk, and off you go. Open contracts are a lot less common, where any number of people can join in. Usually that’s a widespread infestation of lesser monsters, with rewards per kill.”

“I’ve killed a few lesser monsters.”

“They aren’t a big problem unless they come in numbers,” Humphrey said. “Any farmer with a pitchfork can handle most of them.”

“Not all of them, though,” Jason said. “Have you ever seen a malicious hedgehog? Shoots spikes out of its body.”

“I haven’t,” Humphrey said.

“I suppose you don’t get a lot of hedgerow omnivores in this climate.”

“When it comes to choosing a contract, not all are created equal,” Humphrey said, continuing his explanation. “Once a contract has languished for a couple of weeks, it gets assigned to members on a compulsory basis. As to who gets the assignments, that’s all internal politics. There have been some rumblings since the new director came in. There are a lot of nominal Adventure Society members who don’t take any contracts suddenly finding contracts assigned to them.”

“I’ve heard there’s been some internal conflict,” Jason said. “The new person in charge, trying to purge some of the corruption.”

“My perspective has been somewhat peripheral,” Humphrey said, “not being a member until now. My mother likes the new director, though.”

“That’s a good sign,” Jason said.

“The new director had been making a lot of changes,” Humphrey said, “even here in the jobs hall.”

“Such as?”

“Contracts come from the general population,” Humphrey said. “From people who have a problem, usually a monster problem, that requires an adventurer. People of means can offer incentives, so that their contract is taken up more quickly. As you might imagine, there’s a lot of competition for the more lucrative contracts.”

“The new director banned incentives?” Jason asked.

“No, they’re still there,” Humphrey said. “It’s just that there used to be a special notice board up the front with all the incentivised contracts, because they were the ones people were most interested in. The new director put an end to that and had the incentivised contracts posted with all the rest. I’m not really sure what that accomplishes, other than taking up people’s time.”

“It’s actually a smart move,” Jason said. “Once people have put in a certain amount of effort into something, they feel like they need to follow through, or their effort was wasted. They call it the sunk-cost fallacy, where I come from.”

“Sunk cost?” Humphrey asked.

“Think about that board you described,” Jason said. “The one with all the most lucrative contracts on it, sitting up the front. I bet you’d get a lot of people who come in, saw that board was empty, and walked away. Now think about if they have to comb through all the boards to find those high-paying contracts. After having spent that much time looking, at least some of those people will take a contract, even if they don’t find one with bonuses. Otherwise, they feel like they’ve wasted all the time they spent looking.”

Humphrey frowned as he looked at Jason.

“Does it ever bother you?” Humphrey asked. “Manipulating people, I mean. Like with Thadwick Mercer. If you were actually arguing with him would be one thing, but provoking him because a public argument helps your social standing?”

“Manipulation isn’t bad, in and of itself,” Jason said. “Look at it this way: if you have the choice between manipulating someone into doing the right thing, or punishing them for doing the wrong thing, which is more moral? Pushing someone onto a better path and having the right thing done, or having the wrong thing done and hurting the person for doing it? Righteous honesty says to be upright and put the moral decision onto the other person. But what is more important? Feeling righteous, or putting a little more good into the world?”

“You have to give people the chance to make their own mistakes,” Humphrey said. “Otherwise, you’re just trying to control everything, even what’s right and wrong.”

“There is always someone controlling what’s right and wrong,” Jason said. “Look at you, for example. How do you feel about benefiting from a society where the vast majority of the population are exploited for the benefit of you and people like you? The same people who govern the structure of society are the one who benefit the most. That’s true everywhere, your world or mine.”

“I was brought up to believe that nobility is as much duty as privilege,” Humphrey said. “That the advantages we have come with a lifelong responsibility to earn the everything we’ve been given.”

“That’s commendable,” Jason said. “But Thadwick Mercer received every opportunity you did, and he doesn’t strike me as the lifelong responsibility type. How many of your peers are like you, and how many are like him? How is that fair to the people of Old City or the delta? Do you think someone living in a hovel would turn down a mansion because they would have to live up to the responsibility that came with it? Someone like Thadwick isn’t inherently evil, but he’s part of a system that tells him he deserves more than other people, just for being born. Do you think he’s right to think that?”

“Of course not,” Humphrey said.

“But you’re the same,” Jason said. “That responsibility you were talking about? That is you, striving to be better because the world tells you that you’re better and you feel responsible for living up to that. I respect that choice, but it is a choice. If you wanted to slack off and exploit people, there’s very little to stop you. Not everyone gets the chance to live up to that privilege.”

Farrah, had she been present, would have recognised Jason ramping up into full-blown, morally superior proselytising. Not being there to stop him with a sharp punch to the face, Jason’s rant continued.

“You think criminals just woke up one day and thought, ‘gee, I sure would like to take other people’s stuff?’ They turn to crime because it’s that or they go hungry. Their children go hungry. That’s something you and I never had to deal with. We get to choose to be good or bad, because we don’t have to spend our time breaking our backs just to eat or have a roof over our heads. People live their whole lives with nothing but that struggle, birth to death. But we never had to deal with that, and it’s not likely we ever will.”

Humphrey shook his head.

“So what are you suggesting?” he asked. “Revolution? Bring everything crashing down? It’s easy to point at the injustices of the world and use that as an excuse for whatever behaviour you’re trying to get away with.”

“I don’t have an answer,” Jason said, deflating from his self-righteous high. “I’m like you, Humphrey. I’m trying to do my best with what I have. In your case, that’s talent, wealth, looks and privilege. As for me, I’m good at people.”

“You mean good *with* people,” Humphrey said.

“No,” Jason said. “I meant what I said.”

Clarissa Ventress’ bodyguard Darnell led Sophie into the garden, where Ventress was enjoying tea on a terrace.

“Sophie, dear,” Ventress said. “It’s been so long since I’ve heard from you.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“With that little request of mine, yes. But as I recall, what I instructed were high-profile thefts in the midst of public events. It’s been weeks, and I haven’t heard about a thing. If you were doing as you were told, I really should have.”

“Your part in planning this operation,” Sophie said, “was to tell us to do something breathtakingly idiotic. Our part was to figure out how to do that without being caught immediately. Our part is harder, so it takes longer. Unless your intention was for us to march over to the Island and mug the first rich-looking person we see.”

Darnell moved forward threateningly as Sophie raised her voice, but Ventress waved him back.

“But I don’t think that’s what you wanted,” Sophie said. “That might get you out of our deal when I’m hauled away by the guard, but everyone will know that you sold me out. Where would your precious reputation be then? Stop sending your goons to drag me back here, Ventress. You’re only slowing me down.”

“Two weeks,” Ventress said. “I want to hear about your first bold caper within two weeks, or I will consider you as having failed to live up to your side of our little pact. At which point, I will throw you to whichever wolf leaves the thickest slab of meat at my door. And if I hear you try to run out on me...”

She gave Sophie her best serpentine grin.

“...there are men in this city with tastes that would make someone even as hard as you turn soft, Sophie dear.”

Sophie looked ready to spit venom, but kept her lips pressed tightly together. She stared daggers at Ventress, who smiled back as if Sophie’s glare was good for the skin.

“Can I go now?” Sophie asked, biting off every word.

“Of course, dear,” Ventress said. “Two weeks; don’t forget, now.”

Chapter 64: Take My Wife, Please

Luckily for Jason, most of the contracts in the jobs hall were for areas close to the city. Unless the threat was urgent, those further afield were posted on each town or village's noticeboard. Every month, the Adventure Society would send out a number of people to patrol those areas and resolve those notices. It was not a popular task, as it meant a full month away from the city and any opportunities that might arise.

Jason started taking one or two contracts a day, depending on the location. He would then try and clear a notice or two off the local boards while he was out, even if it meant spending the night out in the delta. People were more than welcoming, especially as he took the time to help any sick locals.

In the jobs hall, Jason placed a notice on the desk. Albert was on duty again today, making a record of the contract.

"Badge, please," Albert said.

Jason took out his Adventure Society badge and touched it to the contract. There was a shimmer as the badge touched the magic paper and Albert filed it in one of the desk drawers.

New Quest: [Contract: Bog Shambler]

A bog shambler has appeared close to the village of Hule. You have accepted a contract to eliminate the creature.

- Objective: Eliminate [Bog Shambler] 0/1.
- Reward: Spirit coins.

The Adventure Society rewarded iron spirit coins for an iron-rank monster-slaying contract. The amount depended on number of monsters, travel time and perceived difficulty, from ten, anywhere up to a hundred. If the contract proved more difficult than was originally assessed, bonuses would be given. They went from extra coins, all the way up to an awakening stone, although such a reward was extremely rare.

Jason himself could loot coins from each monster, while the quests that appeared for each contract would give more coins again, and sometimes other valuables. He was effectively being paid three times for each contract.

"Your armour is looking a big ragged," Albert observed. "That thorny-tongue frog from yesterday?"

"It certainly was as thorny-tongued as advertised," Jason said. "The armour self-repairs, but it got torn-up pretty well. It'll be fine in a few days."

"I imagine you got torn-up as well," Albert said.

"I self-repair too," Jason said. "You on tomorrow, Bert?"

"Nah, they've got me on the admin desk, tomorrow."

"I'll see you in a few, then."

Jason made to leave, but found someone standing in his path. It was a tall, gangly fellow who looked a few years older than Jason. He had an iron-rank aura, so he was probably the age he looked. He was wearing robes that were a size too big, with the emblem of the Magic Society prominently placed.

"Mr Asano?" the man asked.

"And you are?" Jason asked.

"Standish," the man said. "Clive Standish, of the Magic Society. To be precise, I am Adjunct Assistant to the Deputy Director of the Magic Society, Greenstone branch."

"That must make for a long desk plate. Is there a reason you're standing in my way, Standish?"

"Actually, Mr Asano, I've been looking for you for some time," Clive said.

"Well it isn't my fault," Jason said. "I had no idea she was your wife, so you can't blame me."

"What?" Clive asked. "I'm not married."

"She told me the same thing," Jason said, shaking his head ruefully. "I wouldn't worry about it."

Clive's brow creased into a frown.

"I'm not entirely sure what's going on here," he said.

Jason patted him consolingly on the arm.

"Welcome to my life," Jason said, then walked past Clive and out the door.

Left standing inside the jobs hall, Clive stood on the spot, confused.

"What just happened?" he asked.

"That's Jason," Albert said. "Nice enough guy. A bit odd."

"Bert?" Clive said, turning to the man behind the desk. "I thought you sold fruit?"

"You're probably thinking of my brother, sir."

In the delta, Jason had been given a room at the only inn in the village. After clearing out a monster and healing some of the sick, the innkeeper refused to take payment. The room was humble, but clean, and Jason sat on the floor performing his evening meditation.

Jason had yet to arrive in Greenstone when Rufus told him the three foundations of building his power as an essence user. Training, to prepare himself; danger, to push his limits; and meditation, to consolidate his efforts. For months, Jason worked on two of the three pillars, under the guidance of Rufus Farrah and Gary. Without all three, however, his abilities made little progress.

Jason was driven to take contract after contract, fighting monster after monster. He was caught up in the heady rush of danger, his skills and powers the line between life and death. It was one of the three pillars Rufus scribed as the foundations of power advancement, and Jason was starting to see results.

The fastest was his vision power, which Farrah told him was normal. After all, it was constantly in use. The next fastest was the spell he used to cleanse sickness and poison, feast of absolution. It had been crawling slowly but surely upwards as he used it over and over at the clinic. Once he started using it in combat, the slow climb turned into a regular upwards tick.

Feast of absolution was more useful in combat than he anticipated, as many monsters spawned in groups. He could use it on a monster right before finishing it off, replenishing himself on the afflictions he had placed on it himself. The injection of mana and stamina gave him the endurance to go full-bore through an extended fight, instead of needing to pace himself.

-
- Ability [Feast of Blood] (Blood) has reached Iron 1 (100%).
 - Ability [Feast of Blood] (Blood) has advanced to Iron 2 (00%).
-

It was usually during meditation that Jason's abilities broke through. He smiled with satisfaction, breaking his meditation and taking a sandwich from his inventory to munch on.

His abilities grew stronger with each rank, although it was easier to see with some than others. His vision power, for example, not only increased his ability to see through darkness, but also his normal visual acuity. Colours were brighter, distant objects clearer. It was a concrete reminder of what all his efforts were for.

He decided that after pushing himself so hard, he would take a few days to rest on returning to the city. He also wanted to look into obtaining more awakening stones. Until he awakened all of his abilities, he couldn't make any true progress toward bronze rank.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: iron
- Progression to bronze rank: 0% (0/4 essences complete)

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood): [Iron 0].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Iron 0].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Iron 0].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Iron 0].

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Interface].
- [Quest System].
- [Inventory].
- [Map].
- [Astral Affinity].
- [Mysterious Stranger].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (3/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 4] 39%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 3] 08%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 3] 21%.

Blood [Power] (4/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 3] 04%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 2] 89%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 2] 00%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 2] 16%.

Sin [Recovery] (4/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron 2] 85%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 3] 96%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 3] 21%.
- [Hegemony] (spell): [Iron 2] 67%.

Doom [Spirit] (1/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 2] 67%.

He would only start down the path to bronze rank once all his essence abilities were awakened. Jason didn't feel put upon by his lack of awakening stones, as even Humphrey

didn't have his full set of powers yet. According to Humphrey, it was Geller family tradition to supply their scions with enough awakening stones to get started, while the rest had to be earned.

The Adventure Society was known to give out awakening stones for exceptional service, although rarely. Usually it was for unexpected success when a contract proved more difficult than expected. Some open contracts also offered stones as rewards for those with the greatest contributions. The competition would strongly drive performance.

Otherwise, awakening stones could be purchased through brokers, almost always at auction. They came up semi-regularly, but the prices were exorbitant. Rufus advised him to be patient and work hard. The Adventure Society made sure stones found their way into the hands of good adventurers.

Returning to the city in the morning, Jason stopped in at Jory's clinic before returning to his lodgings on the Island. Jason's inn was expensive, closer to a luxury hotel than the inns and hostels of the delta towns. Downstairs was a sumptuous lounge, dining hall and bar. When Jason entered the lounge from outside, he spotted the landlady, Madam Landry, berating a tall man in scholar's robes.

"...think you can sleep in my lounge area like it's a common flop house!"

Clive was profusely apologising. Somehow his gangly height seemed lesser than the tiny woman scolding him.

"I fell asleep while awaiting an acquaintance," Clive said. "I'm happy to pay the fee for a night," he said.

"So you do think it's a flophouse!"

"No, good lady I can assure you that..."

Clive continued struggling until he spotted Jason, his eyes lighting up.

"Mr Asano!" he called out.

Clive fled Madam Landry in Jason's direction.

"Here, good lady," Clive said. "This is my acquaintance, Mr Jason Asano."

"Who's your acquaintance?" Jason said, voice and expression full of offence. "After you slept with my wife?"

"What?" Clive said, flustered, head swivelling between Jason and Madam Landry.

"Wait, you're not doing that to me again."

He jabbed a finger in Jason's direction.

"You don't even have a wife."

"Not anymore," Jason said. "She ran off with this tall bloke from the Magic Society."

“You absconded with Mr Asano’s wife and have the nerve to use my inn like some cheap tavern!” Madam Landry said.

“I never touched his wife!”

“I’m off upstairs for a rest, Madam Landry.” Jason said. “Probably best if you showed him the door.”

“You have a good rest, Jason dear,” she said. “I know you’ve been working hard.”

Clive watched Jason disappear up the stairs, and was shuffled outside by Madam Landry. He stood out on the street, looking at the door that had been closed in his face.

“What in the world is going on?”

Chapter 65: Curious Urges

Jason tugged his bowtie into shape in a large standing mirror.

"That's an unusual outfit," Gary said. "A bit more snug than I like. I think the locals have it right, fashion-wise."

They were in the lounge room of the suite shared by Rufus, Gary and Farrah. Gary was wearing evening wear that showed off all the colourful drapery favoured by Greenstone high society.

"I had Gilbert make it up," Jason said. "It's called a tuxedo."

Jason enjoyed the hang of a well-tailored suit, but he found himself missing his armour. He had been wearing it almost constantly, through battles and danger until it felt like a part of him. Still, a night at the symphony involved neither battles nor danger, so perhaps it was best to feel a little different. And even if it did, his tuxedo had some strengthening treatments and a few enchantment tricks to facilitate a quick escape, if necessary.

"Not enough colours," Gary said, still eyeing off Jason's clothes.

"I like it," Farrah said, emerging from her own room. "Simple and elegant."

"Why does Rufus always take the longest to get ready?" Gary asked. "He doesn't even have hair. I'm ready, I'm pretty much all hair."

"I remember not having hair," Jason said. "Didn't care for it."

"It's nice to be going out again," Farrah said. Jason moved so she could take his place to check her outfit in the mirror.

"Agreed," Jason said. "The program was in three parts, right? A nice, long evening at the symphony will be just the thing, I think."

"Danielle said she invited us because she thought you would enjoy it," Farrah said. "She knows you've been working hard."

"I ran into Humphrey out in the delta, yesterday," Jason said. "We did a job off a noticeboard together."

"How was that?" Farrah asked.

"Well, I stood there while and he killed the monster immediately, so... straightforward."

"Everyone's ready?" Rufus asked, stepping out of his room.

"Of course we're ready," Farrah said. "You're always the last one out."

"Did you wax your head?" Gary asked Rufus.

“No,” Rufus said. “I did not wax my head.”

“Really?” Gary asked. “Because it looks like you waxed your head.”

“There is something of a sheen to it,” Jason observed.

“Maybe I rubbed in a little moisturising treatment,” Rufus admitted.

“You did,” Gary said. “You waxed your head.”

“I did not wax my head.”

“I think it looks nice,” Farrah said. “Very shiny.”

Unlike the theatre district, which was located in Old City, the Grand Concert Hall was very close to their lodgings in the guild district. They walked the short distance through the wide streets, the sun low, but still hanging in the summer sky. The concert hall was a magnificent, circular building that Jason walked past every day on his way to the Adventure Society campus. With two lengthy intermissions scheduled, Jason intended to take a look around between performances.

They joined Danielle Geller and her son Humphrey in their private box. When the first interval arrived, the rest of the group headed in the direction of the drinking lounge restricted to private box holders. As they left, Danielle discreetly stopped Jason.

“I have a friend I would like you to meet,” she said quietly, handing him a piece of paper. “I said you would find her during the first intermission. You won’t make a liar of me, will you?”

“You aren’t pushing me into a box are you, Lady Geller?”

“I wouldn’t dare,” she said with a sly smile.

As Danielle left him behind, Jason glanced at the piece of paper. It listed directions to a room on the second floor, one down from the Geller’s third-floor private box. Walking through the hallways was like walking through an art gallery, with paintings and recessed sculptures carefully lit with delicate magical lighting.

He found the room listed on the paper, where a plaque declared it the Edith Vane Memorial Conference Room. He frowned at the name. There was one aura that he could sense within, with the overpowering strength of silver rank. He considered knocking but just went in instead.

The conference room looked like just that, with a long table surrounded by chairs. Soft lamps hung from the ceiling, filling the room with warm light. Along one wall, windows looked out over the city. The guild district was mostly low buildings, with the Adventure and Magic Society campuses looming large, along with the concert hall itself. The sun had set

during the first performance and street lamps lit thoroughfares below, lighting up the bustling nightlife.

The room's single occupant had her back to him as she looked out over the city. She wore a formal dress in the local style; a loose draping of layered colours, cinched with flattering strategy. Chestnut hair spilled down her back, with a pair of tapered ears poking out to reveal her as an elf. Jason couldn't have hidden his presence if he wanted to, but she gave no reaction to his entrance at all.

Jason took a bottle and a glass from his inventory, pouring out a measure of sweet, green liqueur.

"Drink?" he offered.

She held out a hand without turning around. The glass tugged itself from Jason's grip and flew across the room into hers, without so much as spilling a drop.

"Thank you," she said and took a sip. "This is one of Mr Norwich's private concoctions. He's a friend of a friend, yes?"

"He is," Jason said. Norwich was an alchemist friend of Jory's who had been trying to brew a drink that would get through Jason's poison resistance. Norwich didn't want to turn to bronze-rank ingredients, partly as a challenge and partly to prevent a bronze-rank hangover.

Jason took out another glass and poured a drink for himself, then wandered over to stand next to the woman. He looked out at the city instead of at her.

"Do you know who I am, Mr Asano?"

"I only really know the one elf. We don't get along."

"The priestess of purity."

"That's the one," Jason said. "Very severe woman. Powerful, Aryan vibe. Sexy, but you know you really shouldn't. Like an evil lady torturer."

"You think speaking a little nonsense is going to put me off kilter?"

"You think bringing me to a room named after a family I killed half of will do the same to me?"

She turned to look at him, then back to the window.

"Forty-one contracts in eighteen days, if we count adventure board notices," she said. "You've been a busy man."

"It feels like I have a lot of catching up to do."

"Can you keep this pace up?"

"Not unless someone makes me a magical scooter."

"Is that some manner of transport from your world?"

"It is," Jason said. "I think it would be nice. Riding along the embankment roads, the wind in my face."

"I did hear about your distaste for heidels. Quite unusual, for an adventurer."

"Eccentricity is the prerogative of the wealthy and powerful. I barely qualify for either, but I'm working on it."

"Then you should make more lucrative investments than in a man who has dedicated his life to healing the poor."

"I'll muddle through," Jason said. "Did you want anything more than to point out how much attention you're paying, Director? This intermission won't last forever."

Elsbeth Arella was director of the Greenstone Branch of the Adventure Society. Rufus had pointed her out, along with any number of other local notables, during their spate of social outings the month previous.

"You'll find, Mr Asano, that these intermissions last as long as certain people want them to."

"I see."

"I'm satisfied with how you have been conducting yourself since joining the Adventure Society."

"Awakening stone satisfied?"

"I would not take your self-satisfaction as a reasonable measure of mine, Mr Asano. I especially do not care for some mid-level Magic Society functionary contacting my office to request a meeting with a member of my society, one not even a month clear of assessment."

"Couldn't they just come and find me directly?" Jason asked innocently.

She turned to give him a withering glare, her aura crushing his into the floor. He nonchalantly sipped at his drink, still looking out the window.

"Take a break from contracts for a little while, Mr Asano. You've been clearing out the backlog I use to prod some of our members who don't share your work ethic. I will see you are assigned appropriate contracts; just check the desk at the jobs hall. If you do well, you can expect to see a second star in the near future."

"You're the boss," Jason said.

"You don't strike me as a man who pays much heed to authority," she told him.

"I'm not big on abdicating moral responsibility," he said.

She drained the glass and handed it back to him.

"You have a taste for the sweet things, Mr Asano. You drink like an elf."

"You can knock back the plonk pretty well," Jason said. "You drink like an Aussie."

“I have no idea what an ‘Aussie’ is,” she said.

“I am, Director. I am.”

“A friend of yours,” Jason whispered to Danielle as he took a seat back in the viewing box.

“A new friend,” Danielle said, “but I think, a good one.”

The art-lined public corridors of the concert hall worked their way around the circular building. There were plenty of concert goers taking in the art during the second intermission, Jason included. Drink in hand, he meandered down a hallway, alone. He stopped to consider a painting of a barren desert wasteland. It was impressionistic in style, reminding Jason of his earliest days in his new world. A woman joined him in examining it. He spared her a glance before turning back to the picture.

He sensed no aura from her at all. His aura senses weren't the sharpest, but to hide it completely meant she was probably higher rank than he was. She looked to be in her early twenties, by which point any decent adventurer hit bronze rank. Not many got a late start like Jason. She had the olive skin of a local, her delicate features an effortless, dangerous beauty. Dark hair cascaded over her shoulders to a gown that was elegance in cream silk.

“Mediocre,” the woman critiqued the painting in front of them. “They hang the superior works in the restricted lounges.”

“I like it,” Jason said. “It looks how the desert feels.”

“You've spent some time there?” she asked.

“A little,” Jason said. “It reminds me of parts of my homeland.”

“And where is that?” she asked.

“Very far from here,” he said wistfully.

She turned her head towards him.

“You're Jason Asano.”

Jason kept his eyes on the painting.

“I'm not sure you understand how introductions work,” he said. “I already know who I am.”

She frowned, and he felt a bronze-rank aura blaze out to suppress his own. He had been told that was the very height of rudeness, but he kept being subjected to it. He thought there might be a lesson there, but he had no interest in learning it. Absently, he wondered if he was becoming a masochist.

“A beautiful woman invading my personal space,” he said, unconcerned. “Should I be scared or delighted?”

The corners of his mouth turned up in a sly smile.

“Perhaps,” he mused, “the most delicious choice would be both.”

“Do you want to get slapped?” the woman asked him.

He turned his head to face her.

“Would you think less of me if I said yes?” he asked.

She arched an eyebrow.

“My name is Cassandra Mercer,” she said.

“Ah,” Jason said, turning back to the painting. “Now I see.”

“See what?” she asked.

“Everything.”

“Oh really?”

“If Thadwick had sent you,” Jason said, “then this would be an alley and you would be much less pretty. I imagine you are here at your mother’s behest. You strike me as someone very good at satiating urges of curiosity.”

“If I struck you, Mr Asano, you’d know all about it. And speaking of my mother, I’ve heard you said some unkind things in her regard.”

Jason turned again from the painting to give her a sheepish smile.

“For that,” he said, “please convey my unreserved apologies. I didn’t know who your brother was at the time, and he actually asked me if I knew who his father was. You don’t walk away from a line like that.”

“A man of dignity would.”

Jason let out a sinister chuckle.

“Yes, I imagine one would.”

“I did make some discreet inquiries about you,” Cassandra acknowledged. “There was enticingly little to find. You have me at a disadvantage.”

Jason raised his eyebrows at that claim.

“Miss Mercer, you have power, influence, connections, wealth and knowledge. What possible advantage could I have over you?”

“Mystery,” she said. “Isn’t that the greatest advantage?”

“Mystery is an illusory shield,” Jason said. “The moment the veil is pierced, your vulnerabilities become exposed. And there is only one arena in which vulnerability becomes a weapon.”

“And what arena is that?” she asked.

His face showed disappointment.

"It's truly a shame you have to ask," he said. "If you'll excuse me, I believe the intermission will end soon."

He left without looking back. She watched him walk away, a contemplative expression on her face. She left in the other direction.

In their family's private booth, Cassandra sat down next to her mother. Thalia Mercer looked more like her daughter's sister than her parent, the age-defying power of her silver-rank essences.

"Well?" Thalia asked.

"He's dangerous," Cassandra said. "Don't let Thadwick anywhere near him."

"Thadwick isn't the problem," Thalia said. "The problem is how much trouble your father will cause to salve your brother's pride. You know how he is about his male heir."

"That could be a concern given Asano's connection to Rufus Remore," Cassandra said. "Have you found out any more about his background?"

"I have confirmed that Remore is training him," Thalia said, "with no small amount of dedication. As for where Asano came from, it's like he fell out of the sky."

"I've heard something else," Cassandra said. "I wasn't going to say anything until I confirmed it."

"Oh?"

"You'll recall that Remore and his companions undertook an expedition out of the city," Cassandra said.

"The Vane problem," Thalia said. "I always disliked Cressida."

"They went at the behest of the Church of Purity. Took one of the church's healers along with them. A girl from the Lasalle family."

"You know her?"

"I do. Anisa. Zealous girl. Dangerously committed."

"What does she have to say?"

"I can't approach her directly," Cassandra said. "She thinks I comport myself in a sinful manner."

"I should hope so," Thalia said. "That's where all the fun is."

"What I'm hearing from my sources in the church of purity," Cassandra said, "is that Anisa left Remore's group after some stranger with dark powers joined them."

“Interesting,” Thalia said. “That fits with something I heard about Remore believing he bungled the contract. That he would have failed if not for the intervention of someone else.”

“I heard much the same,” Cassandra said, “but how could that be Asano? I’ve already confirmed that he came to the city with no skills at all. Remore and his companions trained Asano for weeks just to get him to a minimum standard.”

“You said dark powers,” Thalia said. “Asano is an affliction specialist.”

“Certainly enough to put a priestess of Purity right off,” Cassandra said, “but there are still incongruities. My instincts tell me there’s more to this.”

“Trust your instincts, dear,” Thalia said. “Find out what you can.”

“Of course. Steps have already been taken.”

“For the moment,” Thalia said, “is it worth you taking the time to beguile him?”

“It might be worth the effort,” Cassandra said, “but not worth the risk.”

“Oh?” Thalia prompted.

“He treated the full suppression of my aura like it was the pleasant cool of the evening.”

“That’s certainly unusual,” Thalia said. “And you aren’t normally so crude as to use your aura like that.”

“I was trying to throw him off-balance,” Cassandra said, “but there’s something strange about him. It’s like he lives off-balance. Talking with him feels like teetering on the edge of something I don’t understand.”

Thalia glanced at her daughter from under an arched eyebrow.

“What?” Cassandra asked.

“Nothing, dear,” Thalia said, turning her gaze to the stage, a slight smile playing across her lips. They sat in silence for a few moments before Cassandra spoke again.

“Mother?”

“Yes, dear?”

“When does vulnerability become a weapon?”

Thalia chuckled, quietly, prompting an irritated look from Cassandra.

“Vulnerability is a weapon of seduction, dear,” Thalia said. “Tricky to use, but devastating, if wielded well. Perhaps Thadwick isn’t the only one I should keep away from this young man.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mother.”

Chapter 66: A Stronger Weapon Than the One in Your Hand

Humphrey was returning to the family estate after completing a contract, muddy and spattered with monster blood. He was met by Phoebe, a distant cousin. Like him, she was iron rank but joined the Adventure Society more than half a year earlier.

The Geller family sprawled across continents. Although they shared a last name, Phoebe and Humphrey were barely related. They didn't even share an ethnicity, with her skin being darker and hair much lighter than Humphrey's. As was traditional for the Geller family, Phoebe had been sent to Greenstone for training and experience. Once she reached bronze-rank, she would return to her homeland.

"What is going on with that friend of yours?" Phoebe asked Humphrey.

"You mean, Jason?" Humphrey asked. "I've been busy with contracts, so I haven't seen him. Mother said was spending a lot of time in the mirage chamber."

"A lot of time is right," Phoebe said. "He's been in there almost all day, every day, for most of a week," Phoebe said. "He'll fight anyone who comes in; bronze rank, iron rank, he doesn't care. Your mother says its good experience for our people to face an affliction specialist."

"Is he winning?" Humphrey asked.

"Mostly he's losing," she said sharply. "People have a habit of dying after he's already been beaten, though. Those afflictions are nasty."

"I've seen him kill monsters with them," Humphrey said. "I'm not sure I want to see that on a person."

"I don't understand how he keeps going when he loses so much," Phoebe said. "That would really get to me."

"You learn more from a loss," Humphrey said. "I wouldn't bother trying to understand Jason, though. I think Mother is the only one who sees through him."

"He did manage a few unexpected victories," Phoebe said. "When the mirage chamber throws out a complicated environment he gets tricky to deal with."

"Oh?"

"He beat my brother."

"He beat Rick?" Humphrey asked.

"Rick is like you," she said. "Put the enemy in front of him and nothing at iron rank is going to survive. But the mirage arena put them in a ruined town. The post-surge, cleanout scenario, so monsters everywhere. He'd hit-and-run every time Rick was distracted."

The illusion power of the mirage area could combine environments and enemies into many different scenarios. A post-surge cleanout was set in a town that had been overrun during a monster surge. It was a favourite of the Geller family trainers, due to the complex environment and constant threat of hidden monsters. Often it was used to train search-and-destroy missions, but it also made a dynamic arena for combat.

"I'm guessing Rick asked for a rematch," Humphrey said.

"Straight away," Phoebe said, "but your mother stepped in and took over and decided to make a demonstration of it. She must have been watching."

"I think Jason fascinates her," Humphrey said. "She likes to take people apart like puzzles, to see how they work. Jason is nothing if not puzzling."

"She put out a notice for everyone on site to assemble in the viewing room in..."

She pulled out a pocket watch to check the time.

"...just under two hours. Enough time for you to take a shower first. You smell like swamp and dead monster. Why didn't you use some crystal wash?"

"I ran out. It's been hard to get a hold of lately," Humphrey said.

"Actually, I noticed that too," Phoebe said.

The mirage area viewing room was laid out like a lecture theatre, and Geller family trainers would often use it as such. With tiered seats looking down on a large viewing window, trainers could talk while mirage arena images, live or recorded, were projected behind them. It was already half full when Humphrey arrived, with more people coming in behind him.

"Your mother tweaked the rematch," Phoebe said as Humphrey took a seat next to her. "This time Rick will have his whole team."

"All of them?" Humphrey asked. "Who does Jason have with him?"

"No one," Phoebe said. "Although I suspect your mother's hand will be firmly pressed down on the scale."

"Rick has Claire on his team," Humphrey said. "She'll just cleanse all of Jason's afflictions."

"Your mother set the conditions of the match," Phoebe said. "I'm not the one to complain to."

"I'm going to go find her," Humphrey said, standing up.

"Sit back down," Phoebe scolded, putting a restraining hand on his arm. "Do you honestly think you can change her mind?"

Humphrey did as he was told and sat down.

"I never have before," he said.

"I'm not exactly sure what the point is," Jason said. He was alone with Danielle Geller, in the control room of the mirage area. They were awaiting the arrival of Rick Geller and his team.

"The point," Danielle said, "is to learn. That's what we do here. We teach, and we learn. My family has spread across the world, but this is the place we first became adventurers. It's where we still do."

"I meant more specifically," Jason said. "I'm not sure I can hold up against five of your family members long enough to make any kind of educational contribution."

"When Rufus first described you to me, do you know what he said?"

"Rakishly handsome?"

Danielle chuckled.

"He told me that when you were all prisoners, you showed him what it meant to find something inside yourself you didn't know was there. To do what didn't seem possible."

"He may not have been paying attention," Jason said. "Mostly I freaked out and got hit with shovels."

"Yet you took down Cressida Vane," Danielle said. "I knew her, you know."

"You did?" Jason asked. "Was she always massively overconfident? That's what got her killed."

"She was, actually, yes," Danielle said. "It doesn't surprise me at all that it killed her in the end."

"I've died seven times today, in your mirage arena," Jason said. "Maybe three dozen, this week. It feels real. The despair, the panic, the helplessness. It still comes, every time."

"Good," Danielle said. "I want to see what Rufus saw. I want to see you do the impossible. More importantly, I want the young members of my family to see it."

"And if I fail miserably?" Jason asked.

"Then perhaps you'll think twice before trying to make my son question the fundamental makeup of our society."

Jason laughed.

"Yeah, sorry about that," he said, sheepishly. "I have a way of climbing up on my high horse."

"My son has started asking questions that I'm not entirely sure I like," she said.

"Yes you do," Jason said with absolute confidence.

She chuckled again.

“Yes, I do,” she acknowledged.

The door opened and Rick walked in. Like his sister, his skin was dark brown, his hair light brown. His build was more like Humphrey, tall and broad-shouldered. He led in four more people behind him.

Teams were not uncommon amongst adventurers, usually three to six members. Only in a relatively safe region like Greenstone was solitary operation commonplace.

Rick’s team had an archetypal distribution of roles, with a couple of resilient front-liners, some damage specialists and a healer. Not every team could find a good healer, with even someone like Rufus yet to find a one. His experience with Anisa demonstrated that team dynamics were as much about the balance of personalities as the balance of powers.

Rick shook Jason’s hand and introduced his team members. It was obvious to Jason that his demand for a rematch wasn’t rooted in pride, but a drive to improve himself common to the Geller clan. He had been as surprised as anyone when Danielle set up Jason against his entire team.

Only three of the five were Gellers, the other two being a pair of twin elf sisters. Jason shook hands with each of them in turn. While Rick may not have been driven by pride, not everyone on his team was the same, and the largest member of the team squeezed Jason’s hand brutally as he shook it.

“Ow,” Jason said, cradling his hand after taking it back. “Strewth, mate. What was that for?”

“Jonah,” Rick scolded. “What are you doing?”

“This idiot thinks he can take us one-on-five,” the big guy said.

“Actually, that was my idea,” Danielle said, drawing everyone’s attention. She had faded into the background so well as they were making introductions that Jason suspected it was some kind of aura trick. Just a subtle rise in her aura suddenly made her the centre of attention. Jason had been working hard on his aura control but realised he still had a long way to go.

Most of the group looked at Danielle respectively, but Jonah looked defiant.

“Do you really think this guy is better than all five of us?” he asked.

“It isn't about being better,” Danielle said. “He may not have been training as long as you have, or used the carefully curated awakening stones you all did, but I've been watching him here in the mirage arena.”

“You have?” Jason asked, looking disconcerted.

"I have," she said. "Jason might still be settling into his martial techniques, but he has completely learned a lesson that everyone here would do well to give more attention. So I set up this little match for everyone to see. I've queued up just the right scenario to make my point."

"Rigged the fight, you mean," Jonah asked.

"Oh, good," Jason said, letting out a relieved breath. "Just between us, I was a little worried."

Danielle chuckled.

"The scenario is a fugitive hunt. Rick, your team has two hours to find and capture or kill Jason. Jason, you need to avoid capture for the full duration, or incapacitate Rick's team."

"Not like likely," Jonah muttered.

"You have something to say, Jonah?" Danielle asked.

"I sure do," Jonah said, either not noticing or not caring about the warning in Danielle's voice. "I'm going to show this little no-name weed what it means to fight a Geller."

Rick punched him on the arm.

"Shut up, idiot. He's been in here fighting Gellers all week."

Danielle gave Rick an approving smile.

"One more thing," she said. "This scenario will be set during a monster surge."

Danielle walked into the viewing room, striding up onto the platform in front of the viewing window, with a crystal rod in her hand. The room went quiet. No-one had the courage to still be talking when Danielle started speaking.

"The Geller name is a good one to have," Danielle said. "Each of you in this room either carries it or are the boon companions of those who do. It is a name that opens doors, garners respect. It is a name to be proud of."

She panned her gaze over the audience. Geller trainees, their companions, and a few of the instructors who trained them. She continued her speech.

"I was just reminded, however, that pride can be a danger. We are not made great because our name is great. Our name is great because we make it so. Every one who bears the Geller name has the responsibility to live up to it. We are born with this name and a lot more. It is our responsibility to spend our lives earning them."

She waved the rod in her hand at the viewing window, which blinked to life. It showed a common scene from the delta; muddy ground filled with tangled tree roots, the canopy

overhead casting everything in shadow. Rick and his team trudged through the mud that sucked at their boots with every step.

“As instructors, we find some lessons take longer to sink in than others,” Danielle said. “You are all filled the realisation of your new power. You feel strong, unbeatable, even. It can make you disrespect the forces outside of yourself as determinates of success and failure.”

She glanced back as the team struggled along the wet ground. Hidden roots and unexpected deep patches on mud made for stumbling progress. The thick foliage above them forced them to rely on a magic lamp for light. It was an expensive one that would float over them without occupying a hand, but it filled the space around them with the dancing shadows of the trees.

“Your surroundings,” Danielle picked up, “can be a stronger weapon than the one in your hand. Monsters rarely spawn in training halls and fighting arenas. In most cases, you will be engaging them in their own environments. While you are watching, I want all of you to pay attention to this point. Who is using the environment, and how.”

Chapter 67: This is What it Means to Fight Me

Jason moved comfortably through the marshy woods. His feet didn't sink into water or mud, while his eyes easily pierced the darkness. Clusters of scraggly trees and other obstacles were no bother; he could vanish into the ample shadows and appear on the far side. Despite being all an illusion, it felt completely real. The hot, heavy air, the tiny insects swarming around him. A small burst of aura projection sent them scattering.

A thick strand of webbing launched itself out of a shadow, striking the spot where Jason had been moments before. It was not the first such miss, as Jason's eyes could dig out the trap weaver's in the darkness. Even if they hit, the webs slid off. They could not adhere either to his essence ability cloak or the armour underneath.

➤ **Effect: Resistant to adhesive substances and abilities with adhesive effects.**

The woods were filled with trap weavers, leaving behind a maze of sticky threads as they attempted to ensnare Jason. He flashed through the shadows, dagger planting in the head of the giant spider. It dropped to the ground as he continued strolling through the woods.

In the viewing room, Danielle controlled the perspective of the viewing window with the rod in her hand. She used it to follow Rick and his team's journey through the dark, marshy woodlands.

Henry Geller threw out his hand as he chanted a quick spell.

"Fire Bolt."

Flame launched from Henry's fingers, missing the fleeting, shadowy figure to burn out as it hit a tree trunk. Hannah's arrow had come closer, but Jason's figure was gone before it too stuck harmlessly into a tree.

"Henry?" Rick called out.

"He jumps around too much," Henry said. "It's like he's everywhere."

Henry wielded magic of wind and fire, and they had been tracking Jason by reading his scent on the air. They had caught glimpses of him, but seen little more than shapes in the darkness.

The group continued searching the murky, woodland bog. Jonah was their bulwark, but his heavy armour and shield slowed him to a crawl. Rick was their other frontline fighter and he was coping better. His armour wasn't as heavy and his might essence gave him the strength to plough through the mud. His greatest problem was that his long, heavy sword was hard to swing among the trees.

Rick and Jonah, along with Henry, were all members of the Geller family. The two remaining team members were the elf twins, Hannah and Claire Adeah; an archer and the team healer. As the healer, Claire was always the most important team member to protect. Her ability to cleanse Jason's afflictions made it doubly true. For this reason, she was in the most guarded part of the formation as they made their sluggish way through the marsh.

"What's that?" Jonah called from the front. The others looked at he pointed out ahead. The trees grew closer together, and streamers of webbing, thick as an arm, were draped through them like party decorations. It wasn't any kind of pattern, instead wild and scattered. It was thickly laid out, to the point of being hard to find a passage through.

"Trap weavers," Hannah said. They had already encountered several, most of which had been pinned to trees by her arrows.

"Trap weavers are careful," Rick said. "This doesn't look careful."

"I think Asano might have provoked them," Henry said. "This whole area is riddled with his scent."

"I don't think going through that is a good idea," Jonah said.

"We have to," Rick said. "He hides, we chase; that's the game. If we refuse to go somewhere, he can just wait there and time us out."

"That's not a fair condition," Jonah said.

Hannah looked at him like he was an idiot.

"There's five of us," she said.

"I'm just saying," Jonah said sullenly.

"Hannah," Rick said. "Your eyes are the best. Find us the clearest path."

The webbing proved to be very widespread.

"How did he get trap weavers to do all this without getting caught by them?" Claire wondered.

"He's tough to pin down," Rick said. "He may need shadows to teleport, but he can keep doing it, over and over. In a place like this, he's a ghost."

As they headed into the web-strewn trees they were plunged into shadow, the canopy above them low, but thick. They were moving slower than ever as they picked their way through the webs.

"I don't like this," Henry said.

"We just need to get a good look at him," Hannah countered. Her bow was always at the ready. She was not worried about the obstructions, prepared to fire from her short bow at a moment's notice.

"Can you burn through these webs?" Rick asked Henry.

"Trap weaver webs don't burn easily," Henry said. "I'd blow through my mana and barely make a dent."

Around them was eerie quiet. Only the buzzing of insects accompanied the squelching of their feet in the mud, so a sudden new sound arrested their attention.

The sound of feet pounding rapidly through mud came from somewhere in the distance. The sound stopped for a moment, then they heard panicked swearing and the sound started again from a different direction. They heard the wet slap of something landing in the mud and a startled yelp.

"He's got monsters on him," Rick barked at the others. "Go!"

They started surging over the marshy ground. Hannah had found them a path that was relatively solid and even Jonah powered forward in his heavy armour. What they found was an indentation in the mud.

Rick looked around, peering at every shadow.

"Hannah?" he asked. When there was no response, he glanced back.

"Hannah?"

The whole team craned their necks searching in every direction.

"She was right behind me," Claire said. "We were all running, and..."

"Back the way we came," Rick said decisively, and so they went. What they found, to their horror, was Hannah's body, barely moved from where they had started running. Her throat was cut and she dangled macabrely from thick strands of webbing like a puppet on strings.

"It's not real," Rick told Claire, who was looking at her sister with a hand over her mouth, eyes shocked wide. He put a supportive hand on her shoulder.

"It's just illusion," he told her. "We've been through this before. Henry, do you have a scent?"

There was no answer, and they looked again. While they had been looking at Hannah's corpse, Henry had vanished. That left the two men in their heavy armour and the healer.

"How did he do that?" Jonah asked.

"He's going for the ones he can kill quick and quiet," Rick said. "The rest of us won't go out like that. Our armour and Claire's magic shield means he can't take us easily.

Suddenly blue light flared around Claire in the form of a bubble as objects struck it, three in quick succession. They were throwing knives, falling harmlessly into the mud after bouncing off the protective barrier.

"That way!" Jonah called out, but Rick grabbed his arm.

"He's baiting us," Rick said. "The way he baited the trap weavers into making all this mess. From now on, we go carefully."

"How do we find him now?" Jonah asked. "Henry and Hannah were our spotters."

"We've been dancing to his tune the whole time," Rick said. "Time to change the music. Use your shout."

"Are you sure?" Jonah asked. "You know what that'll do to the monsters."

"He took out our spotters," Rick said. "The best advantage we have now is a straight-up fight."

"I don't think he's suddenly going to step out for that," Jonah said.

"It's not us he'll be fighting," Rick said. "He might be able to dodge a handful of trap weavers, but look at all these webs. That's more than a handful. If they all go berserk, he'll have a harder time dealing with them than we will."

"Are you sure about that?" Claire asked.

"No," Rick said. "I'm open to alternatives."

The others shook their heads.

"Alright," Rick said. "Jonah shouts, then we fight off the monsters while we wait for them to flush him out."

Jonah nodded, then took a deep breath. Throwing back his head, he roared; a primal scream that blasted through the marsh like an explosion. As he fell silent, animal shrieks rose up in answer, echoing out what felt like miles. Rick grinned, hefting his heavy sword in readiness.

"Let's see how he... crap!"

Everything went dark as a thrown dagger shattered their floating lantern. Rick felt a sting on arm, as did Jonah moments later. Light bloomed, illuminating the area from a glowing orb over Claire's raised hand. They looked around, but Jason was already gone.

“Keep the orb up,” Rick told Claire. “I know it uses your mana, but not that much and another lantern would be vulnerable.”

She nodded, looking at the wounds on Jonah and Rick.

Jason had found gaps in their armour while they couldn't see to defend against him, but he had barely drawn blood. They were minor cuts, but Rick had warned them early that it was all Jason required. Claire extended an arm towards Rick and chanted a spell.

“Be made clean.”

A glow of white-gold light glowed out from under Jonah's armour, and a black smoke arose from the gap where Jason's knife had cut. She did the same with Jonah.

“A poison and a curse each,” Claire said. “All gone, now.”

“His hit and run attacks have done all the damage they can,” Rick said. “He can't quickly finish the rest of us, and now the trap weavers will flush him out. We move carefully, fend off the weavers that come for us, and either find his corpse or make it.”

“Like this body?” a mocking voice asked. There was a lilting malevolence to it, like the speaker was slightly unhinged. They turned, seeing Jason's shadowy figure behind the dangling corpse of Hannah, still strung up on webs. It was their first clear look at him, although clear wasn't exactly the word. He looked halfway made of shadows, his cloak of darkness wrapped around him. The dark, flowing lines of his battle robe melded into the shadows and his face was shrouded in the darkness of the hood. Even with the light of Claire's orb, he was hard to see standing in front of them.

Rick threw his massive sword. It spun through the air at Jason but buried itself in Hannah's body as he moved further behind it for cover. Rick held out his hand and the sword yanked itself from Hannah's corpse, flying back to Rick's hand.

Standing behind the dangling, macabre puppet that was the ravaged corpse of their companion, Jason's laughter was filled with sinister mirth.

“So much for camaraderie,” he said.

“We're going to kill you, you sick prick!” Claire said to Jason, who laughed again. His response was to chant a spell, voice filled with malevolent relish.

“As your life was mine to reap, your death is mine to harvest.”

A dim red light shone from Hannah's body, which was quickly devoured by Jason. As it did, Hannah's skin grew dry, pulling tight over her skeleton as if years were passing in moments. Only a desiccated husk remained in her blood-stained clothes.

Claire screamed out in anger, raising the wand in her hand. A bolt of white magical energy fired at Jason, tracking him through the air, but he stepped closer to the corpse which intercepted the attack. The withered body fell apart, tumbling piecemeal to the

ground. Claire watched in horror as her sister's body crumbled into dried-up chunks, splattering into the mud. Than responsible, Jason, was already gone.

"You should be careful," his voice mocked them, first from one direction, then another. "I thought I had the spiders riled up, but you really went and did it."

Jason's voice was playful and cruel as he taunted them. Each time he spoke, it came from a new direction.

"My friends are coming for you," he said. "You might want to get out of these webs." His laughter rang through the trees.

"Rick?" Jonah asked.

"He's not wrong about the webs," Rick said. "Slow and careful. Claire in the middle and I'll bring up the rear."

"I'm going to kill the evil weasel," Claire said.

"Hannah's fine," Rick said. "She's already awake, back in the control room."

"I hope she stabs him while he's still in here," Claire said.

Jonah yelled out, standing awkwardly in place. He had stumbled into a near-invisible web. At the same time, a thick stand of webbing launched out of the shadows to drag Rick stumbling back.

They were an experienced team who had handled trap weavers in real life, so they moved quickly into action. Claire's wand, glowing at the tip, cut Jonah free of the web as she used it like a knife. Rick planted his feet, and even with the mushy ground underfoot, his immense strength arrested the force dragging on him. He gripped the web and yanked hard, yanking a huge spider off a tree to sail through the air towards him. Swinging his huge sword in one hand, he cut the monster in half as it tumbled through the air, then scraped the sticky web off his hand with the blade.

Jonah sloshed back through the mud, putting up his huge shield as the three of them backed away. Multiple strands of web shot at it, but slid off, as if it were greased in oil. Spiders were crawling all over the trees around them now, leaping from one to the other.

"How are there so many?" Claire asked, firing off bolts from her wand. With each bolt, a spider fell but the tree-hopping creatures were outpacing their careful withdrawal. Surrounding them, the spiders were able to fire webbing from the sides where Jonah couldn't cover, but it accomplished little. Claire ignored the webs, her barrier offering even less purchase than Jonah's shield. Rick danced around as if he wasn't shin-deep in mud, his huge sword flashing out, quick and deadly.

One of Rick's trump cards was an essence ability that temporarily ramped up his speed and power, and he put it to good use. His huge sword was incredibly heavy, but he

waved it like a baton, intercepting webs and slashing through spiders. The blade of his sword was glowing red hot and had burst into flame, cutting through webs and spiders alike with a searing hiss. He had been saving his abilities for a crucial moment, but there was an army of spiders bearing down on them.

“This way!” Jonah shouted, wading into thigh-deep water. “They don’t swim.”

It was a wide patch of water, common enough in the marsh, but it had one advantage: no trees were rising out of it. Following Jonah let them escape the trap weaver onslaught. The lack of trees gave the monsters no place to jump to, and the absence of canopy meant no shadows for Jason to jump out of. Reaching the middle of the water, it had never gone deeper than Claire’s waist.

“Now we wait,” Rick said. “Without us, Jason becomes the only food on the market. He can’t avoid them all, riled up like they are.”

The three waited, back to back as they watched the tree-line for movement. The glowing orb was floating over them, light shining off the water. The screeching sounds of trap weavers came from all around. The water stilled around them as they stopped moving. Eventually, the trap weavers started calming, their shrieks diminishing down until they finally stopped.

“Do you think they got him?” Claire asked.

“They had to, right?” Jonah said.

“We have to go check,” Rick said. “I think the loudest concentration of screeching came from over... did anyone else feel that?”

“I can feel it crawling on my boots,” Jonah said. “There’s something in the water.”

“Out of the water,” Rick commanded, pointing in a direction. Even as he did, the water around them started roiling like a boiling soup. The barrier around Claire started flashing in staccato rhythm.

Jonah grimaced and Jonah let out a painful grunt.

“What is that?” Claire asked, pushing down panic. “It keeps attacking my shield. It’s going to eat through all my mana.”

“Just keep moving!” Rick yelled. Their resolve showing as they kept didn’t slow their pace, even as something attacked them under the water.

Claire’s shield absorbed attacks at the cost of mana, regardless of the strength of the attack. Rapid, weak attacks were the shield’s weakness, and something was attacking it in swarms under the water. Unhappily, she let the shield drop before her mana was emptied out, immediately feeling the sting as something started biting into her legs.

Their attackers were revealed to be leeches as the creatures climbed high enough up their bodies to rise above the water. The leeches crawled over them in search of vulnerable flesh.

Claire fought through the pain to chant spell after spell, cleansing afflictions and healing through bleeds. The others had dropped their weapons to have their hands free, Jonah yanking the shield off his arm. They tugged off leeches with both hands and tossed them away, the leeches taking gobbets of flesh with them. The adventurers' efforts made little headway with the swarming leeches.

"My spells can't keep up!" Claire yelled. The leeches constantly inflicted bleeds and afflictions, faster than she could chant. The afflictions slowly but surely stacked up while the bleeds soaked up the healing. Their skin started to blacken around the leech bites. All the while, they kept making for the shoreline, finally struggling out of the water.

Suddenly Jason was there, a lunging kick sending Claire splashing back into the water. Jonah threw a gauntleted fist, but Jason danced lightly away on the surface of the water. Claire sat up, spluttering, only for Jason to kick her in the teeth in passing, sending her back down. He pointed at Rick.

"Your fate is to suffer."

Rick had his hand extended out in the direction of the water. His huge sword was spinning through the air, throwing off droplets of water as it flew past Jason and into Rick's hand. Jonah held his own hand out and an iron spear appeared in it.

Both men threw their weapons. They struck home with accuracy but kept going, Jason's cloak suddenly empty. After being dragged through the air, the cloak disappeared and Jonah could see his spear splash uselessly into the water. Rick's sword stopped in the air and flew back to his hand.

"What was that?" Jonah asked, looking around for Jason as he yanked off leeches. "I thought he could only teleport through shadows?"

"I don't know," Rick said, likewise yanking off leeches.

"My cloak is a shadow," Jason said, walking out of the trees well out of melee range. His cloak was no longer around him and they could see his face. His eyes were wide and his mouth was twisted in a deranged smirk. He looked hungry for something that definitely shouldn't be food. The cloak formed around him once more, hiding his face and its disturbing grin.

"Finally ready for a fair fight?" Jonah asked, another spear appearing in his hand.

"Two against one is hardly fair," Jason said.

"You mean three," Jonah said. Rick was quicker on the uptake, looking to the water behind them. Claire's body floated on the surface with the awkward stillness of death, leeches swarming over it.

"She focused her healing on us," Rick said bitterly as they looked at her corpse, robbed of dignity in death. He turned to spit invective at Jason, but had vanished again while they were transfixed by the fate of their healer.

"I'M GOING TO RIP YOUR HEAD OFF!" Jonah screamed into the air.

"Are you sure?" Jason's voice came from the trees, lilting and off-kilter.

"Your healer is gone," his voice came from another direction.

"All I have to do now is wait," he said, from a new direction again.

Rick grimaced, knowing Jason was right. They had managed to tear off most of the leeches, which couldn't move through the mud like they could in the water, but the damage was done. Standing around with no recourse, he could do nothing, even as he collapsed to the ground. That left only Jonah.

Jonah had the greatest fortitude of the team. His resilience and heightened resistances let him last well beyond his comrades, but he could do no more than Rick. He screamed rage into the shadowy woods, then spotted Jason emerge, once again at a distance. He threw his spear, expecting Jason to vanish into darkness again. Instead, Jason made no move to avoid it and the spear impaled him, low and to the side of his torso. He staggered back several steps before righting himself, not having made a sound.

Jason regained his balance, then pulled the spear from his body, hand over hand as Jonah watched. Holding the spear in one hand, Jason pushed the hood of his cloak back with the other, revealing his face. He took the spear and slowly ran his tongue along the shaft as Jonah watched in shock. Jason tossed the spear aside, eyes wide as lips, tainted with his own blood, took on a maniacal grin.

"I taste good," Jason said, looking absently at the blood on his hands. Then he looked up at Jonah.

"I wonder how yours will taste."

"You aren't touching my blood, you crazy freak!"

"Are you sure?" Jason asked, then chanted out a spell.

"Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast."

Red life force started shining out of Jonah's body, streaks of dark colours reflecting the afflictions he was suffering. Red light streamed away, through the air toward Jason. Jason threw his arms back, pushing his head forward with a wild and hungry grin. The life force vanished into his face as he moaned with pleasure.

“You’re seriously messed up!” Jonah said as his remaining life force returned to his body. He could barely stand now, blackened veins visible under his skin.

“You’re not looking so good, Jonah,” Jason said. “Don’t worry; I can clear that right up.”

“Feed me your sins.”

“The red light appeared again from within Jonah, but this time the tainted colours poured out into Jason, leaving the dim light of Jonah’s life force clean.

“Refreshing,” Jason said, as if Jonah’s affliction were a cup of iced tea.

The curse and poison were cleansed, but the bleeding continued and Jonah was too far gone to rally.

“You said you would show me what it means to fight a Geller,” Jason said, walking slowly forward. “But I’ve fought Gellers, Jonah, and I’m not sure you live up to the name.”

Jason stepped onto the water, walking past Jonah to Claire’s body. Jonah could barely keep his to his as he turned to face Jason, almost stumbling into the mud. He watched Jason, standing over Claire’s body, grip the elf’s long, blonde hair, stained dark by muddy water and her own blood. He pulled her up out of the water.

“Look at your friends, Jonah. You were meant to protect them, but they died helpless and agonising deaths. Like you will. I’ve seen what it means to fight a Geller, Jonah. This is what it is to fight me.”

He let Claire drop back into the water.

“Just end this, you sick lunatic,” Jonah said, glaring defiance.

Jason walked casually up to Jonah, who could barely stand, let alone fight back. Jason walked around him, looking him over like a slab of meat in a butcher shop. Jonah lacked the strength to turn and face him again. Jason shoved him in the back and Jonah toppled into the mud. Jason stepped forward, pushing down Jonah’s head with his foot.

“I’ve never seen anyone drown in mud before,” Jason said.

In the viewing room, the window went dark as Jonah’s feeble struggling came to a stop. In the aftermath, there was silence.

Chapter 68: Good News For Clive

The common room of Jason's inn was a sprawling, luxurious space, with dining area, bar and lounge. Jason was in the lounge area with Rick Geller, who had sought him out in the early hours, eager to discuss their fight. Jason was quickly realising that Rick was obsessively dedicated to training, even compared to other Gellers.

To Jason's surprise, he bore no animosity against Jason for the loss or wariness over his tactics. Instead, he was excited to encounter a style unlike any he'd encountered before.

"It was incredible," Rick said. "Sometimes people can get lax in the mirage chamber because it isn't real. The way you got in our heads, though? You had me making rush decisions, panicking. I've watched the recording at least half a dozen times, and I just keep screaming at myself to do something different."

"There's a recording?" Jason asked.

"There certainly is," Rick said. "It's all from our perspective, so you're barely in it until the end. You're always this crazy threat, lingering just out of sight. That crazy laugh, that creeps me out. It really felt like you'd lost it."

"A lot of guys ignore the laugh," Jason said, "and that's about standards."

"Hannah thinks you're amazing."

"Isn't she the one I ambushed, cut her throat and strung her up to use as a shield?" Jason said uncertainly.

"She saw most of it from the control room," Rick said. "She had copies of the recording made and she's been showing them off to people."

"Why would she do that?"

"Hannah's very spirited," Rick said. "Always ready to go, ready try anything. She'll take almost anything, good or bad as an experience worth having. She's kind of amazing."

"Oh?" Jason said, arching his eyebrows meaningfully.

"Not like that," Rick said.

Jason shook his head. It wasn't that long since he was a teenager himself, but it had been a hard exit, relationship-wise.

"Don't let it just sit there," Jason said. "Tell her and find out one way or the other. Trust a guy who didn't for far too long."

"The others are mixed in their reactions," Rick said, forcibly steering the topic in a new direction. "Henry is a little scared of you, I think. Claire is ready to stake you out and

leave you to the marsh ants. More for what you did to her sister than her, but she didn't like those leeches. Were you actually controlling them?"

"That's may familiar, Colin," Jason said.

"Colin? Wait, your familiar is a swarm of leeches?"

"That's right," Jason said.

"Swarm-type familiars are really rare," Rick said. "I've seen more dragon and phoenix familiars. The only other swarm type I've seen is a gold-ranker back in my home city. He has these fire hornets that suicide attack to inflict a burning condition, and when they kill something, a bunch more hornets burst out of it."

"Nasty," Jason said. "How did Jonah take how our fight turned out?"

"Jonah can be obnoxious and strong-willed, even to his own detriment," Rick said.

"I won't hold that against him," Jason said. "I've been guilty of that more than once myself."

"Well, you've earned his respect," Rick said.

"Seriously?" Jason asked. "How does that work?"

"Jonah can be prideful, and quick to look down on people," Rick said. "He respects strength, though. He doesn't care if you're a king or a commoner; show him you're capable and you have his respect. He just needs to stop making snap judgements about people before he knows what he's talking about."

"Also something I've also been guilty of," Jason said.

"I think you might have startled Humphrey quite badly, though," Rick said. "I don't think he realised you had that in you."

"I'm not sure I did either," Jason said. "I think that might have been bubbling up for a while. I'm really surprised you don't have more of a 'burn him, he's a witch' attitude."

"You're not actually some kind of blood-thirsty lunatic, right?" Rick asked.

"Of course not," Jason said. "It was just a persona. I might have got carried away with it, a bit, though. I felt so... free, afterwards. Like I finally started pushing back on all the pressures I've been feeling. Still, you really aren't freaked out?"

"You don't know a lot of adventurers, do you?" Rick asked.

"I know a few," Jason said.

"Once you know more, you'll understand. As long as the Adventure Society isn't sending people to hunt you down, anything is on the table. Fear, misery, despair. If those are your weapons, use them. If you have them and you don't use them, you're an idiot. Of course, that's a generalisation. Everyone has their own opinion."

"Humphrey?" Jason asked.

"Humphrey," Rick said.

"I should talk to him," Jason said. "I don't have enough friends to start scaring them off."

"In my experience, it's best to just leave him be," Rick said. "He'll work things through and then come find you."

"Alright, thanks," Jason said.

"So when are we having a rematch?" Rick asked.

Jason went downstairs to the common room. He was dressed in cool and comfortable clothes; loose tan pants, colourful shirt and sandals. He was about to set off on a contract, but there was a decent travel time and he could change clothes in little more than an instant. He might as well travel comfortably.

"Mr Asano."

Clive Standish stood up from where he had been quietly sitting in the common room, under the baleful eye of Madam Landry.

"Jason is fine," Jason said as he walked past Clive and out the door. The sun had yet to rise, the predawn light washing out all the colour from the world. Jason observed the similarity to how things looked with his ability to see through the dark.

Clive followed Jason outside and down the street.

"Uh, Mr Asano. Jason. This was the agreed-upon time for our meeting."

"I've got some good news for you, Clive," Jason said, walking down the street. "Our meeting is going to be extra long."

"Why is that?" Clive asked warily as he followed along.

"I have a contract," Jason said. "Probably take me a few days. We'll have a nice, long meeting on the way."

"On the way where?"

"There are some villages, deep in the delta," Jason said. "They're being menaced by something called a mangrove snatcher."

"A large lizard-type creature," Clive said. "It attacks by ambush after hiding in waterways or burrowing itself into mud or wet earth. Unusual for a monster prone to such tactics, it doesn't have the ability to hide its own aura. That makes it bad at hunting animals, which are sensitive to auras."

"So it goes after people?" Jason asked.

“It does,” Clive said. “Any essence user who has reached iron rank will sense its aura, making it a minimal threat to adventurers. To ordinary people, on the other hand, it can be quite the danger.”

“You know your stuff,” Jason said. “You’ve dealt with them before?”

“Oh, goodness, no,” Clive said. “I may ostensibly be a member of the Adventure Society, but I am not an active one.”

“Well, you are this week,” Jason said.

“What?”

“Your coming with me,” Jason.

“No,” Clive said. “No, I’m not.”

Jason pulled out a folded piece of paper from his pocket and handing it to Clive, who read it as they walked.

“This is the contract,” Clive said. “What does that have to do with me?”

“Four different villages in the area sent word that the mangrove snatcher came right into the village. Aggressive little pricks. The messengers all came in overnight and the contract was assigned to me. I was told to head out at first light.”

He waved an arm at the sky.

“And here we are,” Jason said. “First light.”

“I realise that being assigned a contract pre-empts our appointment,” Clive said, “but it does not mean that I am going to participate.”

“You might want to take another look at the contract,” Jason said. “Down the bottom.”

Clive looked over the contract again.

“It’s been amended,” he read, disbelievingly. “It’s been assigned to me as well.”

“I don’t know if you’re aware,” Jason said, “but the new branch director has kind of a thing about Adventure Society members who don’t actually go on adventures.”

“You did this!”

“Well, I knew we had that meeting,” Jason said.

“Did I do something to offend you, Mr Asano?”

“Just call me Jason.”

“What I call you isn’t the issue!”

Jason stopped walking, turning to face Clive.

“Clive – can I call you Clive? Clive, do you know what an outworlder is?”

“I do,” Clive said. “Astral magic is actually my specialty.”

“I know a little astral magic,” Jason said. “Found this skill book when I first... that doesn’t matter. Clive, I’m an outworlder. I was keeping that under my hat, but too many people know now for it to be a real secret.

Clive goggled at Jason.

“I have so many questions,” he said

“We’ll get to that,” Jason said. “The thing is, I arrived in this world in less than ideal circumstances. Everything was strange, people were trying to kill me and I had no idea where I was or what was going on. So I kind of have a thing about getting ambushed. And then comes you, asking questions, knowing who I am and where to find me. I don’t like it, Clive.”

“I did introduce myself,” Clive said.

“Clive, have you heard of lying?”

“Of the concept of lying?”

“Yes.”

“Of course I have,” Clive said.

“There you go,” Jason said.

Clive shook his head.

“Having a conversation with you is like wrestling an eel,” Clive said.

“When did you ever wrestle an eel?” Jason asked sceptically.

“I grew up on an eel farm out on the delta,” Clive said.

“Really?” Jason said, looking at Clive with new respect. “It must have been a lot of work to get from there to here.”

“I had some good fortune,” Clive said.

“My friend’s grandfather says the great adventurers are the one who turn luck into fortune.”

“Is your friend’s grandfather someone worth listening to?” Clive asked.

“Never met the man, so I’m not sure,” Jason said. “He runs a school in Vitesse. I’ve haven’t had a chance to visit, yet.”

“Wait, are you talking about Rufus Remore’s grandfather?”

“Well, best get going,” Jason said, setting off again.

“Wait,” Clive said. “We need to go to the Magic Society first. If I’m going to be gone for several days, I need to make arrangements for my other duties. Also, we can pick up some transport. I’m not riding a heidel; I hate those things.”

That got Jason’s attention.

“Me too,” Jason said. “What kind of transport are you talking about?”

“How has no one told me about these?” Jason called out joyously. They were skimming over the water in an airboat. Instead of a fan at the back, there was a vertical metal ring, around which had been engraved a magical diagram. Propulsion came from air sucked in through the front of the ring and propelled from the rear with great force. Sitting in front of it, the occupants were bombarded by the loud air rushing in. At the front of the boat was Clive’s familiar, a rune tortoise named Onslow. His head was jutting forward like a dog with its head out a car window.

They left the city from a different gate than Jason had previously, as it gave them better access to the waterways of the delta. Although verdant and filled with wetlands, only some parts were completely navigable by boat. Clive piloted the airboat by holding his hand over a glowing blue cube. With tiny hand gestures, he could speed up, slow down, or turn the boat.

He drove it with confidence, sending them careening over the water. Occasionally they would need to pass through one of the artificial embankment roads that divided up the delta. There were many bridges built into them, so as not to obstruct the waterways. The airboat was just short enough to pass under them, with a wide margin on either side. There were handles on either side of Jason’s padded seat, on which he kept a white-knuckle grip each time Clive sent the boat shooting through the tiny space under a bridge.

“Can you teach me to drive one of these things?” Jason asked. They had to talk loudly to be heard over the rushing air, almost at a shout.

“You can only drive these if you have the right essence ability,” Clive yelled back at Jason. “It usually comes from the magic essence. The same power lets you use magical weapons like wands.”

Jason was learning there was a lot more to the gangly scholar than he had initially presumed. Gone were the too-large robes, replaced with more practical wear for the delta, with sturdy-looking pants, shirt and vest. Jason spotted a bracelet on Clive’s wrist, identical to the one on his own. It was a cord looped through small blue stones, each with a hole in the middle.

Item: [Oasis Bracelet] (iron rank, uncommon)

A bracelet that draws on the power of water quintessence to bestow the blessings of a personal oasis (accessory, bracelet).

- Effect: When a water quintessence gem is set into the bracelet it keeps the wearer cool and refreshed.
 - Effect: Reduces incoming fire and heat damage. This effect accelerates consumption of the water quintessence gem.
-

There was also what looked like an ordinary stick sheathed against Clive's thigh. Jason realised it must be a magic wand.

"I was expecting you to fight me more on coming out here," Jason called out.

"When I have an outworlder's captive attention?" Clive asked. "There's no way I'd pass that up. As you said, we can have a nice, long meeting on the way. I have so many questions."

"I did say that, didn't I? Alright, Clive. Ask away."

They arrived at the first village, where there were signs of the monster attacking. The villagers had reacted quickly, barricading themselves in their homes. There were signs of the monster attacking them, but nothing had been breached the thick, mud-brick walls. The villagers told them that they had been attacked every day while they waited for their messengers to reach Greenstone.

Jason told them to keep themselves locked away while they checked on the other villages. He and Clive got back in their airboat and took off again. As they travelled, Clive continued his interrogation of Jason.

"You killed Landemere Vane?" Clive asked.

"And his mum," Jason said. "Did you know them?"

"I knew him," Clive said.

"He wasn't a friend, was he?" Jason asked.

"No," Clive said. "The whole family was reclusive. I only knew him at all because we specialised in the same field of magic."

Jason looked up and around.

"Hey, we're almost at the next village."

"You know this area?" Clive asked.

"No, one of my outworlder abilities is a map that only I can see. Places only appear on it when I get close, though."

“Fascinating,” Clive said. “Have you tested the effects of going to a high place with superior sight lines?”

“I haven’t,” Jason said. “That’s a good idea.”

“This is why you need to let me study you,” Clive said.

“Definitely not,” Jason said. “I get enough of that from Farrah.”

“Who?”

“A friend of mine. She’s Magic Society, too. I’ll introduce you.”

Chapter 69: Dumpling Soup

There was a small jetty from which they could see the village. There were several dinghies tied up, one of which had been sunk in the shallow water. A streak of dried blood was on the part jutting above the waterline.

"Looks like someone's hurt," Clive said as he tied the airboat to the jetty.

"I hope so," Jason said.

"You hope someone's hurt?" Clive asked.

"You can fix hurt. Can't fix dead."

Jason stopped, looking at Clive.

"You can't fix dead, can you?" Jason asked. "It never occurred to ask."

"Not at our rank," Clive said. "Some gold rank healing effects can bring you back if they're used immediately," Clive said.

"Like magic CPR," Jason said.

"I don't know what that is," Clive said. "There's also diamond rank, but there are always rumours about diamond rank."

They walked towards the village. Like the others they had visited, there was no one to be seen. The people had holed themselves up as they waited for adventurers to arrive. The buildings were mudbrick, with woven reed doors and window shutters. Many of the doors had been scratched into shreds, revealing barriers of stone or metal that had been placed behind them. The people of the delta were prepared for monsters.

Jason loudly announced their presence and the village mayor came out to meet them. She described the monster, which sounded to Jason like a claw-footed, six-legged crocodile.

"That's a mangrove snatcher alright," Clive said.

"Is someone hurt?" Jason asked.

"There is," the mayor said. "We're worried because the healers don't make it out here every month. Even if they do come, I don't know if he can last that long. The injury is bad enough, but the infection has set in."

"Best show us, then," Jason said. The mayor started leading them through the village.

"I imagine infection would be a problem here in the delta," Jason said.

"It is," the mayor said. "Do you have healing abilities?"

"I can handle the infection," Jason said. "The injury will take a potion. Unless you can heal injuries, Clive?"

“No,” Clive said, shaking his head. “I have some self-healing, but I can’t use it on others.”

“We can’t afford potions,” the mayor said. “We could probably put together enough for some healing ointment, if you have some.”

“Ointment won’t get the job done on deep wounds,” Jason said. “I learned that the hard way. I’ll probably use a potion, maybe two.”

“We really can’t afford it,” the mayor said.

“We’re here to save the day, Madam Mayor,” Jason said. “All part of the service,” Jason said.

The mayor looked at him, nonplussed.

“You’ll just give us a potion?”

“Adventure Society,” Jason said, flashing her a smile. “We’re here to help.”

The mayor called out at a house and the barricade was removed from the door. Inside was a man laying on a bed, stripped down to his underwear, with a stained-through bandage wrapped around his leg. He was sweat-covered and muttering to himself.

Jason winced.

“I’d better get straight onto that.”

Jason walked over to the bed, where a woman was dabbing the man’s forehead with a wet cloth.

“Excuse I,” Jason said as he stood next to her. He held a hand over the injured man and chanted out his spell.

“Feed me your sins.”

Red life force shone out from the man, tainted with the yellow and purple colours of a bruise. Those infecting colours rose up from the red light, disappearing into Jason’s hand. What remained was the clean red glow of life force, which retracted into that man’s body.

-
- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Infection] from [Human].
 - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Sepsis] from [Human].

 - Your stamina and mana have been replenished.
 - Stamina and mana cannot exceed normal maximum values. Excess stamina and mana are lost.
-

The injured man took a shuddering breath, then started looking about, confused. His eyes became focused, looking at all the people around him.

“Welcome back, mate,” Jason said. “I’m Jason. Adventurer, raconteur, man-about-town.”

“What?”

Jason pulled a knife from his inventory. It wasn't his fighting knife, but a magically sharp utility knife he had purchased. He dug it under the filthy bandages and cut them away with a single, smooth slice. There were deep claw marks underneath that started pulsing out blood immediately. Jason pulled out a healing potion, carefully pouring it into the wound.

“Alchemist mate of mine made this stuff,” Jason said. “More effective on external wounds than just chugging it straight down.”

The wounds quickly closed up. An iron-rank potion was more effective on a normal person than it was on an iron ranker. The fact that it would be longer before they could use another was a middling drawback, which was why many adventurers kept a high-rank potion on hand for emergencies.

In moments the open wounds had closed into glaring welts. Jason took out a tin of ointment and handed it to the woman by the bed.

“Give him a half-hour for the potion to work its way through his system, then use this,” Jason instructed. “There won't be a mark left on him.”

“We can't afford this,” the woman said, although Jason noted how tightly she clutched the tin.

“On the house,” Jason said. “Well, on me. This is your house. Come on Clive; we've got more villages to check on.”

“Something's not right,” Jason said.

“You mean other than your idea to stake me out, covered in meat?” Clive said.

“Still with this? It was an early stage of planning.”

The third and fourth villages were like the first two, with villagers barricaded inside. Nothing else demanded immediate action and they turned their minds to hunting the monster. They sat down in the shade of a large tree, Jason on a folding chair from his inventory, Clive on the shell of his rune tortoise familiar, Onslow.

“I understand the part about covering me with meat,” Clive said. “I don't appreciate it, but I understand it. But tethering me to a stake? I'm not going to wander off.”

“You might,” Jason said. “I'm sensing resistance to the plan.”

“I could just pull out the stake.”

“See, this is the kind of resistance I'm talking about. It's not my fault your world doesn't have goats.”

“I still don't know what goats are. I'm surprised you didn't want to use Onslow as bait.”

"I'd never do that him," Jason said, reaching out to scratch the tortoise under the chin. "But when I said something's not right, I meant about these monster attacks."

"How so?" Clive asked.

"How fast is this mangrove snatcher thing?"

"They attack in short bursts of speed," Clive explained, "but if you're talking about overland speed, then no faster than a person."

Realisation crossed Clive's face.

"Every village reported daily attacks," he said. "There's no way one monster got around to every village in a day. There's more than one monster."

"That's what I was thinking," Jason said.

"We need to know how many there are," Clive said. "Given the distances, it's at least three or four. It could be more than that. People don't stop when they spot the first monster to check if it brought a friend."

"Well, I don't have a way to check how many there are," Jason said. "But I should be able to tell once we've got them all."

"Oh?"

"I told you about my quest system, right? I got a quest for this contract, the same as the others."

Quest: [Contract: Mangrove Snatcher]

A number of villages have reported being attacked by a mangrove snatcher.

➤ Objective: Eliminate the [Mangrove Snatcher] threat to the four villages 0/1.

"The objective is to end the mangrove snatcher threat. Once we get the last one, the quest should complete."

"That's good," Clive said. "Otherwise we'd be waiting around for days, not knowing if we were finished or not."

Like Jason, Clive had a dimensional space that could store objects. A magical circle appeared in the air, lines and runes glowing with golden light. In the middle was a murky darkness Clive reached into, pulling out a notebook and pencil.

"Your abilities all seem very practical," Clive said as he took notes. "There is a theory that the unique outworlder racial gifts are an unconsciously derived mechanism of self-protection. Possibly as a reaction to the original body being annihilated."

"I'm sorry, what now?" Jason asked, his gaze locking onto Clive. "What do mean by the body being annihilated?"

"You didn't know?" Clive asked. "It's one of the better-known aspects of outworlder knowledge, because of what we already know about the astral."

"Didn't know what? What annihilation?"

"How much do you know about the astral?" Clive asked. "The space between worlds."

"I read a skill book of astral magic," Jason said. "I took it from Landemere Vane."

"So, basically nothing," Clive said. "Those books are all practice, no theory. Alright, here we go: If you could encapsulate the cosmos, as in all of everything, your world, my world, the space in between, it would be like a bowl of dumpling soup."

"Dumpling soup?"

"Do they not have dumpling soup on your world?" Clive asked. "Or do they not have analogies?"

"We have both," Jason said. "We also have smart guys getting punched in the face for running their mouth."

"That's rich, coming from you," Clive said.

"I'm a 'live by the sword, die by the sword' kind of guy," Jason said. "You either keep your mouth shut or accept that someone's going to put a fist in it from time to time."

Clive shook his head.

"You're a crazy person," he said. "Just listen up, alright? So, all the cosmos is a bowl of dumpling soup."

Clive paused, tilting his head in thought.

"Now that I'm talking about it," he said, "I really could go for some dumpling soup."

"I know, right?" Jason said, nodding his agreement.

"I know a really good place back in the city," Clive said.

"We'll go when we get back," Jason said. "Annihilation, the cosmos is soup, remember."

"Right. So, in this dumpling soup, each world, each physical reality, is a dumpling. Your world, a dumpling, my world, a dumpling, every world out there, a dumpling. The astral is the soup through which we are all the dumplings, all the worlds, are floating."

"Alright," Jason said. "With you so far."

"The astral, the soup, is also the source of all magic," Clive said. "That's what it is, just magic. Pure, unadulterated; the most fundamental building blocks of reality. Every world, every dumpling, is swimming in it. Some dumplings soak up a lot of the soup, like this world. Our world soaks up the magic, which takes various forms as that magic gets shaped by our physical reality. That's why we have essences, awakening stones, quintessence, monsters, all just appearing out of nowhere."

"But my world doesn't have any of that," Jason said.

"That means your dumpling soaks up very little of the soup."

"So, how did I end up here?" Jason asked.

"Alright, think of the soup kind of congealing around a dumpling. That's how you get astral spaces, which are a sort of magical dimension attached to a world."

"Like the one that produces all the water that makes this delta," Jason said.

"Exactly like that," Clive said. "But not all that congealed magic is as stable as an astral space. It can kind of drift away, especially if someone goes and pokes a hole in the side of the dumpling."

"Like a big summoning spell," Jason said.

"Precisely like a big summoning spell," Clive said. "Some of that congealed magic can drift off the side of the world, like a tendril. And if it happens to touch another dumpling, a brief, unstable link is formed. In this case, that link was between a world very good at soaking up magic, and one that isn't. So my world sucked in a part of yours through that magical link."

"How big a part?" Jason asked.

"Tiny," Clive said. "Otherwise, you wouldn't have been the only one to arrive. But that link was never established properly; it was a phenomenon created through random forces, which means a couple of things. One, the link would have collapsed, almost immediately."

"So, no using it to get home," Jason said.

"No," Clive said. "The other important thing is that the link wasn't some purpose-built channel designed to transport physical material through the astral. I can't even imagine the kind of astral magic that would take. Gold rank at the least, probably diamond."

"So?" Jason said.

"So, you were pulled straight through the deep astral," Clive said. "And the thing about the deep astral is that it's just magic. Only magic."

"You said that," Jason said.

"Yes, but the point is, physical substance can only exist in a physical reality. I said your body was annihilated, but that wasn't exactly accurate. Your body ceased to exist because it went somewhere where the physical substance it was made of cannot exist. That's also why any physical material dragged into the link with you, didn't arrive with you."

"ceased to exist? The goddess of knowledge said my body was changed."

"Your body didn't change," Clive said. "Your body is gone. Not melted away, not blasted into pieces too small to see, just gone. It stopped existing. You must have misunderstood what the goddess told you."

“Or she lied.”

“She wouldn’t have done that,” Clive said. “Lying is one of the core sins of her religion.”

“She isn’t a member of the religion,” Jason said. “She’s the object of it.”

“Maybe she just told you what you were ready to hear,” Clive suggested.

“You’re telling me that I died,” Jason said, pulling things back on topic.

“I suppose you did,” Clive said.

“Then how am I here?” Jason asked.

“Well, the body died, but the soul isn’t physical. It’s magical. Do you know how summoning a familiar works?”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

“Well,” Clive said, “summoning a familiar is like deliberately creating a monster. A chunk of magic is brought into our world and forms a body. What makes it different from a monster is that it also summons a creature from the deep astral. Such entities are purely magical, like a soul. They normally can’t exist in physical reality, any more than we can exist in the astral. But they inhabit the body you’ve made. Give it a mind, and stability. So it doesn’t break down and go berserk.”

“You’re saying that I’m basically a familiar?” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Clive said, with academic fascination. “Your soul came into this world, and like any other chunk of magic, constructed a physical manifestation for itself.”

“So, my body is the same thing as a monster’s, just with a soul to stop it breaking down.”

“Yes,” Clive said. “You’re picking this up very well.”

Clive’s enthusiasm had blinded him to the growing horror on Jason’s face. Jason leaned forward in his chair, head in his hands.

“Jason?”

“Give me a minute, Clive. You kind of dropped a bomb on me.”

“Oh,” Clive said, realisation suddenly hitting. “Sorry about, you know, dying.”

Jason sat head bowed, mind reeling.

“Is this why I didn’t have hair?”

“Uh, Jason?”

“I said give me a minute, Clive!”

“Not sure you have a minute,” Clive said. “I just sensed the monster’s aura.”

Chapter 70:

Rewards

The village was located right on the water. The monster sensed a potential meal out in the open and burst from the water to scramble in the direction of Clive and Jason. It looked like a large, six-legged crocodile. Clive, still sitting on the tortoise, pointed at the ground in the path of the rushing monster. He quickly chanted a spell.

“Emplace the mark of power.”

A rune appeared on the ground, glowing red. The monster ran straight over it and Clive snapped his fingers. The rune exploded, sending ruptured gobbets of monster raining through the village. Jason’s cloak appeared to shield him from the monster remains.

“Mind if I loot?” Jason asked.

Clive looked at the liberal spattering of monster on his clothes, wiping it off his face.

“Sure,” he said, grimacing at the mess.

Jason poked at a chunk of flesh.

➤ [Would you like to loot \[Mangrove Snatcher\]?](#)

Jason held his nose as the flesh dissolved off his cloak and off of Clive, who was coughing and spluttering.

“I can’t believe you,” Jason asked, giving Clive a flat look.

“You mean the mess?” Clive asked. “It was coming right at us.”

“No, I don’t mean the mess,” Jason said and pointing at the small crater left by Clive’s spell. “If you can do that, why don’t you hunt monsters?”

“I’m really more of a scholar.”

“I hate to break it to you, Clive, but whatever you call someone with magic land mines, it isn’t a scholar.”

“Land mines?” Clive asked.

Jason groaned.

“Let’s just go to the next village.”

Quest: [Contract: Mangrove Snatcher]

- Objective complete: Eliminate the mangrove snatcher threat to the four villages 1/1.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“That was the last one,” Jason said.

In the end, Jason was the one who ended up playing bait. When not triggered immediately, Clive’s rune trap faded away until only special senses could locate it. This made the enthusiastically predatory monsters easy to handle. Jason just stood there as they charged at him, only to die at a snap of Clive’s fingers.

“It only goes off when you trigger it?” Jason asked.

“I can set it to trigger when something steps on it, too,” Clive said. “That seems like it could be dangerous, though.”

“You’re worried about stumbling onto it yourself?” Jason asked.

“My vision power lets me see magic,” Clive said. “I can spot it even when it’s hidden. The same doesn’t go for anyone I’m working with, though.”

“It’s a good power,” Jason said.

“It has its weaknesses,” Clive said. “It takes a few moments to activate and glows bright red when I cast it. Anything other than dumb monsters know to get out of the way.”

“Good news,” Jason said. “Fighting dumb monsters is most of what adventurers do.”

“I will admit to not having a terrible time,” Clive said, “the smell of dissolving monsters, aside. I’m hardly going to start making regular trips to the jobs hall, but if you need a ride out here again, then come find me.”

“I just might do that,” Jason said. “Do you have a bag or something?”

“What for?” Clive asked.

“I was rewarded a hundred coins for the quest,” Jason said. “You did all the work, so you should get the pay.”

“That’s your ability,” Clive said. “You keep it.”

“No dice, mate,” Jason said. “You do the work, you get the pay.”

“Half then,” Clive said, taking a money pouch from his dimensional space. “Use the rest to restock your potion supply.”

“Sounds fair,” Jason said. He withdrew seventy coins from his inventory and dropped them into Clive’s bag.

“I put in half of what I took from the monsters, too.”

Their task complete, they used the airboat to notify the villages that the threat had passed. Clive then directed the boat back in the direction of Greenstone.

"Hey," Jason called out over the noise of the airboat. "Didn't you say something about knowing a good place for dumpling soup?"

"Yes," Clive called back. "Yes, I did."

The airboat emerged from the delta waterways in the late afternoon, approaching the Old City Water Gate. A distributary running out of the delta led into Old City's canal district, through a massive, portcullised arch. The canal docking area was a bustle of activity. Clive drove their airboat right into a building, which was set up like a submarine dock. It belonged to the Magic Society and was quiet compared to the brisk goings-on of the canal docks outside.

"I need to get back to the Magic Society campus," Clive said. "I'm going to have so much to do."

Their trip had involved navigating deep into the delta, checking on all the villages, going through them to kill the monsters, going around again to give the all-clear, then finally come back. By the time they arrived back in Greenstone, they had been gone for more than half a week. When he first decided to drag Clive along, Jason had expected him to balk at the rough delta accommodations. He hadn't expected Clive to have grown up in such conditions.

"I'll go make the report to the Adventure Society," Jason said. "You should be able to drop by the jobs hall anytime and collect your share of the reward."

Clive requisitioned a small, magic-driven carriage from the Magic Society to take them back to the Island, stopping at the Magic Society campus.

"Lunch tomorrow?" Jason asked as they parted ways.

"Dumpling soup," Clive said with a wave.

Since Jason had started taking jobs at the contract hall, Rufus, Gary and Farrah had been increasingly busy. They each had their own projects, and in-between they were taking bronze-rank contracts from the jobs hall. One of their key reasons for coming to Greenstone was the chance for some independence, after all. Between the Vane Estate contract going wrong and Jason's training, their own adventuring had moved down the list. Now Jason was a full-fledged adventurer, they were back to adventuring themselves.

While they were all busy, Jason was seeing a lot less of the trio. He was unsurprised, then, that evening found him alone in his room at the inn. He decided to go out and see if there was anything on at the concert hall, seeing as it was so close.

Although there wasn't anything on the scale of the grand magical symphony, there was a string section recital taking place. He thought it might be interesting to see it from the main floor, given that he usually watched performances from the Geller's private viewing box. He was looking for a ticket box when Cassandra Mercer had spotted him wandering about.

"Mr Asano," she called out as she approached.

"Miss Mercer," Jason said. "Fancy meeting you here."

"You seem a little lost," she said.

"Well, I've never actually purchased a ticket before. I've been meaning to sign on to the patronage program with the Musical Society, but I've been a bit busy."

"The life of a new adventurer," she said.

"Mostly," Jason said. "I did spend the afternoon working in a dumpling restaurant."

"You got a job in a dumpling restaurant?" she asked incredulously.

"I didn't get a job there," Jason said. "I just worked in the kitchen for the afternoon. I wanted to learn to make dumplings with local ingredients."

Cassandra inviting him to view the recital from the Mercer family's private box.

"Thadwick won't be there, will he?"

"Thadwick treats culture like catching a cold," Cassandra said. "You can't always avoid it, but you can take precautions."

Jason laughed. Cassandra explained the reason Jason hadn't found the ticket box was that it was on the other side of the building. He had been looking where he usually entered, which he discovered was for patrons, private box holder and their guests.

The patron lounge was a place for concertgoers to engage socially before the performance and during intervals. They took drinks from the long bar and sat down in a pair of comfortable seats. Jason had a tall glass filled with rainbow layers of liqueur, while Cassandra took a neat measure of amber spirits.

Jason wasn't used to drawing a lot of attention at such events. He was usually an adjunct to groups with Rufus and Danielle Geller, who were much more interesting to high-society mavens. Being the solitary companion to Cassandra Mercer proved very different.

"How is it that you were having an evening out unaccompanied?" Jason asked. "I have to imagine people falling over themselves to be in your company."

"There's a difference between company and engaging company," she told him. "The men in this town are a little simple for my taste."

"You like a sophisticated gentleman," Jason said.

"Sophisticated is good," Cassandra said. "Complicated is better. As for the gentleman part, I can take it or leave it. What about you, Mr Asano? What are you looking for in a woman?"

"Evil genius," Jason said casually.

"Evil genius?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

"Why not?" Jason asked. "Smart, confident, assertive, driven. What's not to like?"

"The evil?" Cassandra ventured.

"That could be a problem long-term," Jason acknowledged. "Maybe what I need is a naughty genius."

He thought it over for a moment as an impish grin took over his face.

"Yeah," he said, voice purring. "That sounds exactly right."

As they continued to chat, several people attempted to join their conversation, usually young men. Jason admired Cassandra's ability to send them off with diplomacy and tact.

"You're very good with people," he complimented.

"You are as well," she said.

"No," Jason said. "I'm good *at* people; there's a difference. Usually, in how angry they get once they realise what just happened."

She laughed.

"Is something odd going on this evening?" Jason asked, looking around the room.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"There's a lot of adventurers here."

"Patronage isn't cheap," Cassandra said. "People of means tend to be essence users."

"I don't mean the attendees," Jason said. "There are people in the shadows."

He nudged his head in various directions, pointing out the people discreetly placed around the room. Cassandra frowned at she let him lead her gaze.

"I didn't notice at all," she said, with self-recrimination. "Perhaps I rely too much on my aura sense. All these essences users are aura camouflage."

"I wonder what they're up to," Jason said.

"Oh," Cassandra said, realisation dawning on her face. "They must be here for the open contract."

"There's an open contract?" Jason asked. "I must have missed it while I was out in the delta."

"Yes, there's actually been some excitement. Two rather brazen robberies."

"Robberies?"

“Yes. The first was in the theatre district. Someone snatched a rather valuable piece of jewellery right off the neck of someone attending a play, then made a run for it. It was some cousin of the Duke of Greenstone, no less.”

“That’s certainly bold.”

“That’s only the beginning,” she said. “A man was attacked right here at the concert hall. He was out on a balcony during the interval when he was attacked and robbed of all his valuables. I know the man in question and he rather had it coming, but still.”

“The same thief?” Jason asked.

“So it would seem,” Cassandra said. “In both cases, it was a woman dressed all in black. The interesting part is that, given the people involved, they were able to get a sense of her aura. She only has a single essence, yet managed to escape both times.”

“That seems wildly reckless,” Jason said. “I can’t imagine the reward to be commensurate to that kind of risk.”

“It certainly does raise questions,” Cassandra said. “The Duke of Greenstone had the Adventure Society put out an open contract for her capture, but the Adventure Society director restricted it to iron rank.”

“Why?” Jason asked.

“It’s the long-standing policy of the Society to send appropriate measures to deal with appropriate problems, and it is one person with only a single essence. That’s a widespread policy, not just here in Greenstone. Of course, the local powers have never had much time for Adventure Society strictures, and have been vocal in their displeasure. They don’t like that the director worked her way up from poverty instead of coming from the established families. They’ve also learned that pushing her does not tend to go well.”

“I see,” Jason said.

“Have you met Elspeth Arella, yet?” Cassandra asked.

“I have,” Jason said. “In fact, it was just before I met you.”

Lucian Lamprey stormed through the grounds of Clarissa Ventress’ estate. The silver-ranked Director of the Magic Society practically blasted away her guards with the power of his aura, using it to announcing his arrival. Ventress came out to meet him in the garden, sending her people off with a gesture. She grimaced as she fell under the suppression of his aura.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, Director Lamprey?” she asked, voice strained.

“She’s meant to get caught,” Lamprey said, “not cause a huge ruckus and get away.”

“Director, I can assure you that this is the way that meets both our needs.”

“Do you realise how many eyes are on this now?” he asked.

“With respect, director, I think you may be missing the point,” she said. “You need to start attending more social events.”

“You want me to catch her myself?”

“No, Director. But given your widely-known patronage of the Fortress and its fighting arena, you would, of course, recognise her aura. Should she make an appearance at an event you attend, of course, a civic-minded gentleman like yourself would reveal her identity. After that, the hunt begins and you have a seamless pretext for taking an interest in subsequent legal proceedings.”

Lucian frowned as he thought it over. Ventress was visibly relieved as his aura retracted.

“Where is she hitting next?” Lamprey asked.

“Even I don’t know that,” Ventress said. “Keeping each element isolated allows us to control the information. As you said, there are many eyes on this.”

Lamprey looked dissatisfied but gave a reluctant nod.

“My patience is not infinite, Ventress.”

“But it will be rewarded, Director.”

Lamprey departed, leaving Ventress alone in the garden. Fury filled her face and she spat at a bush which withered and blackened, letting off an acrid smoke.

“Darnell!” she called out, and her leonid body came quickly.

“Belinda and Sophie,” Ventress said venomously. “Where are they?”

“After the last time you called them in, they holed up somewhere,” Darnell told her. “If you made it known their protection was withdrawn, they’d be flushed out quickly enough.”

“No,” Ventress said, regaining her usual composure. “Make inquiries, but keep it discreet. So long as they get caught, everything works out.”

“What if they tell the authorities that you were behind it all?”

“Lamprey will keep a lid on that,” Ventress said. “So long as he gets what he wants, he’ll want to make use of us again. His backing will make us untouchable in Old City.”

Chapter 71:

A Bit of Poo

Jason didn't normally wear his battle robe around the city, but he was on the job. He had been assigned his first contract within the city itself and was meeting a contact at what was apparently a famous tavern in Old City. It was located in a district named Cavendish, after a family whose interests once dominated the area. The family had long-since relocated to the Island, but the name remained.

There was a bulk trade centre for goods coming in from the delta, one of several locations from which the bulk of Old City's food was distributed. To accommodate the lodging needs of traders and teamsters, many inns and taverns were to be found nearby. After dark, it was a centre for Old City nightlife.

The raucous activity of the night had no impact on the bustling day trade, Jason noted, making his way through crowded streets in search of his destination. The buildings around him were the usual desert stone, although most had some manner of wall treatment that had been painted in bright colours.

The same could be seen anywhere in Old City, but in Cavendish, it was especially prominent. This was especially true of the central thoroughfare, whose uncoordinated clash of colours earned it the moniker Rainbow Road. Jason turned off that main street in what he believed was the right direction.

He stopped at a public pump, where people were lined up to draw water. Unlike The Island, only the wealthiest residents of Old City had magic-driven indoor plumbing. Most residents used communal facilities, like bathhouses, group toilets and public water pumps.

Underneath Old City, water from the delta ran through an elaborate network of tunnels. Ultimately, it all emerged from drains into the artificial strait between Old City and the Island. All through Old City that water was drawn up, used, then the wastewater was siphoned off to processing hubs spaced across the city. There, waste material was extracted before returning the purified water to the tunnels under the city. Waste material was collected in bags and sold as fertilizer.

To Jason, the tunnels sounded like sewers, whatever he had heard about magical cleaning processes. Given that his current contract involved heading into those tunnels, it was suddenly a more pressing concern.

The public water pump Jason approached, like others around the city, drew up water that was magically cleaned to safe standards. There were a few people in line for the pump to fill up jars, bottles, or even whole barrels that would need to be moved by cart.

Jason was about to ask the people for directions when his aura senses picked something up. He projected his aura harmlessly over the gathered people, who all turned to look at him. He took out his Adventure Society badge and held it up.

"I'm an adventurer," Jason announced, "about to do some adventurer things, so please clear the area."

Most people knew the mortality rate of going near adventurers at work, so people picked up their buckets and jugs and hand cart and made themselves scarce. Soon it was just Jason and the five iron-rank auras he had sensed.

"You may as well come out," Jason said.

"I think he noticed us, boys," an arrogant voice said, its owner emerging from an alley with four others. They were young, with the light and practical armour of adventurers. They were all carrying wooden clubs and had recording crystals over their heads.

"I don't know, Dink," one of them said, voice full of reluctance. "You felt that aura. Maybe he isn't as weak as you said."

"Of course he is," Dink said, the first one who had spoken.

"Is there something I can help you gentlemen with?" Jason asked.

"Yeah," Dink said. "You can shut up and take a beating. I'll allow some whimpering."

"Did I do something to offend you?" Jason asked. "Is it the handsomeness? You might be ugly now, but just keep working on those essences and you'll eventually get less awful-looking. It'll never be great with what you have as a starting point, let's be honest, but its magic, not miracles. Actually, have you tried the goddess of beauty? They probably wouldn't let you in the church looking like that, would they?"

"Are you seriously mouthing off right now?" Dink asked. "How smart will that mouth be with no teeth in it."

"I'm not sure you know how being smart works," Jason said. "Or teeth."

"Dink," the doubter spoke up again. "If he was as weak as you said, I think he'd be more scared."

"You should listen to your friend, Dink," Jason said.

"I know all about you, Asano," Dink said. "That Geller lady set up a fight so you could beat all her fancy trainees, teach them a lesson or some crap. But the whole thing was rigged, and really you're weak. But since you beat those Gellers, people don't know that

yet. Someone is gonna make a reputation kicking the crap out of you, and it's gonna be us."

Jason let out a weary sigh.

"Alright, gentlemen," he said. "Do you want to do this with powers, or without? I suggest without because at least you get to limp away after you wake up. I don't think the Adventure Society will like it if I kill you all. To be honest, though Dink, the more you talk, the more it seems worth the trouble."

"You think you can bluff your way out?" Dink asked. "I don't need powers to beat you."

"Just that stick, then," Jason said.

"I'm going to shove this thing down your throat," Dink said, waving his club. He charged forward at Jason, then found himself on the ground, unsure of how he got there. Jason was standing above him, holding his club.

"You get that one, Dink," Jason said. "Come at me again and you pay in screams."

Dink scrambled to his feet, lunging at Jason immediately. Jason rapped him on the head with his own club, arresting his momentum. Jason tossed aside the club and grabbed Dink's arm, yanking him off balance. The first scream came as Jason tried to bend Dink's elbow the wrong way, the second when he did the same with the knee. The screams stopped as knuckles crushed Dink's throat, then he lost consciousness shortly after seeing a knee coming at his face.

Jason let Dink fall to the ground, looking over at the others all clustered together.

"I have a contract to get to," Jason said. "Either all of you get over here and fight, or take this idiot and go."

The doubter dropped his club to the ground, the others doing the same. Jason shook his head.

"How did you idiots collect twenty essences between you?" Jason asked. He'd heard Rufus and others say the local adventurer standard was low, but he hadn't really seen it. Most of the iron-rank adventurers he'd seen were Gellers.

"You'd best get this idiot a potion," Jason said, prodding Dink with his foot. "Oh, and where can I find a tavern called the Townhouse?"

The Townhouse, as it turned out, was the largest building in Cavendish. Once the city residence of the Cavendish family, that time was long past. It had been an inn and tavern for almost two hundred years. Going in through the large doors, Jason arrived in what was a surprisingly well-appointed bar room.

Quality wood was a rare resource in Greenstone, but in the Townhouse it was everywhere. From the polished floor to the wall booths; from the tables and chairs to the long bar. The windows were pristine glass and elaborate chandeliers hung from the high ceiling, the magic crystals bathing the room in warm light. The only place heavily featuring the stone that normally dominated Greenstone construction was the split staircase at the back of the room. Made from dark and expensive green marble, it offered passage to the higher reaches of the building in style.

The patrons were few in the early morning, just a few people quietly enjoying meals alone or in pairs. They were better dressed than the average Old City resident, as was the man behind the bar. He was a member of the runic race, stocky and hairless, with blue-black skin. On his skin were the glowing runes for which his race was named, holes in his outfit designed to show them off. Jason had interacted with his people very little, as they weren't common to Greenstone.

He was packing away clean glasses, in preparation for the evening. He glanced up at Jason, who walked over.

"Hello, sir," the barman greeted. "Am I to take it from your attire that you are the adventurer?"

"Jason Asano, at your service. Are you the owner?"

"The owner isn't in right now," the barman said. "She will be grateful for your prompt arrival," the barman said. "If I may ask, is it Mr Asano, Master Asano or Lord Asano?"

"Stick to Jason and we'll do just fine," Jason told him.

"Very good, sir. My name is Farrokh. Allow me to lead you to the other gentleman, who is already in the cellar."

Farrokh led Jason behind the bar and through a door that led downwards. They arrived at a sprawling cellar. Jason reminisced about the Vane Estate and the cellar where he had once woken up inside a cage. It hadn't been his best moment, but it was where he first met Rufus, Gary and Farrah. That cellar had been empty, cages aside, while this one contained rows of massive barrels on huge racks. It looked like the storeroom of a whisky distillery.

There was a man already in the cellar, kneeling down near a brick wall. He was peering into a hole, large enough that he could have put his head through it, chewed straight through the masonry. There was a glowing magical barrier inside an arch of runes carved into the wall around the hole.

The man looked up at Jason. He looked around fifty, wearing loose coveralls and a workman's cap. He had a tool belt, in which Jason could see implements both magical and

non-magical in nature. From the outfit, Jason took him as the kind of highly skilled tradesman with training in the magical aspects of his job. His aura revealed no essences; his expertise was wholly in external magic.

Jason's magical knowledge, coming from a skill book, was more extensive than the narrow, specialised training of a such a workman. That said, Jason had no illusions he would be the equal of this tradesman in his specialised field. Jason's magically imbued knowledge might be more comprehensive, but he knew it would pale in comparison to the workman's years of experience. The man introduced himself as Frank.

"I've chased 'em all back into this hole here, Mr Farrack," Frank said.

"It's Farrokh."

"Sorry about that, Mr Farrack. So once I got 'em all out, I sealed the hole off. It'll keep 'em out long enough for Mr Asarno here to do his job. You much of a rat catcher, Mr Asarno?"

"I guess we'll find out," Jason said.

The Adventure Society was not normally called in for lesser monsters, which posed a limited threat. Only in large numbers were they a problem that required Adventure Society intervention. In this case, a whole colony of stone-chewer rats had appeared in the tunnels underneath Old City.

"I was told you would provide access to the tunnels?" Jason asked Frank as Farrokh led them upstairs.

"Yeah, but I'll have to leave you down there," Frank said. "This place isn't the only ones with holes in the basement. You're not afraid of the dark are you, Mr Asarno?"

"I'm sure I'll muddle through."

Frank led them out of the building and down a side street, to a set of stone stairs in an alleyway that led down below street level to a metal door. Frank unlocked the door, revealing more stairs. Jason followed Frank down into what looked like a sewer tunnel. The ceiling was arched, dark water run down the middle, with walkways on either side. There was a chemical smell, heavy in the wet air. It wasn't exactly like chlorine, but very similar.

"You alright for light?" Frank asked. "I can lend you a glow stone, if that'd help."

"Wouldn't the rats run from the light?" Jason asked.

"Oh, you see a lot of critters like this in my kind of work," Frank said. "My experience has been more of a run-towards situation. They'll take a nibble out of you if they can, believe me. Your trouble will be the ones hidden away. There's pipes and crevices aplenty down here. Lots of places to nest that people won't fit in to."

"I'm going to let my familiar do the hard work," Jason said.

"That's like a magic pet, yeah?" Frank asked. "Not sure I'd want my dog running around down here. I mean, they clean this water, but there's clean and there's clean, you know?"

"My familiar is an apocalypse monster that can scour a world of life," Jason said absently as he looked around the tunnel. "It isn't going to be put off by a bit of poo."

"Sounds fancy," Frank said. "I don't much about apology monsters or whatever, but I suppose the big nobs wouldn't have sent you if you weren't up to it. You know, we had an infestation like this not long after I started on the job. Weren't cleaned out properly, and you know how monsters get after a bit. Streaming out of the street drains, they were, terrorising regular folk. That was some kind of bug instead of rats, but I imagine it'd be much the same. You just be sure and get them all, yeah?"

"I'll do that, Frank."

"Right, well, I'll leave you to it and get on to sealing up these basements. After that, I'll come back and hang about until you're ready to go. How long do you reckon you'll be?"

"That depends on the rats," Jason said.

"Fair enough," Frank said. "Just try not to get lost; these tunnels all look the same. If you ain't back here come dark, I'll assume you got lost and come find you."

Frank closed the door, leaving Jason in the dark, but his vision power was more than up to the task. Taking out a knife, he sliced open his palm, letting leeches pile out of the wound.

Colin wasn't likely to go causing any apocalypses quite yet, but the neophyte life-devourer did have the power to sense out living things, wherever they might be hiding. The sanguine horror wasn't fast, but it was multitudinous, and as Jason followed the main mass, small groups of leeches broke off to head down tunnels and gaps. Jason's quest might not end quickly, but he would root them all out in the end.

Chapter 72:

Rat Race

Stone-chewer rats were around the size of house cats, with grey fur, protruding teeth and oversized, talon-like claws. Jason watched as a half dozen of them struggled to scratch away the leeches digging into their flesh. One writhed around until it fell into the water.

“Colin, what did I say about letting them go in the water?”

The rats, it turned out were heavy, and after falling into the water didn't come back up. The leeches on them had no such problems, crawling out after the rat had died of either the leeches' ministrations or from drowning.

“How am I meant to loot them down there? The ones hidden away in those nests are one thing, but this is throwing away money.”

The rats were all dead and all the nearby leeches crawled back into a pile. Jason looked at it.

“I'm sorry, Colin,” Jason said. “You're doing all the work, and here I am complaining. I know you're doing your best, buddy. Good job.”

The leech pile started undulating with what Jason assumed was happiness. He pulled up the quest screen.

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

Rats have infested the water tunnels underneath the Cavendish District of Old City. Clear out the nests and eliminate all the rats.

- Objective: Clear out rat nests 5/6.
- Objective: Eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/44.

“One more nest to go. That's a lot of leftover rats for the last one. Or are the others roaming around loose?”

Jason was curious why some quests showed him the exact number of monsters why others didn't, but he wasn't going to complain. He pulled a pocket watch from his inventory and saw they were making good time. Colin might be slow, but its ability to sense life was unerring.

Looting the lesser monsters only produced lesser spirit coins, but they were welcome nonetheless. Most things were paid for in lesser coins and it saved him using the moneychanging services of a brokerage.

Moving further into the tunnels, he followed Colin's leisurely lead. He noticed a change in Colin's behaviour as they went further. Throughout the hunt, leeches had been breaking off in batches to seek out rats inside tunnels and various unreachable nooks. Now they were all slowly converging in the one direction.

"One big nest it is, I guess."

➤ Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/43.

Jason looked at the message that popped up. Normally it told him when he had progressed the objective, but he hadn't killed any more rats. He looked at it again.

"The objective used to be forty-four rats," he mused. "Did some old lady with a broom kill one?"

-
- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/43.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/42.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/41.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/40.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/39.
-

"What's going on there?"

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Hidden objective discovered: Find the secret of the final rat nest 0/1.
 - Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are completed.
-

"All hidden objectives? There's more?"

Jason wanted to pick up the pace, but without Colin leading the way he could easily go off track in the maze of tunnels. He considered for a moment, then lowered his hand close to the ground. The cut on his palm was still there, as his rapid regeneration only worked while the familiar was inhabiting his bloodstream. The leeches crawled into his hand, vanishing as they touched his blood. He wondered if he should have washed them first. Finally, only one leech was left, sitting in his hand.

"Alright, Colin. Lead the way."

Jason moved forward at a brisker pace, hand held out in front of him. Holding Colin out in front of him, he could move his hand side to side. The leech would rear up when Jason was holding it in the right direction, letting him find the right path at every junction.

-
- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/38.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/37.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/36.
-

“Is someone killing them off? What do you think, Colin? Is it going to be super easy? No, I don’t think so either.”

- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/35.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/34.
-

Colin pointed Jason at a tunnel that looked like it hadn’t seen maintenance in a long time. Mortar was loose, bricks had fallen out of the walls. All the tunnels were wet, but here some kind of fungus was growing, in places almost completely obstructing the path.

“That is a lot of fungus.”

- Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/33.
 - Objective: eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/32.
-

“If I were being honest, Colin, I’d admit to becoming a little concerned.”

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Stone-Chewer Rats] 31/31.
 - Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are complete.
-

“Hidden objectives,” Jason grumbled. “I better get some solid loot for this.”

He looked at Colin in his hand.

“Yes, I know other adventurers don’t get a quest system. Shut up.”

A sound, a low rumble, came rolling through the tunnel.

“What do you think, Colin? The sound of a hidden objective?”

The rumble grew louder and clearer. It wasn't an earthy sound, but a sloshing. The water flowing through the middle of the tunnel started running faster and higher, splashing against the brick walkway.

“Ah, crap.”

Water came surging down the tunnel, raising the water level and overrunning the walkway. Jason stood still as the water rose halfway to his knees, not wanting to be knocked over.

“This isn’t good water,” Jason said. “Is this stuff going to clear out?”

The surge of water passed, dropping back to its normal level. Jason guessed it to be a normal function of water tunnel operations. Jason took a few unhappy, squelching steps, then was struck by a horrible revelation.

“Oh, bloody hell,” he exclaimed, slapping a hand into his face. “I totally forgot I can walk on water.”

He continued down the tunnel, squelching boots accompanied by a stream of grumbling.

“I see you did just fine,” Jason said to the leech still in his hand. Then he noticed a circular welt.

“Do you try to eat me while I was distracted?”

The leech waggled its toothy maw back and forth innocently.

“Don’t act nonchalant with me, Colin,” Jason said. “And after I gave you all that blood pudding yesterday.”

Continuing on, Jason paused as he heard scurrying from somewhere ahead. It sounded loud for a rat, even the oversized stone-chewer rats. In any case, all the stone-chewer rats were gone. The sound got closer, and a ratling came rushing out of a side junction.

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Hidden objective discovered: Eliminate [Ratlings] 0/12.
- Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are completed.

Ratlings looked like mice, but stood on their hind legs, half the height of a human. They were also cowardly, usually running from any confrontation, but this one didn’t even slow down as it approached. It tried to barrel past Jason, but bounced off, tumbling from the walkway and into the water. Unable to swim, it splashed about ineffectually as the water flow carried it away. Jason pulled a knife from his inventory, cutting into his hand, sending blood and leeches splashing into the water after it. The rest he let pile at his feet.

“Make sure it doesn’t survive,” he told the leeches, then started off down the tunnel it had emerged from. Whatever the ratling had been running from apparently filled it with more fear than Jason had.

“Too bad monsters didn’t see me in the mirage arena.”

➤ Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 0/11.

“This again? I don’t think there’s an old lady with a broom killing ratlings.”

He heard squeals of fear coming from further down the tunnel. Five more ratlings came scrambling out of the tunnel, rushing toward Jason. This time he was ready, smashing one into the wall with a low kick as he grabbed another by the throat. They were weak and cowardly creatures, and he ended both quickly.

➤ Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 2/11.

The other three made it past him. Two of them tried leaping over the water to the opposite walkway, but only one made it. The other fell short, splashing into the channel. The third one dashed past Jason as he killed the first two, leaping over the pile of leeches.

“What kind of effort was that?” Jason asked Colin. “Now I have to go running after them. Go catch that other swimmer.”

As leeches piled into the water he started chasing the other two. He started with the one on his own side of the tunnel. Letting out just enough light from his cloak to turn pitch dark into shadowy gloom, he shadow-jumped ahead of the creature, grabbing it as it ran right into him. A quick knife slash and it was done.

➤ Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 3/11.

“That other prick has run right off.”

Dropping the light down to nothing again, so it wouldn’t see him coming, he started hunting it down, which took the better part of an hour. He took solace that the leeches had used the time to catch up with the two ratlings that had fallen in the water. In the meantime, another pair of ratlings had mysteriously vanished.

➤ Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 6/9.

Jason took stock as leeches crawled back out of the water at his feet. There were three ratlings left. He set off, Colin lagging behind. He didn’t slow down, leaving Colin to follow as best it could.

“Three to go.”

➤ Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 6/8.

“Alright, two to go. Some kind of monster suicide pact? Did the ones running away chicken out and refuse to drink the punch?”

Pausing at another junction, he wasn't sure which way to go. A sudden squeal of fear and pain gave him a path. The sound didn't last long.

➤ Hidden objective: Eliminate [Ratlings] 6/7.

Jason moved in the direction of the suddenly cut-off screaming.

Chapter 73: A Grim Sword to Live By

Jason was heading down the tunnel from which he had heard the screaming. A bellowing roar came from the same direction, but it definitely wasn't made by a ratling. Jason moved forward, taking care with the wet stone of the walkway and the slimy fungus underfoot. He was still in complete darkness.

At a junction ahead, a ratling sprinted out. Some kind of tentacle snaked after it, wrapping around its ankle. The ratling tripped and was dragged, squealing, back into the tunnel. Jason raced forward to catch a look at the ratling's fate.

What he saw was something like a rat version of Gary, complete with huge, muscular frame and body covered in fur. It was so big it was standing astride the water rushing through the middle of the tunnel, a foot each on the walkways either side. Standing upright, it was so tall it almost scraped the arch of the tunnel with its head. Its body was much more human-shaped than a ratling's, which made its nakedness more obvious.

"You need to put that thing away, mate."

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Hidden objective complete: Find the secret of the final rat nest 1/1.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- Hidden objective discovered: Eliminate the [Rat Gorger] 0/1.
- Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are complete.

The rat monster roared at Jason. It had the head of a rat, except the mouth was larger, its face almost unhinging to reveal jagged teeth like a shark's. It had small, darting eyes, which stared straight at Jason in spite of the total darkness.

Dangling in front of the rat monster was the ratling it had dragged away. The rat monster's tail was metres long, thick, ropy and prehensile. It was also strong, easily holding up the ratling for the monster to bite into. There was a slurping noise as the ratling withered away. Like sucking the juices out through a straw, the monster drained the ratling to little more than skin and bones.

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Ratlings] 6/6.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - Quest cannot be completed until all hidden objectives are complete.
-

“Rat Gorger,” Jason said as he watched in disgust. “The name makes sense.”

It dropped the dead ratling into the water, where it floated past Jason. He looked at the withered remains as they drifted down the tunnel.

“This must be what it’s like to fight me.”

The rat gorger licked its lips with a long tongue that sought out any leftover ratling fluids around its huge maw. Its body rippled and bulged. Jason watched its already powerful form grew bigger and stronger in front of his eyes.

“So that’s what you’re up to,” Jason said. “Sacrifice ratling to get +1/+1.”

The creature started lumbering forward. Jason didn’t want to wind up in the creature’s clawed hands, but that wasn’t a large concern. The extra growth had made it almost too big for the tunnel and it was forced to shuffle along with a foot on either side of the waterway. It was slow, awkward and ponderous, exactly Jason’s kind of enemy.

The only element that worried Jason was the tail, which lashed out in his direction. As quick as the rest of the monster was slow, it snaked around Jason’s waist. It pulled him off his feet and started dragging him toward the monster. Jason took his knife and dragged it heavily across the tail. The monster roared, yank it back and freeing Jason.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Rat Gorger].
-

Jason kicked back up onto his feet, one of the benefits of all his training. He couldn’t use his shadow teleport in total darkness, so he produced tiny motes of light from his cloak, sending them floating up and down the tunnel. He kept the illumination at a minimum, transforming the darkness into a playground of shadows.

The rat gorger continued its slow, hulking approach. The tail snapped forward again, this time lashing out like a whip instead of trying to wrap around him. Jason lacked the reflexes to intercept it, so he vanished and the tail hit nothing but air. Appearing behind the monster, he slashed out with his dagger, cutting into the immobile base of the tail.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Rat Gorger].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Rat Gorger].
-

The monster swung back with a huge arm, but Jason had already teleported back to his previous position.

“Alright, mate,” Jason said. “How dumb are you?”

The tail whipped out again, with the exact same result. Jason jumped behind it and slashed the same spot at the base of the tail, severing the tail entirely.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Rat Gorger].
 - Special attack [Leech bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Rat Gorger].
-

Jason shadow-jumped out of range as the creature went wild, thrashing about itself impotently, as it roared in rage and pain.

“Pretty dumb, then,” Jason said. “Works for me.”

In its mindless fury, the monster stumbled, tumbling into the water. It was far too big to be pulled along in the current, the channel only submerging it to the waist. Putting a huge hand on walkways beside it, it pulled itself out of the water. While it did do, Jason watched from a safe distance. With the severing of the prehensile tail, the main source of danger for Jason was gone. As he watched the monster push itself upright, he chanted out a spell.

“Your fate is to suffer.”

-
- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Rat Gorger].
-

The monster was tough, but with Jason’s afflictions in place, its death was inevitable. He led it up the tunnel, the bellowing its rage at Jason as it sluggishly, hopelessly pursued. It struggled along as its blood poured from the stump of its tail and its flesh blackened with necrosis. It toughed it out surprisingly well until it crossed paths with the leeches that had finally caught up to Jason. Misery and pain finally overwhelmed its rage as it met a terrible, pitiful end, screams of pain and helplessness marking its passage into death.

Quest: [Contract: Rat Infestation]

- Hidden objective complete: Eliminate the [Rat Gorgor] 1/1.
 - [Rat Essence] has been added to your inventory.

 - Objective complete: Clear out rat nests 6/6.

 - Quest complete.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

“Hey, an essence. Rat essence? Appropriate, but not what I would have picked.”

Animal type essences were common, as much as any essences were common. Some, like bear, wolf and snake were quite prized, while others, less so. He didn't hold high hopes for the rat essence, but he should be able to trade it for several of the more common awakening stones.

Jason walked over to the dead monster.

“Why couldn't it have been the might essence?” Jason asked it. Some essences were common as animal essences, yet were more valuable due to their desirability. The might essence, the shield essence or the magic essence could all have been traded for some quality awakening stones.

“As your life was mine to reap, your death is mine to harvest.”

The red glow of the monster's remnant life force emerged from its body, streaming up into Jason's outstretched hand. The monster's body withered to a dried-out husk. It looked a lot like the ratling the monster itself had drained.

“Live by the sword, die by the sword, isn't it mate. Actually, I hope not. I live by a pretty grim sword.”

He lightly touched the corpse, then backed away before it dissolved into smoke.

- 10 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - [Awakening Stone of Wrath] has been added to your inventory.
-

Jason took in a sharp breath.

“Boss drops. Now we're talking.”

He pulled out the awakening stone immediately. It was the same round, palm-sized crystal as other awakening stones. Inside was a burning, shifting red, wreathed in white-gold light.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Wrath] (unranked, uncommon)

An awakening stone that unlocks the power of wrath (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
 - Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
 - You have 8 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Wrath]. Absorb Y/N?
-

As much as he wanted to use it, he put the stone away for the moment. After reabsorbing Colin, he was about to leave when he heard an echoing voice.

"Hello?" it called out. "Anyone down there?"

"Frank?" Jason called back.

"Oh, Mr Asarno," Frank's voice came down from somewhere above. It sounded like he was talking through a pipe or very narrow tunnel.

"Where are you?" Jason called out.

"Up on the street," Frank called down. "There were some pretty loud monster noises coming up through the drains, and the folk up here were getting a bit worried. After it went quiet, I thought I may as well see if anyone was alive down there."

"It was just a rat," Jason called up. "It's dead now."

"That didn't sound like any rat I've seen," Frank said.

"It was a big rat."

"I thought you might not have made it," Frank said. "There some pretty awful sounds of misery and dying at the end there. Thought that might have been you."

"It kind of was, Frank," Jason said. "That's the sound things make when I happen to them. Can you find me the closest way back up to the street?"

"Uh, yes sir, Mr Asano, sir. I'll have you out in no time."

Chapter 74: Doing Better

The balcony for Jason's suite was not as expansive as the one Rufus, Farrah and Gary shared, but it was still more than large enough to put out a reclining lounger. Being on the opposite side of the building, Jason's balcony looked over the street instead of the water. The sounds of the guild district's bustling daytime activity came in through the balcony doors as Jason opened them up.

He was ready for a lazy afternoon, with a colourful, short-sleeved shirt, and loose, knee-length shorts. He lay back comfortably, pulling a small red-gold crystal from his inventory.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Wrath] (unranked, uncommon)

An awakening stone that unlocks the power of wrath (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 8 unawakened essence abilities.
- You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Wrath]. Absorb Y/N?

"Time to see what you have for me."

Jason was about to absorb the awakening stone when there was a knock on the door. Jason groaned, putting the stone away and getting up from the lounger. He made his way back inside and opened the door.

"Humphrey," Jason said. "I haven't seen you in a while. Come on in."

Jason watched as Humphrey came inside. Humphrey's body language was uncertain and uncomfortable, and he was uncharacteristically quiet. Humphrey normally moved with confidence and was quick with the verbal niceties.

"Something the matter?" Jason asked as he directed Humphrey into a comfortable chair.

"Jason..."

Humphrey was hesitant but carried on.

"...can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Jason said.

"I... can you not answer the question with a question?"

"Is something bothering you, Humphrey?"

"I watched you fight and the other in the mirage arena."

Jason chuckled.

"I'm not sure anyone was expecting that," Jason said. "Even me. Your mother gave me way too many advantages. Do trap weavers really show up in numbers like that?"

"During the monster surge they do," Humphrey said. "The last surge was when I was a boy, but a whole army of them got into family grounds. Walls don't stop something that climbs the way they do."

"Wow. You couldn't have been more than six or seven."

"How are you alright with what you did to them? Rick and the others, I mean."

"Ah," Jason said, leaning back in his chair. "You're concerned about the way I fought them."

"We were watching you, from the viewing, room," Humphrey said. "Watching them, really; we didn't see that much of you. What we did see, what we heard... the way you took Hannah and Henry while they were distracted. That laughter as you mocked them from the darkness. It was chilling. What you did do Hannah's body; draping her body off a monster's webs like a decoration."

"What do you think about what I did to them?" Jason asked.

Humphrey sat up in his chair, shaking his head. "You always do this," he said. "I ask you about something that seems questionable, but when I question it, you just question me back. Instead of defending what you did you just talk and talk as if right and wrong are whatever you want them to be if you explain them enough."

Jason sighed.

"You know, I've been where you are," Jason said. "A lot more recently than I'd like. I accused a friend of mine of having an immoral perspective on adventuring, without ever having been an adventurer myself. You're making the same mistake I did, not seeing my perspective, any more than I did hers."

Jason gave Humphrey a friendly, but tired smile.

"I know this is coming from a good place," Jason said. "You have this certainty about right and wrong, and you don't want a friend going down a bad path. I'm not going to sit here and say that you're wrong to do that, but not everything is as simple as it seems from the outside."

"Some things are just right and wrong, Jason," Humphrey said.

"Sure," Jason said. "But the consequences of our actions aren't always what we want them to be. Humphrey, let me put a hypothetical situation to you."

"You're going to make things complicated again, aren't you?" Humphrey said.

“Humphrey,” Jason said unhappily, “you essentially came in here to ask me if I’m an immoral person, which is more than a little rude. This is the answer I have for you. If you don’t want to listen, the door works just as well for leaving as it did for coming in.”

Jason gestured at the door. Humphrey glanced at it but turned his gaze back to Jason.

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “Imagine you’re on a contract. You have to go to a town out in the desert, way out past the delta. It’ll take you a few days to get out there, and you’ve stopped overnight along the way. You’re in a little town, staying at the only inn. You’ve had a long, hot day on the road, and you don’t want to just eat a spirit coin and go to bed, so you head downstairs. The common room is busy, but you find a quiet corner to have something to eat and drink without anyone bothering you.”

“What does this have to do with anything?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m setting a scene,” Jason said. “So, there you are, minding your own business. But like I said, the common room is busy. Some people are eating, everyone’s drinking. There’s this one guy. You’ve been seeing him all night because he’s loud and his aura is the strongest one here. Not compared to you, but a couple of essences make him the toughest guy in this little town.”

Jason paused to take a glass of juice from his inventory.

“Want one?” he asked.

“No,” Humphrey said, then smacked his dry mouth. “Actually, yes. Please.”

Jason handed over a second glass, taking a sip of his own.

“Just make sure and use a coaster,” Jason said. “Wooden tables don’t grow on... oh, I guess they kind of do.”

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jason said. “So, this guy is the town tough. It becomes clear as the evening goes on that he and everyone else knows it. There’s this girl, young, pretty, who works at the inn. The guy has been giving her a hard time, and it’s only getting worse the more he drinks. Everyone can see what’s happening. He’s too rough, she’s too young, but all she can do is bear it. No one is stepping up to help her, because he’s the strongest guy in this town.”

Jason looked Humphrey straight in the eye.

“Except he isn’t,” Jason continued. “Not this time. That night, you’re there. So what do you do?”

“The right thing is obvious,” Humphrey said, “but you’re clearly setting me up to be wrong.”

“Of course I’m setting you up to be wrong,” Jason said, “but that doesn’t change the situation. The girl is clearly uncomfortable. As this guy goes deeper into his cups, he’s even hurting her a little. But no one is saying anything. They might give him some covert looks, but they won’t challenge him. What do you do, Humphrey?”

“I stop him,” Humphrey said.

“How?”

“I go over there and suppress his aura.”

"He's not iron rank," Jason said. "He's too weak to sense your aura and too drunk to realise what you're doing to him. This is his town, and he's the toughest guy in it. You've just challenged that, and he's way past making smart choices. He wants a fight. He shoves you."

“I kick him out on the street.”

“That works,” Jason said. “You’re stronger than him at his best, which he is far from in that particular moment. He wants to keep fighting, but he’s got a couple of friends sober enough to realise you’re an adventurer and not to be messed with. They take him home before he can cause any more trouble.”

“Then what?” Humphrey asked.

“Then nothing. Without that guy and his friends around, the mood is lightened and everyone has a pleasant evening. The girl thanks, you, nervously, and you go to bed. The next day you move on because you still have a long road ahead.”

“I don’t see the problem,” Humphrey said.

“Well,” Jason said, “what happens the next night? You’re not there, but the town tough isn’t going anywhere. His reputation just got destroyed. He was manhandled and humiliated in front of everyone. It was mostly by his own actions, his own arrogance and pride, but he doesn’t care. Who does he take it out on? How does he re-establish his dominance? How does he put the fear back in these people? How does he teach them what happens if they confront him the way you did? What happens to that girl?”

“You think I should have left things the way they were?” Humphrey asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “Standing up for those who can’t stand up for themselves is a virtue. But if acting on that virtue puts more hurt into the world than it takes away? Is that still moral?”

Humphrey slumped in his chair.

“I don’t have an answer to that,” he said.

“There isn’t always a good option,” Jason said. “Doing nothing to change a bad situation may not feel right, but if anything you do will make it worse, then it’s the only choice to make.”

“What does that have to do with what you did in the mirage arena?” Humphrey challenged.

“Do you know why your mother lets us spend time together, Humphrey?”

“She doesn’t decide who my friends are.”

“Of course she does,” Jason said. “Answer the question.”

“Why?” Humphrey asked. “You didn’t answer mine. You always answer questions with more questions.”

“Fine,” Jason said. “You want a simple answer, then here it is: Things are complicated. That’s it. Your mother wants you to recognise that the world is a lot more complicated than right and wrong, good and evil. I don’t think the way you do, and she wants that to challenge you.”

“You think she wants you to think like you?” Humphrey asked.

“No, Humphrey,” Jason said, shaking his head. “It’s like forging a sword. A sharp edge takes heat and hammering. She wants your principles to go through the fire so they don’t collapse once you’re out in the world where she can’t watch over you. I’ve been playing along, but I want a friend, not a frigging ethics pupil.”

Jason sat up straight in his chair and continued, voice rising as pent-up frustration leaked out.

“I may not always make the best choices. Sometimes I do things that are selfish and hurt other people. I try and do good, and when I fall short, I try to do better. That’s all I can do, all anyone can do.”

“How was hanging Hannah’s corpse up like a party decoration trying to do better?” Humphrey asked.

“That wasn’t real, Humphrey. But it could be. The consequences of what we do, as adventurers. The risks we take. Yes, what I did was traumatising. But now they have a better idea of what could be out there waiting for them, and they’re a little more ready for it than they were before. You think I don’t know what my powers are?”

“And if they freeze up because they’re afraid of what you did really happening?”

“Then they shouldn’t be out there at all,” Jason said. “Isn’t that the whole point of all this training? To make sure we go out as ready as we can be?”

“Does that justify what you did to them?”

“My powers are what they are, Humphrey. There’s no point trying to stab someone with a hammer. If I run around pretending I have your powers, then I will die, and die quickly. Maybe I should have waited for different essences, but you have no inkling of how lost I was when I first came here. I would have done anything for just a little bit of control over my circumstances, and now all I can do is live with the consequences.”

“You think that makes it alright to terrorise people?” Humphrey asked.

“I know what my powers are, Humphrey. Misery and death. Blood turned black with taint, your body dying around you while you're still alive. You think I want to use that on a person? Maybe someone wants to come after me, but they hear about that day. Maybe even see the recording. They decide against coming after to me because the price if failure is too high. Not some clean, quick kill, but a slow, lingering death. Every enemy that fears me too much to come after me is a person I don't have to do use those powers on.”

Humphrey shook his head.

“You’re good with words, Jason. Anything I say, you’ll have an answer for.”

He stood up.

“That’s why I’m done listening,” he said. “I watched what you did in that arena. I listened to you taunt them. I’ve never heard a sound so cruel, so inhuman as you laughing at the suffering of others.”

“Humphrey, that was just theatrics.”

“Was it?” Humphrey asked. He walked over to the door and opened it.

“I think you need to take a look inside yourself, Jason. To find out where that was coming from.”

Chapter 75:

Progress

“So,” Clive asked, “the original sanguine horror came from the full creation process? The sacrifice chamber, the alchemy pit, the whole thing?”

As he talked, he enthusiastically gesticulated with a fork, a piece of fried sausage skewered onto the end.

“The whole thing,” Farrah said.

The large suite shared by Farrah, Gary and Rufus included a space with a large dining table. The three of them, plus Jason and Clive, were eating the breakfast Jason had brought upstairs from the inn’s kitchen. Gary was excavating the small hill of sausage, egg and fried vegetables on his own huge plate while Jason and Rufus ate quietly. Farrah and Clive were caught up talking, having barely picked at their food.

“I’d love to see that chamber,” Clive said.

“I’m not going to stop you,” Farrah said, “but it’s way out in the desert, so I’m not going to take you there, either.”

“And the awakening stone came from the horror itself?” Clive asked. “Produced by your looting ability, Jason?”

“That’s right,” Jason said. “You keep waving that sausage around and it’s going to end up on the other side of the room.”

“What?” Clive said, then looked at his fork as if surprised to find it there. He bit off the piece of sausage.

“What I find interesting” Farrah said, “is that a summoned familiar is created through completely different means than the sanguine horror we killed. Yet, that’s what Jason summoned.”

“A good thing they’re different,” Rufus said. “We wouldn’t want a sanguine horror roaming around at full strength.”

“Well,” Clive said, “it is possible that if Jason ever reached diamond rank, his familiar would attain the full strength of a sanguine horror. Of course, it would still be under his control, thus would be unlikely to scour all life from the planet.”

“I actually think I figured out what they wanted the horror for,” Farrah said.

“And you’re only telling us now?” Rufus asked.

“Well, I’ve been going over that book from the sacrifice chamber,” Farrah said. “As it turns out, you can get a non-summoned sanguine horror as a familiar. First, you have to make the thing, which they did. Or we did, whatever, but you start by making the thing, and

then you have to starve it. It starts at bronze rank, that's how it was when we fought it, but it goes down to iron rank if you leave it long enough."

"Can you do that with other monsters?" Jason asked.

"No," Farrah said. "The sanguine horror comes with the inherent ability to shift ranks, which normally means going up, but down is possible too."

"There are other monsters like that," Clive said. "They're all quite rare, though."

"Very," Farrah agreed. "So, once you have your sanguine horror, and you've starved it down to iron rank, you get the right essence and awakening stone and then hope you get a familiar bond essence ability. There are no guarantees, of course."

"Which essence and awakening stone are best?" Clive asked.

"For top reliability," Farrah said, "according to the book, a blood essence and an apocalypse stone are what you're looking for."

"That's exactly what I used," Jason said. "Why bother with all the big chamber and the sacrifices when you can just get one? Are the made ones better than the summoned ones? Do I have a defective familiar?"

"The actual sanguine horrors would be the same, in terms of abilities," Farrah said. "The difference would be the same as between any bonded familiar versus a summoned familiar."

"Which are?" Jason asked.

"Bonded familiars survive, even if the essence user dies," Clive said.

"A summoned familiar won't survive the death of the summoner," Farrah agreed. It also can disappear into the summoner's body, which bonded familiars can't."

"That's alright then," Jason said. "I'd hate having to carry Colin around in a bag or something."

"I still can't believe you named an apocalypse beast Colin," Rufus said.

"Well if you call your apocalypse beast Gorgos, the Enslaver of Worlds, then people are likely to start questioning your intentions," Jason said.

"That's actually a good point," Farrah said.

"I have to imagine reliability is the key factor that led them to make the sanguine horror themselves," Clive said. "When going for a bonded familiar instead of a summoned one, things are much more likely to go your way, if you prepare accordingly. So long as you have the creature on hand and use the right essence and stone combination, that is as close as you'll come to a guaranteed result with any awakening stone. Look at your friend Humphrey and his dragon. I guarantee the Geller's didn't leave anything to chance."

Jason scowled.

“They had a little bit of a tiff,” Farrah said.

“It wasn’t a tiff,” Jason said. “It was a philosophical disagreement.”

“Of course it was, sweetie.”

“Actually, there’s something I’ve been wondering about,” Jason said. “The sanguine horror we fought was vulnerable to salt. I checked, and my familiar is the same. So how would it kill all life in the ocean, which is full of salt?”

“Those vulnerabilities would eventually go away,” Farrah said. “That book has a lot of details about sanguine horrors. It starts off a bronze rank, which is where we fought it, and has some extreme vulnerabilities at that stage. Fire and salt are the big ones, along with esoteric ones that only essence abilities can produce. But those vulnerabilities go away as it grows stronger. Salt stops being an issue once reaches gold rank, after which it can go swimming all it likes.”

“I’d love to get a look at that book,” Clive said.

“Why didn’t Anisa take it?” Rufus asked. “She was collecting everything.”

“From the manor,” Farrah said. “We weren’t in the manor when we found it, so she had no right to it.”

“I’m not sure she would agree,” Gary said. His first contribution to the discussion coincidentally came right after his huge plate was emptied.

“He’s right,” Rufus said. “There’s no way she would have quietly let you take it.”

“That’s why I didn’t tell her,” Farrah said.

“Good call,” Jason said. “I still think there was something shady going on with that woman.”

“Didn’t you say she was a priestess of Purity?” Clive asked.

“Exactly,” Jason said.

“It’s been a while since we’ve all been here together,” Rufus said as they stood in the yard behind Jory’s clinic. There was less space than in the past, with construction materials taking up much of the room. Jory had purchased the large building next to the clinic, and renovations were in full swing.

Like Jason, Rufus Gary and Farrah had all been carrying out contracts. Some they did together, others alone as they each pursued other projects. Rufus had preparations for his academy's joint venture with the Gellers, while Farrah had been undertaking work for the Magic Society. Gary had been exploring the use of local materials in crafting weapons and armour. He sold the work he was satisfied with at the trade hall, with no small

success. The rune tortoise shield he made with Farrah had auctioned well, getting him a lot of attention.

They started with weights training, which left Jason feeling inadequate. Rufus was bad enough, with the strength of a late-stage bronze ranker, but Farrah and Gary were worse. Farrah had a strength power from her earth essence and Gary's race were all physically powerful. They were lifting half-ton barbells in each hand, while at least Rufus had the decency to struggle with one. By comparison, Jason was an out-of-shape guy in his first week at the gym.

The others stopped to cool down as Jason headed inside, using his power to help the waiting patients. With clinic hours reduced by the expansion and Jason often away on contracts, the clinic was more busy than ever.

"Haven't seen those friends of yours in a while," Jason said to Jory. "The fighter didn't get hurt too badly, did she?"

They had just healed up a pit fighter who had been cursed by an opponent.

"No, she's out of the pit fighting game again," Jory said. "Haven't seen them in a while."

Back outside, Rufus was waiting for Jason.

"Time to see if those skills have atrophied," Rufus said.

"Actually," Jason said, "I've been working on something. My martial art, The Way of the Reaper..."

"What's wrong?" Rufus asked.

"Just saying it out loud makes me realise how over the top that name is. Where did you say that skill book came from?"

"I didn't say," Rufus said.

"Not like it matters," Jason said. "I'm a kung-fu wizard of darkness and blood. The good ship Chuunibyou has well and truly set sail."

"Were you approaching some kind of point?" Rufus asked, "or were you just going to stand there and spout nonsense?"

"He's done it before," Gary said, prompting a hurt look from Jason.

"He's done it a lot," Farrah added.

"Farrah, you too?" Jason asked.

"You were saying something about your martial art?" Rufus asked impatiently.

"Right, yes," Jason said. "So, my martial art has five forms. Different approaches, different situations. At first, I thought it was about choosing the right form for the right enemy. Then I spent a lot of time fighting people in the mirage arena."

"I heard about that," Rufus said. "Danielle said she had a recording to show me. I heard you were challenging all comers for most of a week. What did you learn in that time?"

"That the Gellers really teach their kids how to fight," Jason said. "I lost a lot of times."

"What else?" Rufus asked.

"Only using a fifth of your martial arts is like... only using a fifth of your martial arts. The forms aren't just five mini martial arts bundled into a skill book anthology. It was only when I started mixing things up that I realised the key to the whole thing."

"Which is?" Rufus asked.

"The real trick to the style is understanding how and when to move between forms. A well-timed, well-executed change in approach can clinch a victory."

Rufus took up a fighting stance.

"Show me."

Rufus was faster and stronger, with more skill and experience. In all their time training, Jason had never landed more than a glancing blow. Not only did this latest sparring session follow the same pattern, but Jason was performing worse than he had since the early days. Farrah and Gary were watching from the side, using piles of bricks as furniture.

"I'm not impressed," Rufus said after knocking Jason into the dirt again. "You're full of openings, more than when you first used the book. I think your attempts to change things up are making you lose what the book gave you in the first place."

Jason picked himself up from the dirt, body aching from the punishing lesson. He brushed himself down and resumed a fighting stance.

"Prove it," he said.

Spectating from the side, Gary chortled.

"It's on now," he said.

Jason's clear eyes locked on Rufus, who shook his head.

"Some people need the truth beaten into them," he said.

He came at Jason, hard and fast. Jason floundered back, narrowly avoiding a clean hit while almost tripping over his own feet. Rufus held the momentum ruthlessly, pushing Jason into a corner both figuratively and literally. Jason stumbled as a finishing blow came ramming at him, but then his body shifted. Rufus's blow hit nothing but air as Jason shunted into his body, pushing Rufus off-balance. Jason's elbow crashed into the side of Rufus' head, ringing it like a bell.

Rufus staggered and Jason pressed, but suddenly Rufus was moving twice as fast and a fist slammed into Jason's gut, doubling him over and lifting him right off his feet. An elbow was crashing down on the back of Jason's head, but Rufus stopped it before he smashed open Jason's skull. Jason collapsed to the ground anyway.

"Good," Rufus said, stepping back.

"Doesn't..."

Jason barely got a hoarse word out before a coughing fit sent blood speckling into the dirt. He pulled a healing potion from his inventory and tipped it down his throat.

"I think you might have gone a bit hard, there, Rufus," Gary said.

"He did well," Rufus said. "Made me use my full strength for a moment. It was good."

"Doesn't feel good," Jason croaked.

"On your feet," Rufus said coldly.

"Come on, Rufus," Farrah said. "You hit him so hard he had to drink a potion."

"Which he did," Rufus said. "So now he can get up."

Rufus walked over to where Jason was still laying in the dirt.

"This is where he gets to choose," Rufus says. "Is he going to be adequate, or is he going to be great? Stand up or lay down. What's it going to be, Jason?"

Jason pushed himself up and onto his feet.

"You know," he said, "Instructor Rufus is kind of a prick. Haven't you heard of positive reinforcement?"

"All those openings you were showing," Rufus said. "They're a trap."

"Well, some of them are traps," Jason said. "It took you a while to go after the right one."

"Only once you close all those real openings will you have made the style your own," Rufus said.

"No," Jason said. "Once I transform every opening into a trap, *then* I've made it my own."

Rufus grinned.

"I like the ambition. You have a lot of work to do."

Chapter 76: Preparations

"Mr Asano," Gilbert greeted, "always such a pleasure."

"Morning, Bert. Your message said you found something for me?"

"Ah, yes," Gilbert said, looking reluctant. "Loath as I am to refer you to my brother, he does have something that meets your specifications quite neatly. Of course, I could offer you something adequate myself, but adequate isn't the Gilbert's Resilient Attire for the Discerning Gentleman way."

Gilbert held out an envelope for Jason to take.

"Thanks, Bert. Good looking out, mate."

Filbert's Fine Leather Emporium was located in one of the other arcades within the trade hall complex, requiring Jason to pass through the main hall. He passed by Jory's stall along the way, although Jory himself was still overseeing renovations. Instead, it was being run by Jory's assistant, Janice.

"Hello, Mr Asano."

"Hello, Janice. I don't suppose you have any crystal wash back there?"

"Now, Mr Asano, you know what Mr Tillman said. We have to keep some for the other customers."

"Janice," Jason said, voice buttery smooth. "Can't you just free up just a few little bottles? It can be our little secret."

"Mr Asano, Mr Tillman only produces four crates a week, and after you were so generous with the construction funding he lets you take two of them. We keep having to turn people away because we've run out. He'll be stepping up production once his new workshop is up and running."

Jason shook his head sadly.

"You're killing me, Janice. If I don't get that crystal wash, I'm going to end up all dirty. You don't want to be responsible for turning me into a dirty man, do you, Janice?"

Her eyes ran Jason up and down.

"I could live with it," she said.

"Janice!" Jason said, voice filled with admonishment. "I've never heard the like! I think I'd better go."

He moved on, Janice seeing him off with a coquettish wave.

"What has gotten into that girl?"

Moving through the main hall, he was stopped by some people he didn't know. It was a pair of young women with iron rank auras.

"Excuse me," one of them said. "Are you the guy with the evil powers?"

Jason winced. Hannah Adeah was the archer from Rick Geller's team, who Jason had fought in the mirage arena. She had apparently taken upon herself to distribute the recording of their fight, and Jason had been getting variations on the question for a week. Almost every time he visited the jobs hall or the trade hall, someone would approach him about it.

"No," he said, wearily. "I don't have evil powers."

"You're not the guy from the recording?" the other asked.

"I am the person in the recording, but my powers aren't evil."

"Controlling monsters seems pretty evil."

"I don't control monsters!"

Shaking his head, Jason walked away as the pair talked behind him.

"I heard those leeches live inside his blood."

"I bet that's true. Kevin Wasserman has a lizard that lives inside in his skin."

"That makes so much sense. His skin is always clammy."

Jason sighed, grateful as their voices were lost in the noise of the trade hall crowd. He found his way into the right arcade and entered Filbert's Fine Leather Emporium.

"Hello, sir, and welcome to Filbert's Fine Leather Emporium. Which is to say, we are an emporium of leather goods, not an emporium made of leather. Just a little joke we like to say around here. I am the proprietor, Filbert, but you may call me Bert."

"G'day, Bert."

Filbert, like the other Berts, was thick in the middle and thin on top. He wore a waistcoat and jacket, more snug than most local fashion and definitely too hot for the climate. Jason handed over the envelope. Filbert opened it up and read the contents with a frown.

"I won't hold it against you, sir, that you chose to offer my brother your custom. Fortunately for you, Gilbert has acknowledged the superiority of my wares. You are looking for some specialised desert boots?"

"That's right," Jason said. "I have a contract starting tomorrow involving desert travel. I want something that will work well in sand."

"Well, if Gilbert sent you to me, rather than selling you his usual tat, then you must be a gentleman of capability and means. He has suggested something he knows one of my fine craftspeople developed."

Filbert sent off a staff member hovering quietly to fetch something from the storage room in the back.

“While sweet Julio fetches the boots,” Filbert said, “is there anything else I can interest you in?”

The store was laid out with lots of open space, the products displayed on wall racks. It was mostly shoes and accessories like bags and belts. Jason’s eye was drawn to a row of bags that looked like simple leather sacks. He reached out and touched one.

Item: [Dimensional Bag] (iron rank, rare)

A bag that contains a dimensional storage space (container, bag).

- Effect: Can be used to store items in an extra-dimensional void.
- Effect: Can be to fill a bag slot, increasing inventory space by eight.

“Bag slot?”

Help: Bag Slots

- Bag slots can use dimensional bags to expand inventory size. Increase is based on rank of bag. At iron rank, one bag slot is available and can hold only iron-rank bags.

Jason opened his inventory, seeing five new squares in the corner. The first square was glowing, while the others were greyed out.

“Dimensional bags,” Filbert said. “Crafted right here, in the workshop from mirage hound leather. A common enough monster in the desert, but quite tricky to catch. Not so much once they’ve been around long enough to turn aggressive, but the leather has degraded by then, becoming sadly useless.”

“You hire adventurers to hunt them for you?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Filbert said, “but it’s tricky work, and they appear out in the dunes. Hiring someone with the skills to both hunt them and harvest the pelt requires incentive. Thus, I can only offer them at a premium price.”

“I’ll take one,” Jason said.

“Capability and means,” Filbert said. “My fine customers are usually possessed of one or the other, but just between you and I, sir, all my favourite customers have both.”

“I imagine they do,” Jason said wryly.

The store assistant, Julio, brought out a large, single oversized leather boot. Filbert took the large boot from Julio and from inside pulled a box made of stiff, woven reeds, dyed black.

“Novelty shape dimensional bag,” Filbert said, resting a hand on the boot-shaped magical bag. He opened the box and took out a pair of boots that were a different thing altogether. Matte black, with sleek lines, sides embedded with a mesh of black shards.

“I rather like these particular boots,” Gilbert said. “If you’re looking to spend time in the dunes, you won’t find anything close to this quality anywhere close to this price point. I should warn you, however, that it has been the more skilled clientele who enjoy the most success with this design. The ordinary adventurer would be better served by a more... basic product.”

“That’s some fine salesmanship, Bert,” Jason said as he looked the boots over. “Who wants to think of themselves as an ordinary adventurer? It’s a profession for those looking to be extraordinary.”

“Sir, I can assure you, I stand behind my products.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” Jason said. “I’ve found your brothers to be upright in all their dealings. I was actually complimenting you. I appreciate someone who wields their words with purpose and care.”

“I’m glad to hear it, sir. Although, as upright dealings go, it seems you haven’t met my brother Hubert.”

"Haven't had the pleasure, no," Jason said, taking the boots from Filbert's hands.

Item: [Sand-Cutter Boots] (iron rank, rare)

Boots incorporating the chitin of a sand-cutter, inheriting some of its power (apparel, boots).

- Effect: Improved ability to walk on sand.
- Effect: Increased jump height and distance.
- Effect: Enhanced kick attack. Highly effective against enemies with strong earth affinity.

“What’s a sand-cutter?” Jason asked.

"Ah, you have a good eye, sir. Are you familiar with the grasshopper and the mantis?"

“I am,” Jason said.

"Well, the sand-cutter is about halfway between, except it's four-feet long and lives in the desert."

"That sounds horrifying," Jason said.

"They're actually quite good at hunting mirage hounds," Filbert said. "Shame you can't train them."

Filbert rubbed a hand over his mouth, thoughtfully.

"You know," he said, "I did just hear about an adventurer that can control monsters. I wonder if I could get into contact with him."

"That's an unfounded rumour," Jason said darkly.

Filbert, sensitive to the mood of the customer, returned the boots to the box.

"I imagine you'd know, sir, being the capable adventurer. So it was just the boots and the dimensional bag?"

"Thank you, Bert."

"The first green pill will change your aura," Belinda said. "Don't use any mana or they'll be able to sense your real aura through the fake one. I don't have to tell you how fast they'll be on someone with two auras. Once you've got the goods, get to the change point where I'll be waiting."

"I know all this," Sophie said. "We've been over it many times."

"Would you rather be bored from hearing it too much, or caught from hearing it too little?"

Sophie let out a sigh.

"Right, yes. No using mana."

"At the change point," Belinda continued, "I'll give you the blue pill, which will purge the aura of the first green pill. That will take a minute to completely go through your system, during which time you change outfits. Then I give you the second green pill for another false aura. You leave the goods behind and catch the loop line to Marina South."

"I don't like leaving you behind," Sophie said.

"I have to clear the goods of anything they've done to track them," Belinda said. "The change point and the contingency point are the only places I have shielded from whatever they might be using."

"No one knows what we're after," Sophie said. "How would they know what to tag?"

"Ventress has been pushing people hard," Belinda said. "We don't know if she's compromised any of the people I sourced our assets from. If she's figured out the target, or even narrowed it down, she may have warned the potential targets. Even if she hasn't,

you know the kind of people we've been stealing from. They probably tagged their valuables themselves."

Sophie shook her head.

"I hate this," she said. "I'm amazed we haven't been caught already."

"Thank the Adventure Society," Belinda said. "Because you aren't even iron rank, they're refusing to let anyone higher than iron go after you. So the only bronze-rankers you'll have to deal with are any that decide to chase you in the moment. That's why you don't want to get caught swapping your aura mask."

"And if a silver comes after me?"

"I can't imagine a silver who would deign to bother with you. They don't want to be seen doing iron-rank work. But that's why the disguise isn't magical; it'll hold up under magical scrutiny. So will the fake aura, so long as you don't use any mana."

"Are you sure about those pills?" Sophie asked. "The guy sells low-quality potions to poor people in Old City. Every other alchemist I've heard of rakes in money from rich people on the Island."

"He knows what he's doing," Belinda said. "And just as importantly, doesn't know what we're doing. He doesn't ask questions, because he's sweet on me."

"How sweet will he be when Ventress sends Darnell to break his elbows?" Sophie asked.

"She can't," Belinda said. "He's in the Alchemy Association and the Adventure Society."

"And you?"

"What about me?" Belinda asked.

"Are you sweet on him, Lindy? Is your judgement compromised?"

"My judgement has gotten us this far," Belinda said, "and I'm hardly the one with the questionable taste in men. Could you pick one guy who wasn't a con man or some kind of swindler?"

"They're more fun."

"Three of your lovers tried to sell you to Cole Silva. That would inspire most people to examine their taste in men, but you pick up every lying, scheming weasel that stumbles into view."

"Not every one," Sophie said. "And they weren't lovers; they were just a bit of fun. And things didn't exactly work out for them, did it?"

"The point is that you need to raise your standards. We aren't in a great place to be socialising right now, but if you are going to pick a guy, pick a good one."

“Then find me a good guy who’s also lying, scheming weasel,” Sophie said.

Belinda groaned.

“I don’t think there is anyone like that,” Belinda said. “He’d have to be a crazy person.”

She pulled out a pocket watch to check the time, then put on her game face.

“Four minutes,” she said. “Time to go.”

Chapter 77: Group Cohesion

Jason walked through the Adventure Society campus with a recording crystal floating over his head.

“...looks a lot like a university campus,” he continued narrating. “It’s more about child soldiers than education, though. Not super-young; more America than Sierra Leone. Late-mid teens.”

The marshalling yard came into sight, where a number of young adventurers were loosely gathered.

“As you can see, late teens. The big one with the bird on his shoulder is my friend Humphrey, who I’ve mentioned before. We had bit of a fight last week, and we haven’t talked much since, so things are still a little tense.”

Jason saw Humphrey’s face light up with a smile, following his gaze to where an extremely pretty young woman was approaching him with a wave.

“That girl walking up to him is Gabrielle. She’s a priestess in training, with the god of knowledge. Goddess, whatever. Deities are gender fluid, as it turns out. Heard that from the goddess of knowledge herself; direct quote. Oh yeah, I found religion, which is kind of a big deal. I didn’t join, but I found it. It seems fine, just not for me, really but who knows? Maybe there’s a god of delicious sandwiches. If God helps those who help themselves, then the god of sandwiches might offer a two-for-one deal. I might check that out.”

Jason took a pocket watch from his inventory, checked the time and then turned away from the marshalling yard.

“Still got time to check if that bloke with the juice stall is on campus today. An interesting fact about the goddess of knowledge is that she knows everything that anyone in this world knows, including me. Which means she knows a bunch of Mario Kart shortcuts, which is kind of awesome.”

Jason spotted a cart stall set up on the main promenade. The proprietor had set up an awning for shade, with a folding table under which were boxes of fruit and large paper cups.

“There he is. Nice.”

Jason joined the short queue, soon reaching the front.

“Blasphemer,” the man running the stall casually greeted him. “Gods haven’t struck you down, yet?”

He was a runic, with the usual dark skin marked by faintly glowing runes.

“Not yet, sorry Arash.”

They had first met right before Jason saw his first god. Arash hadn't been happy with Jason's lack of reverence, but that wasn't enough to make him turn away a customer.

“What do you have for me today?” Jason asked.

“I just got in the first gem berries of the season,” Arash said. “I can do you a blend with blood-wing cherries over ice I think you'll like.”

“Sounds refreshing,” Jason said. “I'm heading into the desert, today, so rack me up a half-dozen.”

“Perhaps the goddess of earth will drown you in sand,” Arash said optimistically.

“I guess all you can do is pray,” Jason said.

Arash tapped his finger on a plate fixed into the table in front of him, which lit up with a glowing magic circle. He started tossing fruit into the air, which stopped over the magic circle as if caught by an invisible hand. From crates under the table, he threw out berries, cherries and a few other fruits, as well as ice from a magical freezer box. Each fruit he threw up floated in a slow circuit over the magic circle.

Arash placed six large, paper cups on the table, in the circle under the floating fruit. He took out a pair of crystal rods the size of knitting needles and started waving them about with practised ease. They didn't touch the fruit, which nonetheless reacted to their waving like an orchestra to a conductor. Fruit peeled itself, pureeing in the air as berries, cherries and ice were crushed. None of the resulting slurry splashed away or onto the table. At the direction of Arash's needles, it separated into six portions and slid into the cups.

Putting down the two rods, Arash added a paper straw to each cup. Jason paid in lesser spirit coins, then took an experimental sip, giving it a solid thumbs-up.

“Oh, that's a winner,” Jason said. He placed the other cups in his inventory, keeping one to drink immediately.

“What's with the recording crystal?” Arash asked, looking at the object floating over Jason's head.

“I'm making a record of what my life is like here,” Jason said. “Something to show the family if I ever get home. Now they get to see you making a delicious beverage.”

“I don't think it'll be that exciting,” Arash said.

“You might be surprised,” Jason said.

“Where is home?” Arash asked.

“Further away than even the gods can reach.”

“Get away from my stall, blasphemer.”

Jason chuckled.

“Will you be here all day?” Jason asked. “I could see myself picking up another round when I get back from the desert.”

“I’ll be at the Magic Society in the afternoon. You just be careful out there.”

“No worries, mate.”

Jason stowed the crystal away as he wandered back in the direction of the marshalling yard. There were benches around the side and he sat alone, looking over the assembled adventurers. After months of observation training with Farrah, Jason quickly took everything in. Who was alone, who was in a group; what their body language said about group dynamics. What equipment did they have? It was hard to tell who was under-equipped for a journey into the desert, and who had a storage space like Jason.

Farrah had drilled Jason to quickly and thoroughly recognise and catalogue such details. They would watch people in places around the city; Outside Jory’s clinic, the Adventure Society campus, the concert hall. In addition to the practical use of observation skills, exercising the mind also exercised the spirit attribute. It was just as important as working on the power attribute by weightlifting.

Humphrey glanced over at Jason with a complicated expression before turning back to his conversation with Gabrielle and another young woman. Jason gave him an awkward smile back.

“Don’t tell me the honeymoon is over?” a sneering voice came in Jason’s direction. Jason had spotted Thadwick Mercer and his offsiders, not paying him any attention until Thadwick loudly approached Jason.

“Not on the outs with Geller, are you?” Thadwick asked. “I thought you were friends?”

“It hurt his feelings that I’ve been spending so much time with your sister. Do say hello to Cassandra for me.”

Thadwick turned red with fury, pointing a finger in Jason’s face.

“Stay away from my sister, you jumped-up commoner trash!”

Jason glanced at the two flanking Thadwick, who looked more embarrassed than supportive. From what Humphrey had told him, they were both stuck under Thadwick due to their families.

Thadwick’s Mercer family was very powerful in Greenstone. This was only highlighted when the Duke of Greenstone’s brother, Thadwick’s father, married into it. The power of the Mercer family placed it above numerous others, especially those without aristocratic title.

According to Humphrey, both of Thadwick's lackeys were positioned there to help their family interests, rather than any actual regard or friendship. Rufus considered this a shame, as he had evaluated them both highly during their field assessment. They had both passed where Thadwick and Humphrey failed.

Jason was about to say something else when he spotted Vincent Trenslow coming out of the nearby administration building. Paying no more attention to Thadwick, Jason got up and joined the others in converging on the Adventure Society official.

The group was ten altogether, including Jason himself. He knew Humphrey, Gabrielle and, sadly, Thadwick. He recognised Thadwick's offsidiers, although he hadn't spoken with them at all. The others he didn't know, including the woman Humphrey and Gabrielle had been talking to. She looked a little older than the others, maybe eighteen or nineteen.

"Everyone listen up," Vincent told them. "Your task today is to head out to spirit coin farm Geller-Seven. There you will meet with a bronze rank adventurer and assist him in escorting a shipment of spirit coins back to the city."

"Who's in charge?" Thadwick called out.

"The bronze-ranker who you're going to meet," Vincent said irritably.

"If they'll only be with us for the journey back," Thadwick said. "What about on the way there? I think I'm the clear choice for leader. My team is the largest group here."

"That's only three people out of ten, you nonce," a woman said. Jason didn't know her at all, but she immediately made a favourable impression.

"It's still the largest," Thadwick said. "And, of course, you all know who my family is."

Some of the people looked awkward, others disdainful. Jason chuckled quietly to himself, wondering if Thadwick should be the basis of a drinking game. One of the Thadwick's offsidiers put a hand over his own face while the other winced, looking at his feet.

"Contrary to what you may think," Vincent said, "Young Master Mercer is quite right." That drew everyone's attention back to Vincent.

"There may be minimal risk on the outward leg of your trip, but there is always a chance something goes wrong. If you encounter a bronze-rank monster, then you will need to make a coordinated response. A leader can direct you to fight as a team, instead of as individuals.

"Which means doing what I say," Thadwick said with smug satisfaction.

Jason snorted a laugh at Thadwick setting the self-destruct on his own dignity.

"Actually," Vincent said, "that means doing what Young Mistress Geller says."

He put a hand on the shoulder of the woman Humphrey had been talking to that Jason didn't recognise.

"For those who haven't met her, this is Phoebe Geller. She will be the group leader until you reach the spirit coin farm."

"Why her?" Thadwick asked.

"Because she has done this before," Vincent said, "because she actually knows the way to the spirit coin farm, and finally, because she's the only two-star adventurer here. Which puts her a star and a half over you, Thadwick,"

Confusion crossed Thadwick's face.

"A star and a half?" Thadwick said. "You can't get half stars."

Jason burst out laughing, drawing Thadwick's ire.

"You find something funny?" Thadwick asked him.

Jason looked at Thadwick's face and cracked up all the harder.

"He saying," Jason chuckled, "that you're a half-star because you're not a legitimate adventurer."

Thadwick's face was a mix of anger and pride fuelled by a nagging sense of inadequacy.

"Do you know who my uncle is?" Thadwick asked.

"And drink," Jason said, sipping at his fruit beverage.

"What?" Thadwick asked.

"Of course I know who your uncle is," Jason said. "Everyone knows who your uncle is. That's the whole point. Thadwick Mercer never passed the Adventure Society assessment. The Duke of Greenstone's nephew did. I hate to break it to you, Thadwick Mercer, but the only part of your name anyone respects is the last part. You can't be the leader because no one trusts you to do anything. At all. The guys on your team? They have to carry you so hard that it's training. They're really good because they're compensating for your outlandish lack of competence."

He gestured at the gathered adventurers.

"This job means placing our lives in one another's hands. No one here is going to trust you with their life. They might not tell you that, Thadwick, because you're so petty, entitled and insecure that you'll hurt them or their families using your own family's egregious level of influence. Which is, to be clear, the only reason anyone, anywhere puts up with you for so much as a single moment."

As Jason's rant came to a close, most of the people looked on in shocked silence. Humphrey, having seen Jason's mouth run away from him before, was shaking his head.

“You aren’t doing a lot for group cohesion, Jason,” Humphrey said.

Jason looked over at Humphrey and absently nodded.

“Yeah, I uh... that one got away from me.”

“I don’t have to put up with this,” Thadwick snapped. “I’m leaving, and you will pay for this insult, Asano.”

Thadwick started storming off, then realised his lackeys hadn’t followed.

“Well?” asked them, turning back.

“We were assigned this contract,” one of them said.

“We’re refusing it,” Thadwick said.

“We... the Society doesn’t like it when you refuse an assigned contract,” the other lackey responded.

“Who cares? My uncle will put them in line.”

“And drink,” Jason said, finishing off his juice.

Thadwick marched off again. The pair of reluctant flunkeys looked at each other unhappily, then followed.

“Maybe it was good for group cohesion after all,” someone said. “Thadwick’s gone.”

“It wasn’t,” Phoebe Geller said. “Our only healer just walked off after him.”

A slew of unhappy gazes were turned on Jason, who winced.

“Sorry,” he said.

Chapter 78: Jason Has the Good Biscuits

The group, now reduced to seven, made their way through the desert sand. This was proper desert, with blistering sun scouring any life out of the rolling dunes. There were no landmarks, so Jason checked his map from time to time. It unveiled nothing but empty desert as they passed through it, but he saw they were travelling in a dead-straight line. Leading from the front, Phoebe Geller knew exactly where she was going.

Jason had prepared thoroughly for the trip, even though it was expected to only last the day. Aside from the juice he picked up, he had ample supplies of food and water. He could get what he needed from spirit coins, but he had once found himself in the desert, benefiting from Farrah having packed bottles of water.

His oasis bracelet protected him from the heat, and he had plenty of spare water quintessence to fuel it. He also had his new boots, which were already paying off. While others were trudging through the sand, the magic of his boots made every step light and easy.

He'd also brought along some combat items, as open desert was not an environment that played to his strengths. His belt had loops containing vials with various utility potions, along with the usual health and mana potions. The magic on the belt was designed to protect the vials from incidental damage. The belt also carried the scabbard for the sword Gary made on Jason's left hip, with his snake tooth dagger sheathed on the right.

He wore a bandolier diagonally across his chest, with nine throwing darts sheathed into it. Each dart had a small, corded grip, in different colours. Three had a black cord, three had dark orange, with the last three being green.

It quickly became clear which members of the group had joined Jason in making appropriate preparations. Humphrey, Phoebe and Gabrielle were easily chatting as if strolling through a garden. The other three struggled with the sand underfoot and the sun overhead. They repeatedly used spirit coins to replenish their reserves.

"This contract will cost us more coins than it gets us," one of them complained.

"Then you should have prepared," Phoebe said. "Look at how comfortable Jason is."

All eyes turned to Jason, sipping on an icy fruit drink.

One of the exhausted adventurers narrowed her eyes at Jason.

"Aren't you that guy with the evil powers?"

Jason shot a withering look at Phoebe, who gave him a wink and a cheeky smile in return.

Jason returned the drink to his inventory. One of his favourite things about the inventory power was that anything he took out was in the same state he put in. Food stayed fresh, drinks stayed cold. His food supply included bread straight from the oven that would stay warm and fresh until he took it out again.

One of the adventurers Jason didn't know suddenly called out.

"Everyone stop!"

"What is it?" Phoebe asked.

"There's something under the sand ahead of us," the adventurer called out.

There were many kinds of perception powers. Some saw through darkness, like Jason's ability, while others had superior aura perception, or could see magic. Common to the earth essence was a tremor-sense power, able to detect things in or on the ground over large distances.

"Jason," Phoebe said. "You cost us our healer, so you're the bait."

Jason nodded, walking ahead of the others as the starlight cloak formed around him. He kept a quick but measured pace, ready to react at any time.

"How close?" he called back.

"About a dozen metres in front of you."

Jason stopped, drawing one of the green-corded darts from his bandolier. It was a single-use magic item that would manifest a false aura on impact. He threw it into the ground, a dozen metres ahead of him, where it struck the sand.

Sand exploded into the air as a monster erupted from the ground. It looked like a giant, emaciated shark, but with shell instead of skin, spidery crustacean legs and huge pincers.

"A shab?"

It looked similar to the shabs Jason had encountered in the past, but at least triple the size. Instead of the red and purple colouration, it was sandy yellow. The creature skittered about, as if confused, then seemed to spot Jason and moved towards him. Jason walked toward the creature, in turn, as he drew another dart. This one had a black cord and he tossed it at the creature.

The dart bounced off its shell, the impact triggering the dart. Darkness burst out of the dart, shadows engulfing the creature in defiance of the glaring sun. It wasn't complete darkness, instead, a murky region of roiling shadow. Jason continued forward, casually walking into the dark mass as if he hadn't noticed it. The other adventurers looked on as Jason vanished into the shadows.

"What is that thing?" Humphrey asked.

"A sand shab," Phoebe said. "Bigger than the aquatic variety. Likes to drag victims under the sand instead of underwater."

"Should we help?" Gabrielle asked.

Alien shrieks of monstrous rage came from within the darkness.

"I wouldn't bother," Jason said, suddenly next to them.

Phoebe looked between Jason and the darkness into which he had vanished.

"Teleport?" she asked.

"Shadow teleport," Jason said.

"What shadow?"

Jason looked down and she followed his gaze to see he was standing in her own shadow.

"That's sneaky."

"The monster isn't dead," Gabrielle pointed out. Angry cries were still emerging from the patch of shadow, which was fading away. They could see the outline of the monster within.

"The darkness fades over time," Jason said. "It'll last about thirty seconds, total."

He casually restocked his bandolier darts from his inventory. In his other hand was his dagger, blade slick with yellow ichor. He took out a rag and started wiping it clean.

"What about the monster?" Gabriele asked.

"It'll last about fifty seconds, total" Jason said. "That's a guess, since I'm going to try a new ability."

The last vestiges of the magic shadow faded, the shab scrambling around in confusion. It spotted the adventurers and headed in their direction.

"Uh, Jason?" Humphrey said.

"Yes, Humphrey?"

"It's coming this way."

"Shabs aren't very quick," Jason said. "I just need those afflictions to stack up a little more."

He finished cleaning his dagger, returning it to its sheath. He glanced over at the approaching shab. It wasn't built for forward movement, skittering side to side as it came. He raised an arm in its direction, chanting out a spell.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

Black spread out across the shell of the monster as if it were passing into shadow. It's hectic skittering slowed to an uneasy stagger. When one of its shell-encrusted legs

crumbled like dry, stale bread, it collapsed to the ground. More of its shell broke apart to reveal blackened, withered flesh. It didn't get back up.

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: 30 seconds.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (01%).

 - Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.
-

"Uh, Jason?" Humphrey asked.

"Yes, Humphrey?"

"What just happened to that monster?"

"Massive necrosis," Jason said.

"I'm not sure what that means."

"Well," Jason said, "you know what happens to a body when it dies? A regular body, I mean. Not a monster body."

"I'm roughly familiar," Humphrey said.

"I convinced its body to do that," Jason said. "Just very quickly, and while it was still alive."

"Uh, Jason?"

"Yes, Humphrey?"

"Are you that guy with the evil powers?"

"I hope you get eaten by a shab."

The seven adventurers continued their trek through the desert. The three Jason didn't know were bringing up the rear, sweat pouring out of them as they were still forced to replenish themselves with spirit coins. Phoebe and Gabrielle were together, glancing over at Jason and Humphrey talking loudly.

"...how did so many people even see it?" Jason complained. "It was just that archer distributing copies, right."

"Actually, my mother started to help," Humphrey said. "Our people have a lot of family pride, which is good, but she doesn't want us veering into... let's call it Thadwick territory."

“So she started showing people a recording of some random guy no one has heard of going one-versus-five with a bunch of your family members?”

“That’s the basic idea, yes.”

“She could have asked,” Jason said.

“I thought the whole point was to intimidate people.”

“Yeah, well that was my chuuni tendencies getting away from me. Now everyone thinks I control monsters. How would I not be the strongest iron-ranker in greenstone if I could control hundreds of trap weavers?”

“What are chuuni tendencies?” Humphrey asked.

“My powers aren't evil,” Jason said. “You breathe fire. Burning to death isn't exactly a fun way to go.”

“You do have a leech colony living inside you.”

“Lots of people have summoned familiars!”

Humphrey’s familiar, Stash, was happily walking along next to Humphrey’s feet. He barked happily, like a dog, which was a little odd given that he was currently a lizard.

“Who’s a good boy,” Jason said, prompting Stash to transform into a small bird and fluttered up onto Jason’s shoulder. Jason took a biscuit from his inventory and held it up for the bird, who turned into a puppy and snuffled it out of Jason’s hand. Jason used the empty hand to stop the enthusiastic puppy from falling down.

“You spoil him,” Humphrey said.

“He deserves it.”

Stash yapped his agreement, spilling crumbs.

From where she was walking beside Phoebe, Gabrielle looked on unhappily.

“Why does he like Jason more than me?” she asked.

“Which one?” Phoebe asked. “Humphrey or Stash?”

That earned her a sharp elbow. As Gabrielle has the might essence, it sent Phoebe reeling.

“Sorry,” Gabrielle said with a wince.

Phoebe regained her balance, shaking her head.

“Maybe you should carry biscuits around,” Phoebe suggested, nodding at Jason feeding the puppy another one.

“Biscuits for who?” Gabrielle asked. “Humphrey or Stash?”

Phoebe laughed.

“I actually did try that,” Gabrielle confessed. “I think Jason has better biscuits than me. He makes them himself.”

"I didn't think you knew Jason that well," Phoebe said.

"The goddess told me."

"The goddess told you he makes his own biscuits?"

"She seems strangely interested in him."

"Oh?"

"I saw them together, briefly. It was a weird atmosphere."

"You don't suppose she's, you know, *interested* interested?" Phoebe asked.

"Dear gods, no," Gabrielle laughed. "I think it's because he's an outworlder. He doesn't act the way other people do. She said he's dangerous."

"How can that guy be dangerous to a goddess?"

"Not to her," Gabrielle said. "To me. She thinks he's a threat to impressionable young minds."

"She'd know, I guess," Phoebe said.

Suddenly, the adventurer with the tremor-sense called out in alarm.

"Everyone stop!"

"What is it?" Phoebe asked.

"There's something around us. All around us."

Everyone went on alert, scanning the empty desert terrain.

"Is it in the sand?" Humphrey asked.

"I think it *is* the sand."

Chapter 79: Sand Everywhere

Chaos erupted as the sand came to life all around them, surging like waves. From the empty desert, they were suddenly surrounded, the sand rising up to take a variety of crude forms. None were any larger than a person, but there were dozens of them, from crude torsos like half-melted snowmen to sharks swimming through the sand like it was water. The shapes were all poorly formed, without delicate features.

New Quest: [Elemental Ambush]

You have been surrounded by sand elementals. Defeat them before your team is overwhelmed.

- Objective: Defeat [Lesser Sand Elemental] attack.
 - Reward: Quintessence.
-

“Sand elementals!” Jason heard Phoebe shout over the sudden chaos. “Use powerful attacks to completely break up their forms or they’ll just recover!”

Jason released his aura as he felt others wash over him.

- You are in the area of an ally’s [Dragon Might] aura. Your [Power] and [Speed] attributes are increased.
 - You are in the area of an ally’s [Presence of the Master] aura. The effect of your essence abilities is increased.
-

He could easily sense Humphrey and Phoebe through their auras. Gabrielle and one of the other adventurers also projected auras, but they didn’t seem to affect him. Unfortunately, Jason’s own aura was unlikely to have a large impact on the fight.

Ability: [Hegemony] (Sin)

- Aura (holy, unholy)
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to afflictions, while enemies within the aura have their resistance to afflictions reduced. Enemy resistances are further reduced for each instance of [Sin] they are afflicted with.
-

He doubted creatures made of sand would be using any afflictions, and his own would certainly not affect them. For that reason, he drew the sword Gary had made for him instead of his dagger. By the time it cleared the scabbard, Humphrey was already in motion beside him.

Dragon scale armour shimmered into existence around Humphrey as an enormous, wing-shaped sword appeared in his hand. He swept it in a wide arc at the three elementals closest to himself and Jason. They exploded as the sword hit them, showering Humphrey and Jason in sand as the sword didn't even slow down.

"You good?" Humphrey asked Jason.

Jason's starlight cloak manifested around him.

"Do your thing, mate."

Humphrey nodded as dragon wings appeared on his back. They launched him into the air, beating to hold him aloft as he surveilled the team. Phoebe was fine, blasting huge chunks off elementals with explosive palm strikes. Gabrielle had conjured a huge iron staff that was twirling around her like she was putting on a show. Any elemental foolish enough to get close was torn apart by its powerful momentum.

Two of the other adventurers were holding their own, back-to-back against the elementals, while the last was alone and already struggling. Humphrey didn't know him before they teamed up, but seeing he was an elf, the man was almost certainly a spell caster. Close combat was likely to be the man's least-favourable circumstance, so Humphrey dived in immediately.

Humphrey's wings pushed up hard, sending him plunging into a dive bomb special attack. Hurling out of the sky, his feet smashed apart an elemental as he passed through it to land, the wings on his back vanishing as his sword lashed out.

The might essence was one of the most common essences to be found, yet also one of the most highly regarded. Even someone as privileged as Humphrey, who had his pick of essences, had chosen to use it. It was a simple essence, with simple abilities. Mighty strength, for example, was exactly what the name suggested. As the most common ability of the most popular common essence, it was the single most common essence ability in the entire world.

No one needed to have explained what made the might essence so popular, but anyone would think Humphrey was going out of his way to demonstrate. He swung his enormous sword with power and precision, as if it weighed almost nothing. Every elemental it touched blew up like a car in an Eighties action movie, showering the area with sand.

After clearing some space, Humphrey spared a glance for the beleaguered elf, who looked at him with gratitude.

“Keep them off me and I can take a bunch of them out,” the elf told him.

“Do what you need to do,” Humphrey said. “I’ve got you.”

In the meantime, Jason was dealing with elementals of his own. He lashed out with his sword, to minimal effect.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Lesser Sand Elemental].
 - [Lesser Sand Elemental] is immune to afflictions.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
-

Jason lashed out with quick light strikes, putting a special attack into each one. The blade barely finished making a cut before sand removed any trace, but that was never the goal. Each failed affliction triggered the effect of his sword, which grew more powerful with every strike.

-
- [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage. Highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

Every attack started blasting sand off the elementals, but was yet to leave a lasting impact. The sword might not deter the encroaching elementals, but he had an answer for that. He would keep one elemental to build up stacks with his sword; a sluggish, snowman-shaped one, too slow to pose a real threat. At others, he would lash out with kicks, not hitting the creatures, but slicing his foot past them. As he did, a razor-whip of black shards extended from his boot, cutting through the elemental and scattering it to the winds.

“I love these boots.”

Item: [Sand-Cutter Boots] (iron rank, rare)

Boots crafted with the chitin of a sand-cutter, inheriting some of its power. (apparel, boots).

- Effect: Improved ability to walk on sand.
 - Effect: Increased jump height and distance.
 - Effect: Enhanced kick attack. Highly effective against enemies with strong earth affinity.
-

It was taking time to accumulate power onto Jason's sword, but with dozens of elementals still swarming them, he was in no danger of running out. With every attack, the sword's power grew. Sand started blasting off the elementals as it landed, leaving noticeable gouges.

He became more aggressive, lashing out with his sword and his razor-whip boots. The sword kept getting stronger until it was carving a path through the elementals. By the time he fought his way over to Humphrey, Jason's sword had joined his boots in taking down elementals at a single blow.

Humphrey had set about keeping the elementals off the spell caster. By the time Jason reached them, the elf behind Humphrey had gathered a huge sphere of white and fire-orange magic over his head. Looking up at it with a wild grin, he started chanting.

"Fire and air, fuel and feast, come forth and devour, the vortex beast!"

"Hey, that rhymes," Jason said as they watched the orb drift slowly over their heads, drifting toward the largest mass of elementals. Heat and wind washed over them as it passed. Then they heard the elf behind them yell out.

"RUN!"

They turned to see the elf already following his own advice, sprinting away from his own spell at top speed. Jason and Humphrey glanced at one another and did the same. A few seconds later there was a cacophonous explosion behind them as a force wave blasted them off their feet.

Jason pushed himself up from where he sprawled in the sand, head ringing from the noise. All he could hear was a rushing sound, like the ocean. Kneeling in the sand he wavered, unsteadily. Humphrey tapped his arm and pointed forward where the elf had gotten back up and continued running. Jason nodded, and after a dizzy false start followed, picking up his sword from where he'd dropped it.

Jason staggered forward, an equally unsteady Humphrey at his side. They caught up to the elf who had stopped to avoid running into elementals from the other direction. Still unable to hear, Jason felt the air stirring, loose sand fluttering along the ground.

Looking back the way they had come, he saw a burning orb surrounded by a vortex of air, dragging things into it. Closer to the orb, the suction was clearly more powerful, sucking up the sand elementals as they struggled to escape. Those that were caught up passed through the orb, splattering out the back as gobbets of molten sand.

Humphrey tapped Jason on the shoulder again, gesturing the other way. Jason looked to see Phoebe and Gabrielle handling the elementals just fine by themselves. The adventurers fighting back-to-back were doing less well as elementals converging on them.

Jason took a healing potion from his belt, Humphrey doing the same from his own. They each thumbed the stoppers off their vials and draining the contents. Jason head cleared, the rushing noise in his ears replaced with actual sound.

Behind them, they could hear the suction of the vortex. Ahead of them was what sounded like muffled explosions as Phoebe blasted apart elementals with bare-handed special attacks. From Gabrielle's direction was a regular smacking sound as her iron staff burst open more elementals with raw strength.

"Your lady friend is kind of scary," Jason told Humphrey.

"Not the time, Jason," Humphrey said, wings appearing briefly as he used a special attack to leap away. He landed like a grenade near the pair of struggling adventurers, sweeping away elementals.

Jason took a couple of steps and used the leaping power of his boots to follow, arriving in the space Humphrey had just cleared.

"You have to make time for relationships," Jason said, his sword cutting through an elemental. "Time and communication."

The two adventurers they had come to support went from almost overwhelmed to completely unnecessary. Humphrey and Jason each took a side of the pair and moved around them, clearing out elementals like they were trimming a hedge.

Humphrey and Jason had very different fighting styles. Humphrey used strength and the weight of his heavy sword. Solid as a rock, his subtle but crucial footwork the foundation of his balance as he swung a sword heavier than he was. His sweeping strikes looked simple, but their power and precision were exacting.

Jason's style was more like an acrobatic dance. His sword was much smaller, smashing elementals apart not with power but with the considerable magic it had built up over the fight. The blade flickered in his hand, elementals scattering into clouds of sand on

contact. His feet moved just as fast, and not always on the ground. Launching into a spinning leap, his razor-whip boots each took down an elemental before he landed, his movement never stopping.

The vortex bomb was the tipping point of the battle, letting the group get a handle on the elementals' huge numbers. As the last one fell, the group came together, exhausted. They stood around, hands on knees, or lay down, ignoring the heat of the sand. Jason took out a fruit drink, slurping loudly to the envy of the others. Humphrey shook his head as identical paper cups appeared from his own void storage space.

"Gem berries?" Jason asked Humphrey, who nodded as he handed one of the large cups to Gabrielle. She gave him a dazzling smile before happily sipping at the juice drink.

Phoebe looked around the group with a weary grin. Only the elf and the two adventurers who fought together were injured, and nothing more than bruises. Sand elementals weren't very dangerous individually, at least not ones that small. It was their numbers that made them a threat.

"Now you know why we send such big teams when we go out into the dunes," Phoebe told the group.

"That's rough," Jason said unhappily, shifting uncomfortably on the spot. "That's really rough."

"We did warn you that we would be going into the desert," Phoebe told him.

"What?" Jason asked absently, putting away his drink and taking out a bottle of crystal wash.

"Oh, not that," he said, tipping the bottle into his pants. "I meant literally rough. I have sand everywhere."

Chapter 80: It's Not Work if You Love What You Do

After half a day of trudging through the desert, the group finally spotted the spirit coin farm. From the outside, all that could be seen was a high wall. It was still some distance off, but the group appreciated a landmark in the featureless ocean of sand.

"How exactly does a spirit coin farm work?" Jason asked. "Spirit coins don't grow on trees, do they?"

"You really don't know?" Mose asked.

Mose Cavendish was the elf who fired off the vortex bomb of fire and wind against the sand elementals. The fight had instilled a sense of camaraderie in the group, with Jason acquitting himself well enough to dispel the group's earlier dissatisfaction.

"Jason is from another world," Humphrey said. "You should get used to explaining things to him."

"Another world?"

"That's right," Jason said.

"To answer your question," Humphrey said, "spirit coins do not grow on trees."

"I guess that would be a spirit coin orchard," Jason said.

"Another world, as in a whole other world?" Mose asked.

"That's right," Jason said. "So where do spirit coins come from?"

"As in, not this world?" Mose asked.

"It's an alternate universe," Jason said.

"An alternate universe?"

"It's not that big a deal," Jason said.

"Not that big a deal?"

"I think you broke Mose," Humphrey said. "He's just repeating words, now."

"Am I ever going to hear about the spirit coins?" Jason asked.

"They make them out here in the farms," Humphrey said. "They have these special moulds that cause magic to crystallise. It's a delicate process, though. Changes in the ambient magic can ruin whole batches, which is why they have the farms out here. No activity, no life. Very stable ambient magic."

"There must be interesting ramifications of pumping more and more coins into the economy," Jason said.

"The Magic Society manages all of that," Humphrey explained. "It's the main source of their political power, and the reason it's important the Magic Society stays politically neutral."

"Like the Adventure Society," Jason said pointedly.

"Yes," Humphrey said. "It doesn't always work out that way."

Gabrielle wandered closer to join their conversation.

"Did you know that spirit coins are Greenstone's largest export?" she asked. "Most people think it's the green stone, because of the name, but it's actually spirit coins. Especially the lesser ones. The farms out here in the desert produce almost three percent of the lesser coins used worldwide."

"I did," Humphrey said. "Most of these farms are operated by my family or the Mercers. Under Magic Society regulation, of course."

"Of course," she said, lightly slapping her own head. "This coin farm is Geller-something, isn't it?"

"Geller-Seven," Humphrey said.

"How does that work, though?" Mose asked. "I mean, a whole other world?"

"Get it together, Mose," Jason said.

"Get it together? Your very existence fundamentally reshapes my understanding of reality."

"Try going through that while a bunch of people trying to eat you," Jason said.

"Is that some kind of metaphor?" Mose asked.

"No," Jason said. "No, it isn't. Why is so much of the spirit coin farming done in this region? Wouldn't it be easier to have more localised production?"

"It's because of the low magic," Gabrielle said. "Most areas in the world have too high a magical density to produce lesser coins. The smallest denomination they can manage is usually iron rank, or even bronze rank in highly magical areas."

"So why not just make iron coins the basic currency?" Jason asked.

"They're too valuable," Humphrey said. "The values of spirit coins aren't arbitrary. If a farm can produce a thousand lesser coins at a time, the same size farm could only produce 10 iron coins or one bronze coin."

"And higher-ranked coins aren't very useful for everyday life," Gabrielle said. "Almost all the magic devices in a home or business run on lesser coins. Lamps, showers. Higher-rank ones would burn them out."

"Some larger infrastructure works on more powerful coins. The loop line, for example."

“The conditions in which you can locate a spirit coin farm are hard to come across,” Gabrielle added. “Finding a low-magic area with the kind of stability you get out here in the desert is rare. Somewhere as liveable as the delta, so close to the desert here is perfect. Greenstone was founded because it was such a perfect place for low-end spirit coin farms.”

“Even then, there are no guarantees,” Humphrey said. “Volatile weather can affect the ambient magic enough to ruin whole batches. Same if a monster spawns in nearby, or some adventurers runs around using abilities. That’s why we won’t actually be allowed near the spirit coin farm itself. They’ll make us wait outside the walls.”

“How do they stop monster spawns?” Jason asked.

“They don’t,” Humphrey said. “If one appears too close to a farm, you just have to eat the loss.”

“So, how did you get here?” Mose asked. “Do you have some kind of ship that can cross between universes?”

“Still with this, Mose?” Jason asked. “A cannibal summoned me by accident.”

“Are you just making things up now?” Mose asked.

Jason stopped short, his whole body frozen. His face turned pale, visibly shaken.

“You got me, Mose,” Jason said. “I guess I always knew this day would come. This whole thing is an elaborate ruse. I’m actually a failed actor using an array of magical devices to fake being an adventurer from another world.”

He shook his wearily hanging head.

“Nothing for it now but to walk off into the desert, alone.”

“What is happening right now?” Mose asked. “I have no idea what’s going on.”

“Don’t worry about him, Mose,” Humphrey said. “Just remember that if you’re talking to Jason and you get confused, he’s probably up to something. If you’re talking to Jason and you’re not confused, then he’s *definitely* up to something.”

“Well that’s just hurtful,” Jason said.

The walls of the spirit coin farm were five metres tall, made from yellow desert stone. The gates were small, clearly not designed for a lot of traffic. Outside the gate was a fairly large area of tiled ground, scattered with desert sand. The sole feature of the tiled area was a gazebo, providing shade for adventurers to wait in.

It was around an hour after they arrived and Phoebe went alone through the gates that she came back. She had another person with her, and a trio of wagons running behind.

The wagons were the non-magical, heidel-drawn variety, and were longer, wider and definitely heavier than other wagons Jason had seen. They were all constructed from sturdy metal, to the point of looking like old-timey train cars. Each wagon took eight heidels just to move at a crawl. The narrow wheels looked like the exact wrong thing to take onto sand, and the wagons seemed generally useless for desert travel. They stopped in the middle of the tiled expanse and the adventurers left the gazebo for a closer look.

“You’re going to like this,” Humphrey said to Jason.

Each of the wagons had two people on it, who got off and moved around behind them. The back of the wagons folded down into a ramp, down each of which slid a vehicle. They looked a lot like the airboat Jason had ridden on with Clive, and Jason’s face lit up with glee.

“Some kind of sand boat?” he asked.

“We call them sand skimmers,” Humphrey said. “They operate on magic, obviously, so they have to be wagoned out of the farm before charging them up.”

“Don’t want any loose magic in your spirit coin farm?” Jason guessed.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said.

As they drew closer, the people unloading the wagons paused to greet ‘Young Master Humphrey.’ Jason opened his mouth to start of about disproportionate class systems, then stopped himself, shaking his head in self-recrimination.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked him.

“It’s nothing,” Jason said.

“Really?” Humphrey asked. “Since when do you hold back an opinion?”

“Humphrey, opening my mouth wide enough to fit my foot in it already cost us a healer. It’s past time I learned to keep it shut.”

“It wouldn’t be you if you didn’t go into a rant about something,” Humphrey said. “Just let it out.”

Jason looked at Humphrey, warily.

“Look, Jason said. “It’s just that you were born as the employer of these people, and they were born to work for you.”

“Just so you know,” Humphrey said, “these men earn more money than an iron-rank adventurer.”

“Really?”

“They work in a giant money workshop,” Humphrey said. “That makes loyalty important. Also, they have to work in the middle of the desert, which deserves fair compensation.”

“Do they live out here?” Jason asked.

“While they’re working, yes,” Humphrey said. “They do stints out here, then go back to their families with all the money they made. After working the farms for a few years they gain a small part ownership. In our farms, at least. The Mercers don’t do it that way.”

“That’s the rub, isn’t it?” Jason asked. “If your family decided to screw these people over and leverage them into working for cheap while using draconian measures to keep them in line, what would stop you?”

“Basic decency,” Humphrey said.

“And there’s the real problem,” Jason said. “The line between benevolence and oppression falls wherever your family says it does. That’s real power. What happens when Thadwick Mercer is running his family operations?”

“They wouldn’t put him in charge,” Humphrey said.

“His father is grooming him for exactly that. Doesn’t say much for his father.”

“What about Cassandra?” Humphrey asked.

“She’s going full-time adventurer, like her mother,” Jason said. “Like you, for that matter. Once the next monster surge is done, she’s out of here.”

“How do you know so much about the Mercers?” Humphrey asked.

“I may have been spending some time with Cassandra. Socially.”

“I didn’t think she had much time for young men,” Humphrey said.

“Of course she does,” Jason said. “She just doesn’t have time for boys.”

The workers finished sliding the sand skimmers down from the over-sized wagons. The three vehicles were larger than the airboat Jason had been on. They were all flat bottomed, with a large ring at the back for magic propulsion. There were five seats at the front; one front and centre for the driver, with handlebar controls like a jet ski. Behind were four passenger sets, two by two. Between the seats and the propulsion ring bringing up the rear was a flat area for cargo. This space was already filled on all three vehicles with stacked metal crates.

The person who had come out of the farm with Phoebe on foot was the bronze rank adventurer taking charge of the team. It was another member of the Geller family, named Ernest. The resemblance to Humphrey was clear, with the same height and broad shoulders. Jason didn’t assume a close relation though, as all the Gellers looked like that. Phoebe was an Amazonian goddess almost a full head taller than Jason.

“If we have these things,” Jason asked, looking over a sand skimmer, “why did we walk all the way out here?”

“Because picking you up would be an extra trip to the city for our drivers and we don’t care if you have to walk all the way,” Ernest said. “We use the skimmers to take coins to the city and bring back supplies. If you want to use one yourself, go buy it.”

“That’s a fantastic idea,” Jason said. “How much do they cost?”

“You need the right essence ability to use them,” Humphrey said.

“Boo,” Jason jeered.

“Are you a child?” Ernest asked.

“Mate, we’re about to go flying across the desert in giant magic toboggans. If that doesn’t eke out any childlike wonder, then you might want to check your soul’s still in there.”

“He does have a point, Ern,” Phoebe said, patting Ernest on the arm.

“Everyone just get on the skimmers, please,” Ernest said. He shook his head at Phoebe, who flashed Jason a grin.

Ernest and Phoebe took the first skimmer, while Jason sat behind Humphrey and Gabrielle on the second. Mose and the two remaining adventurers took the last one. Three of the workers who had unloaded the skimmers took the front seat in each vehicle. Jason could sense the presence of a single essence from each driver’s aura.

A vulture-like bird came swooping out of the sky, then transformed into a sand-coloured lizard, flailing its limbs in the air as it fell into Humphrey’s arms.

“I’ve had Stash scouting as a bird,” Humphrey said. “I waved him off when we were fighting the elementals. I didn’t want anyone mistaking him for another monster.”

“My familiar wasn’t much good there, either,” Jason said. “Leeches don’t eat sand.”

The driver started feeding spirit coins into a slot next to his seat and the vehicle powered up with an audible hum. Sigils around the propulsion ring lit up and the skimmer floated half a metre into the air.

“Coin-operated,” Jason laughed. “I love it.”

Soon the skimmers were rushing over the desert sand, hot air whipping into the passengers’ faces. Like the airboat, the sand skimmers’ propulsion rings drew in air from the front to blast out the back. In the arid desert, this dried the eyes out quickly. The drivers all wore goggles, as did Humphrey, who gave an extra pair to Gabrielle.

“What happened to bros before hoes?” Jason called out over the blasting air of the propulsion ring.

“I don’t know what that means,” Humphrey called back, “but it feels like I should respect you less for having said it.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said.

As they rushed along, Jason was avoiding looking forward, to avoid the worst of the dry-eye effect. That made him the first one in the vehicle to spot a fast-moving object approaching from the side. It was another skimmer, but larger than their own. There were at least eight people aboard, with a canvas awning cover to shade them from the sun. It was veering in on an intercept course.

Jason pointed them out to Humphrey, who narrowed his eyes gravely at the approaching vehicle.

“They’re after the shipment,” he said loudly.

“Sand pirates!” Jason exclaimed with glee, breaking into a wild laugh. He threw his arms jubilantly into the air.

“I LOVE BEING AN ADVENTURER!”

Chapter 81: Crazy Desperation Move

Jason looked around and saw that multiple sand skimmers were converging on the three occupied by his group. Compared to their own skimmers, the ones pursuing them were made for passengers rather than cargo, with extra seats and awnings to shield them from the sun. Jason grinned, knowing they were about to pay for the comfort the shade offered them. The other skimmers were also faster, not weighed down by shipments of coin.

"I can't feel their auras at this distance," Jason called out. He had to speak loudly over the air rushing through the propulsion ring of the skimmer."

"Me either," Humphrey said.

Gabrielle, in the seat next to Humphrey, stood up. The speed of the skimmer didn't seem to bother her as she stood solid as a rock, head swivelling around.

"Eight enemy skimmers," she said. "Each one has seven or eight people, most of which have at least one essence, with either one or two iron rankers per skimmer. No bronze rankers."

The team's skimmers were running side-by-side, while the enemy skimmers were closing in on the back and side of their formation.

"Which one do you want?" Jason asked Humphrey.

Humphrey pointed out the pair of skimmers behind them.

"Stash and I will take one each," he said.

"I'll take the two coming in on our left then," Jason called out.

"Can you get over to them?" Humphrey asked.

"No worries," Jason said as his cloak appeared around his body. Then the cloak was empty as Jason appeared under the shade awning of one of the skimmers, where he got his first good look at the pirates. They were human, ethnically distinct from the humans that dominated Greenstone. These looked, to Jason's eyes, more like African natives, with darker skin and wild shocks of curly hair.

Jason's sudden appearance in their midst startled the passengers of the enemy skimmer. Before they could react, Jason pushed back the protective sheath on a razor tied to the inside of his forearm. He sliced the back of his hand with it and aimed the shallow cut at the pirates. Leeches sprayed from the wound, scattering over the pirates closely packed together on the skimmer. They immediately went wild with panic.

The driver hadn't seen Jason's appearance, only hearing his fellows react before feeling a couple of leeches latch onto his skull. This prompted the wild swerving that was noticed by the other nearby skimmer, which moved closer to investigate.

As sand pirates screamed panic around him, clutching at the leeches crawling onto them, Jason steadied himself by gripping one of the poles that held up the awning. With his other hand he took out one of his bandolier darts; one with a red cord grip. He saw the second skimmer closing in and tried to gauge its pace as it moved over the sand. Conveniently, it was approaching in a straight line.

Jason threw the dart, which struck the sand right in front of the skimmer. It sailed over the dart, which exploded underneath it. There wasn't enough force to do more than superficial damage, but it pushed up the skimmer's back end, tipping the front end down in turn. The front of the skimmer dug into the sand, but the skimmer's speed didn't halt the momentum. The skimmer flipped over, flying through the air before landing upside down.

Jason own skimmer was slowing down as the driver focused on removing leeches from his head and back. Jason used the leaping power of his boots to jump out as his cloak manifested around him. He drifted gently down to the sand. He glanced over at the skimmer haphazardly moving away from him, confident that Team Colin could handle a few sand pirates.

He turned his attention to the flipped-over skimmer. The poles that held up the awning were never designed to hold the skimmer's weight and collapsed. The propulsion ring had warped and was no longer blowing out air, but it maintained enough integrity to prop the skimmer up at an angle.

Some of the pirates had been tossed free as the skimmer flipped, and he could see others struggling to crawl out from under it. Jason drew his dagger and moved in to finish them before they recovered.

When Jason teleported away from his team's skimmer, Humphrey stood up, Stash the lizard tucked into one arm. He pointed at one of the skimmers behind them.

"Drop," he commanded, then threw the lizard high into the air. Stash turned into a small bird, fluttering in the direction Humphrey had pointed. As the skimmer passed under it, Stash turned from a bird into an enormous sand shab, as large as the skimmer itself.

Under the shade awning, the sand pirates didn't see the tiny bird transform into a monster that crashed down on them. They were just pressed into the bottom of the skimmer by a massive, unknown weight. The skimmer itself was built for speed rather than heavy cargo, and the magic holding it aloft was overcome. It splashed into the sand,

landing flat and heavy so it didn't flip. The propulsion ring whining loudly before cutting out as the skimmer came to an abrupt stop. Stash sat on top of it, his crustacean legs squatting over the sides.

The moment he had released Stash into the air, Humphrey turned to Gabrielle.

"Protect the skimmer?" he asked.

She nodded and he teleported away. Instead of putting himself onto a skimmer like Jason, he appeared directly in front of one. He stared at the driver, who glared back and aimed the skimmer right for him.

Humphrey's huge, wing-shaped sword appeared in his hands. Its length was the equal of Humphrey's considerable height and his feet dug into the sand as he braced to swing its enormous weight. He gathered the power within himself, ready to unleash his strongest special attack. As the skimmer came upon him at speed, he made a huge overhead swing, bringing the blade crashing down.

The sword smashed through the awning, through the driver, through two of the pirates behind the driver, through the base of the skimmer and buried itself in the sand. The skimmer stopped dead, the front half split down the middle and jammed into the ground with the sword. The propulsion ring cut out and the passengers, dead or alive, were tossed forward by momentum, sailing past Humphrey to be dumped in the sand.

The sword was buried to the hilt in sand, so Humphrey let the magically-constructed object disappear. He conjured a new sword into his right hand, this one much smaller. Like his larger sword, it was highly stylised, but instead of a dragon's wing, it looked like that of an angel, the blade assembled from feathers of razor-edged silver and gold. He levelled it at the pirates, groaning where they had fallen in the sand. From their dark skin and wild hair, he could see they were northerners, so he spoke to them in their language.

"I am now accepting surrender."

The team regrouped after all eight of the attacking skimmers were destroyed. Humphrey and Jason took out two each on their side, while on the other, the bronze rank Ernest had dealt with three. The final pirate skimmer had an encounter with Mose's fire vortex bomb, being reduced to a shattered wreck of warped metal.

Jason stood over the bodies of the men he had killed, looking grimly down at them. Sparring with Humphrey and Rufus had given him an inflated opinion of average skill levels, and finishing the pirates who survived the crash had been contemptuously easy. Too easy, for taking a life. He tapped a boot to one of them.

➤ [Ustei Raider] has no loot.

He made his way to where the other skimmer had drifted to a stop. The pirates were all dead, courtesy of Colin. Where the corpses weren't pale and drained, they were blackened with rot. He cut his hand with the forearm razor, holding it out for the leeches to return. The cut quickly closed afterwards, as if it had never been there at all.

The cargo skimmers turned back to pick up Jason, Humphrey and Ernest, who had all left the skimmers to fight. Humphrey was the last to be picked up, waiting next to the ruins of a skimmer with four prisoners on their knees in front of him.

Jason and Gabrielle hopped off the skimmer as it pulled to a stop. Gabrielle moved to Humphrey's side, while Jason examined the wreckage of the pirate skimmer. He could see it had been split down the middle and driven into the ground with a single, ludicrous blow.

"What did this?" he asked.

"Special attack," Humphrey said. "It's called unstoppable force."

"I can see why," Jason said.

Another skimmer arrived, Ernest and Phoebe stepping off to join the others.

"Did you get anything out of them?" Ernest asked, nodding at the pirates.

"They're all northerners," Humphrey said. "Ustei Tribe nomads, from the hair and clothes. I have no idea what they're doing this far south, and they aren't talking."

"Why would they attack a spirit coin convoy?" Phoebe asked. "If they knew enough to intercept it, then they had to know it would be covered in adventurers. That's a crazy desperation move."

The four prisoners knelt in the hot sand, glaring up at their captors.

"Do they look like beaten men to you?" Ernest asked.

"No," Phoebe said.

"Could be just courage," Ernest said, "but maybe take a look around, Humphrey."

Humphrey nodded, vanishing as he teleported high into the air. Dragons wings appeared on his back, holding him aloft as he looked around. From this high, he could see the city and the green of the delta. In the other direction, some of the spirit coin farms. Closer, he saw something moving over the sand. At first glance, he thought it was an enormous monster with three heads, but he realised it was some kind of highly-stylised vehicle. Too big for any monster lower than silver rank, there was a rigidity to its motion. It moved smoothly over the sand, like a humungous sand skimmer. He let himself drop, using his wings to slow down as he neared the ground.

“Anything?” Ernest asked.

“Sand barge,” Humphrey said. “Very big. We should get ready for another fight.”

Chapter 82:

Choices

"I like the enthusiasm," Ernest said to Humphrey, "but we shouldn't immediately rush to battle. What do you think, Phoebe?"

"Our options are run or fight," Phoebe said. "Their skimmers may have been faster than ours, but there's no way a sand barge would catch us."

"What do you think, Humphrey?" Ernest asked.

"That barge was larger than any vehicle I've ever seen," Humphrey said. "I've heard of the nomad tribe barges, and this was everything promised. I'd be willing to bet their whole tribe is onboard."

"How would you approach fighting it then?" Ernest asked.

"The barge will have their strongest people," Humphrey said. "We'll definitely be outnumbered, and we don't have a healer. On the other hand, this first group may well have been trying to drive us into a waiting ambush. If we run, only to fall into the lap of a larger, stronger team, The sand barge will catch us up when we're at our greatest disadvantage. If we're going to fight, it has to be on our terms."

"Do you think that's likely?" Ernest asked.

"I didn't see anyone else from up in the sky," Humphrey said, "but a shovel and some canvas sheeting can make you almost invisible out here."

"So what action do you suggest?" Ernest asked.

"Attack the barge," Humphrey said. "The nomad tribes get by on shock-raids with huge numbers and a reputation for atrocity. They think tactics are for cowards and equipment is for the weak."

Humphrey bent down and picked up a claw weapon he had taken from one of the prisoners, holding it up.

"They use weapons like this, or even none at all," he said. "The nomad tribes are fearsome to an isolated community, but every time I've heard of them coming up against a trained and equipped group they get torn apart. Including this time. Something made them desperate enough to come south and attack a guarded convoy, but that didn't change the result."

Humphrey looked out in the direction the barge was approaching from.

"We take the initiative," he said. "Put them on the back foot, when they're used to being on the front foot. We move fast, hit hard and take them apart before they can regroup."

Ernest gave Humphrey an appraising look.

"You've changed, Hump," he said. "I thought for sure you'd say run."

"Did he just call you Hump?" Jason asked Humphrey.

Humphrey hung his head with a groan.

"Are we doing what Hump suggested?" Jason asked Ernest. "If we're going to follow Hump's plan the way Hump laid it out, we need to get moving, don't we, Hump?"

"I hate you," Humphrey said.

"That's alright, Hump," Jason said, slapping him on the back.

"If you're quite done," Ernest said.

"Don't worry about me and Hump," Jason said.

"Please stop saying Hump," Humphrey begged.

Ernest looked around the group.

"Staging an attack like this is outside my purview as team-leader. I will not order any of you to participate. If anyone has any thoughts, let's hear them."

Jason smiled to himself. He could see Ernest had already made up his mind and was just creating a teaching moment.

"Do we even have time to stand around discussing this?" Gabrielle asked.

"Humphrey?" Ernest asked.

"With the speed it was moving," Humphrey said, "we have five-to-ten minutes before the barge gets here."

"Do we even know they're with these people?" Mose asked. "It sounds like that barge is far away."

"We weren't making a straight line back to the city," Ernest said. "That's specifically to avoid interception. They needed fast skimmers to catch us, but they couldn't handle the weight of the coins. The most likely scenario is that the faster skimmers moved to intercept us, with the slower barge following to pick up the loot."

"That leaves the question of whether we move towards it or away," Humphrey said.

"Anyone?" Ernest asked. His gaze went over the group, who looked largely uncertain. When no one spoke up, Ernest looked to Jason, who was standing around with a casual lack of concern. He was also older than the other team members, even Ernest himself.

"Mr Asano," Ernest said. "What is your assessment?"

"The instinctive reaction might be to neutralise the threat," Jason said, "but that isn't the job. We're not out here to catch pirates or wipe out bandit clans. That'll be the job they send the next group on. We're here to escort the coins. Attacking an unknown force with

unknown capabilities significantly impacts the likelihood of the actual mission going wrong. I say we just get on the skimmers and go.”

“And if they have an intercepting force?” Ernest asked.

“Then we handle it,” Jason said.

“We did handle this lot quickly enough,” Phoebe said. “We’d most likely handle the next before the barge caught up. I vote we stay on task.”

“Same here,” Mose said. “That barge isn’t an immediate threat to anyone but us.”

“That’s true,” Humphrey acknowledged. “The only things out here are the spirit coin farms. Even if there’s a whole clan of nomads on that barge, there’s no way they’d get past the walls.”

Ernest looked around the group again.

“Alright,” he said. “Humphrey, I love that your thinking more actively, but you also have to know when to temper that drive. Everyone back on the skimmers; we’re heading for the city.”

“What about the prisoners?” Jason asked.

“They’re your prisoners, Humphrey,” Ernest said. “Your decision.”

“Leave them here,” Humphrey said. “Let their friends come for them.”

The potential interdicting force never appeared and the skimmers reached a relay station at the edge of the delta without further incident. The coins were loaded from the skimmers to heavy, armoured carriages. These were the kind driven by magic rather than drawn by animals. Clive Standish was on hand as the Magic Society representative to inspect the coin boxes for tampering and check the carriages.

With him was a team of guards belonging to the Duke of Greenstone. Most essence users in Greenstone were a part of the Adventure Society, but the largest group in Greenstone who weren’t were the Duke of Greenstone’s household guard. They would be escorting the carriages through the delta roads to the city, where they would be stored in city-controlled warehouses for distribution and export.

The spirit coin trade was the largest source of income in Greenstone, with many of the major local powers involved. The Geller and Mercer families produced the coins, the Adventure Society brought them in from the wilderness. The Duke of Greenstone saw to their dispensation, managed by the Magic Society.

“G’day Clive,” Jason said, approaching the Magic Society official.

“Good afternoon,” Clive greeted, not turning away from his work. He was bent down checking the underside of a carriage.

"What are you doing?" Jason asked.

"There was an incident several years ago where the carriages were tampered with," Clive said. "They were modified by some rather sophisticated artifice to suborn the magic that drives them. The drivers lost control and the carriages drove themselves away."

"That's kind of awesome," Jason said.

"I know, right?" Clive said, glancing up with a grin. "The perpetrator was never caught, which is a shame; I'd love to discuss how they did it. That was before my time, though."

"So why bother with all this?" Jason asked. "Why not just get someone with a storage power to stow the coins and move them."

"There have incidents in the past where the coins that went into the storage weren't the ones that came out," Clive said. "It happened enough times in enough coins farms around the world that now everyone uses secure transport crates."

"That was a long time ago," Humphrey said. "They changed the system here when my mother was still a girl."

"Are those skimmer drivers going to be alright to go back?" Jason asked.

"No, they'll stay until the barge is taken care of, then go back with another escort, just in case. In the meantime, they get some unexpected time at home with their families."

"Too bad we didn't have another driver," Jason said. "We could have salvaged that intact skimmer for some extra coin."

"The only one not destroyed was full of bodies that looked like they'd been out there for weeks," Humphrey said. "I wouldn't make someone drive that thing."

"Good point. You want to get some juice after this? I'm all out, but Arash said he'd be at the Magic Society campus."

Humphrey leaned in closer, speaking quietly.

"Actually, I was thinking I could maybe ask Gabrielle," he said nervously.

Clive and Jason shared a glance and Jason put a hand on Humphrey's shoulder.

"Good idea," Jason said. "Go with God, my son."

Humphrey frowned in confusion.

"Which god? Do you mean the god of fertility? The one with all the provocative murals? I'm not looking to take things that far."

"Wait, what god is this?" Jason asked. "Should I be checking out these murals?"

Jason wandered into Rufus, Farrah and Gary's suite, crashing down on a comfortable sofa. Farrah was at the dining table, which had a half-dozen open books on it.

She was scribbling in a notebook, occasionally looking up to read a passage or turn a page. She looked consumed in her work, so he didn't interrupt.

After a few minutes, Jason heard the sounds of books closing and Farrah joined him in the lounge area, dropping into a plush armchair.

"The furniture they have here is amazing," she said, luxuriating in the chair. "I wonder where they get it."

"There's a craftsman out in the delta," Jason said. "He uses all local materials."

"How do you know that?"

"Madam Landry told me," Jason said.

"The landlady?" Farrah asked. "How do you get along with people so well when you seem bound and determined to annoy them?"

"That's rich people," Jason said. "Aristocrats and such. Why would I mess with decent, ordinary people? Madam Landry is a small business owner who works very hard to run a quality establishment. I have nothing but respect for that."

"But you're a rich person," Farrah said.

"And am deserving of challenge, as such," Jason said. "You know Humphrey took me to task the other day. Once I cooled off, I realised that there was some insight in parts of what he said."

"Self-awareness after the fact does seem to be a pattern for you," Farrah said. "I've been on the receiving end of that myself."

"You were right then, too," Jason said wearily. "What you said about killing people."

"Did something happen on your job today?"

"We were attacked," Jason said. "I killed, I don't know. A dozen people?"

"How are you taking that?" she asked.

"Better than I'd like, to be honest," he said. "It was easy. I don't mean the fighting, although, that too, but the killing. It should feel harder, shouldn't it?"

"Adventurers have to be ready to act without hesitation," she said. "Honing that reflex to kill probably isn't good for the soul, but it'll keep you alive."

"It's not like I wasn't warned," Jason said. "Rufus told me going in there would be a price. When he said that, I thought I could be different. The guy who doesn't kill. It was breathtakingly naïve. Now, I don't know what to think. How I feel about it doesn't match what I think I should feel about it. I killed people, but I'm being honest with myself... I had fun, today."

"Everyone has to find their own balance," Farrah said. "For me, it's about deserve. If I kill someone, then they had it coming. I know you didn't like that we killed those cultists we

captured when we cleared out the Vane house, but they definitely had it coming. But that's my answer. You have to find your own."

Jason nodded.

"I think..."

He sighed.

"I want my choices to make things better, rather than worse."

"You want to be responsible for your own actions," Farrah said. "I can respect that."

"I think about Thadwick Mercer more than I should," Jason said.

"Why in the world would you think about him?"

"I've kind of shown him up a couple of times," Jason said. "He's just so witless and malevolent that I don't feel bad about using him. It's very satisfying. But an entitled guy like that, you make him feel even a little powerless and he'll take it out on the people he has power over. How many members of the Mercer household staff were raked over the coals because I couldn't help getting a few jabs in? What did those offsidiers of his have to put up with after Thadwick made them refuse a contract?"

"I don't imagine your intervention was required to get that boy to treat his people badly," Farrah said.

"But expand that out," Jason said. "Choices have consequences, and I'm making life and death choices, now. How many fathers did I kill today? How many brothers, how many sons?"

Farrah pushed herself out of the chair and sat next to Jason on the couch.

"I think that as long as you keep asking yourself those questions," she said, "then you're going to be alright."

They heard laughter coming from outside the room, and the door opened to let in Rufus and Vincent, the Adventure Society official with the enormous moustache. They were both slightly unsteady, and Rufus had a bottle of wine in hand.

"Jason," Rufus said with the happiness of drink. "How did the job go?"

"Well enough."

"That's good," Rufus said. He wandered over to the door to the balcony and went outside, Vincent in tow. Both men were normally more formal, so it was easy to spot the easy intimacy in their body language.

"When did that happen?" Jason asked.

"A while ago," Farrah said. "You've been keeping yourself busy."

"I guess I have," Jason said.

“Coming to this city has been good for him,” Farrah said. “He’s more relaxed; there aren’t as many eyes on him. It’s hard to do better when everyone is watching your mistakes.”

“Good for him,” Jason said. “You know, I might go call on Cassandra. I could use a night out.”

Chapter 83: It Makes No Difference to the Ant

Jason spotted Phoebe Geller as he was walking through the grounds of the Adventure Society campus. She gave him a wave and approached.

“There’s an expedition being set up to go after that sand barge,” she told him after they exchanged greetings. “We’re going to find out what the Ustei tribe are doing this far south and stop them from raiding any more spirit coin shipments. It’s a big group, with a silver rank in charge. Want me to get you on the list?”

“Absolutely,” Jason said.

She flashed him a pretty smile.

“I’ll give Humphrey the details; he’ll find you.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Jason said.

They parted ways and Jason entered the administration building. Albert was on the front desk, directing Jason to a part of the building he’d never been in before. He arrived at what looked like an outer office, with an official seated behind a desk, next to a door that led further on. The woman was reading a book, glancing up as Jason came in. She glanced down at a sheet of paper on her desk.

“Mr Asano?” she asked, with a friendly smile.

“That’s me,” he said.

“It shouldn’t be long,” she said. “Please take a seat.”

“Thanks.”

She gestured to a pair of chairs up against the wall, one of which was occupied by an attractive young elf woman. Her appearance was quite different from Anisa, who looked like Nazis had grown her in a lab. This elf had the same willowy figure, but tawny skin and vibrant green eyes. Chestnut hair spilled down over her shoulders. Her clothes were in the loose-fit, local style. Jason had been around enough now to spot the quality make and materials, but they were simple and didn’t flaunt their undoubtedly expensive price.

She was looking him over in turn and gave him a smile as he sat down next to her. He had met enough elves by this point to recognise her age at eighteen or nineteen, which meshed with her iron rank aura.

“Jason Asano,” he said as he sat down, offering his hand to the elf, who shook it.

“I know,” she said. “I’ve seen the recording of you taking Rick Geller’s team apart.”

Jason groaned.

"I'm not as good as that recording makes out," Jason said. "That situation was weighted very heavily in my favour. Also, I don't have evil powers."

She laughed.

"You went one against five with a Geller family team," she said. "Some would argue that no situation could be weighted heavily enough."

"The circumstances always matter," Jason said. "We have a saying where I come from: better lucky than good. Luck has saved my life more than once."

"Sounds like an exciting life," she said. "I'm Beth Cavendish, by the way."

"The excitement is a new development," Jason said. "Are you related to Mose Cavendish?"

"My cousin," she said, nodding at the door next to the desk. "I'm waiting for him now. He says good things about you, by the way."

"That's very nice of him," Jason said. "I was really impressed by that crazy vortex power of his."

"He mentioned you were a bit odd. Something about being from another world, and also, cannibals."

"That would be the exciting new development I mentioned."

"Is that how you became involved with Rufus Remore?" she asked.

"It was," Jason said. "You know Rufus?"

"He conducted my field assessment," she said.

"He didn't fail you, did he?"

"No," she said, with a confident smile. "He passed my whole team."

"Your whole team? He only gave six people a pass, right?"

"Four of which were my team," she said. "The others were those two who follow Thadwick Mercer around. Such a waste of talent."

"Rufus said the same thing," Jason said. "Is Mose on your team?"

"No," Beth said. "Mose is a little inconsistent to pass a Rufus Remore assessment. He's great when everything is going right, but needs a little help when things get sticky."

The door next to the woman at the desk opened to admit Mose Cavendish into the room, looking rather flustered. Jason and Beth both stood up.

"Jason?" Mose said.

"G'day, Mose."

"You can go in now, Mr Asano," the woman behind the desk said.

"No worries," Jason told her, nodding to Beth.

"Lovely to meet you, Beth Cavendish," he said. "Always a pleasure, Mose."

They made quick farewells and Jason went through the door. On the other side was a chamber that looked similar to a courtroom, but one that was almost empty. There was a long, high judge's bench, but all the seating for lawyers, prosecutors, plaintiffs and gallery were replaced with a solitary chair in the centre of the room.

Three people were already sitting behind the bench. In the middle was the director of the Adventure Society, the elf, Elspeth Arella. Jason had only spoken with her the once, although he had spotted her from time to time at social events. To her left was Vincent, who Jason had last seen doing the walk of shame from the suite across the hall. To her right was another elf, an elderly woman. All three of them were looking at him with blank expressions.

Jason looked around, then plopped down in the chair.

"We didn't say you could sit," the elderly elf said.

Jason gave her a casual nod of acknowledgement.

"You're forgiven," he said, her lips thinning as she heard his response.

"I have found that people in your position tend to show us respect," the woman said.

"And I find people in your position," Jason countered, "tend to confuse respect with obedience. Would you rather I come in here acting the way I think you want me to act?"

He gestured to himself.

"What you see is what you get. Do you think dishonesty is more respectful than the truth?"

Vincent was rolling his eyes, while Elspeth Arella's eyes twinkled with amusement.

The woman asking the questions remained stony-faced.

"How would you rate your performance in the group contract you undertook two days ago?" the woman asked, the others still silent.

"Critically poor," Jason said.

"Explain, she asked.

"My inability to keep my big mouth shut cost the team thirty percent of its personnel, including the healer. As such, we engaged in multiple combat situations with crucial absences."

"You acknowledge responsibility for the altercation with Thadwick Mercer that led him and his team to refuse the contract at the last minute?" she asked.

"Yes," Jason said.

"Full responsibility?"

"Yes."

"You don't lay any of this on Thadwick Mercer?"

"Thadwick is what he is, and doesn't know any better. I do, which made it my responsibility to be the bigger person for the sake of team cohesion. Instead, I chose to be small and petty."

The woman looked at the other two. The way they conversed with glances alone showed their close, working relationship. The woman turned back to Jason.

"How would you rate your performance on this mission otherwise?" she asked.

"Adequate," he said.

"Explain," she said.

"We encountered multiple combats and the team handled them effectively. There weren't any shirkers; everyone did their part, myself included."

"You argued against eliminating the threat posed by the Ustei tribe."

"The job was to deliver coins, not get in a fight against unknown odds."

"Overcoming superior numbers is a specialty of yours, is it not?" she asked. "You are aware of a widely disseminated recording of you in the Geller family's mirage arena."

"If you thought that edited recording was a valid basis on which to assess me," he said, "then you wouldn't be qualified to assess me at all."

Again the three of them shared a conversation of glances.

"You were recently assigned a contract to clear out an infestation of rats in Old City," she said.

"Stone-chewer rats, yes," Jason said.

"Your report stated that you killed all the rats," she said.

"That isn't accurate," Jason said.

"Your report wasn't accurate?"

"No, your characterisation of my report wasn't accurate," he said. "My report stated that all the rats were killed, not that they were all killed by me. A number were killed by an additional monster, a rat gorgon."

"But you are certain all the rats were killed?"

"Yes," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"I have an ability that helps me keep track of certain aspects of my activities."

"What is the nature of this ability?"

"My own business."

They locked eyes as he felt her bronze rank aura press down on him. He held her gaze as his own aura was completely suppressed.

“What if I told you that there were still stone-chewer rats being found in Old City?” she asked.

“Two scenarios come to mind as being most likely,” Jason said. “One would be a second rat colony having spawned. The other would be that you’re trying to shake my confidence that the original colony was eliminated fully. Which you have not.”

Jason spotted Vincent nodding to himself.

“You did not request a bonus payment after encountering the rat gorgon,” the woman said.

“That’s correct,” Jason said.

“You haven’t requested a bonus for any of the contracts and adventure board notices you have completed. Several of which would certainly have been approved.”

“I’m not concerned with a few spirit coins here or there,” Jason said. “If I do enough to warrant an awakening stone, I imagine someone will tell me.”

“You’ve been undertaking contracts at a rapid pace,” the woman said. “If not for money, then why?”

“I’ve been told I need to get stronger for what is to come.”

“By Rufus Remore?” she asked.

“He has been telling me to get stronger,” Jason said, “but I was actually thinking of someone I met at the temple of knowledge.”

A powerful aura washed over the room, visibly alarming the panel.

“Name dropper,” a female voice whispered, somehow both quiet enough to feel intimate and loud enough to fill the chamber.

“Do you mind?” Jason asked the empty air. “I’m kind of in the middle of a thing, here.”

With a chuckle, the aura vanished. The three panellists stared wide-eyed at Jason.

“Sorry,” he apologised, with a helpless shrug. “She has privacy issues.”

Vincent and the elderly elf turned to the director sitting between them.

“What is your relationship with the goddess of knowledge?” the director asked him, speaking for the first time since he came in.

“The same as my relationship with you, Director. She’s more powerful than I am, we had a nice chat one time and she’s apparently keeping an eye on me.”

“You seem unconcerned about having the attention of a goddess,” the director said.

“You can squash an ant with a boot or by dropping a building on it,” Jason said. “It makes no difference to the ant. Having her attention is no different to having yours.”

“You seem to be taking it calmly,” she said.

“That’s a skill I’ve developed,” he said.

"Taking things calmly?" she asked.

"No, seeming to. It's possible I just peed a little."

She looked at him incredulously as Vincent hung his head. The director glanced at the other two, the elderly elf gave a firm nod, while Vincent's was more reluctant.

"Approach the bench, please, Mr Asano," the director said.

Jason stood up and walked over. The bench came up his neck height, the panel on a raised platform behind it.

"Badge please," the director said. He took his Adventure Society badge in its leather wallet out from his inventory, reaching up to place in on the bench. The director opened the wallet and touched a black stone to it. He couldn't see what was happening, but she shortly handed it back.

"Here you are," she said, handing back the wallet. He looked down at the badge, where the single star under the adventure society emblem had been joined by a second.

"A second star means you will be held to a higher standard," the elderly elf said.

"Don't repeat the kind of mistake you made with Thadwick Mercer."

"Call it a lesson learned," he said.

"From now on you can take one or two-star missions from the jobs hall," Vincent told him. "Try not to make an idiot of yourself."

"I can do my best with the two-star jobs," Jason said, "but making an idiot of myself is kind of my thing."

Chapter 84: Injury & Death

For the first time, Jason walked past the one-star contracts in the jobs hall to the two-star notices further down. It was a much smaller section, and looking further he saw the solitary three-star noticeboard had no jobs at all.

Looking over the notices, most were regular monster hunts with some kind of complication. The most common was a requirement to avoid damaging whatever valuable thing the monster had chosen to nest in.

Jason frowned as he read a certain contract. He took it from the noticeboard and over to the desk manned by an Adventure Society functionary he didn't recognise. The man looked over the contract, then up at Jason.

"You aren't allowed to take this contract alone," the man said. "You need a team; minimum three."

"I have some people in mind," Jason said.

In an Old City alleyway, two women struggled to move. One was unharmed but weighed down by the other, who was heavily injured. Her all-black outfit had long, bloody tears across the arms, legs and torso. The black mask that had originally obscured almost her entire head was ripped, with silver hair spilling out.

The uninjured woman was not strong but she was determined. With her friend draped over her, she kept moving forward. It was daytime, and the alley was close to the Broadstreet thoroughfare. They could encounter people at any moment.

"We have to stop this," Belinda said. "It's a miracle we haven't been caught already."

"We keep going," Sophie said, her voice strained with the pain. "If we can play this out long enough, Ventress will be forced to show her hand. Once she does, that gives us options."

"Do you not realise the condition you're in right now? You can barely move!"

"But I can move," Sophie said. "The Duke's household guard laid a trap, but now we know to be ready. His bronze-rankers can fight, but they can't chase worth a damn."

"The Adventure Society has been pressuring the Duke to stay out of it," Belinda said. "I haven't been able to find out why, but it's been good for us. That's over, now. The complaints from his high-society friends must have outgrown his unwillingness to push back against the Adventure Society."

"We plan around it," Sophie said.

“Do you even understand how lucky you were to get out of there?”

“This time it was luck,” Sophie said. “Next time will be preparation.”

“Next time you’ll probably get killed.”

“The Duke getting involved buys us time,” Sophie said. “Ventress can’t accuse us of slacking if we take extra time to adapt. There’s only so blatant she can be about setting us up. Whatever she’s up to, she won’t burn her reputation to get it.”

“You do realise she’s not the only one trying to set us up now,” Belinda said. “The pressure is mounting and old friends aren’t as reliable as they used to be.”

They reached a solid metal gate in a high wall. Belinda leaned Sophie against the wall and cautiously pushed on the unlocked gate to peer inside. There were a handful of labourers in the yard, moving materials through a newly made hole in the wall to the yard next door.

“Those adventurers aren’t here,” she told Sophie, “but there’s some kind of construction happening. Just stay there, and I’ll go get him.”

She ducked inside the yard, the workers not even looking up as she walked past them and into the back of the clinic. She saw Jory escorting a patient out of his exam room.

“...just apply the salve every morning,” he was explaining, “and you shouldn’t have any trouble through the day.”

“Jory,” she called out him.

“Belinda!”

Jory’s eyes lit up as he turned around, then narrowed on the blood staining her clothes. He quickly ushered the patient through a doorway.

“Janice,” he said through the door, “no new patients for the moment. No one is to come back here until I say otherwise, understood?”

He closed the door and rushed over to her.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“Not my blood,” she said. “Sophie is out back.”

“Show me.”

In an old city restaurant, Jason was served a dish of rice dumplings in the shape of a three-sided pyramid.

“They have this shape because of how they’re wrapped in the bamboo leaves to cook,” he said, picking up his chopsticks.

"I could never get the hang of chopsticks," Humphrey said as the waiter placed bowls of dumpling soup in front of Humphrey and Clive. Cheap and easily-replaced chopsticks were the primary utensil in the delta and most of Old City, but Humphrey grew up with silverware. Jason had been amused to discover the most common utensil in the high-society was the spork.

They chatted lightly over their lunch. Their empty dishes were taken away and replaced with a tray of fried, sticky rice cake.

"So what did you really want to talk about?" Humphrey asked. "I'm guessing you didn't just call us out for lunch, excellent as it was."

"I have a contract," Jason said. "Two-star. They won't let me take it without a minimum team of three."

"Minimum team?" Clive asked. "That means the danger is either large or unknown." Humphrey's face darkened.

"Unknown usually means it's killed an adventurer already," he said.

"That's right," Jason said. "A solo adventurer took a one-star contract for something called a marsh wyrm. The tracking on his badge recorded his death mid-afternoon, the day before yesterday."

All three men looked soberly down. They were all adventurers, and even the less-active Clive knew that death was always a possibility.

"Alright, then," Clive said. "So the job is to find the body and clear the monster?"

"Yeah, that's the job," Jason said. "Kill the monster and find the body. If nothing's left, then we at least bring back the badge."

"Not much to return to the family," Humphrey said, "but better than nothing."

"I looked up the marsh wyrm," Jason said, "and whatever's out there, I don't think it's that."

"No surprise, there," Humphrey said. "Monsters don't always turn out to be what they're reported as."

"What does your ability say?" Clive asked Jason.

"It says the monster that killed him," Jason said. "Which doesn't tell us what it is, but means there should only be the one."

Quest: [Contract: Fallen Comrade]

An adventurer has fallen in the course of their duties. Complete their task and bring home their remains.

- Objective: Eliminate the monster that killed your fellow adventurer 0/1.
 - Objective: Retrieve the remains of your fellow adventurer 0/1.
-

“It could be a lot of things,” Humphrey said. “There are quite a few giant worm and serpent-type monsters that appear in the delta.”

“There are a few that could be mistaken for a marsh wurm,” Clive said. “At least by someone who didn’t really know monsters. Most people only know monsters that commonly spawn in their area, and usually by description. Most run before they ever get a good look.”

“If it took down an adventurer already, we can’t dismiss the danger,” Humphrey said. “Any monster strong enough to take down someone who went looking for a marsh wurm alone will be at the top of the iron-rank power scale, or maybe even bronze. It won’t be some lesser elemental that anyone could punch apart with sufficient determination.”

Not all iron-rank monsters were created equal. Their rank was a function of their magical density, not actual power. If bronze rank damage reduction and resistances were ignored, the most powerful iron-rank monsters were stronger than the weaker bronze examples. The difference was usually made up in numbers, with weaker monsters appearing in greater numbers.

“So,” Jason said. “Are you in?”

“Of course,” Humphrey said. Clive nodded.

“It could be any of us, someday,” Clive said. “If it’s me, I hope I’m not left at the bottom of a bog somewhere. Do you know anything about the adventurer?”

Jason nodded.

“I asked Vincent about him.”

“I’d like to hear it,” Humphrey said.

Sophie stood under the shower in Jory’s clinic. Designed to wash less-abled patients, the shower had no walls or curtains and was open to the room. Arms out in front of her, hands against the wall, she leaned forward, letting the water spray down onto the back of her head and neck. After several of Jory’s strongest potions, spaced out to prevent toxicity, all that remained of her injuries was the blood the shower was sluicing off her body.

When she emerged, wearing spare clothes provided by Jory, the alchemist shoved a large bottle full of red liquid into her hands.

“Drink it,” he said, bluntly. “Now.”

“What is it?”

“It will stop your blood from responding to tracking abilities,” he said. “I made it up while you were getting clean.”

She looked at Belinda standing behind him.

“What did you tell him?” Sophie asked her.

“Don’t tell me anything,” Jory said. “Then I don’t have to lie if it comes to that.”

Sophie looked down at the bottle in her hands.

“If I wanted to deal with you,” Jory said, “all I had to do was not help you. Drink it, before whoever did that to you arrives at my door.”

“Drink it, Soph,” Belinda said. “We need to get moving.”

She frowned at the bottle but drained it dry.

“Let’s go, Lindy.”

Sophie made for the back door, Belinda in tow. Belinda stopped at the door, looking back at Jory, still standing in the hall. Their eyes met and his hard expression softened at the apology in hers.

“Wait,” he said, ducking through a door and coming back with a leather satchel, which he handed to Belinda.

“Just some random medical supplies,” he said. “It’s all labelled.”

She gave him a sad smile as she took the bag.

“Thank you,” she told him, then walked out the door.

On the top floor of the Adventure Society’s administration building, the director’s office occupied a large space in the corner of the building, the windows giving a panoramic view of the campus grounds. The director, Elspeth Arella, was looking out those windows as one of her officials made a report. Her name was Genevieve, and Jason would recognise her as the elderly elf who questioned him during his promotion hearing.

“Lord Vordis is refusing to say what the package contained, beyond that it was very valuable.”

“And the guards who set the ambush,” Arella said. “They were from the Duke’s household guard?”

“Yes,” Genevieve said. “Six bronze rankers and triple that in iron ranks.”

“And she still got away,” Arella chuckled. “The Duke won’t like how that makes his forces look. This thief is a resourceful girl, lucky for us. Set up a meeting with the Duke. I want to be very clear that the moment he fobbed this issue onto us it became an Adventure Society concern. He can’t take it back now.”

“He’s already sent a pre-emptive response,” Genevieve said.

“I’ll bet he has,” Arella said.

“He claims that since you have failed to complete the contract after the better part of two months, and refuse to raise the contract to the bronze-rank level, then he is duty-bound as the city ruler to intervene.”

“Send our response when you set up the meeting,” Arella said. “Make it clear that he is the one that placed this issue in the hands of the Adventure Society, that the Adventure Society will handle it when and how we see fit. Should he further intervene, either openly or covertly, then the city of Greenstone will be in violation of their arrangement with the Adventure Society. All adventuring activity will then cease until a new arrangement has been negotiated, confirmed and enacted.”

“Are you certain you want to take it that far?” Genevieve asked.

“He’s not stupid enough to renegotiate terms before the original agreement runs out,” Arella said. “Not with me.”

“But do you want to draw that arrow from the quiver?” Genevieve asked. “You can only make that threat once or he’ll have grounds to go over you to the central branches.”

“I need Lucian Lamprey gone,” Arella said. “So long as he’s in charge of the Magic Society here, trying to clean up our own house is bailing water from a sinking boat. Until the hole is plugged, the best we can do is stop things from getting worse.”

“And you think this will get rid of him?”

“If things drag out for long enough. He’s a man unused to restraining his appetites. Sooner or later, he will make a mistake we can use to oust him. When his patience comes to its limit, he will act.”

“So long as the thief remains at large long enough for him to do so,” Genevieve said.

“Yes. Which is why catching her must remain the responsibility of iron-rankers, with no interference from the Duke’s people.”

“Madam Director, do you know who this thief is?”

“Of course not,” Arella said. “That would be unprofessional.”

"We're getting close," Humphrey called out over the sound of the airboat. He pointed at a rise of earth in the marsh and Clive steered the airboat up onto it. Humphrey was guiding them with a crystal orb that lit up in the direction of the badge they were tracking.

He stepped off the airboat onto the soggy bank, Jason and Clive following after. They followed the tracking orb onto higher, drier ground, Jason hacking their way through tight scrub with a machete. The blade was enchanted for the task, a common tool that every adventurer learned to take into the delta. They progressed until Humphrey called them to a stop.

"Oh," he said.

All three looked at the orb in Humphrey's hand. The indicator light was pointing straight down into the wet, heavy earth.

Chapter 85: Because I'm an Adventurer

"I couldn't find anything even resembling an entrance," Jason said as the trio regrouped. The others shook their heads, having fared no better.

"Probably some kind of extended lair," Clive said. "A lot of creatures in this environment, monster and animal both, are just as happy in the water as out. Some like to dig burrows and stash prey for later consumption. The entrance could be in any direction, and is probably underwater."

"Any suggestions?" Humphrey asked.

"We could try a simple ritual used for digging wells," Clive said. "I'm sure I have one in a book somewhere in my storage space."

"I don't know that ritual," Jason said. "Wasn't in my ritual magic skill book."

"People make skill books with knowledge practical for adventurers," Clive said, "not for farmers. It's one of many reasons that skill books aren't proper magic instruction. They only give the flimsiest theoretical grounding."

Jason groaned.

"You sound like Farrah," he said.

"Really?" Clive asked, his head perking up. "Did she say something about me?"

Jason wearily shook his head.

"Why didn't you suggest a magic tunnel in the first place?" he asked.

"My concern would be collapsing whatever underground space we break into," Clive said. "This ground is incredibly wet. Whatever lair or burrow is down there may be full of water already, or our tunnel could collapse the whole thing."

"I don't see a better option," Humphrey said.

"Time to pull out the old bag of salt, then," Jason said. "You know, I'm still on the bag I took from these cannibals I killed. I should practise rituals more."

"Don't bother with the salt," Clive said. "I'll sort it out."

Clive closed his eyes and took a slow, deep breath. Nothing in the surroundings changed, but both Jason and Humphrey felt a stillness come over them.

-
- [Human] has used [Mana Equilibrium].
 - Ambient magic has entered a harmonious state.
 - The next spell cast in this area will cost reduced mana, and the harmonious state will be disrupted.
-

“That’s interesting,” Humphrey said, looking around. Jason knew that Humphrey’s perception power, dragon sight, allowed him to see magic.

“You’re smoothing-out the ambient magic to make rituals easier,” Humphrey said. “You seem very spell-oriented for a human.”

“I venerate the Celestial Book,” Clive said. “I received a blessing that triggered a racial gift evolution. It changed the human special attack affinity to a spell affinity, like the elves.”

“Nice,” Humphrey said.

“I didn’t understand any of that,” Jason said.

“Then you know what it’s like to talk to you,” Clive said and Humphrey nodding his agreement.

“What’s the Celestial Book?” Jason asked. “Is that the god of books, or something?”

“It’s one of the great astral beings,” Clive said. “They’re similar to gods, but instead of belonging to a specific world, they exist between worlds, in the deep astral. You could almost describe them as gods to the gods, although you wouldn’t catch any gods saying that.”

“So, you took a look at the gods,” Jason said, “and basically asked to see their manager.”

“That’s not even close to how it works,” Clive said.

“What about that racial gift evolution you mentioned?” Jason asked. “A lot of religious folk aren’t big on evolution, where I come from.”

Clive looked at Jason, then turned to Humphrey.

“You explain while I look up this ritual,” Clive said, pulling a book from his storage space. Unlike Humphrey or Jason, where objects were pulled from thin air, Clive’s storage space involved a floating ring of runes, in the middle of which a small portal formed.

“You must be constantly learning new things, coming from a whole different world,” Humphrey said to Jason.

“You have no idea,” Jason said. “I haven’t even learned all the fruit, yet, let alone the magic stuff.”

“Well,” Humphrey said, “every race has six racial gifts. For human like Clive and myself, that is an affinity for special attacks and our essences advance more rapidly than others. Then there are the latent powers, that adapt to our essences.”

“Yeah, I heard about the XP boost,” Jason said. “Seems OP.”

“What?” Humphrey asked, confusion creasing his brow.

“Never mind,” Jason said. “Just keep going.”

“Racial power evolution is where a racial gift changes,” Humphrey said. “Any racial gift can change. The latent human abilities are essentially blank slates that are guaranteed to do so.”

“So any of my outworlder abilities could evolve?” Jason asked.

“They could,” Humphrey said. “Usually, there's some kind of trigger, often a traumatic event. Big monster fights where you barely make it out alive would be the one you see the most. Sometimes it just happens over time, though. You do something enough that it becomes a part of you and your powers actually change so it does.”

“Habits really have a way of taking hold, then,” Jason said.

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “Have you met anyone from the smoulder race?”

“No, but I've seen them around,” Jason said.

“Well, they have natural affinities for earth and fire,” Humphrey said. “There's a guy on an adventuring team with my parents; he's a smoulder. He has the air essence and, eventually, his earth affinity evolved to an air affinity.”

“So what about Clive and that blessing?” Jason asked.

“Gods can give their followers a blessing, which triggers a racial gift evolution,” Humphrey said. “I guess whatever that thing Clive worships can do it, too. That one was actually new to me.”

“Great astral beings,” Jason mused, remembering something he heard months earlier. “Hey, Clive.”

“What?” Clive asked, looking up from a book.

“That great astral thing you worship...”

“I didn't say worship,” Clive said. “I said venerate. There's a difference.”

“That's fine,” Jason said. “I was just wondering, though. Would you describe it as an ineffable ancient from beyond reality?”

Clive thought it over for a moment.

“That's not how I'd describe it,” he said, “but can see how someone would, if they didn't know what they were talking about. Why?”

“I heard Cressida Vane talking about it. Apparently, her son was into something like that.”

“That makes sense,” Clive said. “Landemere was an astral magic specialist, like me. We often end up paying more attention to the great astral beings than the local gods. We set our sights higher, you might say.”

“And people call me a heretic,” Jason said.

“Here it is,” Clive said, eyes back on his book. “I haven't used this book in years.”

He started waving his hand like an orchestra conductor, and a glowing diagram started drawing itself just above the ground.

“The ability I used earlier was the racial power I awakened for the magic essence,” Clive explained. “it balances out the ambient magic so you don’t need to adjust your ritual circle.”

The diagram of golden light continued to be drawn out.

“I’m drawing the circle using a rune essence ability,” Clive explained. “It lets me draw out magic circles and use any required materials directly from my storage space.”

“I can see how that would be handy,” Jason said.

“You might want to stand back,” Clive said. “I first picked this up to use on the family farm and it makes something of a mess.”

Jason and Humphrey did as instructed. Soon after, mud started shooting up into the air with a loud, wet flapping sound, scattering itself over the area. Jason conjured his cloak and wrapped it around himself, any mud that reached it sliding easily off. Clive, being much closer, was sprayed with mud, but it struck some kind of force-field and fell away. Humphrey had no such protection and ended up speckled with dark mud.

All three went up to stand around the new hole, looking down. It was a cylinder, neatly carved out of the wet earth. It was quite deep, five or six metres, Jason guessed, and a couple of metres wide. At the bottom, instead of breaching some underground burrow, the hole ended with a floor of large, neatly-fitted bricks of green stone.

“Is that a weird thing to find at the bottom of a hole we randomly dug?” Jason asked. “Everything around here seems kind of weird to me, so I can’t judge all that well. This seems like it might be extra weird, though.”

“This is definitely extra weird,” Humphrey said. “Any ideas, Clive?”

“None,” Clive said. “Anything that deep around here should be filled with water. I get the feeling it isn’t, though.”

“We have to check it out, right?” Humphrey asked.

“You mean the secret underground building we found?” Jason asked. “Of course we have to check it out.”

“Should we tell someone?” Humphrey asked. “The Magic Society, maybe?”

“If we tell the Magic Society,” Clive said, “then we won’t be the ones to explore it. Lucian Lamprey will give it to someone that buys him political points.”

“There is a safety issue, though,” Humphrey said. “Someone already died down there.”

“How about this,” Jason said. “We came out here to find the person who died. Let’s do that, and then tell people where we found him.”

“That sounds fair,” Clive said.

“Alright,” Humphrey said, clearly eager to be convinced. “How do we get in?”

“I have some acid that melts through most varieties of local stone,” Jason said and the two turned to look at him.

“What?” Jason asked.

“Why would you have that?” Humphrey asked.

“Because I’m an adventurer,” Jason said. “I have all the basic adventuring gear. Acid, rope, pitons, a tarp, some empty sacks, a ten-foot pole...”

“Why would you have all that?” Clive asked.

“...flammable oil, a couple of empty scroll cases, a rope ladder, a regular ladder, a tent, a magic lantern...”

“Can’t you see in the dark?” Humphrey asked.

“... a non-magic lantern, which was oddly hard to find, caltrops, empty vials, block and tackle, a big ball of string...”

“Can you please just take out the acid?” Clive asked.

“I could,” Jason said. “I was thinking we might need to set up a way out, though. I don’t suppose anyone happened to bring a nice, long rope ladder? Oh, wait, I did. Because I prepared. Like an adventurer.”

“I did bring rope,” Humphrey said.

While Humphrey anchored Jason’s rope ladder to the ground using some long metal stakes Jason also had, Jason started tipping acid down the hole.

“Shouldn’t you go down to the bottom for that?” Humphrey asked, looking over.

“No he shouldn’t,” Clive said, shortly before gas started fuming out of the hole, Jason and Clive both stepping back. After the fumes cleared, Jason did the same again, then a third time. Looking down, he could see a hole bored right through the bricks.

Leaving Humphrey’s familiar to guard the top of the hole, the three adventurers climbed down through the hole on the rope ladder, ending up in a brick tunnel, tall and wide. It was completely empty, with no indication of moisture penetration. Motes of starlight emerged from Jason’s cloak, floating around them and lighting up the tunnel.

“That’s pretty,” Humphrey said.

“You have that and you brought two lanterns?” Clive asked.

“Preparedness,” Jason said. “What about our guy?”

Humphrey took out the tracking stone they were following to the dead adventurer, and since he would be standing at the front, tossed it to Clive.

“That’s unexpected,” Clive said.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“The tracking stone,” Clive said. “It’s still pointing straight down.”

Chapter 86: Some Kind of Secret

“This construction completely predates the founding of Greenstone,” Clive said, examining the side of the passage they were in.

“Maybe if we look around,” Jason said, “we might even find something more interesting than a blank, brick wall.”

“The construction itself is fascinating enough,” Clive said. “Are you familiar with the Sky River Aqueduct? The building techniques are identical. There’s no mortar connecting these bricks, yet they form a watertight seal. Remember that we’re under a swamp, right now.”

“That explains the stale air,” Jason said, making a distasteful expression.

“It must have been tricky to build,” Humphrey said.

“Beyond tricky,” Clive said. “Even with powerful and sophisticated magic, it would have been an outrageous undertaking.”

“Maybe it wasn’t built under a swamp,” Jason said. “If the same people who built this also built the big aqueduct, then they might have made this place when there was no delta. Before the aqueduct, the river would have spilled into Sky River Gorge, right?”

“That’s a good point,” Clive said.

“We should get moving,” Humphrey said. “We need to find a way down if we’re going to figure out what happened to this adventurer.”

Clive nodded his agreement, taking out a recording stone and throwing it up to float over his head. It joined the other crystal floating there, which continually restored mana. Humphrey had the same essence ability, both men acquiring it through the magic essence.

“I’m going to record everything we see,” Clive said.

They set off down the corridor, the floating motes of light from Jason’s cloak illuminating the way forward. What they found was a large complex buried underground, with very little to indicate its purpose. Every room and every corridor was empty, small chambers and large halls with nothing but bare, brick surfaces.

“Everything has to have been taken away,” Clive said. “Even if this place has been here for centuries, there would be at least remnants of furnishings.”

“This complex is at least the size of a large village,” Humphrey marvelled. “We haven’t even found a way down, yet.”

“It had to be the site of some massive undertaking,” Clive said. “No one builds all this for temporary occupation.”

Their exploration brought them to a stairwell, but the brick stairs were warped and moulded together. It looked like the steps had been melted and reset from a staircase to a ramp, covered in spiked protrusions.

“Some kind of stone-shaping power,” Humphrey said, crouching to look closer. “These stairs were altered to impede anyone looking to go down them. I think this place was attacked.”

“Maybe whoever they were defending against plundered everything away,” Jason said. “It might explain why nothing’s left.”

“Do we try and use these stairs?” Clive asked. “They don’t look pleasant to navigate, and given how big this place is, there should be another way down.”

“The others might be like this,” Humphrey said.

“We have time to check,” Jason said. “That looks entirely too pointy for my liking.”

They eventually found another set of stairs, this time in their original condition. They descended deeper underground, the stairwell switching back with multiple landings before they reached the next level down. Stepping out into another wide corridor, the difference to the floor above was obvious. The walls, floor, even ceiling were marred with signs of battle. Scorch marks, long gouges torn into the brickwork. A wild confrontation of essence users had clearly taken place. There was debris scattered out, mostly stone torn from the wall. As they moved cautiously forward, they looked around at the damage.

“This is incredible,” Clive said. “Almost nothing is known about the history of the region prior to the original Greenstone Colony. There may actually be answers somewhere in here.”

Checking side rooms off the corridor, they had been stripped clean like the floor above. Some were empty and untouched, others bearing the marks of battle. In one of them they found a pair of skeletons, although with no sign of clothing or equipment.

“These are too old to be our adventurer, right?” Humphrey said.

Clive pulled out the tracking stone, which still pointed downward.

“Based on the angle,” Clive said, “I would guess one more floor down. If it’s as far below this one as we’re below the one above.”

Humphrey crouched down to examine the skeletons.

“The short, broad skeleton is a runic,” he said. “You can still see faint traces of the natural runes on their bones. The big one is a draconian, from the skull shape.”

“Draconian?” Jason asked.

“They’re a race that claims to be descended from dragons,” Clive said, “although the claim is not fully substantiated.”

“They have scales and breathe fire,” Humphrey said. “I’d call that fairly substantiated.”
He panned his eyes over the ancient skeletons.

“You’d think there would be rotted clothes or old boots or something,” he said, around. “There’s no rusty old weapons, no tools or jewellery. These bodies were stripped.”

“This whole place was stripped,” Jason said. “It’s like whoever invaded didn’t want to leave a trace. Not of who they were, or even of who they were attacking.”

“Then why leave the bodies?” Humphrey asked. “Why not just take the bodies, instead of stripping them and leaving them behind?”

“No one likes carting bodies around,” Jason said. “No one you’d want to make friends with, anyway. Maybe they were convinced that just bodies wouldn’t tell people anything.”

“It could have been due to some religious practice,” Clive suggested. “A lot of religions have taboos around corpses.”

“Perhaps there’s more, bodies deeper in,” Humphrey said. “Maybe they’ll have answers.”

They continued exploring, finding more bodies that offered no more clues than the others. They came from every civilisation-building species; humans, elves and leonids, celestines, runic, smoulder and draconians.

They were starting to get a sense of how things were laid out, based on the two floors they had explored and ended up standing in front of a wall.

“More earth-shaping,” Humphrey said. “This should be the stairwell, shouldn’t it?”

“I think so,” Clive said.

The wall was made up of warped green stone, which had clearly spent time as a fluid before hardening. They continued searching, discovering another wall of warped stone.

“I’ll try and cut through with my big sword, unless someone has a better idea,” Humphrey said. “Do you have any more of that acid, Jason?”

“I used it all getting us in here,” Jason said.

“So much for being prepared,” Humphrey said, which got a snort of laughter from Clive.

“Oh, you’ve got jokes,” Jason said. He took a sledgehammer from his inventory, letting the head drop heavily to the floor.

Item: [Stonebreaker Hammer] (iron rank, common)

A hammer designed to be effective at breaking rocks (tool, hammer).

➤ Effect: Weight increases in accordance with the strength of the wielder.

“Try that,” Jason said.

Humphrey picked up the hammer, hefting it to test the weight.

“I think I might break something this light,” he said, then frowned, hefting it again. “No, there it is.”

“You were saying something about preparation?” Jason asked.

Clive shook his head.

“This thing gets heavier based on who holds it, right?” Humphrey asked.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Then how good a preparation is it when you’re not very strong?” Humphrey asked.

“That’s why I prepared you,” Jason said.

“Are you calling me a tool?” Humphrey asked.

“Humphrey,” Jason said, placing an earnest hand on the big man’s shoulder. “You’re far more useful and versatile than some ordinary tool. You’re a complete tool.”

“I’m also holding a hammer,” Humphrey said and Jason skittered back.

“As you were, mate,” Jason said.

Clive stood next to Jason as they watched Humphrey hammer away at the wall.

“That mouth of yours is going to get the cream kicked out of you someday,” Clive said.

“Been there, done that,” Jason said. “You can live your life avoiding consequences, or accepting them. I tried the first way in my old world, and I’m trying the other here.”

“And how’s that working out?” Clive asked.

“It feels good,” Jason said. “Wouldn’t recommend it without healing magic, though. Cripes, he’s putting a dent in that wall.”

Humphrey’s hammer blows were crashing into the wall with the regularity of an aggressive metronome. The stone was covered with impact marks all clustered together, spiderweb cracks spreading out. In short order, the hammer breached a hole in the wall, which let out a wave of wet air, stinking with rot.

All three hurried away from the hole.

“That is foul,” Clive said.

“It’s not dissolving monster bad,” Jason said, “but it’s bad.”

Humphrey looked disconsolately at the hole in the wall.

“We have to go down there,” he said unhappily.

Jason nodded.

“I wouldn’t want that to be my final resting place,” he said. “We have an adventurer to bring home.”

“How did they get down there?” Humphrey pondered. “It looks like all the entrances are sealed up.”

“That smell means the water got in somewhere,” Clive said. “Best guess? Some monster burrowed all the way down here, found a hole in the lower level and made it their lair. They killed the adventurer up on the surface, then dragged them down into whatever entrance the monster made for itself.”

“Makes sense,” Jason said. “We were expecting some kind of worm monster.”

Humphrey took a deep, unhappy breath.

“Enough stalling,” he said. “I’m going to bring down that wall.”

Soon there was enough of a hole for a person to pass through and Humphrey leaned in for a look.

“Looks like the stairs were reshaped to make this wall,” Humphrey said. “Can we get some light in here?”

One of the floating motes of light drifted through the hole and Humphrey looked again.

“Yeah, we’ll have to drop down,” he said.

They took another of Jason’s metal stakes and Humphrey hammered it into the floor to anchor a rope. Jason was the first one through the hole, drifting down a stairwell now more like an elevator shaft. He stopped when he reached water flooding the level below. Taking out his ten-foot pole, he tested the depth.

“There’s water down here,” he called up. “Shallow enough to walk through.”

The others slid down the rope, ending up knee-deep in black, icy water.

“I don’t care for this,” Clive said.

“Look around,” Jason said, standing on the surface. “We might find our answers down here.”

Like the levels above, the stairwell opened onto a wide central corridor. This one was full of debris, piled up on the flooded floor. There were large clumps of mud with roots jutting out, bricks wholly dislodged from the wall, revealing holes into walls of packed earth. The battle damage was even more extensive than the floor above, and they didn’t have to look far to see corpses.

“This is barely navigable,” Humphrey said. “Where does the tracking stone point?”

“Ahead and to the right,” Clive said, stone in hand. “We’re on the right level.”

“Then stay ready,” Humphrey said. “Whatever dragged our adventurer down here is likely to be lurking about.”

They started searching the semi-submerged level, the water and debris slowing their progress. Clive had the most trouble pushing his feet through the water. Jason stepped

lightly on the surface while Humphrey's strength ploughed through it as if the water weren't even there. They stopped at the entrance to a large hall, one of the largest rooms they had seen.

"Do you feel that?" Humphrey asked.

"Iron rank auras," Jason said.

"Not people, or monsters, though," Clive said. "Some kind of enchanted objects. Do we take a look, or keep following the tracking stone?"

"I don't like the idea of leaving an unknown potential threat behind us," Humphrey said.

"Let's check it out, then," Jason said.

They moved into the hall, Jason's light motes spreading out to illuminate the space. Flooding aside, it looked like the most intact room they had encountered so far. Everything was rotted, rusted or ripped, but the walls were lined with what looked like the hall's original contents. Vertical banners, blackened with rot hung from the walls. Stone statues were covered in black fungus and erosion, while weapon racks of metal and wood had largely collapsed as their integrity gave out.

At the back of the room were what looked like strange statues; mannequins of stone with segmented body parts connected by lengths of metal. They were the source of the auras, twenty-eight of them. They were standing in what was clearly meant to be four rows of ten, like soldiers at attention but a dozen spots were empty.

"Combat dummies," Humphrey said. "If they're giving off this strong an aura, they're almost certainly active."

"I'd like to take one," Clive said. "You can learn a lot about a culture from their magic items."

"We'll have to put them down first," Humphrey said. "They'll probably attack if we get close enough or unleash our auras."

"Let me put some spells on you, then," Clive said.

He cast two spells each on Jason and Humphrey. The first made them glow briefly with a red-gold light.

"Mantle of retribution," Clive said. "Anyone that hits you will take damage."

The second one caused a ring of runes to start floating around them like a slow-motion hula hoop.

"Rune mantle," Clive said. "It consumes a random rune to trigger an effect each time you're attacked."

"Do you have anything that doesn't require a monster to hit me?" Jason asked.

"If the monsters can't hit you," Clive said, "then what do you need extra magic for?"

“He’s got you there,” Humphrey said. Dragon-scale armour appeared around him, the giant wing sword appearing in his hands. It was too big to swing in most of the complex, but the hall they were in had plenty of room.

Clive pulled back a flap on the front of his robe to revealed a surprisingly ripped torso, covered in runes of blue and green. The runes floated off his body and through the air, where they came together as a ball of light that transformed into Onslow, Clive’s rune tortoise familiar. Jason didn’t bother pulling out Colin, who would have little impact on the combat dummies.

They formed up, Jason and Humphrey in front, Clive in the rear with his familiar.

“Ready?” Humphrey asked, looking at the other two.

“Ready, Jason said, drawing his sword.

Clive pulled out a magic wand.

“Ready.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “Auras out.”

-
- You are in the area of an ally’s [Dragon Might] aura. Your [Power] and [Spirit] attributes are increased.
 - You are in the area of an ally’s [Lord of Magic] aura. You are continually gaining mana-per-second. Resistance to mana drain effects is increased.
-

The combat dummies reacted immediately, all twenty-eight moving toward them. Like Clive, they were hampered by the knee-deep water, but Clive was the first to act. His wand fired a bolt of red and silver light that blasted the arm off a combat dummy.

At his side, a bolt of lightning flashed from Onslow’s shell. It arced out to one of the peripheral dummies, avoiding Jason and Humphrey. Clive touched a hand to the rune that dimmed on Onslow’s shell, feeding mana into it. The rune started to slowly light back up.

Humphrey stepped forward, cleaving two dummies into pieces with one strike as he waded into the most clustered group. Red light flashed as the dummies lashed out, Clive’s retribution spell blasting chunks from their blunted limbs as they hammered on Humphrey’s armour.

Jason was more mobile, using hit and run strikes as he danced over the surface of the water, building up charges on his sword. Unhindered by the environment, he ran rings around the dummies. When a cluster converged on him, he tossed out a throwing dart from the bandolier on his chest, one of the darts with the red cord. It blasted a dummy apart and he escaped through the gap.

Clive focused on using ranged attacks to pick off outliers before they could swarm the other two. Along with his wand and his familiar, he made judicious use of his essence abilities. He cast a spell and a rune lit up under the water. A pair of dummies wandered over it in pursuit of Jason and with a snap of Clive's fingers, an explosion blasted them to pieces, spraying water all through the hall.

Humphrey had torn apart half the dummies alone by the time he slowed down, most of his special attacks on cooldown. Just strength and skill was enough to keep demolishing dummies, though, and his sword continued to smash them apart. Jason was getting into top gear as Humphrey was winding down, his sword now exploding the dummies on contact.

The last few dummies were made short work of. The three regrouped at the end of the fight, chugging potions and eating spirit coins.

"Good fight," Humphrey said. "I think we work well together. Get a healer on board and we have the makings of a team."

"I don't know about that," Clive said. "I've been out on the odd contract with Jason, lately, but my research and duties with the Magic Society consume much of my time."

"Look where we are," Humphrey said. "You're about to sort through what's left of these ancient combat dummies looking for secrets hidden away for centuries. Can you do that in your study room at the Magic Society?"

"No," Clive mused as he looked around the hall. "That's a not-inconsiderable point."

"Did those dummies feel familiar to you?" Jason asked Humphrey. "The way they fought?"

"They fought like you," Humphrey said. "I wasn't sure at first, because the water slowed them down, but that was your fighting style, right?"

"I think so," Jason said.

"Where did your style come from?" Humphrey asked. "I'd never seen it until you and I started sparring."

"I don't know," Jason said. "It's some kind of secret."

"Then let's look around while Clive picks up broken dummy parts," Humphrey said. "Maybe we can learn that secret."

Chapter 87: Can't Lose

"I think I've found something," Humphrey called out and the others moved over to join him.

"Look at this," Humphrey said, pointing to the wall. "See how the mould has grown in the crack between bricks, all the way down this line?"

"Secret door?" Jason asked.

"That's what I'm thinking," Humphrey said. They glanced at each other with mirrored grins.

"Let me take a look," Clive said. He started drawing in the air with his finger, a magic circle appearing in the air in glowing golden lines. When he was done, the circle vanished and runes started glowing on the wall, in the shape of a door.

"There you have it," Clive said.

"Nice one, Clive," Jason said. "How do we open it up?"

Clive looked over the runes, then reached out to touch several in quick succession. He stepped back as a section of wall swung out. They all stepped into the room beyond, which looked to be some kind of book repository. Unfortunately, most of the room's contents had been taken by rot. There was a breach to open earth in one of the walls, exposing the room to untold years of destructive moisture.

"This is a real shame," Clive said as they started looking around.

"I'm seeing a lot of residual magic," Humphrey said, picking up the leather cover of a book whose pages had long since turned to wet pulp.

"Me too," Clive said. "I'm guessing these were all skill books."

"Would have been worth a fortune, intact," Humphrey said.

"It also might have given us some idea of who inhabited this complex," Clive said. "Sometimes a storage room like this will keep the most important items sealed away, so there may still be something to find."

They searched through long-rotted shelves until Humphrey uncovered a group of metal boxes. Three of the five had been breached, but two looked to be still intact. They were large enough that each could contain several skill books.

"We shouldn't open them here," Clive said. "The contents are definitely old and may be fragile. I have tools back at the Magic Society that would let me open them more carefully."

"Sounds good," Jason said. "Bag them for later and we'll go find this adventurer."

Clive carefully lifted the boxes with Humphrey's help and stowed them in his storage space.

"I'm a bit worried about the state we'll find this adventurer in," Jason said as they left the training hall and its hidden storeroom behind. "What if he's just been eaten and all we find is his badge inside a monster."

"Then that's what we bring back," Humphrey said.

They continued exploring the flooded and debris-filled lower level. Rather than continue on through the filthy, icy water, Clive was now sitting atop his tortoise familiar. Not long after leaving the training hall, something came shambling slowly toward them.

"Zombies?" Humphrey said. "How can there be zombies?"

There were dead bodies making a slow, stumbling path in their direction, looking like skeletons stuffed with mud. Humphrey lunged forward, using his smaller sword in the confines of the tunnel. He still made short work of the animate corpses. Clouds of mist rose off them as Humphrey cut them to pieces.

"Why wouldn't there be zombies?" Jason asked as Humphrey walked back to them, coughing from the zombie mist. "Honestly, I'm surprised it took them this long to show up in a place like this."

"The delta is flush with vital energy," Clive explained. "The water coming out of the astral space that feeds the river is full of it. All that life-force prevents undead monsters from manifesting anywhere in the delta."

"Then how are there zombies here?" Humphrey asked, still coughing.

"You don't sound so good," Jason said. He held his hand in front of Humphrey and chanted a spell.

"Feed me your sins."

➤ You have cleansed all instances of [Corpse Fungus] from [Human].

"Corpse Fungus?" Jason asked.

"What's that?" Humphrey spluttered as he escaped the cloud.

"It's a fungus that uses corpses to propagate itself," Clive said. "It takes over a corpse, makes it ambulate like a zombie, then blows spores over any living creature it comes across. Not a zombie at all; just a regular dead body being moved about."

"What do those spores do?" Humphrey asked.

"They grow inside you," Clive said. "Kill you, eventually, but there's plenty of time to find a healer or an alchemist. If you don't have Jason on hand."

They waited for the spore cloud to settle before continuing on, Jason cleansing Clive and Humphrey again, just in case. They followed the tracking stone, closing in on the dead adventurer's badge. It led them to the most ruined part of the complex, where large sections of brickwork had been torn out of the walls, mud encroaching on the rooms and tunnels. At the end of another large hall, all the brickwork from the back wall was gone, with what looked like a giant, burrowed tunnel beyond.

"What needs a hole that big to get around?" Humphrey asked.

"Nothing good," Clive said.

They set off down the earthen tunnel, still knee-deep in water. It didn't seem to bother Onslow, with Clive riding on his back, or Jason, who walked along the surface. Humphrey was left to trudge unhappily through water and mud. The tunnel turned out to be fairly short, breaking back into another room of the complex. It was another large hall, very much demolished. In addition to the breach they entered through, much of the brickwork had been torn out. In its place, recessed alcoves looked like they had been dug out by claws, each one stuffed with a dead creature. Most were swamp creatures, although there were a few dead people as well.

"This one," Clive said, tracking stone in hand. He led them to one of the bodies, an elf in tattered armour. Jason took a casket from his inventory, supplied to him by the Adventure Society.

➤ **Objective complete: Retrieve the remains of your fellow adventurer 1/1.**

While he and Clive placed the body inside, Humphrey was looking around with a concerned expression.

"We should take it and go," Humphrey said. "Fast."

"What is it?" Jason asked. The contract wasn't just to retrieve the body but also kill the monster. If Humphrey wanted to bail out, it was probably bad.

"A swamp-dwelling monster whose appearance could be mistaken for a wyrm, burrows deep into the earth and builds elaborate larders to fill with prey," Humphrey said, and Clive's eyes went wide.

"Yes, we should go," he agreed. "Now."

Jason looked down as a ripple of water came from the corner of the room, spreading over the water that covered the floor. It suddenly occurred to him that he had no idea if all the water was knee-deep. Something bulged up from the surface in the corner of the room. Water poured off its huge mound of a body as it rose up from a submerged tunnel. The

creature was a brown, fleshy mass, with five serpentine necks ending in heads like that of a snake, if snakes had a lot more teeth.

“Marsh hydra,” Humphrey said breathlessly.

None of them had felt its aura approach, but now it washed over them with bronze-rank strength. It moved to block them from the tunnel they had entered through. Its thick legs ended in webbed claws poorly-suited for land movement. Humphrey could have escaped, but seeing Clive and Jason would be cut off, he moved away from the tunnel to join them. The creature, apparently satisfied at boxing them in, eyed them patiently with its five heads.

“Marsh hydras heal fast,” Humphrey said. “Combined with bronze rank toughness, our only chance is that you can pile up enough afflictions to kill it, Jason. Clive and I will try and distract it so you can get close.”

“No need for close,” Jason said. “I’ve got some new tricks; just keep it off me and I’ll get it done.”

Four tree-trunk legs supported the fleshy mound of the hydra’s body, the long necks rising off it like trees on a hill. The creature lumbered towards them and Humphrey went to meet it. Clive patted Onslow on the shell and pulled a long staff from his storage space. It had a large, clear crystal set into the end, and vibrant red-orange runes that shone like fire carved down the full length. Aiming it at the hydra like a gun, a blast of flaming energy launched out, striking one of the hydra’s heads. The runes on the staff dimmed as the struck head shrieked. Its skin was blackened, but the damage appeared superficial.

Jason slit the back of his hand with his wristband razor, sending leeches splashing into the water. They quickly made their way across the room to crawl up the hydra’s trunk legs and swarm over its body.

-
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Bleeding].
 - [Bleeding] does not take effect.

 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Leech Toxin].
 - [Leech Toxin] does not take effect.

 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Necrotoxin].
 - [Necrotoxin] does not take effect.
-

“That’s not good,” Jason muttered. Even with his aura that penalised resistances, almost every affliction his leeches piled on was shrugged-off by the bronze-rank monster.

Fortunately, Colin offered both quality with quantity, and some of the afflictions were getting through. Jason followed up with spells.

"Your fate is to suffer."

-
- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Inexorable Doom].
 - [Inexorable Doom] does not take effect.
-

Jason cast the spell a second and third time, each resisted.

"I'm going to need some time," he called out.

Jason would have liked to toss Humphrey his dagger, which inflicted poison and ignored bronze-rank resistances. Humphrey hardly had time to switch out weapons, however, and trading the enormous sword that was barely holding its own for a small dagger would likely get him killed.

Humphrey's huge sword, dragon-scale armour and incredible strength were a terror to iron-rank monsters, but they were barely keeping him alive as heads the size of his torso snapped at him. Even his strongest attack, the unstoppable force, was significantly more stoppable against the power of the bronze-rank hydra. Only the added attention of Clive and his familiar allowed Humphrey to hold out. Through their combined efforts, Humphrey was finally able to cleave off one of the heads.

"Watch out for the head growing back," Clive called out, but to his surprise, there was no sign of it doing so. From what he had read about the creature, its heads should grow back fast enough to see it happening.

-
- [Marsh Hydra] has regenerated enough health to negate [Bleeding].
 - [Leech Toxin] has been consumed to reapply [Bleeding] on [Marsh Hydra].
-

In the meantime, Jason was casting spell after spell.

"Your fate is to suffer."

-
- Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Marsh Hydra].
-

"Yes!"

With inexorable doom in place and the leeches making slow but constant progress, the afflictions would stack up. Jason raised his hand again and cast one of his new spells.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

-
- Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Sin].
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Mark of Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Mark of Sin].
 - [Mark of Sin] does not take effect.
-

His sin curse was one of the keys to his escalating damage combination. His new spell allowed him to apply it at range, so long as it wasn't resisted. It was the first of Jason's two new spells. The broker he went to had taken a while to find a good trade for the rat essence, as it was not popular with anyone who could afford to be choosy. He could have traded it for a half-dozen awakening stones of the fish but instead went with two stones of the magus. It was a common awakening stone, especially with humans. It almost guaranteed a spell, which humans rarely awakened, with an outside chance of a coveted summoning or familiar power.

Ability: [Castigate] (Sin)

- Spell (curse, holy)
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Burns a painful brand into the target, inflicting slight transcendent damage and the [Sin] and [Mark of Sin] conditions. The brand cannot be healed so long as the target retains any instances of [Sin].

 - [Sin] (affliction, curse, stacking): All necrotic damage taken is increased. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

 - [Mark of Sin] (affliction, holy): Prevents aura retraction. Cannot be cleansed while target retains any instances of [Sin] or [Legacy of Sin].
-

"How's it going?" Humphrey called out.

"It's coming along," Jason called back.

"If it could come any faster, that would be really, really great!"

Jason kept casting spells until his mana ran low, chugged a mana potion from his belt and started casting some more.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

-
- Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Mark of Sin] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] has resisted [Mark of Sin].
 - [Mark of Sin] does not take effect.
-

Jason let out a whoop of triumph. The mark of sin effect was of little use in the current battle, so it didn't matter if it was resisted. With inexorable doom, sin and Colin's necrotoxin in place, the damage would increase exponentially.

"Everything's done," Jason called out. "Stay strong and we have it!"

"I'm not sure if waiting is an option," Clive said, his voice enervated. He drank a mana potion even as he poured his mana into his familiar. One of the runes on Onslow's shell lit up, then dimmed immediately as a cloud rose up out of his shell. Water bullets erupted out of the cloud, pounding into the hydra.

In front of the hydra, Humphrey was bloody and exhausted but defiant, pushing on through sheer force of will. The hydra was doomed now, but it could still take them with it. Jason resumed casting spells, trying to hasten its demise.

"Bleed for me."

- Spell [Haemorrhage] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Marsh Hydra].
 - [Marsh Hydra] is already affected by [Bleeding]. [Bleeding] is refreshed.
 - Spell [Haemorrhage] has inflicted [Sacrificial Victim] on [Marsh Hydra].
-

"First time," Jason cheered. "Good stuff."

The affliction reduction from Jason's aura had limited effect at the start of the fight, but it penalised resistances further for each instance of the sin curse. With the curses now stacking up, afflictions from both Jason and Colin were becoming more reliable, including those from Jason's other new spell.

Ability: [Haemorrhage] (Blood)

- Spell (wounding, unholy)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Inflicts or refreshes the [Bleeding] and [Sacrificial Victim] afflictions.

- [Bleeding] (affliction, wounding): Deals ongoing damage by causing or increasing blood loss. As a wounding effect, this condition absorbs and negates an amount of incoming healing, after which this affliction immediately ends.

- [Sacrificial Victim] (affliction, unholy): Any drain attacks or blood afflictions suffered have increased effect.

The sacrificial victim affliction would help bleed away the hydra's health, but the massive monster had a lot of health to bleed. Clive had a huge amount of mana, most of which he had thrown at the monster. He no longer had enough to recharge the powers of his rune tortoise familiar.

With his afflictions applied, Jason could do little else without wading into melee range. He was confident that would lead to his near-immediate death, probably getting Humphrey killed trying to save him. He had one more spell, but the thirty seconds between casts felt like an eternity.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 1 (06%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.

Despite the afflictions built-up on the hydra, it's resistance to iron-rank damage prevented the spell from taking full effect. Jason had nothing left to contribute.

Humphrey's will was strong, but he had been going full power from the beginning. The hydra was finally fading, but Humphrey was fading faster. He staggered back one

step, then another. It looked like he could barely lift his sword, but he did so again and again.

“I don’t think I can hold it,” Humphrey called back, despair in his voice.

Jason let out a reluctant groan, then steeled his shoulders.

“I’m coming in,” he yelled.

“You’ll die!” Humphrey said as Jason appeared behind him.

“Then I guess you’d better protect me,” Jason said.

Humphrey glanced at Jason, seeing nothing but determination. He turned back to the monster, letting out a wild yell. His wavering stance straightened, waning arms renewed. Where he had been reduced to only defending, he once again went on the attack. Light started shining out of him, the blue-grey of iron rank. He didn’t notice Jason stepping back into safety.

“I was just trying to get him pumped-up,” Jason said, looking at the light shining from Humphrey. “What is that?”

“Racial gift transfiguration,” Clive said in wonder. “It seems his drive to protect is so strong it literally changed who he is.”

Clive gave Jason a wild grin.

“If he can manage that, how can I not make a full effort?” he asked.

Clive glared at the hydra with renewed determination. The red glow of life-force emerged from his body and started turning blue as he burned life-force to restore his emptied-out mana. Clive’s skin turned pale and he gritted his teeth against the pain, but kept pushing for more mana.

Clive dropped his staff into the water and held both hands out in front of him, palms facing out. A magic circle appeared in front of them, turning in the air. It grew and changed, becoming more complicated as Clive pumped more mana into it, then chanted out a spell.

“Feel the annihilation of reality unmade.”

A beam of rainbow light blasted out of the circle in front of Clive, locking onto one of the hydra’s four remaining heads. The rainbow colours started fading, one by one, until all that remained was black. The beam vanished and the hydra’s head was annihilated as a vortex of darkness replaced it. The vortex sucked in air, causing the hydra’s severed neck to flap like a streamer in the wind as the vortex sucked at it.

The spell ended, the dark vortex fading into nothing. The neck dropped limp, as did Clive, who fell to his knees in the water. Onslow gave him a concerned nudge and Clive supported himself on the tortoise’s neck.

Jason looked at Clive, who had burned himself out to contribute. He looked at Humphrey, who had given up escape to be the shield between the monster and his companions.

“I don’t know what kind of person deserves friends like this,” Jason muttered to himself, “but I’m pretty sure it’s not me.”

A blue-grey light lit up from within Jason, just as had from Humphrey. Jason looked at the glow shining from underneath his skin.

-
- **Outworlder racial ability [Interface] has evolved to [Party Interface].**

Ability: [Party Interface]

- **You have access to a contacts list. You can form a party by sending invitations through the contacts list.**
 - **Party members can access interface features so long as they remain in the party.**
 - **Party members have access to party chat and voice chat. These functions have limited range.**
 - **Quests from the [Quest System] can be shared with party members. Quest only remains available to party members while they are in the party.**
-

“You too?” Clive asked wearily, still draped over Onslow’s neck. He watched the light shine out of Jason.

“I’m not sure it actually helps, right now,” Jason said.

Clive’s spell claiming the monster’s second head had marked the turning of the tide. Necrosis was turning the hydra’s flesh to rot as its blood, black with venom, spilled into the water. Humphrey’s sword claimed a third head and the hydra moved to flee, heading for the submerged tunnel.

As the monster was about to plunge into the water, a huge shab rose up from the depths, gaping shark mouth biting savagely into the hydra’s flesh. The shab then turned into a colourful parrot, flying over to land on Onslow.

“Nasty, nasty,” it said, spitting out black fluid.

The injured hydra was confused long enough for Humphrey to come up behind it and bury his sword in a rear leg. Jason followed, digging into the other rear leg with his dagger. The wound wasn’t deep compared to the size of the creature, and his special attack, punish, only dealt a small amount of necrotic damage. However, every instance of the sin curse amplified that damage and the hydra had been accumulating them for a while. The

flesh blackened and withered, shrinking away from Jason's slicing blade. Side-by-side, Jason and Humphrey laid into the crippled monster until it fell still.

Quest: [Contract: Fallen Comrade]

- Objective complete: Eliminate the monster that killed your fellow adventurer 1/1.
 - Reward: [Awakening Stone of Absolution] (Jason Asano).
 - Reward: [Awakening Stone of the Champion] (Humphrey Geller).
 - Reward: [Ring of the Hydra] (Clive Standish).

 - Quest complete. All party members receive:
 - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins].
 - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins].
-

Humphrey went over to Stash the parrot, who was hopping up and down excitedly on Onslow's shell.

"Stash chase worm! Stash chase worm!"

The parrot flew toward Humphrey, transforming into a puppy mid-air and landing in Humphrey's arms. Humphrey was covered in hydra blood, but Stash didn't seem to mind the mess as much as Humphrey's armour. Humphrey dismissed the hard scale armour and Stash snuggled into his chest as Humphrey scratched him behind the ears.

The three adventurers stood exhausted, looking at each other and the dead hydra.

"Clear eyes, full hearts," Jason said.

"What?" Clive asked.

Jason waved a dismissive hand.

"Ah, we'll deal with that later," Jason said.

Chapter 88: The Nature of Absolution

Rufus was at the Geller Estate, discussing property development for the Geller family/Remore Academy joint training facility. In a conference room, he sat across a table from three members of the Geller family, while he was alone.

“There is plenty of unclaimed, undeveloped territory adjacent to the Geller Estate,” Rufus said. “Just give us a location that works best for the changes you want to incorporate, and we can go from there.”

“I know you have a good relationship with Danielle,” the man across the table said. “That doesn’t mean we’ll just acquiesce to your every need.”

Rufus ran a hand over his face.

“What exactly is it you think I want you to acquiesce to?” Rufus asked. “This joint venture has already been agreed to, and as for the details. I literally just said that we will adapt to your needs.”

Rufus got to his feet, placed both hands on the table and leaned toward the man on the opposite side.

“Clearly you are part of whatever internal faction within the Geller family that was against this agreement from the outset, and you ended up negotiating the details as part of whatever deal got your faction to accept the proposal at all. I don’t care about that; I have no interest in playing these games and I’m not going to be a pawn in your family’s internal politics.”

Rufus stood up straight and adjusted his light jacket.

“I know you want to drag this on as long as possible, so let me be explicit. When I come here tomorrow, I want to talk to someone who will actually work on this project instead of stalling it out. If that doesn't happen, then the Remore Academy will undertake the venture without Geller family involvement.”

The man in the middle of the Geller family representatives gave Rufus a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

“Are you sure you have the authority to make that decision, Young Master Remore?”

“I’m not an aristocrat,” Rufus said, “so that’s Mr Remore, to you. If you think I have anything less than full authority over this undertaking, then keep pushing and see what happens.”

Rufus took his unopened document satchel from the table and headed for the door.

“Mr Remore...”

“I’ll listen to what you have to say when you have something worth listening to,” Rufus said without turning around and walked out the door.

Rufus was unhappy as he left the building but calmed down walking through the Geller Estate. The fresh air and smell of verdant plant life improved his mood with every breath. He stopped short as something strange appeared in the air in front of him.

➤ You have received a voice chat request from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

“What?”

The whole way back through the delta, Clive had been pulling items from his inventory to look at them through Jason’s interface ability. After he almost crashed the airboat into the side of an embankment road, Jason kicked him from the party so he would concentrate on driving.

“Can I see that new ability of yours?” Jason asked Humphrey. They had learned that they could give party members permission to see each other’s abilities, which had Clive setting up plans to use Jason as a cataloguing tool.

“Sure,” Humphrey said.

Ability: [Hero’s Drive]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Human Ambition].
- Essence abilities advance at an accelerated rate.
- Enemies to not gain additional resistance and damage reduction against your abilities for being higher rank.
- When fighting higher-ranked enemies or when significantly outnumbered by enemies of the same rank or higher, time before abilities can be used again is reduced.
- Gain [Mana] and [Stamina] over time while this ability is active.
- When this ability is triggered, gain an immediate burst of stamina and mana. This can exceed normal mana and stamina limits so long as the ability remains active.

“That’s not bad,” Jason said. “I wouldn’t start running around looking for bronze-rank monsters to fight, though.”

“No fear on that front,” Humphrey said.

“You say that,” Jason said, “but I can’t help but think you’ll go diving in every time someone needs help.”

“That does seem like exactly what you’d do,” Clive agreed.

“There is one more thing I’d like to try out,” Jason said. He opened up his new contacts list. Most of the names were listed as out of area, his eyes lingering on the names of his family.

“Very out of area,” he muttered to himself.

Moving through the delta on an airboat, they weren’t too far from the Geller family estate. That placed several names on the list within range, including Rick, Phoebe and Danielle Geller. Rufus was also in range, which meant he was probably at the Geller Estate himself. Jason tapped on his name.

-
- You have sent a voice chat request to [Rufus Remore].
 - Voice chat with [Rufus Remore] has been initiated.
 - Party member [Humphrey Geller] has joined voice chat.
-

“Jason?”

Rufus’ voice had a slight distortion, like he was using a low-quality microphone.

“G’day, Rufus. Not sure if you can hear me over the sound of the airboat.”

“I can’t hear any airboat. What is this?”

“I had a racial gift evolution,” Jason said. “Humphrey too.”

“Uh, hello,” Humphrey said.

“What happened?” Rufus asked.

“We fought a bronze rank monster,” Jason said. “Well, I say we, but Clive and I mostly watched Humphrey do it.”

“That’s not the case at all,” Humphrey said.

“I don’t suppose you’re in the market for a funky bronze-rank whip?” Jason asked.

“We looted it from the monster and decided to sell it and split the proceeds.”

“What were you thinking, taking on a bronze-rank monster?” Rufus scolded. “Tell me everything.”

“You’re breaking up, Rufus,” Jason said. “Looks like we’re about to go out of range.”

“What does breaking up mean?” Rufus asked.

“What’s that Rufus?” Jason asked. “Ksht ksht ksht.”

Jason closed the connection.

“So,” he said, turning to Humphrey. “What do you think you’ll get from your awakening stone?”

“Should you have cut off your power like that?”

“It was bad reception,” Jason said.

“I’m not sure what that is,” Humphrey said, “other than an obvious lie.”

“I can do the ritual of awakening for those stones you got,” Clive said, “although maybe you should do it, Jason. You could probably use the practise.”

“Works for me,” Jason said.

“Do I get a say in this?” Humphrey asked.

“A ritual of awakening is basic stuff,” Clive said. “It’ll probably be fine.”

“What do you mean, probably?” Humphrey asked.

Clive’s study at the Magic Society campus was like an old second-hand book store combined with an antique shop, neither of which had been organised very well. Stacks of papers were stopped from falling off chairs by stacks of books piled on them; strange curios were placed absently on shelves, stands or inside glass cabinets.

“Is this safe?” Humphrey asked, looking around. His eyes could see the invisible magic Jason couldn’t.

“There’s a system,” Clive said unconvincingly as he shuffled through papers. “You know, Jason, the Magic Society would definitely pay you to use your ability for the cataloguing of items and abilities.”

“How much?” Jason asked

“Not adventurer money,” Clive said. “Decent, though.”

“I’d rather fight monsters than bureaucrats,” Humphrey said.

“I think I might be with you, there,” Jason said.

“The Magic Society does important work,” Clive said, still searching through the room for something. “You both have monster record tablets, don’t you? What about the essence list tablet? You think they just happen? People work hard to provide the information you rely on to stay alive, but adventurers just dismiss them as dull functionaries.”

Jason and Humphrey looked at each other and shrugged.

“That’s a fair cop,” Jason said.

“I never thought about that,” Humphrey.

“No one ever does,” Clive said unhappily. “Ah, I knew it was around here, somewhere.”

He dug out a magic wand from what looked to be a basket of sticks and led them to a door. Beyond was a room as sparse as the one outside was overstuffed. The only thing in it was a plain metal table in the middle.

“Close the door behind you, please,” Clive said.

From his storage space, he took out the two boxes they had retrieved from the underground complex, placing them on the table. Using the wand he had dug out from his study, he began moving it over the first box. Untold years worth of muck started rising off of it, right down to the oldest filth that had ingrained itself into the metal. The muck drifted through the air to the side of the room, collecting into unpleasant spheres. Leaving the spheres floating in the air, Clive carefully opened the box. Inside, the contents had been kept intact by the box's remnant magic. Clive took out three identical skill books and sat them the table.

“The condition is good,” Clive said, opening the cover of each to look at the title inside.

“The Way of the Reaper,” he read. “Form one, Way of the Hierophant. A martial art skill book?”

“Yes,” Jason said. “My martial art. Part of it, anyway. There are five forms in total.”

“There were five boxes,” Humphrey said.

“Just this one is the size of a normal skill book,” Clive said. “No wonder they split them up. A collected work would be huge.”

“No kidding,” Jason said.

The second case had another three books, this time the third form of Jason's martial art.

“You said you don't know where your martial art comes from, right?” Clive asked Jason.

“That's right,” Jason said. “My friends know, but they're keeping it secret for now. Something to do with a contract they took before I met them.”

“I'll do some digging, see what I can find,” Clive said. “In the meantime, how about we get an awakening ritual going?”

Inside one of the Magic Society's dedicated ritual rooms, Humphrey was standing in the middle of a magic circle, holding an awakening stone in his hands.

“Good,” Clive said approvingly. “You did well, Jason.”

The awakening stone disappeared into Humphrey's hand. His eyes glowed with swirling blue and gold light as the magic settled into him, then dimmed.

-
- Party member [Humphrey Geller] has awakened the dragon essence ability [Spartoi]. [Humphrey Geller] has awakened 5 of 5 dragon essence abilities.
 - Party member [Humphrey Geller] has awakened all dragon essence abilities. Linked attribute [Recovery] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank dragon essence ability.
 - Party member [Humphrey Geller] has completed essences.

Ability: [Spartoi] (Dragon)

- Ritual (summon)
 - Cost: Very high mana.
 - Cooldown: 6 hours.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
 - Effect (iron): Summons three dragon-tooth warriors.
-

“Finally,” Humphrey said.

“Finally?” Clive asked.

“My storage space power. It equips anything I summon with iron-rank magic equipment, but I didn’t have a summoning ability. My mother kept telling me it would come, but it’s a relief it finally has.”

“Spartoi,” Jason said. “That’s unexpected.”

“You’ve heard of them?” Humphrey asked.

“They’re part of a myth from my world,” Jason said. “Oddly enough, about a guy named Jason. He was on a quest, and to complete it he needed to pass these trials set by a king. One of the trials was to sow dragon’s teeth, and a bunch of soldiers sprung up. He threw a rock at one of them and they got confused and killed one another.”

“Was he the person you were named after?”

“No,” Jason darkly. “I was named after a footy player.”

“I guess you just hope no one throws a rock at them,” Clive said. “Want to try summoning them now?”

“I’ll wait until we’re outdoors,” Humphrey said. “I want to see what Jason gets.”

“Yes,” Clive said, turning enthusiastically to Jason. “The no-ritual awakening. I’ve been looking forward to this.”

“It’s really not that exciting,” Jason said. “Let me clean this up, first.” Jason took a cleaning cloth and some alchemical solution from the ritual room’s supply cabinet and wiped the residue of the magical circle off the smoothly-polished, stone floor.

“Now,” Clive said eagerly, as Jason put the cleaning supplies away.

Jason shook his head, taking out the awakening stone. It glowed with a white-gold light, like a holy object.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Absolution] (unranked, epic)

An awakening stone containing the power of redemption (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
 - Effect: Awakens an essence ability.

 - You have 5 unawakened essence abilities.
 - You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Absolution]. Absorb Y/N?
-

The stone vanished into Jason’s hand and his eyes started shining with golden light, which darkened until they were black orbs before returning to normal.

- You have awakened the doom essence ability [Blade of Doom]. You have awakened 3 of 5 doom essence abilities.

Ability: [Blade of Doom] (Doom)

- Conjunction (unholy)
 - Cost: Moderate mana.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 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.

 - [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.
-

The others were in Jason’s party and could see his ability description. They were all quiet for a moment as they looked at it.

“Uh... Jason?” Humphrey asked, breaking the silence.

“Yes, Humphrey?” Jason asked.

“That was an awakening stone of absolution,” Humphrey said.

“Yes it was,” Jason said.

“Didn’t it say something about containing the power of redemption?”

“I think it did, yes,” Jason said.

“And it gave you the power to conjure a cursed weapon,” Humphrey said.

“Strictly speaking,” Clive said, “it’s unholy, not cursed.”

“My mistake,” Humphrey said. “You used the power of redemption to create an unholy weapon.”

“It, uh, it does look like that, yeah,” Jason said.

“How did you manage that, exactly?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m not entirely sure,” Jason said.

“I don’t want to go accusing anyone of being evil,” Humphrey said.

“Very fair,” Jason said.

“I feel compelled to ask, though,” Humphrey said. “Jason, are you evil?”

“I think everyone has dark urges,” Jason said defensively.

“Yes, but not everyone has the blade of doom,” Humphrey said.

“I only had unawakened ability slots from the dark and doom essences,” Jason said.

“It would be a bit odd if I could conjure the wand of sunshine and rainbows.”

He held out his hand and an elaborate dagger appeared in it, made of black obsidian and blood-red crystal. The blade was jagged, slightly curved, and the single most sinister object Jason had ever seen.

“How did you get that?” Humphrey asked. “The awakening stone was absolution.”

“Well,” Jason said, turning the knife over in his hand. “I’m absolutely going to mess up some monsters with it.”

Chapter 89: Anti-Pirate Operations

Cassandra Mercer awoke to the sound of crockery and cutlery being laid out in the next room. She swung her legs out of bed and got up, stretching. She didn't want to put on fresh clothes before she had a shower, so she put on the only article of clothing she could see at a glance; Jason's shirt she had tossed aside the night before.

She stepped out onto the balcony to look out on the guild district street, busy with early morning traffic. Her normal routine was to start the day with physical training, but with the sand barge expedition, she would get exercise enough.

"Morning," Jason said, carrying a large tray onto the balcony, pausing to take in the sight of her leaning against the balcony rail in his shirt. Her delicate features were fresh-faced, despite having just woken up. Her long, dark hair was slightly mussed, which somehow was all the more appealing. A pair of toned, athletic legs emerged from the bottom of his shirt. She turned to give him an inquisitive look and he set out breakfast on the table under the shade awning.

"This is what you look like first thing in the morning?" he asked unhappily as they sat. "You realise the rest of us don't look that good even when we try our best?"

"I didn't hear you get up," she said, ignoring his question. "Are you an expert at sneaking out of bed in the morning?"

"Breakfast the next morning is my signature move," Jason said. "It's how I convince people they haven't made a horrible mistake."

He started lifting the covers off the trays he had laid out on the table, introducing them one by one.

"Scrambled egg hash brown nests; stewed apple oatmeal; cream cheese pancake balls with butter and syrup."

She picked out a pancake ball and bit into it. Her little moan of pleasure crawled into Jason's ear and gave his hind-brain a coquettish wave.

"Just keep bringing the pleasure?" she asked.

"That's the basic idea," Jason said.

"And how many people have you tried this signature move on exactly?" she asked, teasingly. "Am I not the first girl to visit the Asano lodgings?"

"You're the first woman," he said. "Girls don't interest me."

She let out a low, sultry laugh.

"You really are good at people, aren't you?"

“I have my moments,” he said.

“How about back in your world?” she asked.

“Nothing you haven’t heard before,” Jason said. “Heart-shattering first love, followed by a series of empty, self-pitying encounters. A few real relationships, here and there, but I didn’t leave anyone behind, if that’s what you’re asking.”

She smiled, finishing off the pancake ball and reaching for one of the hash brown nests. He poured two glasses of spiced milk from a pitcher. They took to the food, conversing in glances as they ate.

“You’re not going to ask after my sordid past?” she asked.

“You’re here now,” Jason said. “I don’t see how the rest matters.”

She tilted her head, considering him, curiously.

“I’m still trying to unravel you, Jason Asano.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Jason said, then glanced at the clock on the wall.

“Actually, not true,” he said. “We have to be at the marshalling yard in about an hour and a half. I should jump in the shower.”

“Oh,” she said with a smile, “I think we can figure out something much better to do in the shower than jump.”

The Adventure Society campus was only a short walk from Jason’s lodgings, so they walked in the late-morning sunshine. She had her adventuring gear in her storage space, so she didn’t need to detour home. There were around two-dozen people assembled for the expedition, and they were not the last to appear. Their arrival at the marshalling yard together did not go unnoticed. Cassandra went off to speak with friends, while Jason headed for a clump of Gellers. Cassandra’s gently brushing over his arm as they parted likewise caught the attention of prying eyes.

Jason walked across the marshalling yard under the unhappy glare of several young men. He felt several bronze-rank auras press rudely down on him, but ignored them as he greeted Humphrey, Phoebe and Gabrielle, the acolyte of knowledge. Others he recognised from his time in the mirage arena.

“I think you just made a lot of enemies,” Phoebe said. “Do you know how many of the bronze-rankers have designs on her.”

“You can’t live your life afraid of who won’t like you,” Jason said. “Speaking of which...”

Rick Geller and his team joined them. They exchanged greetings, although the healer, Claire, was giving Jason a spiteful look. Her twin, Hannah, cast a gaze in the

direction of Cassandra Mercer, who was chatting with her own friends. Cassandra glanced their way, eyes twinkling, then turned back to her own group.

The big man, Jonah, had squared himself in front of Jason.

"I have to admit," Jonah said, "you can fight. You know we would have pasted you in seconds on open ground, though, right?"

"That's hardly an incentive to fight on open ground then, is it?" Jason asked. Jonah let out a boisterous laugh, slapping Jason on the shoulder.

"That's a pretty good point," Jonah acknowledged. "How do you think you'll do on open sand, though? Sand pirates sound like a lot more fun than yet another bog monster, but it doesn't seem like your kind of terrain."

"Oh, I imagine I'll muddle through," Jason said.

"Jason took out two skimmers full of them," Humphrey said.

"I took one," Jason said. "My familiar took the other. I was pretty pleased with myself until I saw the aftermath of what Humphrey did. He halfway buried a skimmer with the pirates still in it. One swing of his sword."

"Everyone will get their chance today," Ernest Geller said, approaching the group. He had been in charge of their expedition when they first encountered the sand pirates, but today he was just one of the crowd. There were a couple of other bronze-rank family members with his as they joined the assembled Gellers and exchanged greetings.

"Hey, it's Mose," Jason said, spotting another member of their last expedition. "He's with his cousin; I might go say g'day."

"You know Beth Cavendish?" Humphrey asked.

"We've met," Jason said. "You know her?"

"When people talk about the potential of iron-rankers," Phoebe said, "she's the reason Humphrey comes in at number two. She leads her own team; all locals, unlike us."

"Good to know," Jason said, heading over. "I'll say g'day for you too, Humphrey."

The huge expedition had more than forty people. They were divided into teams of six iron-rankers, plus one bronze-ranker per team. Leading the expedition was a silver-ranker, an elf from the Cavendish family, plus Vincent as the Adventure Society representative.

Once the groups were organised, the plan was explained. What they had been calling the sand pirates, after their attack on the spirit coin convoy, were actually the Ustei Tribe, a group of nomads from a region to the north. The expedition was a show of strength, to bring the tribe into negotiations.

The best outcome was to peacefully convince the Ustei to either return north or agree not to attack any further spirit coin convoys. Failing that, they were to be captured by force and brought to the city for interrogation on what had brought them south in the first place.

A train of magically-powered carriages took the expedition to the edge of the delta, where each team boarded one of a half-dozen prepared sand skimmers. Jason spotted Clive, tapped as one of the skimmer pilots for another team.

Jason was placed in a group with the four members of Beth Cavendish's team, plus her cousin, Mose. Leading them was a bronze-ranker Jason didn't know but guessed to be from one of the lesser families in Greenstone. He was only twenty or twenty-one, and was eager to defer to Beth.

One of the members of Beth's team was a huge human named Hudson. He looked like Humphrey with twenty percent bonus person, to the point of being almost as large as Gary.

They boarded their skimmer and set off. They sailed over the sand, rushing through the scorched, desert air. Jason noticed the huge man looking at him.

"Something I can help you with?" Jason asked him.

"Aren't you that guy with the evil powers?" Hudson asked. "The one from the recording?"

Jason sighed.

"That's me," he said.

"You don't seem evil," Hudson told him.

"Then you have to ask yourself," Jason said. "Was I pretending to be evil then, or am I pretending to not be evil, now?"

"Which is it?" Hudson asked.

"Finding out would probably cost you more than you're willing to pay," said Niko, another member of Beth's team. Niko was a smoulder, a race Jason had only met a few of. They had dark skin, glowing red eyes and jet-black hair. All he really knew about them was that they had powerful earth and fire affinities, and that in spite of their sinister appearance, the few he had met were quite easygoing.

The skimmers paused to meet up with an adventurer assigned to keep track of the Ustei sand barge. He was a bronze ranker with the sand essence, completely at home out in the desert. He could move over the sands faster than a skimmer.

“As instructed, I didn’t hide that I was watching them,” the adventurer told the expedition leader. “They tried chasing me off a few times, but didn’t have anyone that could outpace me.”

"Any indication they'd be willing to talk to us, or do you think they'll attack on sight?" the expedition leader asked.

“Well, they might have been chasing me out of the desperate desire to have a nice chat,” the adventurer said. “I didn’t stick around to find out.”

“From what we know of the Ustei,” Vincent said, “so long as we show strength, they should be willing to talk.”

“I wouldn’t go into this expecting to come out unbloodied,” the expedition leader said.

“All we can do is our best,” Vincent said.

A ballista bolt from the sand barge penetrated the canvas canopy on the sand skimmer, pinning Mose to the base.

“Negotiations went badly, it seems,” Niko said, pulling the bolt out of Mose. Blood came with it, but Beth was already chanting a spell.

“Let the waters make whole that which has come to harm.”

Water appeared in front on Mose, flowing into the wound. It washed away the blood to reveal clean, repaired skin. The skimmer came to a stop and Hudson jumped out. The big man knelt to the ground, both palms flat in the sand. Suddenly a wall surged out of the sand to shield them from any further attacks.

“This is our regroup point,” Beth said. “If you get turned around or isolated, or the fight goes badly, get back here. Otherwise, everyone use Jason’s ability to stay in contact.”

With Jason’s new party interface ability, the group could stay in voice contact, even in the midst of battle.

“We’re going to move on the sand barge,” Beth directed, completely disregarding their bronze-ranker. “Hudson, front and centre. Emily and Niko flank, me and Mose, in the middle. Jason, you’re our roaming scout. If there’s any group looking organised and heading in our direction, warn us and sow some chaos. Is that something you can handle?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Beth turned to the bronze-ranker.

“You, uh... Clarence, was it?”

“Terrence,” the man said.

“You bring up the rear and keep a clear extraction path,” Beth instructed. “Losing is acceptable; failing to escape is not.”

They moved around the wall, The huge body of Hudson in the lead. As he moved, his body transformed from flesh to sandstone, which didn't slow him down at all. All around them, the other skimmers had come to a stop and the groups were moving on the sand barge, which had likewise pulled to a halt. People were pouring out of it by the dozen, charging wildly as they raised their weapons in the air.

Jason noticed some of the groups on his side were more organised than others. The two groups made up mostly of Gellers were moving in formation, much like Beth's team. Others seemed no better organised than the whooping Ustei charging in their direction. These less-controlled adventurers were already launching arrows, spears and bolts of magic, to limited effect with the groups were still at a distance.

Behind the charging Ustei, small but fast-firing ballistae were going to work. A bolt came sailing out of the air, only to be intercepted by an arrow shot by Emily, the archer from Beth's team. She was a celestine, with fair skin and golden eyes that matched her pixie-cut hair. She easily picked out the approaching bolt and fired an arrow that exploded on contact.

-
- You are in the area of an ally's [Invincible] aura. You have increased damage reduction against normal and iron-rank damage sources.
 - You are in the area of an ally's [Life-Bringer] aura. You recover health-over-time and healing abilities used on you are more effective.
-

Jason unleashed his own aura as his cloak of night appeared around him. Looking ahead, Ustei were charging at them in clusters.

“Watch your balance,” Hudson warned, and a large, flat block of sandstone rose from the sand under the team's feet. It started carrying them forward like a quick-moving raft.

Jason looked forward to the Ustei drawing closer.

“Sow some chaos, yeah?” he said to Beth.

“If you're up to it,” she said.

“I'll take a gander and see what I can do,” he said.

He took one of the throwing needles from the bandolier on his chest; one identified by a black cord. He pulled his arm back and tossed it in a long arc to land amongst the Ustei, engulfing a patch of them in a sphere of shadow. Jason stepped into Beth's shadow, falling through it like it was a hole in the ground. Shortly after, the group heard screaming mixed into the battle cries of the Ustei.

Chapter 90: The Path to Bronze

The sphere of shadows was short-lived, but Jason made the most of it as he danced among the blinded Ustei.

-
- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Ustei Warrior].
 - Weapon [Ruin] has inflicted [Vulnerable] on [Ustei Warrior].
 - Weapon [Ruin] has refreshed [Bleeding] on [Ustei Warrior]. [Bleeding] will absorb more healing before being negated.
-

His cloak and rapid teleportation made him impossible to pin down, even as the shadows faded. By the time they finally got a good look at his shadowy form, Beth and her team were crashing into the scattered cluster of Ustei. Some had fallen to slit throats or a dagger to the back of the neck, while others had poisoned blood streaming from non-lethal wounds. Some had no wounds at all, yet were bleeding from the eyes and nose from Jason's haemorrhage spell.

Only a fraction of the Ustei warriors were iron-rankers, with most having only one or two essences, if that. The results of clashing with a small army of adventurers were very bad for the nomads. Despite their numerical disadvantage, even the least capable adventurer teams were carving a path through the enemy.

Most of the teams had a bronze-ranker at the front, cutting down sand pirates like wheat in a field. Only as the adventurers neared the sand barge did the bronze-rank Ustei captains go out to meet them. Beth had her team's bronze-ranker at the back, but she didn't call him up as an Ustei captain bore down on them.

The stone raft they had been riding on sank back into the ground. It was replaced by a smaller block under the feet of Hudson, the huge man with the sandstone body. It carried him forward as a stone shield appeared in his hands, while the Ustei captain launched into some kind of charging special attack.

The captain's bronze-rank charging power shattered the stone shield and sent Hudson staggering back. The captain's own momentum was halted, however, and iron chains whipped up out of the sands to ensnare him. The chains started burning red hot, causing the captain to scream with rage. An arrow with a glowing head struck him and exploded. He surged forward, wrenching himself out of the chains.

Hudson, recovered from their initial clash, lunged forward as a huge stone hammer appeared in his hands for a powerful downward swing. The captain met the hammer with an upward swing of his large axe, shattering the hammer into shards. He turned his gaze on Hudson, not noticing the razor-sharp shards were not falling to the ground but instead floating in the air. Realisation came when the sharp fragments shot in to slice at his body.

The captain was on the back foot and Beth's team pressed hard, unleashing a barrage of attacks. Niko conjured an iron harpoon with a chain on the end, throwing it at the captain who deflected it with a bare hand. Other team members unleashed arrows charged with energy and magic bolts of fire and wind. Beth cast a spell that fired a thin jet of water, cutting like a bandsaw. The Ustei captain fell under the onslaught and the group reached the barge, alongside several other teams.

The sand barge was a terrifying edifice. First was the size, easily the equal of a passenger liner from Jason's own world. Jason had heard the entire Ustei tribe lived in it, and seeing it for himself, had no doubt it was true. After the sheer size, the next thing to be noticed were the giant bones that made up the basic structure. It looked like many leviathan creatures had their skeletons taken apart and reassembled as the framework of the vessel. Three giant skulls, each the size of a house, adorned the flat-nosed bow. The result was like a giant, undead chimera, stalking the desert.

The structure was akin to a passenger ferry, with multiple decks towering up into the air. Ramps had opened up in the side to disgorge the Ustei and were still doing so as the adventurer teams approached. Emily, the archer of Beth's team, fired an arrow that duplicated itself over and over as it sailed through the air. One became two, two became four, four became eight. It happened over and over in the short time the arrow was in flight until a storm of arrows rained down on the closest of the ramps. Ustei fell away, those waiting inside given pause as their fellows dropped away.

Hudson ploughed up the ramp, crashing into the people inside and making space for the others. They weren't the first to board. Other teams had made similar progress with other ramps, and Jason had noted the silver-rank expedition leader simply leapt through the air onto an upper deck. Jason followed Beth's team onto the lower decks, where he could make his home in the shadows.

Once onboard, things quickly devolved into a chaotic melee. The calibre of each Adventure Society team quickly started to show. Beth and Rick Geller's groups were both built around permanent teams, and the experience of working together became clear as their formations held, the whole stronger than the sum of the parts.

Other teams were quickly swept up in the chaos. Even Humphrey's group, made up of strong individual members but not a fixed team, had their formation split up. As for the less elite teams, the smaller confines started costing them casualties. Jason's power made him freely mobile, and he didn't gel with Beth's team who were used to one-another. Unneeded as part of the formation, Jason gave Beth a head's up as he moved to try and help the more overwhelmed individuals.

Colin proved to be an absolute menace after Jason sprayed him out over a crowd of Ustei. Jason instructed the leeches to go wild, knowing they shared his understanding of who was friend or foe. He suspected the occasional ally would suffer a nibble, but trusted Team Colin to largely stay on task.

Jason himself used a hit and run approach, doing his best to alleviate the pressure on other adventurers. Harassment and disruption were the goals as he was more interested in turning an ally's fight than finishing it for them. He did land lethal blows, when he could, but was satisfied with a savagely bleeding wound. Timed well, another adventurer could use the distraction to finish the job.

Auras were running wild through the barge, making it hard to pick out the rare iron-rankers among the teeming Ustei. When he found one he would pounce, leaving a full suite of afflictions before moving on. More and more he found people who had suffered the attentions of Colin and would find a dark space cast a spell. His cloak hid him away, while there was more than enough noise to mask a quiet chant.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

His punishment spell dealt instant damage for every affliction Colin had left on the victim. There was no indication of the spell other than the effect it produced, which startled the surrounding Ustei as one after another of their number withered and died without any apparent cause.

Other times he would instead use his feast of absolution spell to replenish stamina and mana. The stream of energy flowing from and enemy into his hand gave away his position, but having just been topped off he could teleport away freely, leaving confused enemies in his wake.

The adventurers slowly but surely gained control of the bottom deck. The bronze-rank Ustei captains held the various stairways leading up as they commanded the tribesmen to retreat up them. The bronze-rank adventurers started regrouping their teams, scattered in the melee. There had been a few casualties, but most were still alive and the healers went to work. Jason took the chance to gather up Colin, although many of the leeches were carried upstairs by the Ustei.

“Good work, team,” Jason told the leeches as he crouched down for them to enter a cut on the back of his hand. As he did so, the bronze-rankers gathered to discuss the next push.

“It’s going to be hard to establish a position on the higher decks,” Ernest Geller said. With the silver-ranked expedition leader somewhere in the upper decks, he asserted control of the gathered forces.

“We should gather all of our bronze rankers and force passage up one of the stairways and push through from there,” he said and the other bronze-rankers agreed. There was no strict chain of command, but Ernest’s confidence brought the others into line.

A team was assigned to watch their backs for an Ustei counter-strike from the other stairwells, then the attack on the next deck began. The tribesmen still had the numbers, but the essence disparity was the defining factor and the deck was soon wet with Ustei blood. After the organised surge up the chosen stairwell, the teams spread out from their foothold on the next level and things once again became chaos.

Jason spotted one of the weaker teams that had managed to stick together but were being hemmed in by Ustei. Their bronze-rank team leader went down, taking an Ustei captain with her. One of the iron-rankers took charge.

“Everyone use your coins!” he shouted out, and Jason watched them all slip silver-coins into their mouths.

“Oh, crap,” Jason muttered, looking around. He spotted Humphrey’s team through the wild melee and teleported over, arriving in front of their team leader, Ernest. The Gellers knew his cloak well, but he still pushed back the hood to prevent friendly fire.

“I just saw a team lose their leader and wolf down silver coins,” Jason said. “They’re going to need an extraction.”

“Idiots,” Ernest said. “Point the way.”

Jason did, sticking with Ernest’s team as they fought their way forward.

“You alright?” Humphrey asked Jason as they pushed forward.

“It’s a grim job,” Jason said and Humphrey nodded agreement.

They were closing in on the other team. Their burst of silver-rank power had overwhelmed the Ustei around them, but that fleeting strength was giving way to weakness as the power of the coins left them. Seeing their enemies flag, the Ustei pushed harder, but reinforcements arrived for the weakened adventurers in the nick of time.

Humphrey exploded into the Ustei like a cannonball, a single, sweeping stroke cutting three of them clean in half at the waist. His team capitalised on the momentum to surge

into the tribesmen. Jason appeared behind the largest cluster, once again unleashing a spray of Colin. The adventurers took control, Humphrey's team surrounding the coin-weakened adventurers. Their healer was going to work on the fallen team leader, who was badly hurt. An iron-rank healer wasn't enough to get a severely-injured bronze-ranker immediately back into the action.

"We'll get them out," Ernest told Jason. "You go back to making a mess."

Jason nodded, flicking his hood back up.

Eventually, the adventurers claimed full control of the great sand barge. While the main force was fighting below, the expedition leader had leapt straight to the upper decks. After crashing his way through the Ustei leadership, he confronted the only silver ranker they had, their tribal chief. Demonstrating the difference between a fully-trained adventurer and a nomad, the battle between silver-rankers was punishingly one-sided.

Once the clan chief fell, the surviving Ustei leadership gave up. It took time to filter down the decks of the sand barge as fighting continued, but the now-decimated Ustei tribe surrendered.

Jason was glad he had no part of the post-battle organisation. Imprisoning the Ustei in their own barge was a logistical nightmare, especially with some of what they found on board. The women and children had been locked away like slaves, which was borne out when they found the actual slaves in essentially the same conditions.

Waiting around with the other iron-rankers not roped into assisting, he sat down to meditate in the shade of the sandstone wall Hudson had made in the beginning.

The battle had been long, wild and quite unlike anything he had experienced. Rather than carefully choosing his moments he had been flickering through the battle, seizing chances as he found them. His familiar proved incredibly powerful, and Jason's abilities saw plenty of use. He had even taken the chance to use his new spells as much as he could.

Humphrey found him, saw him meditating, and sat down to do the same. The battle was as new an experience for him as it was for Jason, and he had his own insights to consolidate. Beth's team spotted them as they returned, the wall being their team's regrouping point. They looked at Jason and Humphrey, sitting cross-legged in the sand.

"They're training now?" Mose said.

"We are too," Beth told him, drawing a groan from Hudson.

“No slacking,” Beth told him. “You can have all the natural talent in the world, but dedication is what makes you the best.”

At her command, the others joined Jason and Humphrey. Not all of them were able to transition to a meditative state right after the battle, but at the very least they worked on clearing their minds.

Caught up in meditation, Jason was shaken out of it by a feeling of pressure in his body. He got up and staggered to the sandstone wall, using it to support him as a wave of weakness overtook him. He started coughing up gelatinous phlegm into the sand, speckled with blood. Then a blue-grey light started shining out of him and his body surged with strength.

-
- Ability [Haemorrhage] (Blood) has reached Iron 0 (100%).
 - Ability [Haemorrhage] (Blood) has reached Iron 1 (00%).

 - All [Blood Essence] abilities have reached [Iron 1].
 - Linked attribute [Power] has increased from [Iron 0] to [Iron 1].

 - Progress to bronze rank: 1.25% (2/4 essences complete).

Jason pushed himself off the wall, feeling slightly dizzy. He noticed the others had all broken their meditations and stood up. They were looking at him with smiling faces.

“That first attribute bump is a little rough, isn’t it?” Beth asked.

Jason nodded, uncharacteristically silent.

“Congratulations,” Humphrey said, giving Jason a slap on the back that almost sent him sprawling into the sand.

“You’ve taken your first step,” Beth said, giving him a pat on the arm. “Welcome to the path to bronze rank.”

Chapter 91: Life & Death

Jason let out a contented sigh.

“This is nice,” he said, then picked up a sandwich and bit into it.

The picnic at the Island’s park district had plenty of people. Danielle Geller was at a picnic table, which she was sharing with Thalia Mercer, Rufus and Vincent. Jory was sitting at another table with Clive and the brother-sister pair of Rick and Phoebe Geller. Gary was sitting in a folding chair with a sandwich the length of Jason’s arm.

“You know you could cut that into smaller pieces, right?” Farrah asked him.

“Then it wouldn’t be an enormous sandwich,” Gary said. “It would just be a bunch of sandwiches.”

Cassandra was sitting next to Jason on a blanket. Humphrey and Gabrielle had their own blanket, like Jason and Cassandra, but Humphrey kept shooting nervous glances at his mother watching over them.

“It feels like it’s been all work and no play lately,” Jason said. Sand pirates, underground lairs, sand pirates again.”

“There’s been a little play,” Cassandra said, lips curving in a tantalising arc.

“You are a beacon of luminous delight in a dark sea of obligation,” he said and gave her a gentle kiss.

“See?” Gabrielle said. “It isn’t that hard.”

Humphrey looked nervously at his mother again.

“Uh...”

Rufus stood up from his position at the picnic table, raising up a glass.

“Here’s to our iron-rankers and their first bronze-rank monster,” he said. “Not to mention two racial power evolutions.”

As the others raised their glasses, Jason smiled, Humphrey looked embarrassed and Clive looked surprised to be involved at all.

“Jason,” Rufus said. “You’ve come a long way from the confused, half-naked man we met in basement in a cannibal’s cage.”

“You say that like we weren’t in cages too,” Gary interjected.

“Thank you, Gary,” Rufus said, then turned back to Jason. “Even then, you were something special. Something strange, certainly, but also special. Some of us wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for your actions that day. Now, look at you. Taking down bronze-rank monsters; terrorising Danielle’s poor trainees. We’re all adventurers here and, I think,

rather good ones. You may have come to us from very far away, but you belong here, just as much as any of us.”

Jason rubbed a hand over his mouth, misty-eyed. He got up to his feet, glass in hand and looked over the assemblage of friends.

“Thank you, Rufus,” he said. “Thank you all. I’m a stranger in a strange land, and I know I can be... difficult, even at the best of times. You’ve all helped me, guided me, taught me, challenged me. Put up with me, more often than not.”

“No kidding,” Farrah called out.

“Quiet, you,” Jason admonished. “I’d just like to express how grateful I am to all of you. I’ve built a better life here in months than I did in my old world in years, and I have all of you to thank for that. I couldn’t ask for better people to be stuck down a hole with, which is lucky, because I recently was.”

He raised his glass.

“Here’s to all of you.”

“That’s right!” Gary yelled out, hoisting a goblet the size of Jason’s head. “We’re pretty great.”

“You haven’t regaled us with the story of fighting the marsh hydra yet,” Farrah said. “By the time we got back from our own contract, Cassandra had already whisked you away.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “Clive, Humphrey, get over here; we have a tale to tell.”

They left out the part about the skill books. Jason suspected it intersected with the confidential mission that brought Rufus, Gary and Farrah to Greenstone, and after some consideration, asked Humphrey and Clive to stay quiet. He decided not to put the adventurers in a position where they had to ask Jason to stop investigating, although it was Clive doing the actual investigating.

At the end of the tale, Jason pulled out the item they had looted from the hydra. It was a bronze-rank, five-tailed whip with biting mouths at the end of each tail. The whip tails seemed to have a life of their own, waving madly and snapping at people as Gary waved it around. Jason had handed it over to demonstrate, as he couldn’t use bronze-rank items himself.

Humphrey had his own news, having been promoted to two-star, which drew another round of toasting. By this point people were starting to get woozy, especially with Gary trying to get people to toast to day-drinking. Even Jason was in his cups, sharing the same bronze-rank liquor as his freinds to get past his resistances.

“Why didn’t we all get awakening stones?” Jason asked Vincent, the only Adventure Society official present. “Killing that hydra was super-hard. It almost ate my boy Hump!”

“As a rule,” Vincent said, “we don’t give out awakening stones to people for killing monsters above their rank. It would just incentivise people getting themselves killed trying to jump ranks.”

“That’s right,” Rufus said. “Jumping ranks isn’t something to take lightly. A good adventurer should be able to jump ranks, but only against the right monster.”

“Don’t tell them that,” Vincent scolded.

“I think I should give it a try,” Rick said.

“This is exactly what I’m talking about,” Vincent said. “Iron-rankers rushing off to their deaths.”

“I’ll do it in the mirage chamber,” Rick said, getting unsteadily to his feet. “Come on, Jason, you can come to.”

“Sit back down,” Danielle told him. “How many times do I have to tell you children about using the mirage chamber while drunk?”

“I’m fine,” Rick said, unconvincingly.

“Such a lightweight,” Phoebe said, shaking her head at her brother.

“The mirage chamber is booked today anyway,” Danielle said. “The bronze-rankers are practising sandy terrain encounters.”

“They have a whole desert for that!” Rick complained.

The drink continued to flow and the conversation roamed. The wiser iron-rankers went easy on the drinks to try and catch any loose-lipped reveals from the bronze and silver-rankers.

“...a committee,” Danielle was saying. “All silver-rankers who spent decades buying up monster cores while they sat on their backsides. Thalia, do you remember when we were the age of these kids? Crazy, we were; knocking out contracts faster than they could post them. Now they’re all sitting around like fonts of wisdom, deciding what to do about pirates that they never would have gone out to catch in the first place!”

“Your Mum seems to like the sauce, Hump,” Jason said.

“She can get a bit boisterous when Father isn’t around,” Humphrey said. “Or when he is, for that matter.”

“Hump takes after his father,” Phoebe said to Jason. “His Dad is the straight line to his Mum’s squiggles. Kind of like Hump is for you.”

“There you go, Hump,” Jason said, throwing an arm around Humphrey’s broad shoulders. “Jeez, you’re a biggun.”

“Please stop saying Hump.”

Later, Rufus was addressing all the iron-rankers in a group.

“Don’t go rushing off to fill all your awaking stone slots. There’s an opportunity coming up. I can’t tell you about it, but in about a month there will be a... thing.”

“What kind of thing?” Jason asked.

Rufus drunkenly frowned at Jason.

“It’s a thing. Shut up.”

Drink and the soporific afternoon sun left most of the group aggressively lounging. Jason was laid out on a blanket with Cassandra, Humphrey and Gabrielle and the one next to them.

“It sounds like your problem is the butter,” Jason said to Gabrielle. “You want to take it out of the cooler box and let it stand for fifteen minutes; no more, no less. Oh, and get a stand mixer instead of creaming it by hand. You can get good ones from Artifice Association.”

“Maybe you can show me?” Gabrielle asked.

“Sure,” Jason said. “Madam Landry gives me free run of the kitchen, and learning about biscuits is very important. There’s this whole country where I come from that call scones biscuits. They’re all lunatics.”

The memorial service was held at the Adventure Society campus. The mausoleum occupied a portion of the campus abutting the north shore of the Island. The shore of the artificial island was raised up from the water, with lawn seeded atop. The service was held overlooking the water.

The adventurer’s remains had been cremated before the service and were stored in an urn kept by the family. The adventurer’s badge was presented to them by Humphrey, while the tracking stone they had followed to his remains were ceremonially placed within the Hall of Fallen Heroes. The mausoleum held not the remains of adventurers, but the stones held by the Adventure Society that marked their lives.

Jason and Clive stood by solemnly throughout the service. After it was done, the family thanked them for bringing their son home. It was widely known what Humphrey, Clive and Jason had faced to do so, and they were looked on with respect. They were invited to a private gathering, but Humphrey had warned them that it was correct etiquette to be asked, and correct etiquette to respectfully decline.

The gathered adventurers made their way to a bar where they took part in a traditional adventurer wake. It was an informal ceremony where a drink was shared in

silence to the fallen, then a drink was taken to Humphrey, Jason and Clive for brining him home. Then those who knew the dead adventurer shared stories as the mood shifted from mourning to a celebration of life.

The adventurer was not from a famous family, or well known for his accomplishments. Many were grateful that someone as well-known as Humphrey was willing to go out and find their friend. Even if the Adventure Society didn't have rules against sending an adventurer's friends and family to retrieve their body, they all knew they would have fallen too. Jason discovered even he was building something of a reputation among adventurers. It was no match for Humphrey's, but he took many a respectful handshake and offered drink.

As the night grew late, Humphrey, Jason and Clive left with most of the adventurers, only the dead man's closest friends remaining. The Island streets were brightly lit by street lamps as they walked side-by-side in silence.

Chapter 92: Unusual Contract

The Adventure Society campus was an unusual bustle of activity as Jason made his way to the jobs hall. It was normal to see people wandering about, but there was a preponderance of Society officials moving about in a harried fashion. The marshalling yard was normally an open space where groups would meet up, but it was now covered in tents and surrounded by temporary fencing.

Outside the jobs hall, he found a notice that the marshalling yard was temporarily off-limits. It directed teams and expeditions to use the space in front of the administration building to assemble. As he was reading the notice, he felt a familiar aura, turning to spot Beth Cavendish approaching.

“Quite the debacle, isn’t it?” she said, nodding at the notice.

“Do you know what it’s all about?” Jason asked. “I’m assuming this is something to do with all those tribesmen we captured. Did your uncle let anything slip?”

The silver-rank leader of the expedition had been Beth’s uncle, Jason discovered. He was the one who had defeated the Ustei chief and accepted the surrender of their leadership.

“The Adventure Society wants to find out why the Ustei came south in the first place, then put them on their barge and send them back,” Beth said. “It isn’t going smoothly.”

“They don’t want to go back?” Jason asked.

“No,” Beth said, “and Uncle Ephraim won’t say why. What he did tell me was that if I did pick anything up, I should keep it to myself. To prevent any potential unrest, is what he said.”

“That sounds serious,” Jason said.

“What he did tell me is the other problems the Ustei have caused. For one thing, they take their defeat and surrender seriously. They’re claiming that their war barge and everything in it belongs to Uncle Ephraim, now.”

“Is that a problem?” Jason asked.

“It is once you realise that includes all the women, children and slaves,” Beth said. “We didn’t fight our way up high enough to find where they were all chained up.”

“Slaves,” Jason said. “That’s never a good sign. Wait, they want to give up all the tribe’s women? Won’t the tribe die out?”

“It’s their culture, apparently. The idea is that now they have to go raiding for more women.”

Jason shook his head.

"It just keeps getting worse," he said.

"You're right about that. Remember I said they don't want to go north?"

"Yeah."

"They want to go east. The nomad tribes follow a circuit around the northern oases. The eastern desert isn't as harsh as the north, and there are more oases."

"With towns and villages around them, not to mention everything in the delta they would chew through to get there." Jason said. "Do they serious expect us to unleash a literal horde of men looking to kidnap women and slaves on a bunch of small, isolated populations?"

"It's their way, and they say we should kill them or let them be."

"I'm all for freedom," Jason said, "but that does not include the freedom to take people as slaves."

"You know they hit up one of the coastal villages, the day before we attacked?"

"I didn't hear about that," Jason said.

"Those villages make a living from fishing and collecting water quintessence. The raiders rely on water quintessence for survival in the desert, so they raided a village. Losing food and quintessence is one thing, but they took all the people."

"We got them back right?" Jason asked.

"The ones who survived. Nasty business."

"What are they going to do with all these tribesmen?" Jason asked. "Doesn't sound like we can let them go, but we can't just lock them all in a prison somewhere."

"I have no idea what they're going to do with them," Beth said. "Someone floated the idea of taking the Ustei men as slaves, which would at least be something they understood."

"That's insane," Jason said, face creasing with anger. "Slavery isn't allowed here is it? Have I been seeing people and not realising they're slaves?"

"We don't have slaves," Beth said. "We have indentured servants. A lot of criminals are sentenced to indenture, then their indenture is sold or auctioned to recoup the cost of their crimes."

"You sell criminals?"

"What do they do with them where you come from?" Beth asked.

"We lock them in boxes for years and treat them like animals," Jason said, then shook his head. "I think we both need better systems."

“You don’t need to worry about taking the Ustei as slaves, at least,” Beth said. “The idea died completely when someone pointed out that the Ustei wouldn’t accept it. Their culture doesn’t allow warriors to be made slaves. For them, capture means release or death. It’s the only thing they’re willing to accept.”

“They aren’t talking about executing the whole tribe, are they?” Jason asked.

“I’m not sure,” Beth said. “Uncle Ephraim was only willing to tell me the ideas they’ve already rejected.”

“It sounds like an absolute mess,” Jason said, then tapped a finger on the notice. “Which I guess it is. Admin must be a mad house with every team assembling on their front steps.”

They went into the jobs hall and checked at the front desk. Since neither had any assigned contracts waiting, they went to the noticeboards. They were both two-star adventurers, so they went to the same one.

“You’d be after the big-ticket items, with a whole team behind you, right?” Jason asked as they perused the notices.

“That’s right,” Beth said. “Mostly I’m after something that can push the team, but also something that still pays out well, split four ways. Fortunately, they tends to be the same jobs. You work mostly solo?”

“Yeah, but I’ve been picking up some group work here and there,” Jason said. “I’ve worked with Humphrey Geller a bit, and a friend from the Magic Society.”

Jason plucked a notice off the board, frowning at it.

“Find something good?” Beth asked.

“Something interesting,” Jason said. “It reads like a one-star mission, but it’s two-stars.”

“Probably means it was one-star but some complication cropped up. Once a couple of people try and fail, they kick it up. They tend to be annoying contracts, so most of us avoid them.”

“I’m more about learning things the hard way,” Jason said. “I’ll see you around, Beth.”

She sent him off with a wave and a smile, turning back to the notices as Jason took his to the front desk. It was listed as a straightforward monster hunt, for a monster called a fergax. Jason looked it up on his monster archive tablet, seeing it listed as a highly-aggressive, bear-like creature. High strength, moderate speed and fortitude, no exotic abilities.

“Morning, Bert,” Jason greeted Albert at the contract registry desk.

“Good morning, Mr Asano,” Albert said. “Quite the kerfuffle we have going on today.”

“So I’ve seen,” Jason said. “I don’t suppose you’ve heard anything about it?”

“Oh, I’m a bit low on the ladder to know about that, Mr Asano,” Albert said. “I imagine you’d know more than I. Weren’t you part of that expedition out in the desert?”

“I was,” Jason said. “They didn’t tell us grunts much, which I’m realising isn’t something I’m comfortable with. I’ll need to be more judicious in what I’m willing to participate in.”

Albert nodded at the notice in Jason’s hands.

“Speaking of choosing contracts, Mr Asano,” he said. “What have you got there?”

Jason handed over the notice.

“Can you tell me why this one is two-stars?” he asked.

Albert gave it a glance.

“Ah, I know this one,” he said. “It’s a bit of an unusual contract. Do you know anything about the fergax, Mr Asano?”

“Just what’s in the Magic Society archive,” Jason said.

“Well, there isn’t much else to a fergax,” Albert said. “Simple creatures, not too bright. Very aggressive, which makes them easy to find. Usually they spawn in the driest parts of the delta, where it’s actually possible to grow some lumber-worthy trees.”

“That’d make it some of the most valuable land in the delta, right?”

“Indeed it would, sir,” Albert said. “People get real fastidious when it comes to land rights, out there. Most times the laws are whatever the richest person nearby says they are, but the land rights for the lumber region are heavily regulated.”

“What’s different about this contract?” Jason asked.

“There’s a fellow who owns a lumber mill out there,” Albert said. “Been around long enough to know a fergax when he spots one. Every time we send someone out there, though, no fergax. No deaths, no damage which is pretty much how you track a fergax. The mill owner has registered a sighting eight times in three months, even pushed a nice incentive on it. People keep taking the contract, going out, and not finding a thing. It’s reached the point where the Society is about ready to black-mark him.”

“Black-mark?” Jason said.

“That means he won’t be able to register contracts.”

“I can’t imagine that would be good for someone who relies on land out in the delta.”

“I don’t imagine so. Might even be legal repercussions; those regulations I mentioned. Couldn’t say for certain, with it not really being my area.”

Jason frowned, thoughtfully.

“Whose area is it?”

Bert thought it over for a moment.

“I guess that would be the folks at the Civic Records Hall,” he said.

“Thanks, Bert. Put me down for the contract; I’m taking it.”

Jason didn’t immediately set out for the delta. His first stop was the Civic Authority Records Hall & Library in the guild district. After paying small fee for access and a moderate bribe for assistance, he was able to find what he was after. As he was about to leave, he turned to his bribed functionary.

“Oh, and Miss?” he said. “Do be sure not to tell anyone that I was here, or what I was here for. Only you and I know that, so if I find out that someone else knows, I’ll know it was you.”

He walked right up to her, pushing down on her aura with his own. She stood there, shivering slightly as he leaned forward to whisper in her ear.

“It doesn’t matter who you tell, because they can’t protect you from me. The Mercer family can shield you if I try to get you censured for having loose lips, but that isn’t what’s going to happen. One day, all your colleagues here will wonder why you didn’t turn up. Your family will wonder where you’ve gone, but they’ll never find out. Do you know why?”

“Be... because you’ve killed me?”

“I doubt you have any idea what my powers do, so I’ll explain the portions that are relevant to you. First, your body will die. Not of anything; it’ll just stop being alive. Then, I’ll suck all the moisture out of your corpse. I’m not sure if you’re aware, but life force is a beautiful, vibrant red. I’ll be taking any that your body has left, which will dry out your remains, nicely. Then I’ll collect you in a cask. Not a big one, because there won’t be much of you left, but I have a dimensional storage space, so it’s fine either way. Whatever remnants there are, I’ll clean off the floor with crystal wash. Are you familiar with it? Marvellous stuff, but hard to afford if you’re not making adventurer money. Suffice to say, it will clean up any residual stains of what used be your body. Then, on my next trip out to the delta, I’ll scatter what’s left of you, scoop by scoop, into the bogs and marshes, until your final resting place is just sticky patches of mud.”

He stepped back, flashing her a friendly smile.

“So let’s just make it our little secret, yes?”

“Absolutely not,” Clive said. Jason had found him in the chaos of his disorganised study.

“It’s for a contract,” Jason said.

“I don’t care if it’s for the god of generosity,” Clive said. “Those records are anonymous, and they stay anonymous. Even Lucian Lamprey wouldn’t violate that, and he’s as rotten as three-week meat.”

“Who?” Jason asked.

“Lucian Lamprey,” Clive said. “Branch director of the Magic Society here in Greenstone.”

“Never met the man. I guess I shouldn’t complain about your reticence; I should applaud integrity wherever I can find it.”

“There’s no telling if we would have a record of the power you’re looking for, anyway,” Clive said. “Not everyone records their powers with the Magic Society.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “What about a ritual that shows me if a summoning was used in an area?”

“A regular, essence ability summoning?” Clive asked. “I can do you one better. How does a ritual sound that not only shows what was summoned, but takes an aura imprint of the summoner and puts it on a tracking stone? You’d need to be right on the site of the summoning, and within maybe half a day of the summoning, though.”

“Clive, I could kiss you.”

“Please don’t.”

“How about this,” Jason said. “If you can’t tell me who has the ability, can you tell me everything the Magic Society has about an ability?”

“I could,” Clive said, “but why would I bother? Don’t you have the magic tablet that can access all the Magic Society’s public records on powers? You know we sell them, right?”

“Oh yeah,” Jason said. The same list that showed restricted essences had records on everything the Magic Society knew about individual powers. Jason looked up the power he was interested in on his tablet.

“Standard salt circle,” he read. “No worries. Hunt me up a copy of that tracking ritual, Clive, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

“Why would you be in my hair?” Clive asked as he started looking through bookshelves.

“It’s just a saying,” Jason said. “It means I’m tangled up in your business in an annoying manner.”

“You don’t need my hair for that,” Clive said. “You have a natural talent.”

“Harsh,” Jason said with a wince.

“Did you hear anything about what’s coming next after capturing all those sand pirates?” Clive asked, still looking for a copy of the ritual.

“Not much,” Jason said. “Apparently everything is under wraps until they figure out what to do next.”

“Well, I hope they don’t need as many drivers, whatever they do,” Clive said. “I’ve been trying to figure out who that ancient complex belonged to. As I thought, I’ve been cut out of the investigation in favour of Lamprey’s favourites. Of course, the skill books we extricated may have slipped my mind.”

Jason chuckled.

“How’s that going?” Jason asked.

“It’s odd,” Clive said. “It’s like there’s a ‘whatever it is I’m looking for’ shaped hole in the historical records, as if someone went through and purged it. I’m putting a puzzle together by connecting around the outside, working in, until I’m left with a gap the same shape as the weird piece I started with.”

“I love puzzles,” Jason said. “Farrah had me doing speed runs as mental training.”

“I like them too,” Clive said. “Do you have one of the magic sets where the picture and the pieces change? Back when I was studying to join the Magic Society we’d get drunk and try to solve them.”

“Oh, we’re definitely doing that,” Jason said. “Hey, you should talk to Gabrielle about the missing knowledge thing. You know; Humphrey’s lady friend.”

“The acolyte of knowledge,” Clive said. “That’s a good idea. Destroying knowledge is the biggest sin they have. Can you pass me the book on that table?”

Jason took a book out from under a potted plant and handed it to Clive.

“I’m fairly certain that ritual is in here,” Clive said, flipping through it. “I’ll make you a copy and you can be on your way.”

“Finding high salt content?” Jory said. “Yeah, I have something for that. Come with me.”

Jason followed Jory into his new store room, practically an alchemical warehouse.

“With the clinic closed all week for the final renovations,” Jory said, “things have been completely mad. The big re-opening is in a couple of days. Will you be in town?”

“Not sure,” Jason said. “I have this contract and I’m not sure how long it’ll take.”

“You know you’re the one who made all this possible,” Jory said, gesturing to the building around him. “It’d be nice to thank you, publicly,”

“On second thoughts,” Jason said, “I’m pretty sure that contract will keep me out in the delta. I’d rather be a silent partner, thank you very much.”

“I’m not sure that works, with you having been healing sick people with your magic powers for months, but sure.”

Jory took a bamboo watering canister down off a shelf, giving it a shake.

“Should be about four cubic metres of water in there,” he said.

“A dimensional bag watering can?” Jason asked.

Jory chuckled.

“Just clean it out and top it off before giving it back,” he said. “Those things aren’t cheap.”

“Will do,” Jason said.

Jory opened a cabinet, taking out a large glass bottle with a teal liquid inside. He tipped half the bottle into the watering canister before putting the bottle back. Then he took out a small vial of liquid, before handing the vial and the canister to Jason. He gave Jason the instructions to use, clean and refill the canister.

“Not sure what you’re up to,” Jory said, “but good luck.”

Chapter 93:

Truth

The lumber region was on the south side of the river, in the eastern parts of the delta, furthest from the city. Jason had long been refining his long-distance running style, that employed the weight-reducing power of his cloak. It was really more like a series of floating, horizontal hops over whatever surface he was crossing, be it land or water.

He'd been through enough of the delta that he had most of it mapped out and he could save time by taking direct routes instead of following the embankment roads. He could walk on water and teleport past obstacles, so while he might not match the speed of airboat travel, his straight-line navigation outpaced an ordinary mount. It required occasional replenishment from mana and stamina potions, but Jory's low-cost options were easily worth it. Their moderate effects might not have the kick required for intense combat, but they were perfect for Jason's travel needs.

The days were growing shorter as summer moved into autumn, and the sun had just set as Jason arrived in the town of Leust. It was one of the largest and richest towns in the delta, with paved roads and stone instead of mud-brick for the buildings. Mostly it was the cheaper, yellow desert stone, but there were green stone buildings as well.

The interior coolness afforded by the water affinity of green stone was appreciated by everyone who could afford it. In the muggy heat of the delta, it was often the difference between a good night's rest and a sweaty, sleepless night. For that reason, Jason selected a large, green stone inn to stay the night. Pausing outside the door, Jason stopped to put on his game face.

His posture shifted and tightened, face and shoulders both scrunched up in annoyance. He threw open the door and marched inside, face full of aggravation. Striding across the room, he parked himself angrily on a barstool.

"Drink," he demanded of the barman. "Best you have, and same for food, after."

The barman reached for a bottle of amber spirits behind the bar.

"Not that bitter crap," Jason said. "Do you have any Norwich Blue?"

"Uh, yes sir, we use it to make blue juice-jumpers."

"Blue juice jumpers?"

"It's a mixed drink, sir, but..."

The barman leaned in close.

"...usually we serve to our female patrons."

"If someone has a problem with what I'm drinking then I'll be happy to clean them off my sword."

Jason was in full adventuring gear, weapons at his hip and bandolier of throwing darts on his torso. He turned and took in the busy common room at a glance, no one willing to meet his gaze.

"That's what I thought," he said, turning back to the bar.

"If I may ask, sir," the barman said as he made the drink, "are you an adventurer?"

"That's what the badge says," Jason grumbled. "Some bloody adventure they've sent me on, though. Do you know how many people they sent out before me after this imaginary frigging monster? Eight! I'm the ninth, and I'll be the last, one way or another. You can believe that. If this monster isn't out here this time, I'll personally see to it that the prick sending out these notices gets black marked. A fergax that doesn't kill anyone or break anything? What a load of crap."

"That would be the Lindover Lumber Mill you'll be heading out to, then?" The barman asked.

"Probably," Jason said. "They gave me a map; I don't care what the place is bloody-well called."

Jason had trouble grumbling through what turned out to be a delicious drink and a quite excellent dinner, but he did it anyway, resisting his normal urge to seek out the recipe. He retired angrily to his room, performing a simple ritual to shield himself from surveillance magic before dropping the act.

The next morning he left the inn, as irritably as he arrived and set out for the lumber mills. The lumber region was more solid ground than marsh, like most of the delta, but not dry and hard or dead and empty like the desert. It was like walking through a forestry reserve, with straight, earthen roads passing between trees lined up in neat rows. Sometimes it was akin to a natural, if neatly-arranged forest. Other times he was walking past a sea of saplings or the devastation of a recently deforested field. Wagons went past on a regular basis, wheeling loads of lumber to Leust.

Jason passed several large, wooden archways with signage declaring the name of the lumber mill the road behind them led to. When he reached the one labelled Lindover, he walked through it. He followed the road through the trees to a large lumber mill, but it was still and devoid of people. Jason kept going past the mill and up to a sizeable farmhouse.

Knocking on the door, he was met by the most lumberjack-looking man Jason had ever seen and they made introductions. Kyle Lindover was a leonid even larger than Gary, with a red plaid shirt, tough worker's pants and huge, thick boots. He looked like he could knock down trees by punching them.

"If I was a tree and saw you coming my way," Jason said, "I think I'd just surrender. Do you like pressing wildflowers?"

"No," Kyle said. "Why do you ask?"

"Just something I heard about lumberjacks," Jason said.

Kyle showed Jason around. Kyle had shut down the mill after the repeated fergax sightings, not wanting his workers to get hurt. His business was lucrative enough to sustain the downtime for a while, but his reserves were falling short and most of his workers had taken up with other operations, having their own families to feed.

"My wife and kids are staying with her parents in Greenstone," Kyle said. "I've been maintaining things here, but every time I look at starting back up, the monster appears again. I keep getting adventurers out here, but they don't find anything. I'm afraid I'm going to be black-listed."

"We'll have to see what we can do about that. I'd like to start by seeing all the places the monster was spotted."

Kyle did exactly as asked, taking Jason all around the property. There was the lumber mill, the farmhouse, and a dormitory for the people working the mill. There was also a small farm, producing food for Kyle, his family and the workers. Kyle was doing his best to keep everything in order, but he was clearly getting overwhelmed.

Jason said he wanted to look around for himself, leaving Kyle to go back to the farmhouse. Jason made his way around the property until his map ability had fully unveiled everything. Afterwards, he sat down with Kyle at the farmhouse, enjoying some fruit punch Kyle made while Jason was roaming about.

"This is really good," Jason said. "Can I get the recipe?"

Looking over his map, Jason marked out the areas the fergax had been spotted. He could just tap a finger to the map and set a marker, or drag his finger to mark a whole zone. Kyle watched curiously as, from his perspective, Jason was wagging his finger in empty air.

"Invisible magic map," Jason told him, not looking up.

"I figured it was something of the like," Kyle said.

Looking at the map, the general area the monster was coming from was quite clear. Jason marked out a grid pattern to search, then left the farmhouse to get to work. He took out the watering can Jory lent him, complete with extra-dimensional water storage, and started sprinkling it over the area marked on his map. Kyle looked on with curiosity.

"What exactly are you doing?" Kyle asked.

"Looking for salt," Jason said. He kept moving from spot to spot, sprinkling little bits of water as he went.

"Salt?" Kyle asked.

"That's right," Jason said. "When you use an essence ability to summon a monster, the first step is to make a summoning circle. It isn't complicated, but you do need to use the

right material. I have some friends who use obsidian dust and iron filings, but exotic materials like that are generally for the fancy summons. Most people just need a circle of good-old salt, including people who summon a fergax. I'm betting the summoner just kicked it into the dirt, after, rather than collect it up."

"You think someone is summoning the monster?"

"I do," Jason said.

"You think someone is trying to drive me off my land?"

"I do," Jason said.

Kyle hung his head.

"Why us?" he wondered allowed.

"You're independent," Jason said. "You don't have a backer in Greenstone to push back with."

"How am I meant to prove what's going on?"

"You're not," Jason said. "I am. Adventure Society, at your service."

"I've had the Adventure Society out here before," Kyle said. "How are you going to prove any of what you're talking about? We don't even know who's behind it."

"Sure we do," Jason said. "This investigation is taking a two-pronged approach. Best of both worlds, you might say. What we're doing here is using some local ingenuity to follow the magic. That's one prong. The other is a method we use where I come from called following the money."

White smoke started rising from where Jason had just sprinkled water.

"That's our first hit," Jason said.

Jason took out a metal stake with a bright red ribbon tied to it and shoved it into the ground. Then he went back to moving through his grid pattern, sprinkling more water.

"There isn't a lot of business regulation, locally," Jason said. "That's what happens when the people who make the rules are the ones who own the businesses. When I took this contract, however, I discovered the lumber industry is a notable exception. The industry and its attendant land rights are very regulated."

"That's why I'm in danger of losing my land," Kyle said. "There are production requirements for landholders, and we haven't been producing since this monster started showing up."

"Well, good news," Jason said. "Since investigation here seems to consist of finding the first guy that can throw fireballs and asking him to take a look, no one seems to have invented shell companies. I found where all the records were kept, spent a few hours to poke around and found everything I needed. With a little help from a bribed official."

"You bribed a city official?"

“Not to do anything illegal,” Jason said. “Just to help me navigate a less-than-helpful records system. That’s how I know who’s behind all this and why.”

“You already know?”

“Yep,” Jason said. “Now I just need some corroborating evidence, by which I mean whoever they’re actually paying to come out here and summon the monster. I get that person to talk and we can get you back up and running.”

“You think they will?”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “Even if they don’t, we’ll get something we can use.”

Jason searched out his whole grid, putting down a stake each time Jory’s water-potion mix found high salt content. When he was done, Jason took stock. His stakes with the eye-catching ribbons were clustered in a small area.

“About what I thought,” he said. “I checked the whole are to make sure, but it looks like our summoner comes out here and summons his monster in more-or-less the same spot, every time. Then he has it wander about until you see it. I take it you never chased the creature.”

“A huge aggressive monster?” Kyle asked. “No, I didn’t.”

“Eminently sensible,” Jason said. “When was the last time you saw it?”

“Five days ago,” Kyle said.

“Probably too long to track it from the last summoning,” Jason said. “I’ll give it a go, though.”

Jason conducted the ritual Clive had given him at each of the summoning sites he had found. Ghostly images of a bear-like creature appeared briefly, but there wasn’t enough residual magic to imprint the summoner’s aura on a tracking stone.

“Yeah,” Jason said as he kicked the salt he used for the circles into the dirt. “We’re going to need a fresh monster siting.”

“That last appearance was less than a week ago,” Kyle said. “That could be some wait.”

“No worries, Kyle,” Jason said. “I’ve already laid some groundwork.”

Jason returned to the inn as the sun ducked below the horizon, unhappier than when he left that morning.

“Food and drink, same as before,” he demanded of the barman. “I’m out of here at first light. I’m not staying a moment longer than I have to.”

“No luck?” the barman asked.

“It’s not a matter of luck when some idiot is making things up,” Jason said bitterly. “I swear, if one more report comes in from Lindover, I’m not coming back. I’ll have him black-marked on the spot and let the damn bureaucrats sort it out.”

As promised, Jason departed at first light down the road to Greenstone. He passed through the next town as well to make sure before he cut back cross country to the Lindover Property. The trees made stealth easy on the occasions he saw workers on the properties he passed through.

It was three days before the fergax appeared. With his aura fully restrained, he followed it with a recording crystal active as it roamed around for several hours. Kyle came out and spotted it, running when it roared at him, but it didn’t give chase. It didn’t do anything but roam about until it vanished when the summoning duration expired. All the while, Jason quietly stayed out of its path, watching it as the image was captured by the recording crystal floating over his head.

“The problem is we have bears around here,” Kyle said as he and Jason looked at the tracks left behind by the fergax. “Sometimes they get curious and come in close, and their tracks are pretty much identical. Some of the other adventurers that came out thought I was seeing bears and getting rattled.”

“Well, we have the recording now, so at least we can demonstrate there really is a monster,” Jason assured him. “That means a black-mark is off the table, at the very least. Next, we see if we can’t do a little better than that.”

Using the watering can again, Jason found a large salt reaction and performed the tracking ritual. This time an aura imprint found its way onto his prepared tracking stone. As expected, it led him straight in the direction of the neighbouring Clementson property, which Jason had anticipated before ever arriving.

It was laid out much the same as the Lindover property but was in full operation. There were workers everywhere, and the magically-driven saws could be heard loudly cutting into wood in the mill. The other big difference was the farmhouse. The Lindover farmhouse was large but functional. On the Clementson property, the farmhouse was both larger and more ostentatious.

Jason didn’t bother to hide, striding through the property as if he owned the place. He got a few glances from workers, but the combat robes and the weapons said adventurer, which no one wanted to mess with. A man came out to meet him and was forced to follow along as Jason didn’t slow, letting the tracking stone lead him to his quarry. Where the lumber workers had practical attire like Kyle, this man wore city fashions.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” the man said, “what brings you to my property?”

“Monster hunt,” Jason said, without so much as looking at the man. “You’re Clementson?”

“Eustace Clementson, yes sir. You think there’s a monster on the property?”

“I’m sure you’re familiar with the troubles your neighbour is having,” Jason said. “A monster appeared there several hours ago, and I’ve been tracking it to the source.”

“Tracking it?” Clementson asked, unable to hide the panic in his voice. It might have been at the idea of a monster on his property, but Jason didn’t think so.

“I managed to get an aura imprint. That imprint led me directly to your property.”

Clementson was starting to sweat, his eyes darting nervously in the direction Jason was heading.

“You’ve obviously been working hard,” Clementson said. “Why don’t you let me offer you some hospitality? You can have some refreshment and I can tell you about the property. It might help you find what you’re looking for.”

“This tracking stone is all the help I need,” Jason said, continuing his rapid stride.

“I’ll leave you to your business, then,” Clementson said and started moving ahead of Jason at a half-run.

“Stop,” Jason ordered. His aura came down hard on Clementson, who staggered and stopped.

“Sir?” He asked, feebly.

“I think it would be best if you stayed with me,” Jason said. “For safety.”

Withering under the force of Jason’s aura, Clementson reluctantly nodded, falling in behind Jason as he resumed his path through the property. They quickly came on a building detached from the main residence, made from stone and an indulgent amount of wood. On a porch swing, a man was sitting up, rubbing his eyes as if just having woken up. He gave the approaching pair a bleary-eyed look, focusing on Clementson.

“Eustace,” he said, “what was that aura I just...”

The man trailed off as he realised the source of the aura was standing next to Clementson. Then his gaze locked onto Jason’s face and his eyes went wide.

Chapter 94: Consequences

The Temple of the Healer in Greenstone was one of the central temples on the Divine Square. Inside, a man named Neil Davone was making a stand.

"I won't be a part of this," he declared to the Chief Priest. "This isn't about serving the Healer. I spend my days following around the most petty noble in Greenstone, so I know what power and ambition look like."

The Chief Priest had all the temple clergy arrayed behind him, ready to move out. He looked at Neil with a dismissive sneer.

"Be thankful that your powers come not from our god, for he would take them from you. If you would stand against us, then you are no longer welcome in this church. Begone from this place, and never return."

Neil steeled himself, his expression hard. He turned around and strode out of the temple.

On the Clementson property, Jason was confronting the man the tracking stone had led him to.

"Asano!" the man uttered, causing Jason to frown. He recognised the face from somewhere, but couldn't place it, at first. Then revelation struck.

"You're one of the people that attacked me in Old City."

"I didn't attack you," the man said quickly, his voice rising in pitch. "That was Dink! We all left, just like you said."

"And now you're here summoning monsters," Jason said. "Stay where you are, Mr Clementson."

Clementson had been slinking away while Jason's focus was on the other adventurer, but stopped short at Jason's command. He looked back, seeing that Jason hadn't turned back to look.

"Yes, Mr Clementson," Jason said, without taking his eyes off the man in the other direction. "I am watching you."

Jason had Clementson under the strict watch of his aura sense, the normal-rank mill owner having no way to hide it.

Jason kept his eyes locked in the iron-ranker.

"I don't know anything about summoning any monsters," the man said.

"If you don't want to tell me things, then don't tell me," Jason said. "Lying is just going to make things worse."

The man looked up at the crystal floating over Jason's head.

"Is that a recording crystal?" he asked.

"It is," Jason said. "Why don't you tell me your name?"

"Why?"

Jason's hard expression broke into a chuckle.

"Well, if nothing else," Jason said, "it can't be worse than what I'm calling you in my head. What's your name?"

"Tuckell," the adventurer said warily. "Dean Tuckell."

Jason gave him a sympathetic smile, his body language shifting from harsh confrontation to loose and relaxed. Jason casually strolled up to the porch, where the man had been napping on a long, swinging chair. The man tensed at Jason's approach, giving a startled jerk as Jason casually plonked himself down next to the man on the long chair.

"Nice to meet you, Dean. I'm Jason, but you knew that."

Jason looked out from the porch. This back building didn't look out over the lumber mill, but instead at the crops grown to feed the workers.

"This isn't bad," Jason said, taking it all in. "If I recall correctly, Dean, you were the one that tried to talk Dink out of attacking me. Is Dink his real name?"

"That's his nickname," Dean said hesitantly, wary of the man sitting next to him. "His real name is Jared."

"I'd definitely take that over Dink," Jason said. "Was he the one who picked Dink?"

"Yeah," Dean said.

"Clearly, some people are beyond help. Alright, Dean; this is quite a pickle you've got yourself in. The way I see it, things are going to go one of four ways from here. I'm just going to come out and tell you that I know what you're doing, who you're doing it for and why."

"Don't listen to him," Clementson said, from where he was still standing, in front of the porch. "He's just trying to get information out of you."

Jason turned his gaze unhappily to Clementson.

"That's quite enough out of you, Mr Clementson," Jason said. "If you're going to be a nuisance, then you may as well run along, after all."

The mill owner required no further encouragement, scuttling away as quick as he could.

"Now," Jason said, "where were we? Right, I was just explaining that I already know everything."

"Do you, though? Its sounds like Mr Clementson is right and you just want me to talk."

“Oh, I certainly do, but want isn't the same as need. This is more about tying things up neatly than me requiring anything from you. Dean, let's go through the four ways I see this situation potentially playing out. In scenario one – which is my personal favourite and I hope will be yours as well – you tell me everything. That gives me what I need to make sure this all gets handled quietly and without too much of a fuss. Are you a member of the Adventure Society, Dean?”

Dean nodded.

“Alright, then you definitely want to talk to me. With your cooperation, and me putting in a good word, then you shouldn't expect more than a slap on the wrist. It lets me settle everything nice and quiet, and the Mercers don't have to dump all the blame on you when everything goes public.”

Dean started when Jason said the name Mercer and Jason felt the hook set in.

“Dean, this is an opportunity for you. A chance to get out of doing shady jobs for other people and stand on your own as an adventurer. My guess, and what will be my recommendation, is that you get put on a road contract. A bit of travel, helping some people who need it. Most importantly, it gets you out from under everything while the situation gets settled. Then you can come back having proven that you can do your job.”

Dean looked uncertain.

“You don't do a lot of monster fighting, do you, Dean?”

Dean shook his head.

“That's alright,” Jason said. “On a road contract, you'll have people to back you up. Wouldn't you rather have someone better than Dink watching your back? You have all the tools you need to make it in life, Dean. You don't have to be the greatest adventurer in the world. You can live a good life just being an okay one.”

Jason kept his own expression under control as Dean looked thoughtful.

“That's scenario one,” Jason said. “They gradually get worse from here. In scenario two, you keep your mouth shut, but don't make a fuss. I don't know all the details, so things get messy as what I do know starts loudly clashing with what I don't. The Mercer name gets loudly bandied about, and not in a good way. They'll be fine, of course, but I don't think you're the one they'll be looking to protect in this situation, do you? Especially given that they'll need someone to push all the blame onto. Best guess, they'll come down on claiming the whole plot was you and Clementson.”

Jason knew that Dean didn't even realise he was nodding as he thought it over.

“That's how things go if I just walk away now. Scenario three is where you kill me keep everything covered up, but that's a rough one. I have friends and connections that will be out here going over everything. It won't just be me you have to get rid of. Clementson,

everyone on the property who saw me head in this direction. Lindover, a few people in Leust, even. Or you could run, but where are you going to go? Greenstone's out. Probably the delta, too. Are you going to go out to one of the desert towns? The veldt? You have a full set of essences, so you could make a life for yourself, out there. If my friends don't find you."

Jason slapped Dean on the back.

"All of that assumes you could even kill me, which I think we both know is a sketchy proposition at best. I'm fully armed and equipped for combat, here; you're armed and equipped for a relaxing nap. Scenario four is that you try to kill me and fail. I don't need to explain the consequences of that one, do I?"

Jason sat back in the chair.

"It's all up to you, Dean. Except for the one where you kill me, my contract gets completed whichever way we go. That first scenario works out best for both of us, but I can live with any of the ones where I, you know, live."

Dean looked at Jason, reclining comfortably as if he didn't have a care in the world. He was spent a long time thinking in silence as Jason quietly waited.

"Alright," Dean said. "It was Thadwick Mercer. He set all this up."

"Just Thadwick?" Jason asked.

"Yeah. He's been pulling in some of the less successful adventurers over the last year. He even pulled some strings to get some of us an easy ride through the assessment."

"You?"

"No," Dean said. "I didn't do all that well, but I got through on my own. But it shook me, you know? Putting your life on the line. It's not easy for adventurers who don't want to fight monsters. People look down on you, you know? We come from decent enough families, so working under someone like Mercer is better than working for some crime lord or gang boss. At least, that's what I thought."

"Oh?" Jason prompted.

"That thing where Mercer sent us after you? Kicking the crap out of you and recording it? How is that any different from working for a criminal?"

"Thadwick sent you after me?"

Dean nodded.

"He knew about the contract you'd been assigned and that you were meeting a contract in the Townhouse. We just had to hang around, waiting for you to pass through."

Jason sighed. Using and abusing Thadwick had been a mistake from the beginning, and now he was paying for it.

“What about this whole thing?” Jason asked, gesturing around them. “The land-grab deal.”

“I don’t know what it’s about,” Dean said. “Every couple of weeks I was told to come out here and spook Lindover with my summon. Then I lay low here in Clementson’s guest house and quietly go back a few days later. A couple of days ago I was told to get out here and do it again, and he said it was probably the last time.”

“And by ‘he’ you mean...”

“Thadwick Mercer; it was all him. He’s always going on about how this is all his deal. How he’ll show his father what he’s really capable of.”

Jason sat up straight and took a deep breath.

“Alright, Dean. You did well. We’re going to Greenstone to get all this settled. I said I’d look out for you, and I will.”

Jason stood up, then held a hand out for Dean to shake.

“Are you ready to stand on your own feet, Dean?”

Dean stood up and shook Jason’s hand, looking like a weight had been lifted off him.

“You know what? I think I am. There’s something you should know, though.”

“Oh?” Jason asked.

“I didn’t come out here by myself. One of Thadwick’s other people came with me. I don’t think he’ll let us leave quietly.”

“You’ve got that right!”

Both men turned in the direction of the intruding voice. A burly human was storming in their direction, Clementson following behind.

“Looks like I have to put both of you down,” the burly man said.

“Not going to happen,” Jason said as darkness manifested around him, speckled with stars. “Dean, you’ll want to stay out of this.”

Neil Davone rushed down Broadstreet Boulevard. There was a crowd gathering outside the newly-refurbished Broadstreet Clinic, which was about to have a grand re-opening. Neil pushed his way through the crowd and rushed up to the doors, made of reinforced, magic-wrought glass. They were designed to open and close themselves, but the clinic was not yet open and they remained shut. Neil and started hammering on one of them with his fist.

“Friend, they’ll be open soon,” an older man assured him. “Just be a little patient.”

The man chortled to himself.

“Patient,” he said. “That’s funny.”

Neil ignored him and kept hammering away until a young woman appeared on the other side of the glass.

“Sir,” she said loudly through the glass, “if you can’t wait quietly for the clinic to open, then you will be turned away when it does.”

“I need to see Jory Tillman,” Neil yelled. “I need to see him right now.”

The woman looked Neil over. Compared to the bulk of the crowd, his clothes spoke to more than enough money to find medical help elsewhere.

“Go around to the back gate,” she said. “I’ll see if Mr Tillman is willing to speak to you.”

Neil groaned his frustration but nodded, fighting back through the crowd to go around to the rear of the building. There was a yard enclosed by a wall that he couldn’t see into, but found the gate wasn’t locked when he pushed on it. Inside was a yard tiled with colourful tiles and lush greenery in wall planters.

The yard was occupied by three adventurers with bronze rank auras. A huge leonid man and a small human woman were both hoisting heavily-laden barbells in each hand. The third adventurer Neil recognised. Rufus Remore was meditating on a woven mat, eyes snapping opening as Neil came into the yard.

“Neil Davone,” Rufus said. “What brings you here?”

Rufus had administered Neil’s field assessment for the Adventure Society. Given Thadwick’s reaction, he almost would have preferred a fail to a pass. Neil had no idea what Rufus was doing there, meditating in the courtyard of an Old City clinic.

A man came out of the building, dressed in clean and simple white linens.

“Who are you and why do you want to see me so urgently?” the man asked. “I’m more than a little busy right now.”

“You’re Jory Tillman?” Neil asked.

“Yes,” Jory said irritably. “What do you want?”

“The Chief Priest of the Healer is coming,” Neil said. “He’s bringing almost everyone.”

“What for?” Jory asked.

“He thinks your new clinic is a usurpation of the Healer’s authority,” Neil said. “They’re coming here to tear it to the ground.”

Chapter 95: Punishment

The glass doors at the front of the clinic opened up. Deftly using his aura, Rufus pressured the crowd away without distressing them. He led the way outside, flanked by his adventuring companions, Jory, and Neil Davone. They stood in front of the doors and waited. Jory explained to the crowd that there would be a delay with the clinic opening. People started asking him to make exceptions, and Gary stepped out.

“It’s an unfortunate situation,” he said, daring anyone to disagree. “It might be a good idea for everyone to leave and come back later.”

“What for?” some yelled out. The crowd could smell a spectacle.

“That,” Gary said, pointing an arm along the boulevard. All eyes followed, seeing a multitude of robed clergy making their way down the street. People were scrambling to get out of their path. The crowd outside the clinic moved well away, although not so far that they couldn’t see what was happening. Their numbers even grew as others gathered to spectate.

At the head of the approaching religious expedition was the Chief Priest, blasting out his silver rank aura. The group came to a halt in front of the clinic making an impressive sight. The Chief Priest was flanked by bronze-rankers, with iron rankers and lesser clergy arrayed behind them. The basic robe of the Healer’s clergy was simple brown, but these all wore opulent silks of white and gold, with only brown embellishments.

Facing the Chief Priest was Rufus, flanked by Farrah, Gary, Jory and Neil. Panning his eyes across them, the Chief Priest sneered at Neil before his gaze came to rest on Rufus.

“Rufus Remove,” the Chief Priest intoned, his sermon-practised voice reaching all the gathered onlookers. “I’m not sure what brings you here, but is it your intention to stand with heretics?”

“I’m not sure what you mean by that, Chief Priest,” Rufus said.

“This place seeks to set itself up as a temple of healing, taking that which is the right of the Healer, and the Healer alone.”

“I’m not one to speak for the gods,” Rufus said. “I will say that Jory, here, is an alchemist, not a priest. So far as I can tell, he mostly advocates that people read the little labels he puts on the medicine bottles. He certainly isn’t claiming to be a priest. He’s just trying to help people by healing them. Surely your church would take no offence at someone doing precisely what you advocate.”

“The only truth in your words,” the Chief Priest announced, “is that it is not yours to speak for our church. Do you think that you, better than I, can interpret the will of the Healer?”

“I do,” a voice said softly, yet everyone present heard. Carried on a wave of aura that was benevolent yet overwhelming, the two quiet words somehow crashed into the crowd like thunder.

Dean Truckell watched Jerrick approach the guest house where he and Asano had been talking on the porch. The burly man was the toughest of the thug adventurers Thadwick Mercer took under his auspices; the strongest of Thadwick’s lackeys, outside of the noblemen who followed him around in public. Unlike most of them, he was an active adventurer, regularly hunting monsters. He followed Mercer as a way to overcome his own humble beginnings, having no backing of his own. He had earned his essences through years spent in the Greenstone fighting pits.

“Dean, you’ll want to stay out of this,” Asano said.

“Mr Asano,” Dean warned, “watch out for...”

His warning came to late as Jerrick launched like a ballista bolt, crashing into Asano and through the door of the guest house. The door of woven reeds and bamboo smashed apart at their passage. Dean turned to look inside, seeing the pair already moving. They were both on the floor, Jerrick seeking to pin Asano down, but all he got was a handful of empty cloak. It vanished in his fingers, revealing Asano was already gone.

“YOU THINK YOU CAN HIDE FROM ME?” Jerrick called out as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Actually, yes,” Asano voice came from deeper in the house. Clementson’s detached guest house was generously-sized, with plenty of rooms to hide in. The outer rooms were well lit, but the interior of the brick building had plenty of shadows.

Jerrick threw a gaze at the door, pointing a finger at Dean.

“Don’t even think about running,” Jerrick said as iron plates started magically appearing around his body to encase him in heavy armour. Once it was in place, he started storming through the building.

Dean backed off the porch, winding up next to Clementson. Clearly the man had rushed off to fetch Jerrick the moment Asano had dismissed him. They stood side by side as they listened to the noises coming from inside. Mostly it was loud crashing, Dean easily able to picture Jerrick tossing around furniture. It was occasionally punctuated by Jerrick’s shouting.

“YOU THINK I WON’T FIND YOU?”

“YOU CAN’T HIDE FOREVER!”

“YOU THINK A SCRATCH CAN HURT ME? YOUR HIT AND RUN TRICKS WON’T LAST YOU LONG!”

“You should never have gone against Mercer,” Clementson told Dean. “Derrick is going to tear that adventurer apart.”

Dean frowned, then went back up to the porch with determined steps. He grabbed his dimensional bag from where he left it by the swing chair. Coming back down, he paused in confusion when he saw Asano standing behind an oblivious Clementson, even as Jerrick’s shouts continued to stream from the building. Asano was eating a sandwich.

Clementson saw the odd expression on Dean’s face and followed it to looked behind him, stumbling away in surprise on finding Asano there.

“Come on, Dean,” Asano complained. “What kind of a poker face is that?”

Asano’s sandwich vanished and a magical cloak of darkness and stars manifested around him. Clementson called out to Jerrick that Asano was outside and Jerrick’s armoured form came stomping out the door. He launched forward with incredible speed once more, but this time Asano seemed to bounce off, like a scarf tossed into the wind, his cloak fluttering around him as he drifted back to the grass some distance from where Jerrick had stopped.

Asano held up a hand toward Jerrick, chanting a spell.

“Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast,”

Red light lit up from inside Jerrick, some of it siphoning off in a trail to be absorbed by Asano’s hand. As this was happening, Jerrick charged forward. It didn’t match the pace of his charge special attack, but was still fast for someone wrapped in that much metal. As he moved, Jerrick waved an arm, sending a wave of metal spikes ahead of him. Asano shielded his body with his cloak, but let out a grunt as most of the spikes punched through.

Jerrick conjured a huge metal pole with a spiked metal sphere on the end, an oversized morning star. He swung it down like a hammer and Asano danced back lightly from the crude swing, the sphere digging into the ground. He cast another spell.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

Jerrick let out a painful yell as he let go of his weapon and staggered before righting himself. Dean couldn’t see the results of the spell under the armour, but he’d never actually heard Jerrick make a sound of pain before. Jerrick walked back to where his weapon was half-buried in the earth, yanking it out. Holding it horizontally, in spite of what

must have been enormous weight, the sphere shot away toward Asano, trailing a chain that linked it to the pole in Jerrick's hands.

The sphere shot through Asano's cloak, but he was no longer in it. Rising up behind Jerrick from his own shadow, Asano jabbed his ornate dagger into a gap at the bottom of Jerrick's thick breastplate. Jerrick whirled around, but the unarmoured Asano was much lighter. Almost comically, he moved to stay behind the spinning Jerrick's back. Jerrick stopped and Asano dropped through his shadow, vanishing just as myriad spikes shot out of Jerrick's armour.

While he was keeping an eye on the fight, Dean had taken a sack of salt from his dimensional bag and was pouring out a circle on the grass. Clementson saw what he was doing and tried to interfere, but Dean's forearm grew large, hairy and clawed, grabbing Clementson by the throat. He lifted Clementson into the air.

"I may not be the adventurer they are," Dean said, "but that doesn't mean I'll let the likes of you treat me like I'm nothing."

Dean tossed Clementson to the ground, where he scrambled away on all fours before getting to his feet at a safe distance.

"Mercer will make you pay for this," Clementson said, all but spitting his words at Dean. Dean looked over at Asano, dancing around Jerrick. Other than the two noblemen who followed Mercer around, all Mercer's lackeys were terrified of Jerrick, Dean included. He squared his shoulders, held up his hand and snapped his fingers.

The circle of salt glowed with a green light, then lines within drew out the shape of a pentagram. Runes appeared between the lines, then the lines and symbols turned gold as the circle filled with green light. Out of the light rose a bear-like creature, with savage claws and a body covered in bony protrusions. Dean pointed at Jerrick.

"Kill."

Dean refocused his attention of Jerrick. The big man seemed unsteady, but still whirled the sphere on its chain around himself, holding onto the pole at the base. The sphere sailed through the air, shooting out spikes as it did. Asano easily avoided the sphere itself but the spikes where landing hits. With the strange way Asano's cloak flowed, drifting on the air, it was hard to tell how many were ameliorated by Asano's cloak and armour.

The fergax came up behind Jerrick, clutching him in a bear hug. If it weren't for the heavy armour, the bony protrusions on the monster's body would have pierced flesh in a half-dozen places. Instead, spikes shot out of the armour, puncturing the fergax's flesh. It staggered back and Jerrick turned on it as the sphere, snaked back down to slam solidly

onto the pole. Jerrick lifted the pole up and brought it down on the monster. The weapon buried itself in the fergax, which fell dead at a blow. As it did, Asano chanted out a spell behind Jerrick.

“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”

A horrifying groan came out of Jerrick, who dropped his weapon and started stumbling around. The plates of his armour fell away, vanishing before they hit the ground. The skin of his arms and face revealed black veins and patches of dead, withered flesh. Thick, dark blood trailed down from his eyes and nose.

Dean and Clementson recoiled at the sight while Asano moved closer. No longer able to stay upright, Jerrick toppled to the ground. Asano held his hand out and channelled another spell.

“Feed me your sins.”

Red light again glowed out of Jerrick, now massively discoloured with blue, purple and sickly white. All the discolouration flowed out and into Asano’s waiting hand as he absorbed the afflictions, leaving only the feeble, flickering red of Jerrick’s cleansed life force. The black veins visible through his skin had vanished, but Jerrick was beyond resuming the fight.

“Help me with him,” Asano said to Dean, and they pushed him into a sitting position. Asano took out an iron collar and snapped it onto Jerrick’s neck, before feeding him a potion and lowering him back down.

“He’ll live,” Asano said. “He’ll need a few more potions, but he’s a tough one.”

“Is that a suppression collar?” Dean asked.

“That’s right,” Asano said. “They’re supposed to be restricted, but the bad guys seem to get their hands on them anyway. This one was used on a friend of mine when some cultists tried to sacrifice us. I borrowed it in case you turned out stropky.”

“You’re not going to kill him?” Dean asked.

“That was my inclination,” Asano said, “but when a man turns his dog on you, you can’t really blame the dog. Is he an adventurer too?”

“Yeah,” Dean said.

“Well, not for long, I’m guessing. Sorry about your monster.”

They looked over at the dead fergax, Jerrick’s weapon already vanished from it.

“It’s a summon,” Jerrick said. “A new one manifests each time I use it.”

“I see,” Asano said. He turned to Clementson, who was cowering off to the side.

“Do you think this guy will lend us a cart?”

The god appeared in front of Jory's clinic without fanfare; a small, middle-aged man, with ordinary features and plain, brown robes. Nonetheless, power radiated of him, affecting the crowd gathered on the street. Sicknesses were dispelled and injuries healed. Everyone in front of Jory's clinic fell to their knees as silence washed over the crowded street. Into that silence came the clattering of a wooden object falling onto stone, and a single, startled voice.

"My foot grew back!"

The god laughed, looking over at the man who spoke out.

"You have a new foot," Healer said. "Please, stand upon it."

A scrawny man stood up in the middle of the crowd, looking immensely nervous.

"You came to this clinic," the god said, "but the alchemist here could not regrow your foot."

"No, er... your goodness, sir. He helped me with the pain, and found someone to make me a wooden foot. It worked pretty well. Enough to get me back working, at least."

"Did you go to my temple?" The god asked, as if he didn't know exactly what happened in his holy places.

"They said I didn't have the money to grow a foot back."

"Yes they did," the god said, his gaze turning to the Chief Priest.

"It is my way," the god said, "to give those who follow me the freedom to do what is right. If doing what is wrong is not truly an option, then doing good isn't a choice; it's just obedience."

The god moved forward until the knelt-down Chief Priest was looking at the bottom of the god's robes.

"My ways have allowed my followers to go astray in the past, particularly in these outlying regions," the god said. "Rarely, however, has one of my temples fallen so far, and so completely. You should be not only ready but eager to help those in need. Instead, you use the gifts I have given you to garner power and line your pockets."

The god turned to look at the sign for the clinic, then back to the Chief Priest. As he continued talking, his voice was rising to an angry pitch,

"The fact that the proprietor of this establishment was forced to step in where you fell short was miserable enough. But to then turn around and try and stop him from the good works that should have been yours?"

The god gestured and lights started floating up out of the bodies of his assembled clergy, Some were cubes of various colours, others smaller spheres. The people they flew

out of collapsed to the ground, moaning in pain. The cubes and spheres continued to float over them, connected by a tendril of light.

“Many of you have taken what I offered, yet turned so far from my will that you travel in the other direction! These gifts I take back, for there are none among you worthy. Those who are, you have driven or cast out. Those who looked only to serve, to give help to those who needed it. As we speak, I am bringing the true faithful from distant lands to take your places in my temple. Those who you once shunned will now be welcome.”

The god turned to looked at Neil Davone, giving him a warm smile.

“This includes you, young man. I know you have your struggles, but you bear them as well as any could ask, including me. Let any who would bar you from my holy places again answer to me.”

“Thank you, Lord,” Neil said.

“Lord...” came the Chief Priest’s voice, weak and pained.

“...mercy,” he begged.

“That you are not shunned from my temples and their services, as you have shunned others is mercy enough,” Healer said. “You may not serve me again, but we will see to your ills. If you have the coin to pay.”

“With our essences gone,” the Chief Priest begged, “we are crippled.”

“For that, I shall give you no salve,” the god said. “But you may turn to another.”

A second god appeared next to the first, being very different from his fellow. His dress was regal, with a long cape, a sceptre and a crown. He was young and handsome, but with a look of disdain and faint cruelty behind the eyes, not than anyone was looking. His aura washed over the crowd like a wave of fire.

The newcomer nodded acknowledgement to the other god.

“Healer,” he greeted.

“Dominion,” healer said back, cordially, then gestured to his clergy. “These are of no use to me. I think, perhaps, they are more temperamentally suited to your worship.”

Dominion crouched down in front of the Chief Priest, rubbing a portion of the priest’s robe between his fingers.

“Very fine,” he said, standing back up. “You have some seekers of power and privilege, here; not your sort at all. I’ll take them off your hands, if they’re willing to submit. I can replace those essences and awakening stones.”

“Yes!” the Chief Priest exclaimed. “I’m willing to serve!”

“There is no service in my church,” Dominion said harshly. “Choose carefully before you enter into it. I am not Healer. There will be no freedom to choose the right path. There

will be no freedom at all. Under me, you will obey or suffer. Or both, as I choose, because you will not enter my service. You will belong to me.”

The now-former Chief Priest gulped, but nodded. The other behind him mostly did the same, although some did not. With a wave of the god’s hand the spheres and cubes floating over those who capitulated shifted in colour before returning to their bodies. With another gesture, Dominion summoned an arched gate, through which could be seen the interior of one of his temples.

“Go!” he ordered. The former clergy of the healer got up and scrambled through the gate, which closed behind them. Dominion turned to the group gathered in front of the clinic door behind Rufus.

“Your friend Jason isn’t here,” Dominion said. Rufus, Gary, Farrah, Jory and Neil were all still kneeling, but looked up, startled.

“You know Jason?” Rufus asked, uncertainly.

“I love that guy,” Dominion said with a grin. “The ones who won’t kneel are always the most fun. Seeing what it takes to make them capitulate, to put that knee down.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Gary asked. Dominion turned his gaze full bore onto Gary, who trembled under the force of it. Gary defiantly kept his eyes locked on the god, forcing himself onto his feet. Dominion laughed, and the pressure vanished.

“That is where monarchs come from,” Dominion said. “I love them most of all. I’ll be keeping an eye on you, Gareth Xandier.”

Dominion turned to Healer, nodding a farewell and then vanishing, as if he had never been there are all. Healer turned to those who had not accepted Dominion’s offer. One of them spoke out.

“Lord! Please allow this humble sinner to seek atonement in your service. I was led astray.”

“You blame others for your failings?” the god asked.

“I was weak, Lord! The failing was mine!”

The god looked over the remaining people, then gave a slight nod. Heads bowed, they couldn’t see it, but they felt their god’s assent.

“The path to redemption will not be easy,” Healer said. “A lifetime of humility and service.”

The essences and awakening stones floating over them returned to their bodies.

“I have restored those powers I gave you in the past, but sealed them away. They will not be available to you, and may never be. This you must accept.”

“Thank you lord!” they chimed out.

Healer turned to Neil.

“Neil Davone,” the god said. “Please lead these penitents back to my temple. You will find good people waiting to greet you.”

“Thank you Lord!” Neil said, getting to his feet. He was soon leading away Healer’s remaining clergymen.”

The god then turned to Jory.

“Stand and see me, Jory Tillman,” the god said. Jory got nervously to his feet.

“I am moved by what you have done here,” Healer told him. “If you are willing, I will give this place my blessing and declare it a sanctuary for healing.”

“Um, that would be amazing,” Jory said, then his face plummeted.

“Uh, Lord Healer... there are some things we make here that you might not entirely approve of. I’d stop, but they pay for a lot of the healing research.”

Healer chuckled.

“I’m not going to begrudge people a little... togetherness jelly,” Healer said.

Jory led out a nervous noise, then nodded.

“Thank you, Lord.”

“Very good,” Healer said. “I will have people come to this place for rituals of sanctification. They will be careful not to disrupt your alchemy. And if you are willing, I will maintain a healer here. Your friend had not been as present as in the past, due to his adventuring commitments.”

“Thank you, Lord,” Jory said.

“Then we are done here,” Healer said, and turned to the gathered crowd.

“Good people,” Healer said. “Know that this place has my blessing.”

A golden wave shone out of him, passing through the crowd and spreading to the city beyond.

“All in Old City are healed,” Healer said. “Jory Tillman, you have no need to open your clinic today. Rest, and take people in tomorrow.”

Healer vanished, leaving silence in his wake. Some time later, a shell-shocked Jory, Gary, Farrah and Rufus were sharing a drink in the clinic.

“I’m going to need new labels,” Jory said absently.

“Labels?” Farrah asked.

“For the Rumpy-Pumpy Good Time Ointment,” Jory said. “I’m definitely calling it Togetherness Jelly now.”

Chapter 96: You Don't Get a Third

Jason's path back to the city was a long one. The lumber region was on the far side of the delta and he had Dean alongside him, as well as the suppression-collared and manacled Jerrick shuffling behind. Jason considered commandeering a cart from Clementson but decided he'd rather walk than deal with the heidel he would need to pull it. As for Clementson himself, Jason left him behind. Another person would be unmanageable, and Clementson wasn't going anywhere. Without his lumber mill, he was nothing

Jerrick made some trouble early in the journey. On the first day, he tried to sneak-attack Jason from behind, but without his powers, he quickly came to regret it. The first night he tried to sneak out the inn, which he came to regret far more. Jason had not used his familiar when fighting Jerrick, and Jerrick was unaware Jason had left bunches of Team Colin suckered to the wall above every exit.

Jason also slowed their progress with his usual routine of healing people in the towns and villages they passed through. He also took some notices from the adventure boards if anything seemed like a threat.

Leaving Jerrick in the middle of a leech circle, Jason took Dean to show him what actual adventurers did. His fergax summon was a powerful, but singular threat. Jason quickly identified Dean's problem while on a notice for a small humanoid monster called a pixelax. Quick creatures with emaciated limbs and long, sharp fingers, they were around a metre tall and appeared in large groups. They swarmed over Dean's summon, which occupied many of them, but others made straight for Dean, who started to panic.

Jason swept in to handle them, sword flashing. His afflictions were of little point against the frail monsters, so he didn't bother. Their pointed fingers made little headway against his armour and they fell to a well-placed sword stroke. Between Jason and the fergax, the pixelaxes were made short work of.

"Who names these monsters?" Jason wondered aloud as he used crystal wash to clean himself off.

"I don't know," Dean said, still shaken.

"Someone overly-enamoured with the letter X, apparently. We had a phase like that where I come from."

Dean gave Jason a strange look and Jason realised it probably didn't translate well.

“The good news,” Jason said, “is that the problem keeping you from being a decent adventurer is quite evident. I know someone at the Adventure Society who can get you assigned to the right contracts to work through it. If that’s still what you want.”

Dean nodded, hesitant, but forcing himself to be determined.

“I can’t go back to what I was doing,” he said.

“Good man.”

As they drew closer to the city, Jason was surprised to find church of the Healer members in multiple towns and villages. It was a pleasant surprise, letting Jason hasten his journey without leaving sick people untreated behind him. Finally, they reached Greenstone and started making their way through Old City.

“I have to assume that Clementson got word ahead to Thadwick,” Jason said. “We didn’t exactly make great time through the delta. You have family here in Old City, right?”

“That’s right,” Dean said. “We build and maintain devices that use water quintessence. It’s a decent living, which is how they managed to afford a full set of essences for me.”

His head fell.

“I haven’t seen them in a while. I let them down pretty badly.”

“Take it from someone further away from family than you can imagine,” Jason said. “Don’t let pride keep you away. If I leave you and Jerrick there until I sort things out, will that be alright? Can you handle him?”

“I can do that,” Dean said determinedly. “We may not be one of the big-time families, but our compound is secure enough. Thadwick’s people wouldn’t move on it unless Thadwick himself was with them, and the whole point of him using us was to keep his hands clean.”

Dean guided them through Old City toward his family’s compound. They went through one of the main market districts and into a vast arcade. It had high, vaulted ceilings, stores on either side and was an obstacle course of stalls and shoppers.

That changed as a group of twelve, heavily-armed thugs started marching down the arcade, pushing over people and even small stalls that were in their path. The arcade started clearing quickly as people scattered. Seeing them coming, Jason handed Dean a recording crystal.

“Use it,” he said. “We’ll probably need the evidence, later.”

“Evidence of what?” Dean asked as he threw the crystal up to float over his head.

“Stay here and watch everything,” Jason said instead of answering and walked forward to meet the group.

One of the men was clearly the leader, walking front and centre.

“So you’re Asano,” he said. “I’m not impressed.”

Jason panned his gaze over the group. A dozen men, all with iron-rank auras. Every aura was uncontrolled, either through lack of training or a lack of aura powers altogether.

“I see some familiar faces,” he said. He spotted Dink, far less brazen than their last encounter. He was hovering at the back with the others who had slunk away after witnessing Dink’s beating at Jason’s hands.

“I’ve become a big believer in seconds chances,” Jason said. “This is yours. Leave now.”

He pointed out the ones he recognised.

“Except for you, you, you and you,” he said as he pointed each one out. “You all had your second chances. You don’t get a third.”

The leader laughed.

“Do you not see where we are?” he asked. “These are our streets. See how they all scuttled away like little bugs? That’s because they know what’s coming. Do you really think you can take us all?”

“Yes,” Jason said, his voice dismissive. “I just don’t know if I’ll be able to leave any of you alive.”

The leader laughed again.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “Either I’m overestimating myself, or I’m not. Decide which you think it is, then act accordingly.”

“You’re relying on that rigged fight to make people scared of you,” the leader said.

Jason looked around. The skylights in the ceiling left plenty of shadowy nooks in the arcade. Even the open space had plenty of stalls and carts to cast shadows. The people were already gone.

“I hope you let me keep doing so,” Jason said. “I’d prefer that to having it based on what I do to you.”

The leader grinned and stomped the ground with his foot. Stone erupted from the ground, flying at Jason in shards. His ability to aim the power was clearly not good, most of the shards being intercepted by one of the fruit carts in between them. Gobbets of pulped fruit flew as the stone tore into the cart. Jason was unconcerned by the attack, having already dropped into a shadow on the ground.

“Where did he go?” the leader yelled, looking around. Blood from a slashed artery sprayed over them as they looked behind and realised one of their number had already

fallen. His body dropped to the ground, falling at the hands of a shadowy figure in their midst.

Spattered with the blood of their companion, the thugs were startled into a brief, but critical moment of inaction. Jason's wicked-looking red and black dagger didn't stop as he moved like a ghost, finding the back of a neck, a throat and then burying itself in the side of a head before Jason vanished into the shadow of a dropping corpse. None of the spooked, bottom-feeder adventurers reacted effectively in the few startled moments it took Jason to appear, kill and vanish. In the aftermath, some of them realised the dead were Dink and the others Jason had pointed out.

"Last chance," Jason's voice came from the darkness.

"Leave now," his voice came again, from the opposite direction.

The group looked at each other nervously and the leader slapped one across the head.

"Don't let him get to you. It's just games because he's scared to fight us straight-up!"

His own voice didn't sound completely convinced, and the others looked at the dead bodies at their feet.

"No way," one of them said and started running. There was a rip of cloth as a huge rat tail emerged from the leader's back. To Jason, watching from the shadows, it looked like the prehensile tail of the rat gorgon he had fought. It wrapped around the fleeing man's ankle, tripping him over and dragging him back to the group where the leader savagely stomped on his head.

"NOBODY RUNS," the leader announced fiercely. "Everyone their keep eyes out. He can't pick us off if we see him coming."

They all started looking around them, peering into every shadow.

"Don't forget the shadows at your feet," the leader said. "Catch him quick and you can drop him while he's disoriented from appearing."

As they watched the shadows, they neglected to realise that not every patch of darkness in the tall arcade was at ground level. None of them saw Jason floating down until Jason let his weight return, using the weight of the fall to plunge his dagger through the startled man's eye. Their leader slid off Jason's blade and dropped to the ground, dead. The others stared at the shadowy figure standing in front of them like deer in headlights. Even though he was right in front of them, out in the open, none of them made a move.

Jason looked down at the man whose head had been stomped on by the now-dead leader. He was in a very bad way, but still alive. Jason walked closer to the group, who flinched at his approach. Jason took a potion from his belt and held it out.

“Heal this one and go,” he told them, gesturing to the hurt man on the ground. The thugs looked at the potion like it was a venomous snake, but finally one of them reached out to take it. As if that movement was a starter’s pistol, the others all ran. The one who took the potion knelt down to feed it to his fallen companion. It didn’t bring about a full recovery, but with his friend’s help, he got to his feet. The thug who had taken the potion from Jason gave him a look of wariness and confusion.

“Thank you,” he said. “For the potion.”

“You won’t thank me if we meet like this again.”

The pair hurried off, one supporting the other. Soon after, Dean cautiously approached with the recording crystal still over his head. Jerrick was walking behind him.

“Give me that,” Jason said and Dean nervously took down the recording crystal and handed it over. Four of the five dead men on the ground had been beside Dean himself when they first confronted Jason. If Thadwick hadn’t needed Dean for his summoning power, and if Jason hadn’t needed Dean to use against Thadwick, then Dean himself could have easily been one of those bodies.

Jason looked at Jerrick, who was also staring down at the bodies.

“You’ve had your two chances,” Jason told him. “If you and I run into each other again, after all this is done, I hope you’ll be smart enough to run.”

“Are these all adventurers?” Jason asked.

“What?” Dean asked, looking up from the corpses, distracted. “Oh, uh, yes. Those who couldn’t pass the assessment themselves, Thadwick had slipped through. That was a while ago, though. It’s harder since the new director came in.”

Jason started shuffling through the pockets of the fallen, eventually digging out their Adventure Society badges.

“I’m a little surprised they carried them,” Jason said. “It’s not like they do any adventuring.”

“We all carry them,” Dean said. “It gives you some weight to throw around.”

Standing up, Jason looked around the arcade.

“What’s the local civic authority here?” he asked.

“The what?” Dean asked.

“Who’s in charge here,” Jason said. “Who do we tell about the killings?”

“This is Dorgan’s territory,” Dean said.

“Dorgan? He’s one of those three crime lords, right?”

“The Big Three,” Dean said. “They run Old City because people from the Island don’t care so long as the money keeps coming.”

“What about some kind of local government authority?” Jason asked.

“There’s the Duke’s guard,” Dean said, “but they only come over if there’s some kind of threat to Island interests. The Big Three makes sure there isn’t.”

“Five dead adventurers is a long way from nothing, though,” Jason said. “The Adventure Society will be looking into it.”

“So what do we do now?” Dean asked.

“Stick to the plan,” Jason said. “Get you to your family and I get things settled. This is just one more thing to settle.”

Chapter 97: Integrity is Sexy

With Dean and Jerrick stashed with Dean's family, Jason decided he had time to stop at his lodgings before getting to business. He was weary, heavy with the blood of the men he killed, even after the crystal wash had cleaned it away. He took a long, luxurious shower and, with a fresh change of clothes, went for lunch with Farrah, Gary and Rufus in their suite.

Madam Landry sent lunch up in the dumbwaiter and they went out to the balcony. Since Jason became an adventurer they were seeing less of each other, and eating lunch in the sunshine as they looked out over the ocean was something they did whenever they had the chance.

"You missed a lot," Farrah said to Jason as they sat down.

"Oh?"

"Gods showed up at Jory's clinic," Gary said. "It was something to see. Dominion asked after you by name."

"What?" Jason asked, half-standing in his chair. "Dominion as in the god?"

"That's the one," Farrah said.

"That's bad," Jason said, settling back down. "That's really bad."

"He seems to like you, if that helps," Farrah said.

"No, it does not help," Jason said. "That makes it worse."

The others recounted to Jason what took place outside the clinic.

"Good for Jory," Jason said. "He deserves recognition for what he does. And that Davone, guy. Turns out he's alright?"

"He's wasted following around that idiot, Thadwick," Rufus said.

"You should tell him about the other thing," Gary said to Rufus, who looked over at Farrah, who shook her head in resignation.

"Cowards," she said. "Jason, we're going away for a while. There's a big expedition, and we're on it."

"Oh?"

It finally came out why the Ustei Tribe came south. You remember that waterfall that shut off briefly, with monsters coming out?"

"Of course," Jason said.

"Well, there have been other instances around the desert. Close by, it's only been brief, isolated instances. Up north it looks like the problem is much worse. Enough that the oases connected to the astral space were no longer able to support all the nomad tribes."

"Something is going on with the astral space?" Jason asked.

"That's what we're going to find out," Rufus said, picking up the narrative. "We're going to relocate the Ustei back to the north, enter into one of the apertures and investigate the astral space."

"That doesn't sound like a small expedition," Jason said.

"It isn't," Rufus said. "It's massive. Danielle Geller is leading it, along with a handful of other silver rankers. Dozens of bronze-rankers, hundreds of iron. People who haven't been on a contract in years. The chance to explore the desert astral space, under the watchful protection of silver rankers? The city's most prominent families are falling over themselves to be involved."

"I can imagine," Jason said. "Why am I getting a sense of hesitation from you all?"

The others looked at each other, all shaking their heads. Finally, Gary groaned capitulation.

"You don't get to go," Gary said. "This isn't just a matter of you not being invited; you were specifically excluded. Which is a load of crap, if you ask me."

"Specifically excluded?" Jason said, his voice ramping up. The other braced for an explosion, but Jason let out a long, calming breath, instead.

"I guess I can see that," he said.

"You can?" Rufus asked, looking at Jason like he was a grenade that unexpectedly didn't explode.

"Look, it's no secret that I can be contentious when it comes to the upper-classes. I've caused problems before. And I've been rising up very high and very fast, socially, for someone with no background. I'm guessing this is a test. If I show that I can take this quietly, miss an opportunity without kicking up a stink, then I pass."

Jason turned his attention back to his meal as the others stared at him in silence.

"What?" he asked them.

"We kind of thought you'd have a bigger reaction," Farrah said.

"Making a noise in the face of authority is kind of a thing for you," Gary said.

"Yes, but I'm coming to realise it doesn't get me anywhere. The snake slithering across the lawn gets shot. The one waiting for the toddler to wander near the tall grass gets fed."

“That’s a horrifying analogy but welcomed, measured response,” Rufus said. “We might make a decent adventurer out of you yet.”

Jason frowned.

“Sometimes I wonder about that,” he said, his voice heavy. “I need your advice on how to handle something.”

“Of course,” Rufus said and they waited for Jason to speak. They showed concern at his uncharacteristic hesitation.

“I killed five adventurers today,” Jason said.

“What?” Gary asked immediately.

“Let him get it out,” Farrah told Gary.

“Yes,” Rufus said. “Start at the beginning.”

Jason nodded, absently.

“It started with this contract I took at the jobs hall...”

Unlike the Geller family, whose seat of power was a sprawling estate in the delta, the Mercer’s main residence was a manor on the Island. A feat of magical engineering, it was a series of five towers set out in a ring. Built from a combination of the finest grade of green stone available and magic-wrought glass, each tower was five storeys tall, interconnected by a network of glass walkways. One set of the walkways was curved, linking the towers in a circle. Another set of walkways were straight, connecting every second tower in such a way that seen from above, it would form the shape of a pentagram.

Each of the walkways had a clear glass ceiling and colour-tinted glass floor, with a different colour for each walkway. The sides were open, but with invisible, magic barriers in place. The barriers let in fresh air while shielding from inclement weather, as rare as that was. It also prevented Mercer’s children and pets from running off the sides.

In the space between the towers was a park, with trees and lawns showered with colour as sunlight passed through the walkways above. In the centre of the park was a pond where waterfowl swam happily about. Children were playing as parents or family servants watched on. They ran around, climbed trees and tossed torn-up pieces of bread into the water to be gobbled-up by ducks.

Thalia Mercer was passing through one of the walkways when she felt a familiar aura from the park below. She moved to the side of the walkway to look down and then vanished, reappearing on the ground. She arrived next to a bench in the park where a man was eating a large sandwich.

“Jason,” she said, sitting down next to him. “Your ability to restrain your aura is quite developed for someone of your rank.”

“Thank you,” he said. “I’ve been working quite hard at it.”

“It shows.”

Jason placed his sandwich in his inventory, dabbed at his face with a napkin, then put it away as well.

“Lady Mercer,” he said, once he was done.

“I’ve told you, please call me Thalia. I’m afraid you’ve missed Cassandra; she’s out preparing for the big expedition.”

“Sadly, this isn’t a social visit,” Jason said. “I’m here about a contract.”

“I wasn’t informed of your arrival,” Thalia said. “Have you been using my household guard to practice your stealth techniques?”

“Your household guard only has a few bronze-rankers,” Jason said, “and they all seem to project their auras as imposingly as possible. Not that hard to avoid. I wouldn’t be able to get into the buildings unnoticed, though. Too many high-ranking Mercers in residence.”

“That’s the problem with having essence users as guards,” Thalia said. “Anyone with the skill to excel is unlikely to work as a guard, while anyone without essences can’t be an effective one.”

“I imagine you have a few quality staff nestled away,” Jason said. “I’ve recently been learning about the Mercer name’s ability to attract people into service.”

“Oh?”

“I assume you have a recording crystal projector we can use?”

“Of course,” she said. “Please follow me.”

“Looks like I have to put both of you down,” Jerrick’s voice came out of the projection. Jason reached out and tapped the projector, bringing the playback to a stop. They were seated in Thalia’s personal study, a recording crystal projector on the table between them.

“After that is something of a mess,” he said. “A fight from my perspective makes for a disorienting recording. Lots of darkness and teleporting about. Suffice to say, I took the man into custody.”

“He’s alive?”

“Yes.”

“And this witness of yours?” Thalia asked.

“Also fine,” Jason said. “I didn’t want him mixing with his old crowd, so I sent him to stay with his family. They seemed quite happy to see him.”

“It can be that way, with the lower-end adventurers,” Thalia said. “A family can work for years, generations even, just to get an adventurer in the family. Adventuring is a dangerous life, though, and not everyone has the training, temperament or talent. Add on the family pressure and it’s hardly a surprise when many fall short. Some end up in the household guard of families like mine. Others end up working for criminals in Old City.”

“Or a bit of both, when they end up in your son’s employ.”

Thalia frowned.

“It seems we have been a little too loose with the reins when it comes to my son. His father wants to give him the room to come into himself, while I prefer a more guided approach. We raised Cassandra my way, and Thadwick his. Marriage is a matter of compromise, after all. This recording of yours lays my boy’s follies out on a slab.”

“I have another recording,” Jason said. “Has word got around about the dead adventurers in Old City yet?”

“From this morning?” Thalia asked. “Not widely, but yes. That was you?”

“Your son sent his lackeys to keep me from revealing everything. I have it all recorded. They don’t mention Thadwick at all, which I imagine was a point quite specifically made to them. If someone were to go round up the survivors, though, I doubt getting them to talk would be tricky. Especially with my corroborating witness from the recording you just saw.”

“Is he safe, this witness?” she asked.

“Safe enough,” Jason said, “So long as your son is prevented from taking revenge.”

Thalia sighed.

“That boy,” she muttered. “I think his father and I need to have a very long talk. What are your intentions?”

“For your son? Nothing. Regardless of what he’s done, I know you’ll protect him from anything within my power to do. I could kill him but I’d know I’d quickly follow him to the grave.

“Then you’re willing to forgive?”

“That’s asking a bit much. I’m willing to be patient. My desire to stay in your daughter’s good graces is a better shield than he could hope for. The most I can hurt him is to collect more than enough evidence to give your family a headache for which he is directly responsible. In addition to the recording you saw, I have copies of all the relevant

documents and another recording of finding them all. In case something mysteriously happens to the originals.”

“What inspired you to look into the hall of civic records?” Thalia asked.

“Where I come from, we don't investigate with magic,” Jason said. “When it comes to business fraud, you follow a paper trail. Once I heard about a monster known for death and destruction that keeps turning up without either, plus the highly-regulated and valuable nature of the lumber territories, it seemed obvious what was going on. All I had to do was figure out who stood to profit, then prove their involvement.”

“You must have needed help to find all that. I’m surprised that records official didn’t come to us. It’s widely known that we’ll double any bribe.”

“I didn’t offer a bribe,” Jason said. “I told her a story.”

“It must have been some story. You’re thorough, I’ll give you that. The question is, what will you do with all this information? Frankly, I’m surprised to find you here. I’ve had you looked into quite thoroughly, and everything I’ve heard suggests you would start shouting this information from the rooftops. You seem to have a dislike for aristocratic power structures.”

“I’m just some iron-ranker,” Jason said. “If I lay out an exploitative land-grab by your family, then all that does is demonstrate your power when you face no real repercussions. All you would suffer is the reputation hit of bumbling the affair to the point it went public. A headache, but one easily endured.”

“You may be underestimating the damage to our reputation,” Thalia said.

“Greenstone is a productive city, with decent work for those who want it. If our reputation suffers too much, then we have to start paying more or people will move into the service of other families. We may have power, but there’s always a balance.”

“Yes, but the scales are rigged.” Jason said. “Be that as it may, this won't start some populist revolution. I need to go up a few ranks before I can start changing the world. In the meantime, all I can do is go for the best outcome I can see.”

“Oh?”

“If I make a big fuss, then your family pushes back. I’ll suffer; the lumber mill owner, Lindover will suffer. Poor Dean, who I promised to shield from all this will definitely suffer. And when everything is said and done, you’d probably end up with the land, anyway.”

“You’re not exactly painting my family in a positive light,” Thalia said.

“You have power,” Jason said. “That’s the nature of power. So, for now, the best way to go is to see this quietly brushed under the rug.”

“And what do you want in return?”

“Here’s how I see it going,” Jason said. “I make a discreet report to the Adventure Society to close out the contract. Straight to the office of the director, to help keep a lid on the details. Your family compensates Lindover for the months of stalled production, and all the preparations Clementson made in preparation for a takeover get rolled back. Dean doesn’t suffer any blowback for having come clean and Jerrick is quietly struck off the Adventure Society roll.”

“You don’t want him punished for trying to kill you?”

“If he were put on trial for trying to kill me, the reason why would be an inevitable question. Also, I’m not the kind of person that kills the minion when he can’t kill the master. Losing his Society membership is enough.”

“What about the men you killed this morning?”

“The ones I killed already had their chance,” Jason said with flint in his voice. “I let most of them go.”

“Most of them? You killed five; how many people did you fight?”

“Elspeth Arella will have the recording. I imagine she’ll show you when she’s leveraging your family.”

Thalia gave a wry smile.

“I daresay you’re right. So, you’re willing to leave Thadwick to my family?”

“We both know he’s out of my reach,” Jason said. “But regardless of how powerful your family is, and my affection for your daughter, there is only so far I’m willing to be pushed. I’m running out of mercy for your son.”

“You know, my husband won’t be happy about this outcome. He’s been waiting to see some initiative from Thadwick.”

“Then he should wait to see some morals,” Jason said, his expression turning hard.

“He won’t like compensating the mill owner, either.”

“He doesn’t have to like it,” Jason said. “He just has to do it.”

“I thought the whole point of you taking this approach was to avoid provoking us?”

“And you need to recognise that I’m not a doormat you can just walk over. I have my bottom line, Lady Mercer. You would do well not to cross it.”

“Is that a threat?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Yes.”

She smiled.

“Mr Asano, you have some backing, but you are ultimately an iron-ranker lost in a world he does not know.”

Thalia’s silver-rank aura pressed down on Jason.

"You pose no threat whatsoever to me or my family," she told him.

"I imagine a thought very much like that was one of the last to pass through Cressida Vane's head before it was smashed open."

Thalia laughed, breaking the tension.

"You really don't flinch, do you? My daughter certainly knows how to pick them. Alright, Jason. Lindover will be duly compensated and Thadwick will be suitably chastised. I'll see to it my husband doesn't kick up too much of a fuss. He dotes on Cassie, and her approval of you will go a long way."

"In my world, fathers often don't care for their daughters' gentlemen friends."

"The gods know my husband has his failings," Thalia said, "but a failure to trust his daughter's judgement isn't one of them."

They stood up.

"Very well," Jason said. "I imagine you'll be pushing all this onto Clementson? Making out that he was behind everything as a way to ingratiate himself with his aristocratic backers?"

"Are you alright with that?" she asked.

"The man was clearly complicit, and fetched one of your son's lackeys to kill me, so yes. Don't be too harsh on him, though. Not many can say no when the Mercers tell them what to do."

"You make us sound like tyrants," Thalia said.

"That's the thing," Jason said. "You are if you want to be."

Jason was sitting on a bench in the park district, speaking into a recording crystal floating in front of him.

"...it was sort of a business fraud kind of deal. There was a lot of waiting around, but it gave me a chance to catch up on my reading. I was stuck at this abandoned lumber mill for three days with a guy named Kyle. Nice enough bloke, but really only likes to talk about wood. I suspect he's very good at his job, but not much of a conversationalist. My friends Farrah and Clive, I'm sure you've seen them on some of these recordings, they've been foisting a lot of magical theory texts on me, so I was able to get stuck into those. It's pretty fascinating, but I can't tell them that. They're rabid enough as it is."

"Hello, handsome," a sultry voice came from behind. Jason grinned as Cassandra sidled onto the bench, leaning into him.

"Is this one of the recordings you're making for your family back home?" she asked, looking at the crystal.

"It is," Jason said. "Family, this is Cassandra. We've been seeing each other socially."

"Is that how you describe it?" Cassandra asked cheekily.

"That's how I describe it to my mum," Jason said, taking down the recording crystal.

"Well, you impressed my mother," Cassandra said. "Dad, not so much. And I'd watch my back around Thadwick."

"One of his henchmen tried to kill me, so yeah, I'll be watching out. What about you?"

"Mother said you barely mentioned me," she said with a pout.

"I can't go around making decisions based on dark, gorgeous eyes," he said.

"Besides; integrity is sexy."

He reached out for her hand as they sat side-by-side, intertwining their fingers.

"You'll be away for a little while," he said.

"I don't like that you're not coming," she said. "We could have had a fun little trip away."

"We can do that when you come back," Jason said. "I assume your family owns an obnoxiously large boat. We could have a little sailing trip. A picnic basket, some wine... a small army of nautically adept servants."

She laughed, resting a head on his shoulder.

"Something to look forward to," she said.

"You can tell me all about your exciting adventures in the astral space."

"Deal," she said. "Maybe you should round out your awakening stones while we're gone," she said. "take the chance to blitz some one-star contracts, get moving towards bronze. You have to get there before I hit silver, you know."

"My friends told me not to do that," Jason said. "It seems there might be an unusual opportunity not long after they get back."

"Oh?" she prompted.

"They're still not giving me any details," Jason said. "It's something to do with why they came here in the first place. They're expecting another adventurer to arrive. A gold-ranker, apparently."

"I've heard rumblings about that. Maybe you should catch that thief giving everyone so much trouble. My uncle and the Adventure Society director have been quite contentious about it, behind the scenes."

"The whole thing seems sketchy to me," Jason said. "High-profile jobs; the Duke and Elspeth Arella taking such an interest. The whole thing smells of politics."

"You know, she was almost caught a few days ago. A group of adventurers almost pinned her down, but they were attacked."

“By who?”

“No one knows,” Cassandra said. “They just slowed them down for long enough for her to escape, then fled themselves. Dressed all in black. They weren’t even iron-rankers.”

“I told you,” Jason said. “Politics. There’s a mess of undercurrents running through the whole business.”

“You don’t want to catch her?”

“She’s robbing from rich people,” Jason said. “I can appreciate that.”

“Aren’t you rich?”

“Not compared to you.”

Chapter 98: The Point of Money and Power

The Adventure Society campus was a sea of chaos as the grand expedition prepared to depart. With the Ustei detained in the marshalling yard and being prepared to move, the adventurers were gathering in front of the main administration building. Neither space was designed for that many people or that kind of activity, so people were spilling out all over the campus.

Jason navigated the commotion-filled campus, leisurely eating an apple. He watched absently as an Ustei made a run for it, a couple of Adventure Society officials in pursuit. He reached the administration building, where a crowd of people swarmed around the carriages that would take them out to desert relay stations. The humungous Ustei sand barge was going to be used, along with smaller sand barges supplied by the Magic Society.

It had been a good choice to make his farewells to Gary, Farrah and Rufus at the inn rather than at the assembly point. Looking at the huge mess and hearing the harried shouts, Jason was somewhat happy that he wasn't a part of it. He was disappointed he wouldn't get to see the inside of the astral space, though.

"One of these days," he consoled himself.

He approached the space in front of the admin building where the adventurers were gathering. He paused as he felt the wild storm of auras crashing together in a maelstrom. Not everyone had the control that came from just having an aura power, let alone the kind of training Jason had received from Farrah.

He used that training to suppress other auras in a very small space around his body, allowed him to move closer without being overwhelmed. He noticed a lot of iron-rankers looking woozy because they couldn't do the same. Farrah's emphasis on the importance of aura training was once again borne out.

It took him a while to track down anyone he knew in the crowd, as they were all restraining their auras to avoid adding to the mess. He found Danielle Geller busily directing the loading of supplies, pausing only long enough to point Jason in the direction of the main mass of Gellers.

If he had come at the crowd from the other side, he quickly realised, he would have had no trouble. The Gellers were gathered en masse, looking like a modelling agency that formed an Olympic team. Surprising Jason not at all, they were already packed up and ready to head out. He nodded to those he knew as he made his way over to where Rick

and Phoebe were talking, while Humphrey was saying goodbye to Gabrielle. Rick's team was also there, Jonah laughing at Humphrey.

"You're going away for a few weeks," Jonah jeered. "It's not like you're going off to war."

"Leave them be," Jason said as he approached. "They're sweet and earnest. The world could use more of that."

"I'm glad you think so," Cassandra said, suddenly standing next to him. He smiled as she slipped her hand into his.

"Oh, hey," he greeted, voice softening with pleasure. "Can you teleport?"

"Maybe," she said. "A girl has to have some secrets," she said.

"I have secrets, too," he said. "My fried chicken spice mix is better than my essence abilities."

She laughed and nodded in the direction of her own family.

"Are you going to come to see me off?" she asked.

"Of course," he said, and waved at Humphrey with the hand Cassandra hadn't claimed.

"See you in a few weeks, Hump!"

"Go die in a bog!" Humphrey called back. He winced at the startled look this earned from Gabrielle, which caused him to glare at Jason's laughing face all the more.

Cassandra led Jason through the chaos to where her own family were preparing. No one could match the numbers of the Geller family, who drew from branches all around the world, but the Mercers still made an impressive showing.

"What do you think you're doing, Asano?" came Thadwick's, voice, drawing a sigh from Jason.

"You need to get away from my sister," Thadwick said, marching up to Jason. "You need to stop sticking your nose into business that isn't yours. You had to go and ruin my deal, didn't you?"

"Thadwick..."

Jason was about to point out that with all the ways his family had to legally exploit people, Thadwick still managed to find one that was against the law but stopped himself. Instead, he took a slow, cleansing breath.

"You know what, Thadwick?" Jason asked. "You have a good trip."

"What does that mean?" Thadwick asked suspiciously.

"Just wishing you well," Jason said. "I'm going to try and put more positivity into the world."

“You're weird,” Thadwick said, giving Jason a wary look. His mother walked over to them, placing a hand on Thadwick's shoulder.

“Do go finish stowing your gear on the carriage, dear.”

“Why didn't we bring servants for that?” Thadwick complained.

“There aren't servants where we're going, dear, and you may have noticed that things are crowded enough.”

Danielle Geller's voice boomed over the crowd through some form of magic amplification.

“All non-expedition members please clear the area, as we are getting ready to depart!”

Jason leaned in to gently kiss Cassandra, only for her to forcefully latch onto him. After a lingering kiss, they stood leaning into one-another, foreheads together.

“You're being naughty,” he told her softly.

“A naughty genius?” she asked.

“You've certainly got me figured out.”

“Somehow I doubt that,” she told him.

Soon Jason stood off with other well-wishers at the huge train of carriages rolled away. In the empty space left behind, Jason was about to leave when he was approached by Vincent.

“You're not on the expedition?” Jason asked. His brain started turning over, and he laughed. “I get it. Everyone wanted in on this expedition, so Arella let all the people who aren't wildly on-board with her agenda go. That gets her some bureaucratic capital, and while they and most of the city's big power-brokers are gone, she can institute a few sweeping changes.”

“You got that just from my still being here?” Vincent asked.

“Just postulation, but it's what I'd do.”

“Well, the director is going to be quite busy for the next few weeks, so she wanted to get something out of the way first. If you'll follow me?”

Vincent led Jason into the administration building.

“The director is hoping that you can resume the pace of handling contracts you demonstrated when you first joined the Society,” Vincent said as they walked. “Most of our best adventurers just left.”

“No worries,” Jason said. “Most of the people I know just left town, so I figured I'd throw myself into it. I was expecting there to be more trouble over killing those adventurers.”

“The recording makes it quite plain what they were there for,” Vincent said. “What really clinched it was that most of them hadn't taken a contract in months. Some hadn't taken one at all. The director hates that kind of adventurer with a passion. Something to do with her upbringing, I've been told. She was more than happy to just push it under the rug.”

“I've heard she isn't from one of the big families,” Jason said. “That she made her way up out of Old City.”

“That's about as much as anyone has heard,” Vincent said. “She doesn't talk about her past, at least to me.”

“She respects privacy,” Jason said. “Unlike someone I know. I'm having a barbie tonight, if you'd care to join.”

“A barbie?”

“A barbecue, mate. Nice and casual. A few mates still in town, they're all bringing people. You can bring some Adventure Society people if you'd like. Clive's bringing some Magic Society people, plus their families. We've got enough meat to sink a ship, and Norwich Distillery is putting on the drinks. Fair warning, though; leave your social stratification at the door. Duke or dunny-cleaner, everyone's a mate at an Asano barbie.”

“I'll think about it,” Vincent said. “Norwich Distillery, you say?”

“Yep,” Jason said. “Norwich'll be there himself, along with some of his workers. They're bringing a few barrels along.”

Vincent led them into what turned out to be a magical elevator. Jason knew they were in some of the Island's taller buildings, but it was his first time using one. The ride was swift and smooth, depositing them on the top floor. Vincent led Jason to a door with a plaque proclaiming it to be the office of the branch director. Vincent led them in without knocking.

Jason and Vincent went in to find the director, Elspeth Arella sitting behind a paperwork-covered desk. At another desk was the elderly elf who had assessed Jason for his promotion. They were both busily writing and Vincent gestured for patience.

Looking around, Jason noticed several desert landscapes hung on the walls. They were all by the same artist who painted a similar work Jason favoured at the concert hall.

“I like your taste in art,” he said to the director. “You have a lot of Moher's work.”

“He's a friend of the family,” the director said absently. “I'll be with you in a moment, Asano.”

Vincent gave Jason an admonishing frown, and they waited until the director and deputy director finished their work. Once the papers they were working on were signed and filed, they turned to Vincent and Jason.

“G’day,” Jason said, offering his hand over the desk to the elderly elf. “We haven’t been properly introduced.”

“Genevieve Picot,” she said, curtly shaking his hand. “Deputy director.”

“We’re quite busy, Mr Asano,” Arella said, “so I’ll be brief. First, thank you for not making a fuss about being excluded from the expedition. I know you have enough connections now that you could have.”

“Plenty of people did,” Genevieve said unhappily.

“Second,” Arella said, “I was very impressed at your handling of the lumber mill contract. You could have been loud about it, but you weren’t. The thoroughness with which you investigated and collected evidence gave me some much-appreciated political capital.”

“I didn’t do it that way to give you another stick to whack the Duke with,” Jason said. “I did it because that’s where the contract took me.”

“Yet your response demonstrated an awareness of the political realities,” Arella said.

She opened a drawer on her desk and took out a small bamboo box, handing it over to him. He slid off the top to see a round crystal inside and tapped a finger to it.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Judgement] (unranked, rare)

An awakening stone containing the power of adjudication (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.

- You have 4 unawakened essence abilities.
- You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Judgement]. Absorb Y/N?

“Judgement,” Jason mused.

“It seemed appropriate, given that’s what you’ve demonstrated,” Arella said. “We’re rather understaffed right now, so if anything unexpected arises, we’ll need people to take on leadership roles. At iron rank, you will be one of those people. Hand over your badge, please.”

Jason frowned as he took out his badge and handed it over.

“You’re promoting me?” Jason asked. “Days after I killed a fistful of adventurers?”

“They weren’t adventurers,” Arella said darkly. “They were the filth clinging to the side of a boat in desperate need of righting.”

She took out a wedge-shaped stone and tapped it to Jason's iron badge. The metal shifted as the two stars embossed on it were joined by a third and she handed it back.

“No big, imposing room?” Jason asked. “No officious questioning?”

“The rules only require three officials present, including at least one of director or deputy-director level. We have a lot to do, Mr Asano, and such proceedings aren’t as valuable with some members as they are with others.”

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “You know, if you need to wind down after work, I am having a barbie tonight...”

The turnout for Jason's barbecue was larger than he expected. They had staked-out a section of the park district, bringing out picnic tables with colourful tablecloths. Jensen Norwich had set up a long bar. There was a whole array of grillers, covered in sizzling meat, fish wrapped in bamboo leaves, vegetables and fruit.

“Good thing I overdid it on food,” Jason said. “Thanks for wrangling the extra grills, Jessica.”

“It was my absolute pleasure,” Madam Landry said.

People in the park district had wandered over and were invited to join in. There was some kind of three-way ball game happening, the participants having marked-out a triangular field. The teams were Magic Society versus Adventure Society versus the people that were both. The mixed team had Clive as captain.

Jason spotted a pair of elves looking on at a remove, standing under a tree. Jason teleported through the tree’s shadow to join them.

“You made it after all,” he said to them.

“You’ve created quite a commotion in the park district,” Arella said. “You did get permission for this, right?”

“As you know,” he said, “Thalia Mercer owed me for not throwing her crappy son under the bus. Her brother-in-law is the Duke, so it wasn’t hard to get.”

“This is how you spend your political capital?” Genevieve asked.

“What’s the point of money and power if you don’t enjoy it?” Jason asked. “I don’t suppose either of you ladies can explain the rules of that ball game?”

“You don’t know tri-ball?” Arella asked. “You really are from another world.”

Chapter 99: Someone Else's Game

Dean Tuckell was part of a team of adventurers that arrived in a village in the delta. The team was a makeshift one put together for a road contract, patrolling a fixed route through the delta and beyond under the supervision of a bronze-ranker. The others were unhappy to be on punishment duty instead of the big expedition, while Dean was just happy to get away from the city. He didn't want the people still working for Thadwick Mercer to find him and take him out for a little chat.

The team moved straight to the adventure noticeboard.

"This one actually has a notice," the bronze-rank team leader said, taking it from the board. This was their third village for the day, and every noticeboard had been empty.

"Trap weavers," the bronze-ranker read, causing the iron-rankers to groan.

"Wait, this one's been claimed already," the bronze-ranker said. "Just not completed, yet."

As he said it, the paper dissolved away to nothing in his hand.

"And now it has," he said. "Next village on the list, then."

"Can't we stop for a drink?" someone asked. "There's a tavern right there."

"We can stop once we've dealt with at least one monster," the bronze-ranker said.

"Assuming we can find one."

Jason dropped a stack of papers on the registration desk in the jobs hall.

"Three contracts, eleven board notices," he said.

"In three days," Albert said. "That's some schedule you've got going."

"Any assigned contracts for me?" Jason asked.

"No, but there are a few incentivised contracts. Fewer adventurers means less competition."

"I think I'll leave those for others," Jason said. "Maybe it'll get a few more people picking up contracts."

Jason didn't need to go back to his inn for a shower, having cleaned himself off with a bottle of crystal wash. Switching from his battle robes to casual civilian attire, he caught the loop line out of the Adventure Society campus to the park district and bought a flatbread wrap from a food cart. He ate it on a park bench with a fruit drink from his inventory while he watched the sun go down.

"Not bad," he said to himself.

He took the world phoenix tablet from his inventory and looked at it in his hand. Since being told it was his way home, he'd considered throwing it away time and again, closing that door forever. As always, he put it back in his inventory.

When the sun dropped below the horizon, a city worker came along the pathways of the path district, lighting up the magic lamps. Jason got up, walked away from the paths and into the darkness. He took out his sword and a crystal, similar to a recording crystal. He tossed it away from himself, where it stopped and floated in the air. A few moments later, a soft, entrancing sound started coming from it. Jason drew his sword from its scabbard, which he dropped onto the grass as his cloak of stars appeared around him. He started moving in time with the meditative music.

His movements were slow and small, deliberate and smooth; something between a sword kata and a dance. Gradually his motion became larger, with moments of speed, although always completely controlled. His cloak flowed around him, throwing off motes of light.

The Dance of the Sword Fairy was a meditation technique Rufus had taught him that merged mind and body. Despite the inclusion of the sword, it wasn't about fighting technique. The goal was to meld the conscious and unconscious. Rufus had described the goal not as using the sword, but becoming it.

-
- Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Iron 0 (100%).
 - Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Iron 1 (100%).
-

Jason ignored his newest ability advancing, losing himself to the dance as movement and meditation became one. He felt as if he were merging with the world around him. Something tickled his senses, so faint he wasn't sure it was there at all. He continued on but sensed it again and this time he was sure. He stopped, looking off into the darkness.

"You sensed me," a male voice said. "That's quite the surprise."

The accent reminded Jason of Rufus. He couldn't see anything in the dark, even with his vision power, and he could no longer sense what was out there.

"Meditation increases sensitivity," Jason said to the hidden person.

"An impressive feat, even so," the man said, "you must have deep in it. My apologies for disturbing you."

A man walked out of the darkness, which Jason found disorienting. He could see through the darkness, yet the man was invisible to him until he didn't want to be. He had midnight-black skin like Rufus, but instead of being bald, his hair was dark, woven into

rows and threaded with colourful beads. His outfit was neat and fitted, also like Rufus preferred.

“Not at all, Mr Bahadir,” Jason said. “I’ve been looking forward to meeting you.”

The man raised an eyebrow.

“How did you know?” he asked.

“Your aura,” Jason said. “I’ve been around enough silver-rankers to know what it feels like when they restrain their aura. There’s a stillness, almost an almost an absence of power, like the shadow of an unseen object. Your aura melds into the surroundings, like there’s nothing there at all. There’s only one gold-ranker expected to come here, and the accent and the clothes just clinch it.”

Bahadir laughed, moving closer to shake Jason’s hand. From that simple contact, Jason could feel the power flowing through him. Bahadir’s hand was perfectly controlled, lest his gold-rank strength crush Jason’s hand with more ease than crushing an egg.

“Emir Bahadir,” he introduced himself.

“Jason Asano.”

“I’ve been hearing a lot about you, and wanted to see for myself.”

“I’ve been hearing about you too,” Jason said. “How was the wine festival?”

Bahadir laughed again.

“Very fine, thank you. How have Rufus and his friends been?”

“Also very fine,” Jason said. “They’re not in town, right now.”

“So I’ve heard. There’s no rush; I’m not officially arriving for a little over a week.”

“Well, if you’re looking for something to catch your interest, I suggest a visit to the Magic Society. They’re excavating a complex out in the delta that belonged to the Order of the Reaper. That is why you’re here, right? To investigate the ancient order of assassins?”

“I didn’t think Rufus had such loose lips.”

“Oh, he didn’t tell me,” Jason said. “Neither he nor the Magic Society knows about the connection.”

“But you do,” Bahadir said.

“Some friends and I found the place, but the Magic Society cut us out. You’d be amazed at what a rogue Magic Society official and an acolyte of knowledge can dig up between them. Someone tried very hard to erase these assassins from history.”

“So if you haven’t told Rufus, and you haven’t told the Magic Society,” Bahadir said.

“Why tell me?”

“You wanted to see me for yourself,” Jason said. “Call this me wanting to make a good first impression. At the very least, I’m capable of piquing your interest until Rufus gets back. Let’s just hope he doesn’t take three months.”

Jason stood in the ruins of a coastal village. It had been one of many such villages scattered along the desert coast. They made an industry out of scouring the waters for water quintessence, which formed in larger than normal proportions due to the magic of the Mistrun River washing out to sea. Villages up and down the coast made a living from that and fishing, but it was not a practice without risk.

"Sundown, right?" Jason asked.

"That's the normal pattern," Vincent said. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

They glanced around at the broken remains of the village. It was very small, mostly constructed from bamboo, and it looked like a hurricane had passed through. Boats and buildings ranged from severely damaged to smashed into pieces. There were net-drying racks and other paraphernalia of a coastal village, none of which was left untouched. Scraps of netting, broken barrels and the remnants of objects too destroyed to recognise made up a carpet of debris.

The only two-storey building was stone on the bottom floor and bamboo on top. There was a dinghy jutting out of the wall of the upper level. The doorway on the ground floor had been ripped wider, brickwork cast aside in huge chunks. Inside was some kind of nest made out of debris and the bones of large sea animals. Jason spotted the skeletons of fish upward of a metre and a half long

"That's where it's been coming back to," Vincent said. "That's the normal pattern. Roam the waters attacking deep-sea fish and coming onshore to raid villages. It picks the first territory it conquers to make a lair."

"But it's slower out of the water right?" Jason asked.

"Very," Vincent said, "but you can see for yourself how strong it is. If it's hurt badly, it will retreat into the ocean. Submerged, it will move faster and heal very quickly. Do not pursue it into the water."

"Other than that, though, no exotic abilities?"

"No," Vincent said.

Jason knew all of this but wanted the assurance of double-checking. The tidal troll was the first bronze-rank monster Jason would face on purpose, and he was facing it alone. He brought up his character sheet to help his resolve.

Jason Asano

- Race: Outworlder.
- Current rank: iron
- Progression to bronze rank: 10% (2/4 essences complete)

Attributes

- [Power] (Blood):[Iron 2].
- [Speed] (Dark): [Iron 0].
- [Spirit] (Doom): [Iron 0].
- [Recovery] (Sin): [Iron 2].

Racial Abilities (Outworlder)

- [Party Interface].
- [Quest System].
- [Inventory].
- [Map].
- [Astral Affinity].
- [Mysterious Stranger].

Essences (4/4)

Dark [Speed] (3/5)

- [Midnight Eyes] (special ability): [Iron 7] 84%.
- [Cloak of Night] (special ability): [Iron 6] 19%.
- [Path of Shadows] (special ability): [Iron 6] 21%.

Blood [Power] (5/5)

- [Blood Harvest] (spell): [Iron 5] 18%.
- [Leech Bite] (special attack): [Iron 5] 78%.
- [Feast of Blood] (spell): [Iron 4] 97%.
- [Sanguine Horror] (familiar): [Iron 5] 16%.
- [Haemorrhage] (spell): [Iron 2] 46%.

Sin [Recovery] (5/5)

- [Punish] (special attack): [Iron 5] 83%.
- [Feast of Absolution] (spell): [Iron 5] 91%.
- [Sin Eater] (special ability): [Iron 5] 69%.
- [Hegemony] (aura): [Iron 5] 67%.
- [Castigate] (spell): [Iron 2] 32%.

Doom [Spirit] (4/5)

- [Inexorable Doom] (spell): [Iron 5] 66%.
 - [Punition] (spell): [Iron 3] 57%.
 - [Blade of Doom] (spell): [Iron 2] 08%.
 - [Verdict] (spell): [Iron 1] 00%.
-

His abilities were coming along, with only three more to awaken before he was truly on the way to bronze.

“If anything goes wrong, I’m stepping in,” Vincent said.

“That’s why you came along?” Jason asked. “You think I’ll fail?”

“Actually, I had a favour to ask.”

“Oh?”

They were looking out at the ocean, sun lighting the sky with gold as it dropped to the horizon.

“It’ll return to its lair, soon, but we should have time to talk,” Vincent said. “You’re aware of the open contract? The thief girl?”

“I’m aware.”

“Have you considered going after it? The Society has added an awakening stone to the rewards.”

“It smells political,” Jason said. “I don’t have any interest in jumping on the board, just to end up a piece in someone else’s game.”

Vincent smiled wanly.

“I know exactly what you mean,” he said. “I support the changes the director is trying to make, but she’s pushing back against a long-entrenched network of power. No one is playing fair and it’s the mid-level officials like me being squeezed between powerful forces.”

“This thief’s activities are becoming a point of contention between the director and the traditional power-brokers?”

“It could have been anything, I think. This just happened to turn up and she’s using it.”

“And now you have pressure from both sides,” Jason said.

“Exactly. I don’t want to go against the director, but she either doesn’t know or is willing to accept the collateral damage. I’m not sure she understands how much that is hurting her. A lot of people have been happy to move away from the corruption of the past, but the director is pressuring the aristocrats, who are pulling hard on all the old levers. People who should be the director’s allies are becoming very unhappy.”

“So you want me to take this point of contention out of play,” Jason said. “Give people some room to breathe while the big nobs find the next vicarious battle.”

“Yes. The director has been relying on the fact that there aren’t a lot of iron-rankers with the skill-set to chase her down. You’re fast and good in darkness, and the thief mostly strikes at night. Have you noticed that any time you aren’t busy with a contract, one gets assigned to you?”

“Sounds familiar.”

“I’ve been looking at any adventurers with the right skills to chase the thief, and they’ve been getting the same treatment. For most of them, the assigned contracts have been lucrative enough to not turn down. She knows that isn’t your driving factor, so she’s been assigning contracts she thinks you’ll find interesting. Underground tunnels. Spirit coin farms. Recovering a dead adventurer’s remains.”

Jason considered as they watched the drop below the horizon.

“You know you’re asking me to do something she won’t like,” he said.

“That’s why I came to you. Out of the various adventurers she’s been keeping busy, you’re the only one that would do it anyway.”

“That, and I bet she shuffled the rest off on the expedition.”

“Most, but not all. We do need some competent people left to actually do the work.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “The best I can do is look into it; I’m making no promises.

There’s every chance she runs rings around me the same as everyone else that went after her.”

“That’s all I can ask,” Vincent said. “Rufus believes in your resourcefulness, as does the director. Otherwise, she wouldn’t be keeping you busy.”

It was near dark when a huge form rose up from the water. Vincent withdrew as it moved closer to shore, more and more of a huge body rising above the surface until it strode onto the beach. It moved into the village where Jason got a better look at it than he wanted, realising the monster was buck naked. It was around five metres tall and over one shoulder carried a dead shark that could have swallowed Jason whole. The troll’s skin was the blue-grey of the ocean on an overcast day, and rough like that of the shark it was carrying. Dangling in a tangled mess from the troll’s head was what looked more like kelp than hair.

Light erupted from Jason’s cloak, scattering motes of illumination through the village. Shadows were everywhere in the shattered remains of the beach hamlet, from broken boats to half-collapsed buildings. The Tidal Troll roared at Jason and lumbered forward, swinging the shark like a flail.

Jason started with his old snake-tooth dagger, which ignored bronze-rank poison resistances and damage reduction. Appearing behind the monster, Jason scored the back of its leg.

➤ [Weapon \[Night Fang\]](#) has inflicted [\[Umbral Snake Venom\]](#) on [\[Tidal Troll\]](#).

By the time the sluggish giant turned around, Jason was gone. Soon after the monster was sprayed with leeches from another direction, and they had plenty of flesh to latch onto. From the shadows, Jason winced as they bit into parts of the troll Jason would have preferred remain covered.

The monster was tough, perhaps even tougher than the hydra, and with resistances to match. The sheer quantity of leeches meant afflictions were landing, however, and Jason went to work on bringing those resistances down. Switching to his conjured dagger, he ran shadowy rings around the troll as he landed strike after strike.

➤ **Weapon [Ruin] has inflicted [Vulnerable] on [Tidal Troll].**

Between his elusive strikes and casting spells from the shadows, all of Jason's afflictions eventually took hold, while the troll alternated flailing ineffectually at Jason and brushing away leeches with its huge hand. It stomped on those pushed onto the ground, but even its enormous feet could only catch so many. All the while, every instance of the sin curse allowed Jason's aura to further decrease the troll's resistances, as did the vulnerable affliction from his new dagger.

➤ **[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.**

With inexorable doom racking up more instances of both, the troll eventually stopped resisting the effects at all. With leeches in full effect, the creature was ravaged and fled for the ocean. Vincent ran up to Jason.

"It's making for the water," Vincent said urgently. "If it makes it in, it'll start healing."

"No it wouldn't," Jason said, "but it won't get that far anyway."

He didn't move from where he stood. Unhurried, he raised an arm in the monster's direction and chanted a spell.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

The creature's resistances were in ruins, but its bronze-rank damage reduction was still in effect. Even so, the punishment spell inflicted damage for each of the myriad afflictions on the troll. It was enough that most monsters, even at bronze-rank, would be dead already. The troll stumbled as its flesh withered and turned black, but continued staggering forward. Jason chanted a final spell.

"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."

Light of silver, gold and blue shone down on the troll from above, and under its radiance, the monster's body started rapidly dissolving into rainbow smoke. Leeches dropped out of the air as the flesh they were burying themselves in vanished. In the spot where it had been fighting, gobbets of blood and flesh remained, patches of light shining to eradicate them as well. In moments, there was nothing left of the troll but a memory.

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Conjunction (execute)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Deals a small amount of transcendent damage. As an execute effect, damage scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury.

"Was that transcendent damage?" Vincent asked incredulously.

"Yes," Jason said as he glanced over the rewards.

-
- You have defeated [Tidal Troll].

 - [Tidal Troll] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
 - [Gauntlet of the Sea Giant] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

Quest: [Contract: Tidal Troll]

- Objective complete: Eliminate [Tidal Troll] 1/1.
- [Necklace of the Deep] has been added to your inventory.

- Quest complete.
- 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
- 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

"What ability was that?" Vincent asked as he started at the spot where the monster had been annihilated.

"That's a rude question," Jason said absently, also staring at the space where the troll vanished.

"You're dealing transcendent damage with an iron-rank ability! Do you know what transcendent damage does?"

"I do," Jason said.

Help: Transcendent Damage

- Transcendent damage ignores all forms of physical and magical defence, damage reduction and resistances.
-

“So, what ability is that?”

Jason turned to look at Vincent, his face unreadable.

“It’s the end,” Jason told him, his voice flat and emotionless.

“The end? The end of what?”

“Of whatever I want.”

Jason’s hard expression suddenly broke into a grin and he laughed.

“Listen to me, right? ‘Whatever I want. I’m very scary.’ I need to stop listening to that chuuni angel on my shoulder. Colin, gather up. This sea air isn’t good for you.”

Chapter 100: Legwork

Danielle Geller and Thalia Mercer looked at the water pouring out of the astral space aperture. It was within a crevice in a rocky outcropping but was itself a free-floating circle of shimmering blue. The water streamed out of the aperture, the source of a small creek they were currently standing in. It wasn't the overwhelming torrent that some apertures had, which is why they had chosen this particular one; there wasn't so much force that people couldn't push their way against the water to enter. The other reason being that the first two apertures they tried had already failed and vanished.

"You've been in the astral space before, haven't you?" Danielle asked.

"The last monster surge," Thalia said. Monsters were spawning out of an aperture out in the desert, so we set up a defence point just inside.

"The advantage of having our family seat in the city," Danielle said. "I spent the whole time defending the estate."

Danielle turned back to look at the expedition arrayed out behind her. The order of entry had already been organised, with the silver rankers heading through first to scout and deal with any immediate trouble. She turned back, took a deep breath and pushed herself through the water streaming out.

She emerged underwater, disoriented. She thrashed around, finding a sandy bottom and using it to push herself up. She breached the surface, finding the water was not very deep. She swam away from the aperture in the water, taking a look at her surroundings. She was in a lagoon of turquoise water, under a clear cerulean sky. The lagoon was mostly bounded by rocky rises with scrubby trees growing up the sides, but she spotted a small, sandy beach. Behind it were trees and tropical plants.

Thalia emerged from the aperture and likewise quickly surfaced.

"Nice," Thalia said, swimming away from the aperture to give the next person space. "It'll be good to explore instead of just staying near the aperture and fighting monsters."

Clive entered the office of the Magic Society director. As normal, the director was absent, while the deputy director, Pochard Finn, was at work behind his own desk. Pochard barely glanced up at the intrusion, continuing to write as he spoke.

"What is it, Standish? I don't have a lot of time with all these people off on the expedition."

"I'm aware, sir," Clive said. "I've been very busy myself, but I've managed to get things reorganised, so I'd like to take some time on another project. As you know, I also have Adventure Society membership."

"Yes, I heard about the marsh hydra," Pochard said. "I can't imagine your contribution was all that much but well done."

"There's an open contract with the Adventure Society," Clive said. "A friend and I want to take a crack at it."

Pochard paused his writing to look up at Clive.

"You want to slack off so you can go to social events in the hope this thief shows up?"

"Actually, sir, we're going to take a different approach. Something that will hopefully have more success."

"Who is this friend of yours?" Pochard asked.

"He's another iron-ranker. Jason Asano."

"The one who handled the lumber mill affair," Pochard mused thoughtfully.

"You know him?"

"I like to keep apprised of goings-on," Pochard said. "You're sure your duties will be covered?"

"I won't be completely absent, sir. I'll be checking in each day to make sure everything is running smoothly."

"Then take what time you need, so long as you still feel your chances of success are reasonable."

"Really?" Clive asked.

Pochard turned back to his work.

"Learn to take yes for an answer, Standish."

Clive called on Jason in his lodgings. Jason had papers scattered over the refreshment table, picking some up to read from the comfort of a lounge chair.

"How did it go?" Jason asked.

"Surprisingly well," Clive said, still registering the surprise. He nodded at all the papers.

"What's all that?"

"A copy of the contract of service between the Adventure Society and the City of Greenstone. If the Duke of Greenstone and the Adventure Society director are playing some kind of game with this thief as the central piece, I thought I should get a look at the board."

“And?” Clive asked, sitting down.

“It’s possible this whole thing is about trying to get the Duke to violate the terms of the agreement. It gives local authorities a lot of influence in Adventure Society affairs. It would make sense, given that Elspeth Arella’s driving goal is to eliminate that influence. I’m inclined to think that isn’t it, though.”

“Why not?”

“The agreement is up for renegotiation in a couple of years, and the director doesn’t strike me as an impatient person. If she were to violate the terms herself, trying to provoke the Duke, he could appeal to the core branches of the Adventure Society, maybe even get Arella replaced. Given her proclivities are a direct threat to aristocratic power, having almost anyone else in her seat when the negotiations come up is a win for him. I don’t think she’s willing to take that risk when all she has to do is wait for her chance to renegotiate terms.”

“Then what is it all about?” Clive asked.

“I’m not sure,” Jason set. “There’s some third factor beyond the Duke and Arella’s basic agendas. Arella wants something, and she’s willing to push the boundaries to get it.”

“How does that affect us?” Clive said. “We’re just trying to catch the thief.”

“It’s the knife you don’t see that stabs you, Clive.”

“What next, then?”

“We turn off the filter, pinch one off in the pool and see who comes to clean it up.”

“What?” Clive asked.

“We catch the thief, and see who tries to stop us.”

“What if they do stop us?”

“Have some self-confidence, man.”

Jason started gathering the scattered pages.

“There were a few interesting things in the agreement,” Jason said as he put them away in a leather folder. “The Adventure Society has quite a lot of say in civic affairs when it involves a Society contract. Interestingly, it puts that power with the individual adventurers executing the contracts, rather than the Society itself.”

“What does that matter?” Clive asked.

“The loosened adventurer standards, have allowed more-or-less the entire aristocracy to be nominal members of the Adventure Society, so decentralising power is another means for the aristocracy to circumvent the authority of the Adventure Society’s higher officials. I’m starting to understand what Arella is up against, now. It’s something worth knowing; another trick to have up the sleeve.”

“What now, then?” Clive asked. “I know we won’t be randomly attending social events, hoping they get robbed. People have been trying that for months and it hasn’t worked.”

“Then what do you think should be the first step?” Jason asked.

“Figure out what they’re doing, and how, right?” Clive asked.

“I was thinking the same thing,” Jason said. “We need to go talk to all the victims, learn as much about what was taken and the thief’s methodology as we can.”

“Are these people going to talk to us?” Clive asked.

Jason chuckled.

“These are people used to having the power, not being the victim, and there isn’t anything they can do about it. Don’t underestimate how much that will eat at them. They know that the Adventure Society isn’t letting anyone other than iron-rankers in on this, so a three-star is the best they can hope for. Add in an assist from a Magic Society official and it will seem like a ray of hope. They’ll cooperate.”

“And if they don’t?” Clive asked.

“We’ll talk them into it,” Jason said.

“You say that like it’s going to be easy.”

Jason and Clive left the townhouse of Lord Vordis and started heading toward the closest loop line transit station. Lord Vordis was a minor noble, but one known for making useful connections between the upper and lower echelons of society.

“Are you sure you should have done that?” Clive asked, glancing back nervously.

“Done what?” Jason asked innocently.

“Told him the Mercers sent you.”

“I didn’t do that,” Jason said.

“I was there!”

“But were you really listening? I never said the Mercers sent me. Yes, the conversation happened to go in such a way that certain connections between myself and the Mercer family came to light. And I suppose I can see how that particular topic of conversation, in proximity to other topics, may have led some people to assume that the Mercers sent me, but I made no such assertion. I’m not responsible for other people’s assumptions, Clive.”

“It really seems like you are.”

“We got what we were after, and that’s the important thing.”

"I can't believe he told you he was smuggling sump coil rods," Clive said. "They're restricted by the Adventure Society and the Magic Society, but he told an adventurer and a Magic Society official."

"Lucky this town's so corrupt," Jason said. "He figured there wouldn't be any major repercussions."

"Because he thought the Mercer family sent you."

"I told you that I'm not responsible for the assumptions of others. What are sump coil rods, anyway?"

"They're used to create very small areas that are invisible to magical senses," Clive said. "Auras, tracking abilities, seeking rituals. Nothing short of gold-rank ritual or ability stands a chance. Very small spaces, though. About the size of a laundry basket."

"What are they used for?"

"The big things about them, is they don't trip warnings. A lot of detection magic, be that abilities, rituals or items, give back a negative reading if they hit a zone they can't penetrate. Use sump coil rods the right way, and most things won't even register the negative space."

"You think maybe they took them to create a hideout they can't be traced to?" Jason asked. "Use a bunch of those rods to stack the spaces?"

"That wouldn't be practical, and they didn't take enough of the rods."

"Well, we just keep collecting puzzle pieces," Jason said. "Eventually we'll have enough to figure out the picture."

Jason and Clive were in Jason's lodging, poring over notes. Jason's were scattered over the refreshments table in the lounge area, while Clive laid claim to the dining table. More than a week into their investigation, Jason's lodging were so deep in notes, maps, lists and magical tool design documents that Madam Landry refused to have her staff clean around it.

"You just tell me when your done and I'll send people in," she had told Jason. "Just don't leave it too long, or I'll send people in anyway."

In almost three months, the thief had done seventeen jobs. Every day Jason and Clive would go from victim to victim, scene to scene, gathering information.

"They're basically doing two kinds of jobs," Jason mused. "The first type is public, usually some kind of snatch-and-grab of valuables. These jobs are in open places with plenty of escape routes. The loot is frankly, not worth the risk. It tends to be highly specific, which would make fencing it tricky."

“A lot of adventurers have been taking that angle,” Clive said. “The Magic Society has sold a lot of appraisal tools in the last few months.”

“The other type of job tends to be specialised magic equipment. Rare, valuable, sometimes restricted. They’ve taken much bigger risks for these jobs, as well. Every time they’ve come close to being caught it was on this type of job.”

“Whoever this thief is,” Clive said, “they either have an interesting understanding of magical tools or are working with someone who does. Aura masking, material deconstruction, bypassing magical protections. Her methods speak to an eclectic magical knowledge, most likely specialised for this kind of work.”

“A professional thief,” Jason said. “That’s hardly a surprise, at this point.”

“I’d love to meet them,” Clive said. “Their unorthodox approach to magical study would be fascinating to discuss.”

“The whole point of this is so you can do exactly that,” Jason said, sorting through the piles of paper in front of him. He frowned, looking at them all.

“There’s a lot of paper in this city for a place with such a small lumber industry.”

“This is all reed paper,” Clive said. “There’s a local reed that grows prolifically in the delta,” Clive explained absently, not looking up from his own notes. “It’s a fairly easy process to produce paper from it. Pulp it, a little bit of magic and here you go. It’s one of the local exports.”

“Reed paper,” Jason said, running a sheet between his fingers. “I wouldn’t have guessed that. This high-quality stuff.”

Clive started reorganising all the papers in front of him. Some he placed into neat order on the table, others he stacked in haphazard piles on the chairs around it.

“The snatch-and-grabs are obviously some kind of distraction from their true intention,” he reasoned.

“Agreed,” Jason said. “Clearly their true intention is all these magical supplies they’re taking on the other jobs.”

“If I can figure out what all of it is for, then maybe we can figure out their ultimate objective.”

He stood up, rubbing his temples.

“I need a break to clear my head.”

Jason glanced at the clock on the wall. Like everything in Madam Landry’s inn, it was tasteful and understated in design and worked perfectly.

“It’s almost time we headed out, anyway,” Jason said. “There’s something that should be worth seeing.”

“Is it something to do with the mysterious group taking over the expedition to explore that complex we found?” Clive asked. “Word came down from on high to let them take over, which didn’t impress Lucian Lamprey.”

“Who?” Jason asked. “Oh, the director of the Magic Society. Haven’t had the pleasure, yet.”

“Pleasure isn’t the word I’d use,” Clive said. “Still, it was gratifying to see it taken off him the way it was taken off me.”

“Well, you can meet the man who took it off him,” Jason said. “He’s scheduled to arrive this afternoon.”

Chapter 101

Fantasy World Goodness

Jason and Clive made their way to the northern side of the Adventure Society campus, which occupied much of the western side of the Island's north shore. They passed a grey, stone tower that Jason now recognised as the prison tower. The Society was only allowed to hold prisoners taken as part of a contract, while others went to the courthouse gaol. It had briefly held the man who attacked him at the lumber mill, Jerrick, before he was stripped of his Society membership and sent packing.

Getting closer to the north shore, they skirted around the memorial grounds where they had attended a solemn service three weeks earlier. They both gave sober glances to the mausoleum as they went past. The memorial grounds occupied a good chunk of the shoreline, while the private dock took up most of the rest.

"Isn't this a bad place for a dock?" Jason asked. "It'd be very exposed to the elements."

"It's rarely used," Clive said. "Usually by prestigious visiting adventurers, who get dropped off before the ship moves on to the ports. Sometimes vessels with important cargo for the Adventure Society or Magic Society."

The Adventure Society's private dock had few buildings nestled into garden grounds where the plant life was chosen for its resilience to salty sea winds. Clive pointed them out explaining their purpose to Jason. The largest was a service building, right up against the dock. The smallest was a processing building for ships' crews. The middle-sized building was nicer than the others; an arrival and departure lounge with space for lavish functions.

As they went inside there was no elaborate function set out, but the small crowd looked like all the prestige Greenstone could muster, at least while so many luminaries were absent on the expedition.

As Clive's gaze wandered over the assemblage, he became increasingly startled. He recognised the directors and deputy directors of both the Magic Society and the Adventure Society. There was the Duke of Greenstone and his brother, Beaufort Mercer.

"It's Cassandra's Dad," Jason said.

"You've met him, then?"

"There was a brief, stilted encounter. Reserved respect isn't really my strongest play."

"You might want to consider what that says about you," Clive said.

Along with nobility, there were representatives of the various temples. That including Gabrielle Pellin, who had been helping Clive with his investigation into the underground

complex. She was standing with one of her church's more high-ranking members. Given how many of the city's elite were off on the expedition, it was an absurdly high-class gathering. Jason led Clive away from the group gathered near the doors. The lounge was spacious with glass, dockside frontage, so they easily found some isolated seats that still afforded them a view of the ocean.

"Jason, what is this?" Clive whispered as they sat down. "That's my boss and my boss' boss. The Duke, a bunch of silver rankers..."

A few curious glances were thrown their way. Jason sensed, as much as saw the look Elspeth Arella gave him, with the weight of her silver-rank aura behind it. It wasn't a suppressive force but made itself unmistakably felt.

"Let's just keep our distance," Jason said. "I'm not sure I can be around that much wealth inequality without going on a socialist rant."

Jason looked out over the water.

"I always meant ask what the tides are like with two moons," Jason said.

"What?" Clive asked, still distracted by the crowd, then turned around to Jason with a confused frown. "What do tides have to do with the moons?"

"The moon has a huge effect on the tides," Jason said. "I can only imagine it's bigger with two. What is it you think causes tidal action?"

"It's not really my field," Clive said, "but the prevailing theory is that is a function of ambient magic. We just can't test it because we would have to monitor the whole planet's magical field for an extended period. Or a good-size chunk of the planet, at least."

"No, that's all wrong, mate. What you're dealing with is... Gabrielle?"

"I'm dealing with Gabrielle?" Clive asked, then noticed Jason looking past him. Gabrielle had left the group and was approaching them as swiftly as her formal robes would allow.

"Jason," she insistently hissed, wanting to be forceful without being loud. "You can't tell people that."

"I can't tell people what?"

"About that thing you were about to tell him about. Hello, by the way, Clive."

"Acolyte Pellin," Clive greeted her.

"I can't tell people about gravity?" Jason asked.

"No, you can't. Some things people have to figure out for themselves."

"This is your boss telling you this, then," Jason said.

"Yes," Gabrielle said. "She said you can't just go around telling people about fundamental aspects of physical reality. Especially not someone like Clive."

“Fundamental aspects of physical reality?” Clive asked. “Wait, why not someone like me?”

Gabrielle gave Clive a friendlier look than the forceful one she had been giving Jason.

“Because you’ll run around telling everyone,” Gabrielle told him. “My Lady quite likes you, by the way.”

“Really?” Clive asked. “She knows who I am?”

“She knows who everyone is, Clive,” Jason said. “She knows everything except what a private conversation is, apparently.”

“Jason,” Gabrielle said. “She says the people of this world have to learn important things for themselves, instead of from some dimension-hopping loon.”

“Did she tell you to say that?” Jason asked.

“She was very explicit. She said that if you keep your mouth shut for once, she’ll give you a gift.”

“Bribery?” Jason said, thinking it over. “Yeah, alright.”

Gabrielle nodded and turned back for the group, some of whom had been looking on with curiosity. Many of them had the perception of a silver-ranked spirit attribute and could have easily eavesdropped.

“Gravity?” Clive asked.

“Did you not just hear me get bribed not to tell you?” Jason said. “She’d know immediately.”

A look of contemplation crossed Jason’s face.

“She knows when you’ve been naughty,” he mused. “She brings gifts, apparently.”

Halfway back to the group, Gabrielle wheeled around and stormed back to Jason, waving a finger in his face.

“I don’t know what a flirty Santa Claus is,” she scolded, “but my goddess definitely isn’t one.”

“Does she have a big temple to the north where elves make toys?”

“What?” Clive and Gabrielle asked.

“Look,” Jason said, pointing out to sea. “I think it’s kicking off.”

Their eyes followed where Jason’s hand was pointing until they spotted what looked like a mass of cloud on the horizon.

“What is that?” Clive asked. “It’s magical, but I can’t make anything out at this distance.”

“You don’t know?” Gabrielle asked. “Why are you here?”

“Jason wouldn’t tell me.”

“I thought it would be a fun surprise,” Jason said defensively.

“What are you up to?” Clive asked Jason warily.

“Actually, it should be kind of a fun surprise,” Gabrielle conceded.

They watched as the mass of cloud moved closer.

“It’s a ship,” Clive said excitedly. “It’s a ship made of clouds.”

The cloud ship, sailing through the water, was not as close as it first seemed. Its enormous size made it seem that way, growing bigger and bigger in their vision as it approached. It was proportioned like an ocean liner, crafted from fluffy white clouds. Sunset shades of blue and orange delineated the dimensions of the ship that floated over the water at a goodly speed, in spite of no visible propulsion.

“That’s some proper, fantasy world goodness, right there,” Jason said.

By the time it pulled into place at the dock, it was clear how overwhelmingly humongous the vessel was. Over three hundred metres long, sixty metres wide and high, even the silver-rankers were agog at the sheer magnitude of it.

The ship drew to a gentle stop in the dock and a walkway of cloud started emerging from the side. When it connected to the shore, a hole appeared in the side of the ship to reveal Emir Bahadir. Seeing him in daylight, he looked the same as when Jason had met him in the dark. Sleek clothes, midnight skin and dark hair woven with colourful beads. Jason had been uncertain in their previous encounter, where he could seemingly evade his ability to see through darkness.

He walked across the platform to the shore, meeting Elspeth Arella who came out to greet him. She led him inside to be met by the assembled welcoming party, but Clive was uninterested. He had stood up out of his chair, his eyes roaming the side of the ship. His vision power allowed him to see at least some of the otherwise-invisible magic.

“This is amazing,” he said.

Gabrielle had remained with them to watch the ship appear and suddenly remembered she should be with the larger group. She was about to hurry away when Bahadir vanished from where he was standing to appear in front of them in a single step.

“Mr Asano,” Emir greeted.

“Mr Bahadir,” Jason said, standing up to shake hands.

“This is Gabrielle Pellin,” Jason introduced. “You’ll know Danielle Geller, I presume. Gabrielle is currently attached to her son, Humphrey. She does have accomplishments outside what man she’s hanging around, but she called me a dimension-hopping loon, so I won’t bother with them.”

“A delight to meet you,” Emir said. Gabrielle’s eyes shot daggers at Jason, before turning back to Emir with a smile.

“A pleasure,” she said, shaking his hand. “I’m an acolyte with the church of knowledge.”

“He knows that from your robes,” Jason said. “You might as well have worn a white sack and painted ‘church of knowledge’ on it.”

“You will pay for this, Jason,” she said.

“Facing up to consequences is the making of a man,” Jason said, gesturing to Clive, still looking out the window. “This is Clive. He’s the deputy something-something at the local Magic Society, and more interested in your boat than meeting a gold-ranker, it appears.”

“What?” Clive said, turning his gaze from the boat for the first time. “Oh, um, wait. A gold ranker?”

“Emir Bahadir,” Jason introduced, “meet Clive Standish.”

“I’ll see you get a tour,” Emir said, shaking a flummoxed Clive’s hand. “It won’t be a ship anymore, but I’m confident you’ll find it just as impressive.”

“It won’t be a boat?” Clive asked.

As they chatted, more people had come across the wide gangplank made of cloud.

“My staff,” Emir said. “The ship can be crewed by only a few people, as you will come to see, Clive, but I have various other needs. There seem to be some necessary social duties planned, so I will have to go back, but first...”

The people finished disembarking, around fifty of them.

“Come along,” Emir said and walked back outside, Jason and the others trailing behind.

As they swept past the nonplussed welcoming committee, Gabrielle glanced nervously at her high priest, who nodded the affirmation to continue. Outside, Emir’s staff were gathered haphazardly. They were a wild collection of races and ethnicities within those races. Their attire ranged from neat and subdued like Emir and Rufus preferred, to the wild and colourful clothing that Gary and the Greenstone locals preferred.

Emir walked over to a woman dressed in a similar style to himself, with a one-button jacket, neat slacks and practical dark shoes. Where Emir was dark-skinned, she was pale. Her dark brown hair dropped simply down to neck length in a cut that, like her clothes, was simple and stylish. She had a subdued, but not wholly restrained, silver-rank aura.

“This is Constance,” Emir introduced. “She is the single most indispensable person in my world. Constance, this is Jason, Gabrielle and Clive. They are always welcome.”

Constance nodded.

“Understood.”

Jason sensed something of a kindred spirit in Emir’s easy persona, which he knew had strengths and weaknesses. The professionalism he read in Constance gave him a sense that she was the one who kept the clocks running.

“Everyone’s off?” Emir asked Constance.

“They are,” She said.

"Alright then," Emir said, reaching into his jacket. From it, he pulled what looked to Jason like a round-bottomed chemistry flask, with Emir holding it by the neck. It was certainly too large to fit in a pocket.

“Is that a dimensional jacket?” Jason asked.

“It is,” Emir said.

“Stylish and practical,” Jason said. “I like it.”

“If you ever find your way to Vitesse,” Emir said, “I’ll introduce you to my tailor. He only takes new clients by referral.”

Emir shook the flask, then took out the crystal stopper. Four thin streams of mist emerged, gathering in the air to form four shapes that floated in place. Like the ship, they were made of clouds with sunset colours giving definition. One looked like a model of a sprawling estate house, the next like a bus or recreational vehicle with no wheels. The third was a sprawling palace, and the fourth was a small replica of the ship floating in front of them. That final image was glowing with an internal light.

Emir pushed his hand into the image of the palace, which started to glow as the light in the ship began fading. After a few moments, The cloud images streamed back into the bottle and Emir put it away.

The sheer magic power of the ship gave it a potent, gold-rank aura, and Jason felt that aura start undergoing a shift.

“I need to go back to my welcoming party,” Emir said, “but I think you might enjoy staying to watch. The transformation is something to see.”

Emir held out his elbow for Gabrielle.

“Care to join me, young lady?”

“Certainly,” she said, and they departed.

Left behind with Emir’s staff, they watched as the huge ship morphed into a palace of clouds, floating on the water. It took around ten minutes, which was, as promised, quite something to see. It was even more so to Clive, who could see some of the magic as it transformed.

"This is crazy," Clive said. "I can barely understand what's happening with these gold-rank processes, but just that little is amazing. Mostly I'm just seeing the structural changes, with the external security measures stopping me from looking deeper, but even that much is incredible."

"Security measures?" Jason asked.

"Oh yes," Clive said. "I would very much advise against trying to get in uninvited. It'd be harder to break into than..."

Jason looked at Clive after he trailed off. Clive was no longer focused on the transforming ship, instead taking up what Jason recognised as his thinking pose. His eyes were closed, his expression stern. His hands were held loosely in front of him, fingers wagging. Jason watched, waiting quietly until the fingers stopped moving and Clive opened his eyes, nodding.

"That adds up," he said absently to himself, then turned to Jason.

"I know what the thief is after."

Chapter 102: You Fight Like Me

In Old City, the wealthiest area was the canal district. Once the home of aristocratic power, migration to the Island left it open for those who ruled Old City with money and power. It was strictly neutral territory for the Big Three, due to a preponderance of Island interests based around the canals and water trade flowing in from the delta.

In a less-used area of the canal docks were a cluster of buildings, not well-placed and too small to service the water traffic that had built up in the years since their construction. Mostly the buildings were used to store items that were rarely, if ever used. One housed small watercraft awaiting repairs that never came, the cluttered space untouched for years, or so it seemed.

Sophie had judiciously placed some of the clutter and quietly moved the rest to the other buildings. Add in some rituals by Belinda to muffle noise and display some simple, static illusions and the seemingly abandoned building had become a well-hidden lair. Belinda quietly made her way inside, where Sophie was already waiting.

“The last item on our shopping list just came up,” Belinda said without preamble. “We need to move fast, though.”

“Good,” Sophie said. “It was getting about time to do another distraction job, or Ventress would call open season on us.”

“Now we don’t have to,” Belinda said. “Once we have the tilting stones, we’ll have everything we need for the last job.”

“And we’ll finally get out of the city,” Sophie said, shoulders slumping wearily.

“How’s the preparation for that?”

“I’ve got maps and supplies enough to get us through the delta, into the Veldt and then south to Hornis,” Sophie said. “After hitting the spirit coin vault we’ll have enough money to buy our way past any influence the Big Three have there and leave this whole continent behind.”

“Let’s not go making assumptions until we’re on open ocean,” Belinda cautioned. “We have two jobs and a long journey between us and there. We have to move fast on this next one.”

“Tell me.”

“There’s some big project out in the delta, some ancient ruin or something. The Magic Society was crawling all over it, until some out-of-towners showed up and took over.”

“Out-of-towners?”

“They arrived on a ship made of clouds, if you can believe that.”

“A ship made of clouds?”

“Sounds incredible, right?”

“Sounds made up.”

“Nope,” Belinda said. “The ship turned into a cloud palace and is floating off the north end of the Island. I’ve seen it for myself. It’s so big you can spot it from any rooftop on the north side of the city.”

“Please tell me you don’t want us to rob it.”

“No,” Belinda said with a laugh. “That ruin they’re excavating; it was originally a Magic Society project, but these people took over.”

“That’s some serious clout.”

“Yes, it is. The important part is that the Magic Society is still providing supplies and support. One of the things on the supply list is the tilting stones we need. I’ll be getting a head’s up when they’re scheduled to move, but it’ll be sometime this week. We grab the stones during transit.”

“That’s not a lot of time to prepare,” Sophie said.

“We shouldn’t need it. The supply shipments move out from the supply complex at the Magic Society campus with minimal protection. The shipment isn’t high-value, so they have a heavy guard until the Duke’s guards meet them at the bridge to Old City.”

“If it’s not high-value, then couldn’t we just have bought these tilting stones we need?”

“They’re restricted,” Belinda explained. “Not dangerous, but they have some specific uses in certain activities.”

“Like the one we want them for?”

“Exactly.”

“So we hit it on the island,” Sophie said.

“Exactly. All the supplies will be in dimensional-storage crates. You just need to grab the right crate and get out.”

“You have the route?”

“Yeah.”

“Alright, then,” Sophie said. “Let’s go scout some locations.”

One of the largest and busiest areas of the Magic Society Campus was the magical supply complex. In addition to the space requirements, operations were complicated by the sometimes volatile nature of magical materials. Care had to be taken to store various goods correctly while keeping apart materials that would affect one another in proximity.

This caused a number of fundamental problems for the smooth running of the supply complex.

The first problem was structural. Purpose-designed, the complex was a nest of interconnected buildings, linked by secured walkways at ground level and above. There were warehouse structures, towers, domes, and in one case, a spherical building secured by a cubic frame of support struts.

Storage and record-keeping were even more of a mess. Because of the nature of the stored materials, magical requirements took precedence over the practical requirements of space efficiency. This, in turn, made inventory management and supply a nightmare.

In the central loading and distribution centre, the supply manager was named Thel and the distribution manager, Drew. They were having several busy weeks at a run. First, the Magic Society started up some operation out in the middle of a swamp, which was already a logistical nightmare. Then the whole thing was taken over by some out-of-town group. The Society was still giving logistical support and supply, which meant meeting the different needs of the new group while adding a whole extra layer to supply management because they weren't Magic Society. Amid a busy day, Thel brought out a new supply order to give to Drew.

"This just came in from the big building," she told Drew. The big building was what they called central administration, out of which the Magic Society officials operated.

"Great," Drew said as he unenthusiastically took the paper with the supply order and started reading it over. "One more idiot who doesn't think twice about messing up our schedules."

He glanced at the authorising officer box on the order to see who dumped it on him.

"Adjunct Assistant to the Deputy Director of the Magic Society, Greenstone branch," he read. "What is the gods' names does that mean?"

"Sounds like a position that was made up for some rich prick's useless kid," Thel said.

"Doesn't it just."

"This one's a little odd," Thel said, gesturing at the order. "The guy who delivered the order said he was told to be very clear it was a low-priority order."

"Low priority?"

"That's right. He said he was given specific instructions that we don't break schedule and just fit it in when we can. He just wants us to let him know when it's going out."

"That's weird, right?" Drew asked.

"Very weird. I've seen plenty of demands from the high-ups to rush an order, but being told to take our time is a first."

“Sounds shady,” Drew said. “Since when did you see anyone with authority show any consideration or decency?”

“Never,” Thel said. “Think we should look into it?”

“Gods, no. The order isn’t a do-up, is it?”

“No, the order’s for real.”

“Then it’s not our problem. We get the piece of paper and we do what it says. Anything more than that is someone else’s problem.”

Jason and Clive were walking through Old City, in the direction of Jory’s clinic.

“Are you sure just organising the shipment was enough?” Clive asked. “Maybe I should have leaked some more information.”

“No,” Jason said. “This thief clearly has solid information sources. If she kept hearing about this shipment from too many places, she’d get spooked and not take the bait. As long as you made sure the shipment won’t out until they’ve had time to hear about it. You are sure this is what she needs, right? These tilting stones?”

“Jason, I’m one of the few people with a complete understanding of the security measures around the city’s spirit coin vault. Once we scratched the distraction items off our list, everything she’s stolen as part of this spree can be used to circumvent one of the security measures. Bronze-rank sopor gas for the guards, sump coil rods for the alarm matrix, dodec crystals for the vault door...”

“The magic D12s,” Jason said. “They’re my favourite.”

“I don’t know how this thief got such a complete rundown of the security, but looking at what she’s been stealing, she clearly has it.”

“And you’re worried she won’t find out about the shipment?”

“That’s a good point.”

“You just have to swap us out for the regular drivers at the very last minute so she doesn’t catch wind.”

They went in through the new self-opening glass doors of the clinic.

“Nice,” Clive said, looking them over as they went through. “That’s some clean, simple magic.”

“They were my suggestion,” Jason said.

They walked up to the receptionist.

“Morning, Janice,” Jason greeted her. “Can he spare a minute?”

“For you, Mr Asano? Always. Things have been a lot more manageable since the initial rush, and having a healing priest here full-time really makes things easier. We miss

having you around, though. You're always off having exciting adventures, these days. I'm surprised you aren't on that big expedition everyone was talking about."

"They need someone to keep things running while everyone else is gallivanting about," Jason said. "You haven't met Clive, yet, Have you?"

They chatted, waiting for Jory, but a different person emerged instead. It was a runic, with the dark skin and glowing runes typical of his people.

"Mr Lange," Janice greeted and made introductions. Donal Lange was the priest of the Healer assigned to Jory's clinic for the moment. He had arrived in Greenstone through a portal created by the Healer to help replace the excommunicated clergy.

"Jory has good things to say about you, Mr Asano. Confusing and contradictory at times, but with much praise. Healing people for nothing is a fine calling, although I may be biased in that opinion."

"Don't go praising me too much," Jason said. "It was an easy way to train my cleansing power, so it wasn't exactly selfless."

"Jason!" Jory said, entering the waiting room. "Come on back."

Jason and Clive shook hands with Donal, then followed Jory. In one of the back rooms, Jason quickly got to the point.

"I need something that can change our faces and something that can mask our auras. Knock it down to normal rank, if possible."

Jory rubbed his chin, thoughtfully.

"Changing your face is easy enough," he said. "Frankly, I'm surprised it took you this long to ask."

"What's wrong with my face?"

"I've had some reports that the face-changing ointment is a bit unreliable," Jory said, ignoring Jason's question. "Moving your face reduces the effective duration, so try not to talk and keep your expression blank as much as you can."

"That should be fine," Clive said, Jason nodding agreement.

"Changing your aura is trickier," Jory said. "If you just wanted to mask it at your own rank, that would be one thing. I could give you something for that now. Dropping it down a rank is another matter. This is for a contract?"

"It is," Jason said. "Clive and I have been working this one for a little while."

"I heard you're a big, three-star adventurer now," Jory said. "How did you swing that?"

"With your watering can and a little discretion," Jason said, causing Jory to laugh.

"That makes sense," he said. "They must have been so startled to see discretion from you that they handed over the star from sheer startlement."

Clive burst out laughing.

"I'm starting to feel put upon," Jason said. "Can you help with the aura?"

"I think I can make up what you need," Jory said. "It'll be precarious though. How's your aura control?"

"It's coming along," Jason said.

"It'll have to be. If you can't keep it suppressed, it'll breach the aura mask. So will using any essence abilities."

"That's fine," Jason said. "It's just an extra precaution that Clive suggested."

"Our quarry is cautious and resourceful," Clive said.

"Probably best not to share any unnecessary details," Jason said to Clive.

"He's right," Jory said. "I can't spill porridge that's not in my bowl. I can have that for you tomorrow, or tonight if you're really in a rush."

"Tomorrow is fine," Clive said.

"We'll let you get back to it," Jason said. "How are those church of the Healer people working out?"

"Fantastic," Jory said. "Mostly it's been Donal, and he's terrific. It's like having you on full-time, without the ominous overtones. Oh, before you go; Jensen loved that barbeque you had. It drummed him up a whole lot of business. He wanted me to ask you if you had any interest in doing it on the regular. Your connections, his booze."

"Jenson?" Clive asked. "Was he the guy running the bar?"

"That's right," Jory said. "He has a distillery a couple of streets over."

"It's not a terrible idea," Jason said. "I'm a little busy just right now, but tell him I'm interested."

A wagon was making its way through the streets of the Island. It had no animals pulling it, being driven by magic. There was a driver, plus another man next to him on the driver's bench. In the early afternoon, there were people out and about. It remained uncrowded, though, with the wide streets and generous footpaths. The men on the wagon didn't even glance as it rolled past a young woman with short hair, wearing a light jacket over a dress decorated with dark flowers.

After the wagon passed her by, Belinda opened her jacket to look at the crystal plate sewn into it. It showed the aura of the wagon's dimensional-storage crates and the normal-rank auras of the two men riding it. She took a small tube from her jacket pocket, holding it vertically as she peeled a paper cap off the top. She felt a blast of heat and air, but the

magical flare would be invisible and silent to anyone without a special viewing item or certain essence abilities.

Another of the Island's streets had a row of trees planted down the middle of the two-lane thoroughfare. Sophie had been hidden in the upper branches of one of the trees since before dawn. She was dressed in shades of dark green to blend into the foliage. The clothing was the ideal balance of fitted and loose to provide optimum mobility, but their protective value suffered somewhat.

When she saw the flare rise into the sky, Sophie took off the spectacles that allowed her to see it and put them in a case which she returned to a pocket. Shortly after, a wagon passed under the branch she was perched on and she dropped down behind it, barely making a sound as she landed in a crouch on the street. She moved swiftly, clambering over the back of the covered wagon. It was filled with metal crates, just as promised, and she quickly found the one with the markings she was looking for. When she grabbed it, though, a rune appeared and explosive force blasted her out the back of the wagon as it activated.

She rolled on the ground, head spinning. By the time she recovered, the wagon had stopped and the two men on it had gotten off and were rushing toward her. She hopped quickly to her feet just as the first one reached her. She lashed out with a series of attacks but every move in her flurry of blows was blocked. He looked as surprised as she felt.

"You fight like me," he said.

She didn't respond and resumed her attack. She had never met anyone who knew her father's fighting style before, but she adapted quickly. After a rapid exchange, she winded him with a palm strike to the torso and sent him tumbling with a kick to the side of the head.

She was moving before he hit the ground, sprinting for the wall of a nearby property. She zigzagged her movement, not presenting an easy shot, which proved wise as a bolt of magic shot past her. A glowing rune appeared in her path and she neatly side-stepped it, almost having reached the wall. Behind her, she heard a spell being chanted.

"Carry the mark of your transgressions."

Sophie felt a burning on the side of her face but didn't let it slow her down. She reached the wall and ran up it as if it were flat ground. Reaching the top, she pulled herself over and out of sight.

Chapter 103:

Silver Hair

Sophie vaulted a wall from one private residence into another, sprinting across the grounds. She did this twice more, avoiding public streets and the people on them. Finally, she ducked into a large brick shed full of landscaping supplies.

Jason chased after Sophie, relying not on his eyes but his aura sense. One of the afflictions he marked her with made her aura radiate like a beacon.

-
- [Mark of Sin] (affliction, holy): Prevents aura retraction. Cannot be cleansed while target retains any instances of [Sin] or [Legacy of Sin].
-

Using weight-reduction to vault walls, he pursued until her aura suddenly vanished. He didn't have an exact lock on her location, so was forced to start searching around.

"Excuse me!" an affronted voice came in Jason's direction. He flashed his adventurer badge to the angry resident.

"Adventure Society business, sir."

"Is this to do with the person who just ran across my lawn?"

"It certainly is," Jason said. "I don't suppose you could point out the direction they went?"

"Gladly," the man said.

"What's that on your face?" Belinda asked. She had cleared a space on a bench in the shed, now covered in magical tools.

"Not sure," Sophie said. "Some kind of tracking magic, probably."

Belinda moved close to examine it. It looked like a word from a symbolic language she didn't know. She picked up a thin metal rod, waving it in front of Sophie's face.

"Not tracking," She said, swapping the rod for a small plate made up of crystal fragments. She looked at what appeared when she held it in front of Sophie.

"It looks like it forcibly projects your aura," Belinda said. "Not as bad as a tracker, but I don't have anything here that can deal with it, the way I could with tracking magic. Like this, aura masking won't work and disguises won't be much better. You'll stick out like a turd in a punch bowl to anyone with aura sense."

"Good thing we're here on the Island, where all the people with aura senses are."

“The protection I set up in here will hide your aura so long as you’re in this shed, but you can’t stay here. The usual trick of blending into the crowd won’t work with your aura like that.”

“Any good news?” Sophie asked.

“Unlike a tracker, you can only be followed so long as you remain within their aura sense. If you can outrun them and get to our fallback point, we can take our time with whatever that thing is affecting your aura. And no one can run like you.”

Sophie nodded, regret on her face.

“I didn’t get it,” she said. Belinda put a reassuring hand on Sophie’s shoulder.

“One step at a time. We can work on what comes next after we get ourselves out of this mess. Now, you need to go.”

“You need to be careful too,” Sophie said.

“My aura isn’t shining like a beacon in the night, remember? You play distraction and I’ll slip away.”

“Bloody hell, she’s fast.”

Jason had sensed it the moment the thief’s aura re-emerged and he immediately gave chase. He caught sight of her sprinting through other people’s properties. They were in the north marina district, which had the Broadstreet Bridge to Old City, marinas on the Island’s eastern shore and was otherwise mostly private residences.

The thief moved incredibly fast on the ground, the walls and hedges barely slowing her down. Her mottled green clothing covered her entirely, with even her head wrapped up like a ninja. If he didn’t have her aura to track, she could probably vanish into one of the gardens she was passing through.

He was unable to match her speed. In the end he resorted to a desperation move. The bright sun cast large shadows from the uniformly big houses. This allowed Jason to shadow jump into the air, three storeys up, next to a wall. Spotting the thief, he teleported to the shadow of the next building, then the next. With the combination of weight reduced-floating and shadow teleporting, he pursued in something of an awkward flight.

The thief was making a beeline for the marina. She crossed the busy esplanade at a sprint, startling passers-by. Jason teleported onto the covered balcony of the yacht club, but it was the last of the easy shadows. He watched the thief pelt down the pier faster than he could match, until she reached the end and vaulted onto the water. She landed on the surface like it was solid ground and kept running.

Jason could likewise walk on water, but by the time he chased her across to Old City, her speed would have left him behind. He ran to the edge of the balcony and looked around for options.

“Well, there’s that,” he told himself.

Using the parkour skills Gary had taught him, he jumped out to grab the edge of the roof and pull himself on top of the building. He was grateful for the ostentatious size of the four-story yacht club, which gave him a high vantage. He glanced down at the figure sprinting across the water, then up at the opposite shore, some two kilometres distant.

When he was still training, he had conducted various long-distance teleporting experiments. The key seemed to be seeing a shadow to teleport to. Teleporting to the shadow of a large, distant object didn't work, as his ability required a more discreet shadow to use as a portal. He tried magnifying items to pick out a distant shadow, but viewing through these magical devices made him unable to form a connection with the distant shadow.

In the end, since he couldn't find one to purchase, Jason commissioned a craftsman to make a high-quality, non-magical telescope. The unusual request had taken time, however, and by the time it was completed, Jason was living the busy life of an adventurer. As such, he'd picked up the item and left in his inventory with the ten-foot pole, the rope ladder and his various other pieces of adventuring kit.

"No time like the present," he said, pulling out the telescope. It truly was a fine piece of craftsmanship, but he didn't stop to admire it, putting it directly to his eye. First, he picked out the thief, moving across the water. Once he spied where she was heading, he looked to the far shore, in search of a shadow.

Clive looked around the interior of the brick shed. His ability to see magic let him pick out what were the otherwise invisible magical marks, drawn onto the bricks of the wall to shield it from magical detection. It had taken him time to seek out, using flaring rituals to find the magical dead-spot. If Jason hadn't told him the right area through his voice communication power, he likely wouldn't have found it at all.

Examining the work, he saw the principles involved were basic, making of use of fundamental magical theory. The application, however, showed a comprehensive understanding and was highly innovative in execution. If it weren't for criminal purposes to which it had been put, he would admire it.

“Who am I kidding?” he asked the empty shed. “I do admire it.”

The shed clearly didn't see a lot of use. Almost everything had a thick layer of dust, except a section of the bench and a pair of stools. Jason and Clive had considered whether or not the thief had one or more accomplices, and it seemed she did.

Whoever this accomplice was, they had taken their tools but didn't have time to clear off their magical workings. Presumably, they were relying on the magic being invisible and the distraction of the fleeing thief. That left Clive with a good chance to extract an aura trace from the magic.

Moving outside, he balanced out the ambient magic with his mana equilibrium racial gift, then took out a book and used his enact ritual essence ability to start placing out a magical circle around the shed. Where his finger pointed, a line of shining gold energy appeared as he drew out a sophisticated circle, referencing the book as he went.

"What are you doing on my lawn!" an affronted voice called out.

"Adventure Society business," Clive said, not looking away from his work.

"Again? Who do you people think you are?"

"I'm Adjunct Assistant to the Deputy Director of the Magic Society, Greenstone branch," Clive said.

"Is that something important?" the man asked uncertainly.

"Do you really want to find out?" Clive asked.

The magical circle completed. From inside the shed, the previously invisible magic lit up in blue and red. A vaguely human image appeared, flickering in and out in the middle of Clive's circle. Clive took a tracking stone from his storage space and shoved it into the middle of the image. The image was drawn into the stone, like being sucked into a void. The gold light of Clive's ritual and the red and blue from the shed then dimmed to nothing. Clive looked at the tracking stone in his hand, which now had an internal light pointing in a very definite direction.

"Got you."

Sophie's singular essence ability made her fast, and by spending mana she could run up walls or over water. The breakwaters at each end of the straight between Old City and the Island made the space between calm and easy to run over. Reaching the Old City port, she ran right up the side of the dock and onto dry ground. For a fleeting moment, she thought she was free and clear. Then she saw a shadowy figure standing in her path.

The person was shrouded in what looked like the night sky; not just black but dark and deep, with distant stars twinkling within. Inside the cloak were dark, flowing robes, with

a sword on one hip and a dagger on the other. A bandolier with what looked like throwing knives went from left shoulder to right hip.

The port was busy, as always, and the two unusual figures staring each other down caught the attention of the dockworkers. Sophie looked around as people quickly gathered.

“Don’t make me go through you,” she told the dark figure.

“Don’t make me use my abilities,” the figure said. “They’re for killing, not catching.”

It was the same voice as the person who ambushed her when she tried to rob the wagon. The one who fought like her. She launched herself forward, confident that she was better. They clashed, then broke away inconclusively. This repeated a second time and a third. She was landing hits, but nothing conclusive. She absently noted that the dockworkers had started taking bets.

Their fighting styles were the same, but they used them very differently. She was all speed and efficiency, using the versatility of the style to adapt and pressure opponents. He was deceptive and manipulative, seemingly full of openings but more than once she thought she almost had him only to realise it was just the opposite. He also used his cloak to mask his movements, making him hard to read. She had some near misses, but the more she pressured him, the more she figured him out. His methods were dangerous, but he didn’t have a complete handle on them yet. So long as she was cautious and stuck to fundamentals, she knew she could take him down.

So, apparently, did he, taking the dagger from his belt. The bone blade, with its slight curve, made it look like a fang. She knew it was almost certainly magical. She drew the knife strapped to her thigh, not magical, but well-crafted.

“We can still end this here,” he said. He sounded earnest but resigned. She lunged in again.

A knife fight was a messy business; fast hands, fast blades too quick to intercept. Even against an amateur, accepting a knife fight meant accepting wounds, if only superficial ones. The difference in outcome between Sophie and the shadowy man was a matter of equipment. Her knife slid off his thin-but-strong cloth armour, while his knife cut through her camouflage clothes to leave shallow cuts on her arms as she used them to guard more vital points. Breaking off again, she realised he wasn’t even going for real hits, satisfied to inflict minor injuries. Either his dagger or his abilities most likely inflicted poison.

“Now you see your situation,” the man said, having noticed her realisation as she looked at her wounds. “Your choices now are to come with me, or die.”

Sophie glanced back, considering leaping back off the dock. In her moment of distraction, he made the first move for the first time in their confrontation. She evaded, but his free hand grabbed at her. She slipped away, but his fingers closed on her mask, pulling it free. As her silver hair spilled out, he saw her face. His own was hidden in the hood of the cloak, although she had seen it back at the wagon.

The situation suddenly shifted as a half-dozen people broke through the circle of onlookers. There were dressed all in black, with masks like she had been wearing. The shadowy figure said a word she didn't recognise and was immediately attacked. She took the opportunity and ran. Even as he fought off these new opponents, she heard him chant an ominous spell behind her.

"Your fate is to suffer."

Belinda was in line at the Broadstreet Bridge, waiting to hand over her permit before crossing to Old City. In both dress and manner, she was indistinguishable from the many servants likewise heading to Old City on household errands. She noticed a slight commotion in the line, looking back to see a man walking down the line, looking at something in his hand. He was tall and lanky, with the uniform of a Magic Society functionary. The men on the wagon Sophie had attempted to rob had the same uniforms, but this wasn't one of those men. Unless they changed their faces with magic. Sophie and herself had tried that from time to time, but it was unreliable and prone to wearing off early.

Belinda couldn't run like Sophie and had always relied on secrecy and deception. Even if she could, there wasn't much place to run. The Duke's guards manning the crossing booth might be casual to those departing the Island, but that would quickly change if she made a break for it. The best she could do was keep in character and hope that the man was trying to flush people out with security theatre. Her hopes were dashed when the man stopped right in front of her.

Jason was startled to see silver hair spill out, forming a corona around the thief's dark beauty. He froze in that fleeting moment, then recognised her as Jory's celestine friend. She also froze, looking cornered as her eyes darted around. Then out of nowhere, a group of attackers came barrelling at Jason, dressed head-to-toe in black.

"Ninjas?" he said, and they were on him. He evaded, seeing the celestine taking the chance to run. He had to send her where he knew he could find her.

"Your fate is to suffer."

She would have to run to Jory if she wanted to stay alive but casting the spell cost Jason as he was overrun by attackers. They dropped him to the ground and gathered over him, laying in kicks. Jason evened the odds and then some by sending a geyser of leeches spraying up into them. The attackers reeled, screaming as they pulling off leeches who took gobbets of flesh with them in rings of burrowing teeth. The watching dock workers backed off, but not so much that they couldn't keep watching.

Jason got to his feet and held a hand out at one of the men yanking leeches off his body.

"Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast."

Jason siphoned-off the man's life force to heal the beating they had got in. They all had essences, but he could tell from their auras that none had a full set.

"You won't survive long if you don't tell me who sent you," he told them.

"You can kill us," one of them said, "but the man who sent us will kill our whole families."

Jason frowned at that.

"Encircle," he commanded, and the leeches dropped off the men to form a ring around them. They were all bleeding and poisoned, but Jason used his feast of absolution power on each in turn. It replenished his mana and kept them alive, as they would probably survive one bleed affliction. They stood in place, unsure and unsteady. Jason moved forward and ripped the mask off the one who had spoken. Jason didn't recognise him.

"The person who sent you will kill your family if you talk?"

"That's right," he said, scared but looking back with defiance. "You might as well let us go. We won't talk, even if you kill us."

"Let you go?" Jason asked. "After you attacked me? If you're not going to talk, then you're no use to me alive."

Jory was seeing out a patient when he heard a crashing sound from the back room and rushed back there. Donal, the priest of the healer, was likewise coming to check the commotion. Together, they found a woman who had apparently staggered in the back and knocked over a rack of alchemy implements as she collapsed. She was now laying amongst shattered glass.

"Silver hair," Donal said. "A celestine."

Jory's troubled expression got worse when they turned her over and it was, as he feared, Sophie Wexler. They picked her up out of the glass and carried her into one of the

new treatment rooms laying her out on the examination table. Seeing darkened flesh under the rips in her clothes, Jory cut away her outer garment, revealing a tight sleeveless top and cuts on the arms that weren't from the broken glass. Ominous black veins traced out from each of the wounds, clearly visible through the skin. The wound themselves were already showing signs of necrosis.

"Some kind of necrotic poison," Jory said. Donal was already chanting a spell.

"Make clean that which has been tainted."

The black veins retreated somewhat, but then visibly started crawling up her arms once again.

"It's like the poison is replicating itself," Donal said.

"I'll work on the poison," Jory said. "You stop it from killing her. If we can beat it back enough you can try a longer spell."

Jory started grabbing supplies from cabinets as Donal chanted another spell.

"You're not going to kill us in front of all these people," one of Jason's attackers said.

"Are you kidding?" one of the others asked. "Look at that cloak. He's the cloak guy!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" the first attacker asked.

"The one who killed five adventurers in a shopping arcade in the middle of the day," the second attacker said. "Not just regular people, but actual adventurers! And you know what they did to him? They promoted him! You think he won't kill us because some dockworkers saw it?"

Jason, taking in the exchange, turned to the second attacker.

"You seem to know a lot," Jason said, walking over and pulling off the man's mask.

"You won't tell me who sent you?"

"I can't."

"Then tell me why. That's your live-or-die question."

"I don't know," the man said, voice almost begging. "I really don't. We were just meant to slow you down and run, like with the others."

"Shut up Jacob," one of the others barked. Jason pointed at the man who spoke.

"Mount," he ordered, and the leeches crawled up the man's legs and over his body, but without sinking their teeth into him. Then Jason turned back to Jacob.

"By others, you mean the other adventurers trying to catch the thief?"

The man nodded, and Jason started pacing as his brain ticked over. The now terrified attackers watched, unmoving, as they awaited their fate with bated breath.

"How did you know to intercept me here?"

“Keep your mouth shut, Jacob!”

“Screw you guys! I don’t have a family, and I ain’t getting eaten by leeches. There’s some silver-ranker, tracking the thief. Abilities too high for the thief’s friend to spot.”

That would be the one Jory has a thing for, Jason realised.

“Go on,” Jason said.

“That’s all I know. He tracks the thief, then we get a signal and a location if we have to intervene. I don’t even know why they bother with us if they have someone like that.”

“To keep it low-key,” Jason said absently. “Who do you work for?”

“What I told you already gets me hurt,” Jacob said. “Telling you that gets me killed.”

“I know that guy,” one of the dockworkers called out. Jason turned and flipped him a bronze spirit coin.

“Jack-Jumper Jacob,” the dockworker said. “He’s one of Dorgan’s.”

Jason didn’t know more than the basics about the Big Three. Dorgan was the quiet one, while the ambitious Ventress and the impetuous Silva worked their schemes against one another.

“Things are coming together,” Jason said absently, “but there’s a connection missing.”

“That’s enough, Asano,” a harsh voice said, and a man approached through the crowd of dockworkers. He was human, with well-made, sandy coloured clothes. Jason could sense no aura, but the workers instinctively moved out of his way. Jason was willing to bet the aura he couldn’t sense was silver.

“Your quarry has escaped,” the newcomer said, “and you’ve got all you’re getting out of these men. Time to give up and try another day, Asano.”

Jason tutted.

“She won’t be happy you had to show up in person,” he said and the silver-ranker flinched. Jason chuckled.

“Fair enough,” Jason said. “I have somewhere else to be, anyway.”

Sophie was unconscious but alive, still on the examination table but now with a sheet over her. Jory and Donal were exhausted; Donal was sprawled in the room’s only chair while Jory was on the floor, leaning against the wall. On the floor were dozens of empty vials that Jory had used to treat Sophie, or that Donal had emptied to replenish his mana.

“It was some kind of curse,” Donal said. “Two curses, really. One was making the poison worse, while the other was adding more poison and the first curse. The curse that

kept making more of the other two couldn't be cleansed until the other curse was cleansed, and she had so much of it in her when she arrived."

"Too bad Jason isn't here," Jory said. "He'd have eaten it all like it was nothing."

"Eaten?"

"He can be a little sinister," Jory said, "but he's a good man."

"I hope you still think so, after today," Jason said from the doorway.

"Jason!" Jory said. "We could have used you here a while ago. Something happened to my friend a while ago. I don't know what, but it was bad."

Jory and Donal pushed themselves to their feet.

"Curses and poison," Jason said, looking at Sophie.

Jason was decked out in his adventuring gear, spattered with blood.

"Are you chasing what did this to her?" Jory asked.

"I'm chasing her," Jason said. "I am what did this."

Chapter 104: An Outcome That Satisfies

“This is bad,” Jory said, pacing back and forth. “That’s what they’ve been doing? Ripping off the rich and powerful?”

Jory, Jason and Donal were in one of Jory’s treatment rooms, with an unconscious Sophie on the treatment table. She was mostly covered in a sheet, except for her head. Her silver hair hung off the side of the table in a tangled mess.

“Who is this woman?” Donal asked.

“Donal,” Jason said. “Janice is probably becoming concerned that no one is taking patients. Can you cover for Jory for a bit?”

“Do I get an explanation about all this later?”

“Yes, but I’ll probably lie,” Jason said. “Thanks for keeping her alive.”

Donal frowned, but made his way out.

“Lord, you were right about him being trouble,” Jason heard him mutter as he closed the door behind him.

“What about Belinda?” Jory asked.

“Remember my friend Clive? He caught her.”

“Where is she now?”

“We set up a discrete location to hold the thief while we figured out the politics. Hang on a bit and I’ll check up on her.”

Jason used his party interface to open voice chat with Clive.

"She's trouble," Clive said, his exasperation coming through loud and clear. "Using an old Magic Society storehouse for our makeshift cell may not have been the best idea. The resourceful little minx almost broke out of the binding circle using random magic supplies. That shouldn't even be possible. It's all random, leftover trash."

“You said she’s resourceful,” Jason said.

“I caught her decoding a barrier-ritual with half of a magic wand and a broken device for assessing the freshness of fish!”

"I wouldn't have thought there was a lot of crossover between a magic barrier and a fish."

“There isn’t! This woman is a complete... hey! Put that down! I saw that.”

“I need you to bring her to Old City,” Jason said. “That clinic on Broadstreet Boulevard we visited the other day, but bring her around the back.”

“What? Old City? How do I explain to the bridge guards why I’m taking a woman I have in custody to Old City? They’ll definitely think I’m going to do something bad.”

“Yeah but you’re a Magic Society official, so they’ll let you through anyway.”

“What?”

“Look, Clive. Her name is Belinda. Tell her that... hold on. What was this one’s name, Jory?”

“Sophie,” Jory said.

“Tell her that Sophie was badly hurt and she’s at Jory’s clinic.”

“What else?”

“Just be honest. I don’t think lying’s your thing.”

“Don’t I have to lie to the bridge guards?”

“Yeah, but they’ll just think you’re nervous because you’re a sexual predator.”

“What?”

“See you when you get here,” Jason said, ending the chat.

“What now?” Jory asked, almost jumping on Jason in anxiety.

“Obviously,” Jason said, “I have to turn in Sophie.”

Jory opened his mouth to protest, but stopped and nodded reluctantly.

“If it ever came out that you completed a contract and then uncompleted it,” he said, “that’s your Adventure Society membership gone. Mine too, for that matter, just for knowing about it.”

“We do have some room to move,” Jason said. “For one thing, the contract calls for the capture of a thief, not thieves. We caught them both because we were being thorough, but now we know they’re friends, we can cut Belinda loose.”

Jory let out a sigh of relief, although he still had stress to spare.

“I’m having Clive bring Belinda here,” Jason explained, “because I don’t want her running around causing trouble before I have a solid plan in place.”

“So, what is the plan?”

“We have to hand Sophie in,” Jason said. “That’s something we just have to accept. I’m going to need you to convince her friend not to do anything stupid. You need to keep them both here, without them running, while I fill in the gaps in the political landscape. Once I know how everything fits together, we can work something out.”

“Like what?”

“Have you ever read the service agreement between the city and the Adventure Society?”

“Of course I haven’t.”

"It has some interesting provisions," Jason said. "Until I understand the political context, though, I'm stumbling in the dark. When Clive gets here with Belinda, just try and keep a lid on things until I get back."

"Get back? Where are you going?"

"To get some context," Jason said. "Do you know where Dorgan lives?"

"Dorgan? As in, the crime lord, Dorgan?"

"That's the one."

"Are you insane?"

"Probably," Jason said. "I heard the Big Three all live pretty large, so it can't be that hard to find."

"They all live in the canal district," Jory said. "Safe and neutral territory because of the Island interests that operate out of there. I don't think wandering into his compound is a good idea."

"Come on, Jory. Where's your sense of adventure?"

"Where's your sense of self-preservation?"

Jory groaned.

"Look who I'm asking," he said. "The day we met, you picked a fight with a couple of priests and got knocked out cold. Fine. All of the Big Three live in huge compounds that used to belong to families who moved to the Island. Go to the Cavendish side of the canal district and look for the big walls with the big guards at the big gate."

"Thanks," Jason said. "I'll be back soon."

"If you live," Jory muttered.

No one knew how physically vast the astral space supplying water to the desert was, as it had never been mapped. The goal of the expedition was to find whatever was causing the apertures to become unreliable. They found the closest stable aperture within the thickest cluster of unstable ones and had gone through.

The terrain inside the astral space was tropical rainforest; very beautiful and very wet. There was a smell of life to it, wet leaves and earth. There was no night, the sun just moving around on a circuit in the sky. The expedition made camp by a river and the expedition leaders, led by Danielle Geller, set out a search pattern. Multiple teams, splitting up to follow streams and trails through the wet, tropical forest. What they found was that they were on one of a sprawling chain of islands, close enough to see one another from shore.

Traversing the short distance to the next island was a trivial task, given the assemblage of powers in the expedition. They started systematically searching one island after another, sending out individual teams for the smaller ones. The most difficult aspect of the environment was not the verdant growth or the thick, humid air. It was the endless daylight. As what should have been days passed without the respite of night, the less disciplined members of the expedition became increasingly disgruntled.

Many of the expedition's members had come along not for work, but because they felt it was their right to not miss out. Danielle would not normally accept such a team, full of spoiled incompetents and people who were only adventurers on paper. Elspeth Arella already had a list of participants when she offered leadership to Danielle, whose instincts told her it was a bad bet. She accepted anyway because when something inevitably went wrong, she could save lives by being there that couldn't.

The driving schedule laid out by Danielle Geller to advance their goal was being increasingly spoken-out against, largely by the wealthy young iron-rankers who were the most novice among the expedition's number. Danielle herself had no time for their complaints. She knew that a problem with the astral space potentially posed an existential threat to the region, and was determined to find it and crush it.

Adris Dorgan's aura senses weren't as powerful or well-trained as someone like Thalia Mercer's. Where she had detected Jason's when he was still in the grounds, Jason penetrated the heart of Dorgan's home. Dorgan found him in front of one of the many paintings that adorned the library walls. He was dressed in neat casual attire, for all the world as if home invasion was a simple outing. He didn't turn from the painting as Dorgan made his way across the library.

"Mr Asano, isn't it?" Dorgan said. He recognised the face, having seen it in several recordings. There was the widely disseminated recording of the man fighting the Gellers, and the less-widespread one of him beating down thugs in Cavendish. The men in question had each been using a recording crystal, a copy of one had found its way into Dorgan's hands. He had even seen a recording of Asano killing those same men, in the largest arcade in Dorgan's own territory. That recording was far from just floating around, yet had still come into Dorgan's possession.

"Mr Dorgan," Jason greeted, turning with a friendly smile and looking him up and down. The elven man was handsome, with slender features, tawny skin and shoulder-length, chestnut hair. There was an air of sharpness about him, although that may have just been his aura.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, but I’m a little surprised to find you in my library,” Dorgan said.

“You know, I was just recently discussing the problem of home security with Thalia Mercer.”

“Did you break into her home as well?”

“More like snuck onto the grounds,” Jason said. “No offence, but your people are not the equal of the Mercer household.”

“I could summon my bronze-rankers now,” Dorgan said. “Or deal with you personally. You realise I’m bronze rank.”

“I can see that,” Jason said. “Not a lot of time to work on aura control with a criminal empire to run.”

Jason gave him an easy smile.

“I recently had a problem,” Jason said, “where I was unable to deal with a certain individual due to his connections.”

“Thadwick Mercer.”

“I’m flattered you’re paying attention.”

“You dropped five dead adventurers in my territory, Mr Asano. Not paying attention would be foolish.”

“That kind of ties in with what I want to say, given that I now find myself on the other side of the privilege coin. If I don’t walk out of here, you won’t like who comes to ask why.”

“Are you sure about that? Perhaps I have connections of which you’re not aware.”

Jason laughed and gestured at the painting he was standing in front of.

“Before you came in, Mr Dorgan, I was just admiring your art collection. There is a desert landscape by Moher in the grand concert hall that I very much admire, and I see you have quite a number of his works. I’m envious.”

“Perhaps I can help you add something to your own collection. He’s a friend of the family.”

“So I’ve heard,” Jason said and Dorgan stopped cold.

“You know,” he said, his voice half a whisper.

“I do,” Jason said. “I came here with a question and found the answer hanging on the walls. Is she your daughter?”

“I kept it a secret so her future wouldn’t be caught up with criminal entanglements,” Dorgan said. “A father’s wish for his child to go further than he.”

“I can respect that,” Jason said. “I have no interest in telling tales. I came here to find out why your people were interfering with my contract.”

"I believe it's an open contract, Mr Asano."

"I'm closing it, which makes it mine."

"You caught the thief?"

"Of course. When your men intervened, I sent her where I knew I could find her."

"How did you manage that?"

"In an unpleasant manner. But sometimes life requires unpleasant things."

"Doesn't it just," Dorgan said. "It seems you're a resourceful man, Mr Asano."

"Thank you. My problem is that I don't quite grasp the entirety of the political landscape. I obviously understand the connection with your daughter, now, but what is she after in keeping the thief at large? It seems like she wants a point of contention between her and the Duke, but that's a stupid move and she's not stupid. She's taking risks, which is the only reason she was sloppy enough that I found out about you and her."

"What are the chances of someone visiting her office and my house both?" Dorgan asked. "Not high."

"The paintings in your daughter's office didn't bring me here," Jason said. "They just made it easy for me once they arrived. Anyone who really looked at the connections would figure it out soon enough."

"I don't know about anyone."

"What is she after, Dorgan?"

"Why does that matter?"

"Because I have my own concerns. I don't want her squashing me like a bug because I ignorantly blundered underfoot."

Dorgan nodded.

"Very well, he said. "Her goal is Lucian Lamprey."

"The director of the Magic Society?"

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"I've heard he's a crate full of rotten eggs," Jason said, "which explains why she wants him gone. Having a corrupt Magic Society makes cleaning up the Adventure Society all the harder, but what's Lamprey's connection with this thief?"

"He's fixated on her. He's the kind of man who sees being told no as a challenge to his power, and he's become obsessed with possessing this thief. She is ostensibly under the protection of Clarissa Ventress, one of my contemporaries, but Ventress has her own well-known obsession; her reputation. As she made it known the girl was under her

protection, she couldn't just hand her over. Instead, she has leveraged the girl into a position where she would fall into Lamprey's hands."

"So he's a perv," Jason said. "That's why the thief was hitting such insanely dangerous targets. Ventress was pushing her into it, under threat of withdrawing her protection. If she refuses, Ventress can throw her to the wolves, and if she's caught, Lamprey can throw his weight around with the inevitably corrupt civic justice system."

"Yes," Dorgan said. "That's my understanding."

"But Ventress never expected it to take this long to catch her," Jason reasoned. "Meanwhile, Lamprey is climbing the walls while your daughter waits for him to do something stupid she can hang him out to dry with."

"Yes," Dorgan said. "I don't suppose I can convince you to let the thief go?"

"And hand you a great big lever on me? No thanks. Besides; if I let her go, then my ability to control how this ends goes with her."

"You think that's something you can control?"

"Enough for an outcome that satisfies me, yes."

"You may be overestimating your limits, Mr Asano."

"I have a friend who says pushing our limits is how we grow beyond them."

"Then what now?" Dorgan asked.

"Now I complete the contract. I'm sorry it will interfere with your daughter's plans, but she should really be thanking me. It had far too many potential failure points."

"You aren't going to ask why the daughter of a crime lord is trying to excise corruption from the Adventure Society?"

"That's obvious," Jason said. "She gets rid of Lamprey and the Magic Society becomes less corrupt because almost anything would be. She moves on to smoothly cleaning up her branch of the Adventure Society. She culminates that time by capping it off with the renegotiation of the city's service agreement in a couple of years. Cleaning up one of the Adventure Society's rotten provincial branches gets her promoted up and out of Greenstone, putting her secrets behind her. That promotion lets her climb the ladder instead of just moving on. Is that more or less it?"

"Yes," Dorgan said darkly. "Mr Asano, let me make something clear. If you do anything to derail my daughter's ambitions, I will see you dead, consequences bedamned."

Jason held out his hand for Dorgan to shake.

"I think we understand each other, Mr Dorgan. Sharing your daughter's secret is worthless to me. Only keeping it has value."

Dorgan shook Jason's hand.

"Do let me show you to the door, Mr Asano."

Chapter 105: You Aren't in Control of What Happens Next

Sophie woke up. Unfamiliar ceiling, something around her neck. She moved and there was a clink of chains as she realised her wrists and feet were manacled. Her body was under a soft, thin sheet. Memories came rushing back as her head cleared. The chase. Getting clear, only to feel the poison eating into her. Fighting a body desperate to close its eyes, knowing they wouldn't open again. Pushing past her limits to reach the clinic and stumble in through the back. Falling onto the rack of glassware as she finally succumbed.

Sitting up was awkward in the manacles, her leg irons connected to her wrist irons by a length of chain. Her eyes were crusty and blurred. She probed the thing around her neck with her fingers. A thick metal band, padded just enough to not dig into her neck, but not enough to be comfortable. It felt enervating to the touch, as if it was draining her, somehow.

"Power suppression collar," a male voice said. It was casual and friendly, which seemed sinister in the circumstances. She rubbed the accumulated gunk from her eyes and looked around.

She was in a white, tiled room on a padded table. There was a man in a chair in the corner, observing her from over an open book. It was that friend of Jory's, whose name she didn't remember. He used a bookmark to keep the page and shoved the book into the air, where it vanished. Dimensional storage space. She had heard he was an adventurer.

"Good morning," he said. "Sorry about the manacles, but you're very good at running. It was your friend who changed your clothes and cleaned you up while you were asleep. If she left any sharp implements on your person, I'd appreciate not being stabbed."

"Belinda's here?" she croaked. Her mouth was gluggy.

"She's upstairs," he said. He stood up and walked over to her, plucking a glass out of thin air to offer it to her.

"Juice," he told her as she eyed the glass warily. "If I wanted to dose you with something, I had all the time in the world."

She took the glass and sipped. The juice was icy cold, sweet and delicious. She gulped down the rest and he took the glass from her hand. There was a sink in the room where he walked over and started washing out the glass.

"The others wanted her to be the one here when you woke up," he said with his back to her, "but I need you to understand that you aren't in control of what happens next."

“Who are you?”

Darkness started rising off him like shadowy flames, engulfing him. It was like a void, with stars twinkling in the depths. She hadn't taken a good look during his pursuit and their brief fight. It was beautiful but also gave a sense of hidden dangers. It was odd to see on a man doing the washing up.

“Jason Asano,” he introduced himself, and the darkness vanished again. He dried the glass with a cloth and returned it to his storage space before retaking his seat across the room.

“I didn't realise who you were until the mask came off,” he said, “which is how I knew you'd come here. If you lived that long. You were already recovered when I arrived but quite thoroughly unconscious. Apparently, when you get healed up from comprehensive injury, it takes a while to sleep it off.”

“How did you catch Belinda?”

“Like you, I wasn't working alone. My friend, Clive, tracked her from the staging point you two set up.”

“She's not easy to track.”

“Also like you, I'm the fast one, while my partner is the one with the know-how. I have some good news for you, though. We caught your friend out of thoroughness, not knowing who you were, but the Adventure Society contract stipulates catching a thief, not thieves. We're going to let her go.”

“But not me.”

“No,” He said. “You, we're turning in. We, that's me, my partner and Jory, have been discussing what to do next. We need you to convince your friend Belinda not to try something reckless to get you out of this. That ship has sailed and now the only way out is through.”

“So, what now?” she asked.

“My friend, Clive, figured out that your goal was to hit the city's spirit coin vault. He even thinks you had a chance at succeeding, which is impressive. Not a good chance, but still. I assume the point of your foolhardy scheme was to net you enough money to buy your way out from under Clarissa Ventress.”

“What do you know about it?”

“I know she put you up to these robberies. And I know why, which your friend tells me you don't.”

“Island politics,” she said.

“Yes,” he said, “but it didn't start that way. Do you know who Lucian Lamprey is?”

“Some kind of Island big-shot,” Sophie said. “Likes to spend his time at the fighting pits.”

“Yes,” He said. “Your friend told me a little about your issues with Cole Silva, another member of the Big Three. You play dangerous games.”

Sophie frowned.

“Sometimes, all your options are bad. It sounds like my friend has done a lot of talking.”

“You and I fought two days ago,” he told her. “You’ve been asleep a long time, which gave me time to do some digging around.”

“Two days?”

“Yes.”

“Then people already know we’re here. Ventress, Silva.”

“Dorgan too,” Jason said. “The Big Three trifecta.”

“What’s Dorgan’s interest?”

“We’ll get to that. With all the eyes on you, right now, it would be best if your friend occupies Jory’s guest room for a while. Between his affiliations and his recent acknowledgement by the Healer, no one will try anything. Not so long as she stays here.”

“You brought up Silva,” Sophie said. “Why? Ventress didn’t send us to provoke the Island over him. Too big a risk.”

“No,” he said. “My understanding is that Silva has a very strong interest in you. Can you tell me about that?”

She looked at Asano, lounging casually in the chair, not knowing what to make of him. She didn't recognise where he was from, ethnically speaking. His skin was lighter than the local humans and much lighter than hers. His features were a little too sharp to be handsome, but his short hair had an appealingly silky lustre.

He waited patiently for her to respond as if he didn't have a care in the world, which she was confident wasn't the case. This had to be a big deal for him. He might seem casual and in control, but he wanted something from this conversation, leading her to his objective like a heidel to water. She decided to let him, for now. If she knew what he was after she might find some leverage, or at least learn some things along the way.

“Silva and I kind of grew up together,” she told him. “My father worked for his. He wanted what all young men want, but I very much didn't. His father indulged him too much, which had turned him into a little dictator.”

“I know the type,” he said. “Insecure about their power, they become fixated on obtaining or destroying anything that challenges it.”

“Exactly. He wasn’t used to hearing no, but his father protected me.”

“Until his father died.”

“That was when we sought-out Ventress for protection. It was fine, at first. Then she had me fighting in the pits to provoke Silva into doing something stupid. I could live with that. Then came this. Stealing from the wealthy and powerful. You said you knew why.”

“It’s interesting,” he told her. “The story you just told me has been playing out again, but with bigger stakes. The reason I asked about Lucian Lamprey is that he was the one that prompted Ventress to send you off, thieving. Like Silva, Lamprey took an interest in you, but Ventress had promised to protect you.”

“Reputation means everything to her,” Sophie said.

“That’s why she sent you off on jobs that would get you caught. Once you were in the system and out of her reach, Lamprey could swoop in using his own influence to get his hands on you. The problem is, Lamprey turned out to be very much of a type with Silva. He isn’t used to being told no, and you became the symbol of his denial. As time moved on, his inability to have you became an obsession, leading him to increasingly pressure Ventress. You seem to attract a certain kind of man, unfortunately.”

“We were in hiding from Ventress. She was quietly trying to find us, even while publicly, we were under her protection. Even her reputation won’t matter if someone that powerful is bearing down on her. But what you said about the story repeating itself; someone wants to provoke Lamprey, the way Ventress was provoking Silva?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“I’m not going to tell you that.”

Sophie fell silent as she thought it over.

“Dorgan,” she concluded. “That wasn’t the first time someone has interfered to help me get away. Those people who attacked you at the docks had to be his. Ventress or Silva’s people would have gone for me, not you. That was because they wanted me to not get caught, so Lamprey would keep stressing?”

“Yes.”

“Whoever it was had to know who we are, and what we were doing. Someone from the Island using Dorgan’s people as a cut-out, to keep their hands clean.”

“Yes.”

“So all that we did. Our plan. We were just dancing in the hand of some rich prick on the Island.”

“Yes.”

“But you messed that up. And now I’m going exactly where Lamprey and Ventress wanted from the start.”

“Not exactly,” he said.

“Are you joking? You think I don’t know how this goes? I’m sentenced to indenture, except instead of getting auctioned off, the court makes a deal to hand me over to an upstanding member of the community.”

“That’s where I intervene,” he said. “I can’t stop the indenture, but I’ve recently been reading the agreement between the city and the Adventure Society. One of the rules tucked away in the small print is that anyone who completes the contract gets right of refusal on anyone sentenced to indenture as a result of that contract.”

“So I end up in your hands, instead of Lamprey’s.”

“Yes.”

“How do I know that’s any better?”

“You don’t. I could be making all this up to manipulate you into quietly capitulating to my arrangements.”

She stared at him and he gave her a friendly smile in return. They sat in silence while she thought things over.

“Why?” she asked, finally.

“Why what?” he asked.

“Why take my indenture. Won’t that pit you against Lamprey?”

“Yes.”

“You work for the person who wants to provoke him, don’t you?”

“If that were the case, I wouldn’t have caught you at all.”

“You say that, but there could be plenty of reasons. Those people they sent to interfere, they didn’t seem to stop you. That might just be cover. They were afraid mine and Belinda’s plan might actually work, or maybe that we’d get caught carrying it out. So they send you to catch me and still keep me out of Lamprey’s hands.”

He smiled.

“That makes sense,” he said, “assuming that anything I’ve told you is true. Lamprey may not be involved at all. There may be no mysterious figure from the Island, masterminding events. We may not have your friend upstairs and this might not even be Jory’s clinic. Have you been inside since the renovations? This could all be a game I’m playing. The man with lascivious intentions could be me.”

“Then why bother with all his?”

"Who knows? Maybe I need you to go along with my plot due to some nuance of local laws that would put you in my power. Maybe I'm just a twisted maniac who likes to play with his food. I told you in the beginning that you aren't in control of what happens next."

"I'm starting to think you're twisted, whatever the truth is," she told him. He chuckled.

"Quite probably," he said, and stood up. "I'll go get your friend. You can talk things over."

He opened the door and left, then it opened again immediately and he stuck his head back in.

"Please don't try to break out."

Chapter 106: Something Shady

Jory's kitchen table was covered in magical diagrams, with Belinda taking Clive through how they worked.

"Obviously, the lock is impervious to ordinary intrusion," she explained. "I re-sequenced the magical bursts into an irregular pattern. It doesn't throw-off any individual element, but..."

"...it accumulates small errors that cause the whole thing to break down," Clive finished. "That brilliant. How did you come up with that?"

"I was working on something a while back. I was stuck using low-quality sequencing rods and I didn't realise what was happening until the misalignment crashed the whole rig. I came up with this while troubleshooting."

"Brilliant," Clive said. "Adversity driving innovation."

Jory's assistant, Janice, knocked on the door as she came in.

"Mr Asano says she's awake. You can go and see your friend now."

They all went back downstairs, Janice heading back to reception while Clive and Belinda went to the treatment room where Sophie was locked up. Jason was outside, leaning against the wall. He was watching an image being projected onto the opposite wall by a small crystal.

"How is she?" Belinda asked.

"She's trying to pick the lock right now," Jason said, "so I'm guessing fine."

Clive gestured at the wall opposite and they saw Sophie, from above and behind, hunched over the door lock. The three of them stood looking at the door as five runes lit up around the doorknob.

"Five-element lock," Belinda said. "Not bad for an internal door."

"Jory keeps some expensive supplies in these rooms," Jason said.

"Good to know," Belinda said.

"Please don't steal them," Jason said.

"I don't think she'd do that," Clive said.

"No, I would," Belinda told him.

The runes on the door moved until they formed a straight line and the lock clicked. The door opened just enough for Sophie to look out.

"Didn't I ask you specifically not to do that?" Jason asked her.

Sophie groaned in dissatisfaction, but Belinda threw the door wide to ensnare her friend in a huge hug.

"I'm so glad you're alright."

"You too."

Jason gestured at the room Sophie had just broken out of.

"You can talk in there," he said. "Clive, can you do something to the door to stop them opening it up again?"

"To stop her," he said, nodding at Sophie, "probably."

Then he gestured at Belinda.

"To stop her, probably not."

Jason groaned.

"Just go in and talk," Jason said.

Belinda gently pushed Sophie back into the room, closing the door behind them. She looked around until she spotted the far-seeing crystal Jason had been using to watch the room, floating unobtrusively near the ceiling. She stood up on a chair to take it down and shove it in a drawer.

"What was that?" Sophie asked.

"He was watching you."

"What a creeper."

"You did try and break out."

"I didn't try; I did break out."

"How are you?" Blind asked.

"I feel alright, Sophie said. "A bit withered on the vine. Has it really been days?"

"It has."

Sophie sat down on the chair, shuffling to find a posture where the manacles didn't bother her too much. Belinda hopped up to sit on the treatment table.

"So," Sophie said. "What did they tell you?"

"Ventress, Magic Society guy, indenture."

"The same for me. What are they after?"

"I'm not sure. According to Asano, he only came after us because someone asked him to. People at the Adventure Society were getting pressured over how long it was taking to catch us."

"Do you believe him?"

"I'm not sure. He seems to be in charge, or at least, the others are taking cues from him. He's hard to read, but his partner, not so much."

"That's the one that caught you?"

"Yeah. He's all book smarts; more interested in how we did the jobs than the fact that we did them. I've been playing along for a couple of days, taking him through stuff as I

tease out information. I think Asano knows I'm doing it, but hasn't let the guy know for some reason. Which means he's either on the level or is playing a game his partner doesn't know about."

"Could be either," Sophie said. "When I was talking to him, he knew I wouldn't trust him, so he cranked up the shadiness until I didn't know what to think."

"So, what's the move?"

"I don't see any good angles," Sophie said. "The deal with Ventress is burned, so even if we get away from these people, the streets aren't safe. We could try the plan to leave the city, but we'd have not much more than food and a map."

"Then what?" Belinda asked. "Going along with this guy's plan puts us right into his hands. No way out if he's playing us or any of a dozen other things go wrong."

"Did they tell you they would let you go?" Sophie asked.

"Yeah. They said I should stay here, where Ventress and Silva wouldn't dare come for me."

"What do you think?"

"I think the one I'm worried about is you, Soph."

Sophie sighed.

"We've been running further into the fire for a while now, to escape being cooked," Sophie said. "It could be that all we have left is to choose who bakes us, if we can choose even that much."

Belinda nodded.

"I think maybe we take a risk with this guy. Jory and Janice have known him for months. The whole time he's apparently been coming in and healing people for free."

"Sounds like he's running some kind of scam."

"I know. But Jory sees him as a friend, as does that partner of his, Clive. I know Jory's alright, and I like Clive. He's refreshingly straightforward."

"That's not a lot to bet the future on."

Belinda hopped down off the table and walked over to Sophie, giving her a reassuring squeeze on the shoulder.

"You know why I like Jory? Most people I've met, us included, are out for themselves. Those that don't have are trying to get. Those that have are trying to get more. Jory could have set up shop on the Island, selling his alchemy to rich folks, but he didn't. He came here, and he helps people."

"He can't be doing too badly," Sophie said. "The money to rebuild it all came from somewhere."

“It came from Asano,” Belinda said. “At least according to Janice. Asano just gave Jory the money. No loan, no questions asked.”

“Why would he do that?”

“I think, and I’m just guessing here, that Asano looks at Jory the way I do.”

“With girlish affection?”

“Shut up. I think he sees someone who helps people. Even the god of healing sees him like that, so why not this guy? And if his response to that is to give Jory money to do it more, how bad can he be?”

“That’s a lot of ifs and guesses,” Sophie said.

“If you have anything more to work off, this is the time for sharing.”

Sophie ran her hands over her face.

“It’s not much to put myself in the hands of a stranger over.”

“I think we’re already in his hands,” Belinda said. “It’s just a matter of how much we struggle.”

“So, what do we do?”

“I think we go along for now,” Belinda said. “Those tracking bracelets they give to indentures can’t be that hard to beat. But I won’t be the one wearing it, so you decide what we’re going to do. I’ll back you, whatever it is.”

“Enter,” Arella’s voice came through the door and Jason showed himself into her office. Jason was a little surprised to find the deputy director also present, sitting behind her own desk.

“You met my father, then,” Arella said as soon as Jason closed the door. He glanced at the deputy director before turning his gaze back to Arella.

“I did,” he said. “I like him. He seems to care about you a great deal.”

“What is it you want in return for silence?” she asked.

“I’m not a blackmailer, Director. I would like to avoid any bureaucratic roadblocks in securing the indenture of the thief, but since that will aggravate Lucian Lamprey, that’s exactly what you want. And you owe me that much.”

“I owe you?”

“You sent people to interfere with my completion of a contract you posted. That’s unprofessional.”

Arella reluctantly nodded.

“I’ll acknowledge the point,” she said. “Who told you about that clause in the service agreement?”

“I found it myself.”

“You read it?” Genevieve asked. It was the first time the elderly deputy director had entered the conversation.

“That’s right,” Jason told her.

“Nobody reads it.”

“It wasn’t that bad,” Jason said. “You should see legal documents where I come from.”

“You know placing yourself between Lucian Lamprey and his objective may not be the safest position,” Arella said, pulling the conversation back on track. Jason turned to look at her.

“If I don’t, who will?” he asked.

“Does it really matter?”

“I put this woman in a situation where Lamprey can potentially get his claws into her. That makes it my responsibility to see that he doesn’t.”

“Your responsibility?”

“Yes.”

“You realise people are placed in horrifying situations every day?” she asked.

“They aren’t my responsibility. Not until I have the power to really change things.”

“And when you do, what makes you think you know best?”

“Some things are just obviously wrong, whatever world you come from.”

“So you’re going to come here and tell us right from wrong?”

“It’s easy to excuse away doing nothing,” Jason said. “It’s our tradition, our culture, our values. That does not make it acceptable to hand someone over to a predator.”

“You’re naïve,” Arella said. “It’s easy to do more harm than good, bumbling around with no idea of the realities.”

“I’ve seen the realities, Director. I covered up crimes by a man who tried to have me killed. I did that because the only people who would be hurt if I tried to do something about it would be the victims. Yet this woman I just had locked up in the tower has been hunted for months. Why? For taking things that didn’t belong to her? That’s the easy excuse that lets a pervert with power claw after her. Thadwick Mercer tried to have me murdered and the best I can hope for is that him Mum tells him off. Every time I kill people in job lots, I get a promotion. But gods forbid a poor person take a rich person’s stuff. That’s pretext enough to hand them over to whatever filthy lech has the power to demand it. This whole thing was over hunting down the victims and you’re going to tell me I don’t know right from wrong?”

“Are you quite done, Mr Asano?”

Jason let out a tension-relieving sigh.

“You did ask,” he said.

“I think we’re done here. You can have your thief, Mr Asano. The agreement with the city is quite clear on this point, and I will see it is enforced. Try not to make more trouble than you have to.”

The Adventure Society holding facility was a stone tower. Not the usual Greenstone, but a dark grey. It saw little use and had little capacity, which is why the Ustei had been penned up in the marshalling yard. Only the Ustei leadership had been held there. An adventurer entered, shoving two surly men in manacles ahead of him. Inside the only door was a small administrative area, where an Adventure Society functionary sat behind protective glass.

“I need to put these two in lockup,” the adventurer told Albert, the man behind the glass.

Albert regularly worked the jobs hall a lot and had an eye for faces, but he didn’t recognise this adventurer. That had been happening a lot lately. With so many people on the expedition, the director had been pressing the more nominal members of the Society into service. This adventurer looked more rough and tumble than the usual noble fop, though.

“I’ll need to see a copy of the contract they were taken under,” Albert told him.

“No contract,” the adventurer said. “These two idiots tried to mug the wrong guy.”

“If it isn’t contract related,” Albert said, “then we can’t keep them here. Take them to the courthouse gaol.”

“I’ve got stuff to do. Just let me stash them here and we can sort the rest out later.”

“This isn’t a hostel,” Albert said. “We’re not taking them.”

“You’d rather I let two hardened criminals loose right here?”

“If you like,” Albert said. “We’re in the middle of the Adventure Society. If they have half a mind, they’ll run like there’s a fire behind them.”

The adventurer threw Albert a sneer, but dragged the two men away. Around an hour later he was back. Along with his two prisoners, he had brought Guy Spalding, the Adventure Society official that was Albert’s supervisor.

“Bertinelli,” Spalding scolded Albert. “This adventurer’s prisoners need to be taken upstairs.”

“Sir, he didn’t have a contract.”

“I don’t care,” Spalding said. “Have them sent up, right now.”

Albert frowned.

“If you insist, sir, but I’ll need to process them first.”

“Don’t bother with that; just send them up. On my authority.”

“With respect, sir, you have the authority to tell me to do my job. You do not have the authority to tell me not to.”

“What? If you know what’s good for you, you’ll do as I say.”

“With respect, sir, I strongly suspect what’s good for me is not factoring heavily into your reasoning.”

“Are you going to do it, or not?”

“No, sir, I’m not. It’s quite obvious something shady is happening and I suggest you give it up before you do something that comes back on you.”

Spalding glared at Albert through the glass, then turned on the adventurer who had brought him there.

“Let’s go,” Spalding barked.

“You’re joking,” the adventurer said to Spalding.

“I said let’s go!”

Shaking his head, the adventurer followed reluctantly. Outside, the adventurer turned on Spalding.

“What the hell was that? I did what you said and you messed it up twice. Now there’s no way to get to the girl quietly.”

“Don’t talk at me like I’m another one of Silva’s lackeys,” Spalding warned.

“A man who gambles as hard and as badly as you,” the adventurer said, “should be concerned when he can’t keep his promises.”

“Don’t threaten me,” Spalding said. “Look where you are.”

“And how would it go for you if your new director found out how deep in you are? The world’s changing, Spalding. Being on the take isn’t as easy as it used to be. You have to know what you’re doing, these days, and you’ve had it too easy for too long. Silva isn’t his father, willing to indulge your whims. You need to show us you can adapt to the times, or things are going to get very nasty for you.”

Chapter 107: All the Good People We Can Get

The expedition was going Island by Island, searching for traces of what was disrupting the astral space. They made their first discovery on the third island; a five-sided column, about as tall as a person and covered in magical engravings. One of the adventurers, who was also a member of the Magic Society, was examining it while Danielle Geller hovered nearby.

“Well?” Danielle asked.

“Definitely some kind of astral magic,” the man said. “We could have used Landemere Vane, if someone hadn’t gone and killed him. He was a dab hand at this kind of thing. Even Clive Standish would have been a good pick. He’s only iron rank, but he knows his astral magic.”

“I didn’t pick the expedition members,” Danielle said. “Complaining about what we don’t have isn’t productive, in any case. What can you tell me?”

“Not much,” the man said. “It’s a relay for a larger effect. Some kind of astral magic on a very large scale but I’d need to find a central node to get more. Even then, this isn’t like anything I’ve seen. We need an astral magic specialist.”

Danielle scowled. The makeup of the expedition was an absolute mess. Every prominent family in Greenstone wanted to go along and Elspeth Arella had accepted them all. It was too many people with too little ability, to the point Danielle had wanted to pull out her family’s participation entirely. She couldn’t convince enough of the family leadership for that, so she ended up agreeing. When things went inevitably wrong, she could at least mitigate the damage if she was present. She did lodge a formal protest over Elspeth Arella’s head, however, directly with the Adventure Society’s Continental Council.

“Large scale,” she said unhappily. “Large enough to disrupt a massive, desert-spanning astral space?”

“I would say exactly large enough. If we can find some more of these, I might be able to pinpoint a central node. That might lead us to whoever set all this up.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” Danielle said, patting the man on the shoulder. “Good work.”

Jason and Vincent rushed through the Adventure Society campus toward the prison tower. With them were Jory and Belinda, who had hurried from Jory’s clinic after Jason sent an anxious message through his voice chat power. The four of them were walking swiftly, not breaking into a run only to avoid attention.

“I’m an idiot,” Jason said as they marched. “I was so impressed with myself. Pure hubris. I stupidly forgot that the most fundamental aspect of corruption is working around the rules, not within them.”

“I don’t know why the director is doing this,” Vincent said.

“She has a number of compelling reasons. Leverage on the Duke, to start with. If one of his judges makes a shady ruling regarding the service agreement between the city and the Society, the director gets another arrow in her quiver. Then there’s Lucian Lamprey. I bet he was willing to cough up some reforms he couldn’t care less about in return for the director going along with it.”

“But getting rid of corruption is her whole agenda,” Vincent said. “I don’t understand her turning around and using it herself.”

“I warned you this had the stink of politics,” Jason said. “She doesn’t actually care about eliminating corruption. Cleaning up this branch is just her ticket into the upper ranks of the Adventure Society.”

“You were right,” Vincent said. “We just ended up pieces in someone else’s game. You only got involved because I asked you.”

“You were coming from a decent place, unlike Elspeth Arella. We need to look forward; there’s no point fretting over what’s done.”

“I’m still unclear on what’s happening,” Belinda said. “Jory just said we had to go and brought me here.”

“You didn’t explain it to me, either,” Jory said.

They spotted the tower. It would have been faster to cut straight across the grass, but Jason steered them onto the more meandering walkway.

“Stick to the paths,” Jason said. “We don’t want to draw Arella’s attention.”

“She can tell if people are walking on the grass?” Belinda asked.

“No, but rushing across the grass to the prison tower is something people might pay attention to. The longer before Arella finds out what we’re up to, the better.”

“What are we up to?” Jory asked. “You said we had to hurry a lot, but never actually said.”

“Sophie’s sentence-dispensation hearing is today,” Vincent said. “She’s already been sentenced to indenture, and today is when that indenture gets assigned.”

“I thought it was being assigned to you,” Belinda said to Jason.

“The rules are very clear on that,” Jason said. “Unfortunately, rules only matter so long as they matter to the powerful.”

“I could have told you that,” Belinda said.

“Lucian Lamprey has a legal advocate who will move that because the contract was an open one, the clause in the service agreement with the city doesn’t apply,” Vincent explained.

“Is that how it works?” Jory asked.

“Not even a little,” Jason said. “The argument is worthless.”

“Then what’s the issue?” Jory asked.

“That’s where I come in,” Vincent said. “The Adventure Society director is powerful, but she rose up very quickly and doesn’t know all the old networks. The Adventure Society’s legal advocate she ordered not to contest Lamprey’s court argument gave me a heads-up. The magistrate had also been handled, but that’s nothing new. I just don’t understand why Arella is working with Lamprey when she’s been trying to get rid of him.”

“Ousting Lamprey was always a means to an end,” Jason said. “If she can get him to fall into line, that serves her just as well. The sham court ruling is just gravy.”

“Is the court ruling that bad for the Duke?” Jory asked. “Can’t he just point out that the Adventure Society didn’t fight it?”

“There’s a hundred ways around that,” Vincent said. “Arella could claim the Adventure Society didn’t see the point of challenging over a minor case. She could throw the advocate under the wagon, claim incompetence or corruption.”

“She could have him killed off and claim no one knows what his motivations were,” Jason added.

“She wouldn’t go that far, would she?” Vincent asked.

“Her father is one of the Big Three,” Jason said. “She’d have her dad do it.”

“Dorgan?” Belinda said. “He’s the father of the Adventure Society’s director?”

“She’s been keeping it under her hat, for obvious reasons,” Jason said.

“Should you even be telling us this?” Jory asked.

“She lost discretion privileges when she lied to my face,” Jason said. “She told me she would help, then stabbed me in the back as I was congratulating myself over being such a political genius.”

They reached the prison tower, Jory and Belinda waiting outside while Jason and Vincent went in.

“Mr Asano,” Albert said. “Come to check on your prisoner?”

“I’ve come to check her out of prison, Bert,” Jason said.

“Since it was an open contract,” Albert said, “there’s a little extra paperwork. I can release her into the custody of the contracted agent, but with an open contract, you only count as the contracted agent if you’re the one that closed it. I’ll need the documentation that confirms your status.”

Vincent took a folder from his leather satchel, taking out a short stack of documents. He put them down in front of the security screen, pushing them under the narrow slot at the base.

“Copy of contract,” Albert checked off, leafing through the documents. “Confirmation of contract closure, registration of contract closure. Please hold your badge up against the security screen, Mr Asano.”

“No worries,” Jason said, taking his badge out and pushing it against the glass window between himself and Albert. Albert pressed one of the documents against the other side of the glass and it pulsed briefly with a yellow light.

“All in order,” Albert continued and turned back to the papers Vincent had given him. “Finally, order of release into custody of contracted agent. Which is now officially you, Mr Asano.”

Albert stamped the various forms.

“I can hand her over to you, then, sir.”

“Quickly would be ideal,” Bert,” Jason said.

“I will have to fit her with a tracking bracelet,” Albert said. “Wouldn’t want people just running off. Especially a pretty girl like that, sir. You could see how she might turn a man’s head. Get him to let her loose against his better judgement.”

“Perish the thought,” Jason said. “Fast as you can would be really appreciated.”

It was only a few minutes later that Albert, accompanied by an iron-rank guard, brought out Sophie. Around her wrist was a simple metal hoop.

Jason took out a bottle of the Norwich Distillery’s finest, handing it over to Albert.

“By way of apology,” Jason said.

“What for?” Albert asked.

“For what’s going to happen later.”

“Well?” Danielle asked as Thalia entered the command tent.

“Still nothing,” Thalia said. “That’s two hours overdue.”

“Then our scouting team is likely either captured or dead, and we still have no idea who by. How is camp readiness?”

“Still on alert but this is a large and undisciplined group. Too many people used to being captain and not enough willing to be crew. They’ve been on full alert since the team was due back and trying to keep them focused for hours at a time is making them inattentive and rebellious.”

“Damn Arella for handing me all this dross,” Danielle said. “All our good people are wasted keeping an eye on the bad ones. With half the number we’d be twice as effective.”

“You’re too used to only dealing with Gellers,” Thalia said. “You know better than to complain about what you want instead of dealing with what you have.”

Danielle flashed her a tired smile.

“You’re right. Thank you.”

“So what do we do? We have a missing scout team and fractious troops.”

“We give them focus,” Danielle said. “Get ready to mobilise in full force; we’re going to find out what happened to our people.”

“Heading into unknown territory, potentially against an unknown enemy?”

“Better than waiting for them to come to us. At least it gives us the initiative.”

Suddenly there was an explosion in the camp, followed by yells and screams.

Danielle and Thalia went outside to see some kind of automaton army storming the camp. The enemies were not flesh and blood but built of from wood, steel and stone. The majority were the size and shape as people, but there were towering golems standing two or three times the height of a person, and even stranger constructions. There was a huge, steel spider on, which a figure with robes could be seen. Other robed figures rode similarly outlandish creations, but there were only around a dozen robed figures in total, all at the rear of the enemy forces.

The pair were nonplussed for only a moment before they started loudly barking orders.

“The girl’s tracking bracelet?” Arella asked.

“Not showing up,” the deputy director, Genevieve, said. “The last location shown was in front of the cloud palace.”

“He’s hiding her with Emir Bahadir,” Arella mused. “No surprise the tracker won’t work in there. How strong is that tie?”

“Asano with Bahadir? Superficial, from what I’ve been able to gather. The connection is Rufus Remore.”

“Can Bahadir be convinced to hand her over?”

“Unlikely. My read is that Bahadir will keep showing Asano courtesy at least until Remore gets back and he can make another assessment. It might be different if we had something to offer but that’s unlikely. For a gold-ranker in this city, wanting and having are the same thing.”

Arella tilted her head, her aura senses picking something up.

“Trenslow is in the elevator. He may storm out, so go out the side door and be waiting for him when he leaves.”

Genevieve nodded, taking the second door into the conference room instead of straight back out to the hall.

Vincent arrived outside the director's office, taking a steeling breath.

"About time, Trenslow," Arella's voice rang displeasure through the door. "Get in here."

"Madam Director," Vincent said as he entered. She was seated behind her desk.

"Where were you, Trenslow?" she demanded. "Did you stop to wax your moustache?"

He had, in fact, done exactly that. The long, familiar process calmed him, and he felt better equipped to face the world with it in best condition.

Arella didn't wait for an answer, waving a piece of paper at him.

"Would you care to explain why I'm holding in my hand an order placing a prisoner into the personal custody of Jason Asano, issued by you?"

"You will find that all rules and procedures were followed, Madam Director."

Vincent was putting on a better show of steadfastness than he thought he would manage, but had no illusions the director didn't see through it. Arella took a breath and sat back in her chair.

"I had thought you were my man, Vincent," she said softly. "I thought you agreed with what I was doing."

"I did," Vincent said. "But then you started cutting corners; hurting the people who wanted to help you. I couldn't understand why, but I was willing to be patient. Now you've shown yourself to be everything you claimed to be fighting against. Selling a woman to someone like Lucian Lamprey? Don't even try and tell me you don't know what fate awaits her in his hands. With a father like yours, there's no pleading ignorance."

"Asano told you," Arella said. "I wondered if he would."

"He said it won't really hurt you. The things you've done will outshine where you came from. He even thought that you chose eradicating corruption as your project for advancement because it plays to the story of rising above your criminal origins."

"He's not unintelligent, although far from as smart as he thinks. Where is he now, Vincent?"

"I don't know. He said he wasn't going anywhere."

"Of course he did; he's arrogant and reckless. Running around, believing himself some master manipulator. If it weren't for people not wanting to anger Rufus Remore and Danielle Geller, he would have been put in the ground months ago. He stood, right where you are, and told me how things were going to go. It never even entered his head that he

was being played. You know I'm going to take his membership if he doesn't produce the girl. I hope you told him that."

"I guess Lamprey won't keep his end of the deal unless he gets her," Vincent accused.

"I'm not looking for your perspective on my affairs, Vincent. You no longer work here. Genevieve is waiting outside to take your official's pin and other accoutrements."

Vincent knew it was coming before he set foot in the building, but it didn't lessen the sting. Without bothering to respond, he turned and walked over to the door.

"I didn't tell you to leave," she told him. He opened the door and paused, without looking back.

"You just gave up the right to tell me a damn thing," he said. "I thought you were different. That you had integrity. Just so you know, I don't care who your father is. You're worth hating all on your own."

He closed the door behind him to find the deputy director waiting in the hall as promised. Vincent had always liked the elderly elf. She was stern but fair in her dealings, at least the one's he was privy to. It saddened him to know she was aware of the director's activities.

He was taking off his Adventure Society pin and handing it over when a flustered functionary came stumbling out of the elevator and rushed down the hall.

"Deputy director!" the winded woman greeted. "Something's happening with the expedition!"

"Tell me."

"The tracking stones connected to their badges. They're marking people as dying. A lot of iron-rankers, but also bronze and even a silver."

Genevieve frowned as she considered briefly, then threw open the door to the director's office.

"Inside," Genevieve commanded and the functionary scuttled in. She looked at Vincent and pressed the pin back into his hand.

"Why?" he asked.

"It sounds like we'll need all the good people we can get."

Chapter 108: You Don't Have the Strength

Emir Bahadir's cloud palace was a sprawling, monstrous edifice. Floating just offshore on the north side of the Island, it was fully exposed to the waves and currents, yet remained as immovable as solid ground. The entire structure was made from cloud, dyed in colours of blue, purple, orange and gold. Laid out in multiple wings and towers, it was a fairy tale brought to life.

Just walking on the cloud floors gave a sense of serenity, gentle and floating, yet supportive at the same time. Jason and Emir were strolling down a great, long balcony, looking out over the Adventure Society campus.

"I can't thank you enough," Jason said. "There's no place in the city I can hide her from Elspeth Arella."

"This is why I like outworlders," Emir said. "You have a knack for drawing a large amount of trouble in a small amount of time. Something to do with not recognising the dangers, perhaps, or simply an unwillingness to waste a second life on caution and worry. It has been my experience that helping an outworlder in their moments of early need pays off handsomely down the road. Ten years from now, I have no doubt that being owed a favour by you, Mr Asano, will be a valuable commodity indeed."

"You haven't earned a favour here, Mr Bahadir. You've made a friend, and friends don't count favours. If you need me, I'll be there."

"I'm starting to see what Rufus was talking about. I am curious as to why you're throwing away so much for a pair of thieves that, if I'm not mistaken, you hardly know."

"I don't really see it as a choice," Jason said.

Following the balcony to a terrace, they sank into the welcoming embrace of a pair of chairs made of clouds. Jason let out a contented sigh.

"I don't think I'll handle going back to regular furniture well."

Emir chortled.

"It is easy to become accustomed to the finer things," he said. "We must always remember, though, what we do to get them. You were saying that you didn't feel you had a choice."

"I was the one who caught this young woman, which makes her disposition my responsibility."

"I'm not sure I agree," Emir said. "She set out on her own path."

“Yes, because orphans with a debt to a crime lords have so many options in life. If you placed someone in the hands of a filthy degenerate, would you feel that your own hands were clean?”

“I suppose not. I’m not sure I’d go so far to protect them, though.”

“A responsibility isn’t just a responsibility so long as it’s convenient,” Jason said. “I can live with burning bridges, if the bridges are rotten. If I lose my Society membership, so be it.”

“My understanding is that you did everything according to the rules,” Emir said. “Outside of ‘losing’ the young lady in your custody, of course, but incompetence is not grounds for expulsion. I would expect a demotion, however. Do you have your second star?”

“And a third,” Jason said, “but I’m wondering how much of that was to keep me distracted. I imagine I’ll be left with just the one when this is over.”

“I think, perhaps, it is coming on time to put Greenstone behind you, Mr Asano. Has Rufus broached the idea of joining him when he returns to Vitesse?”

“He has,” Jason said. “That said, he still has work to do, here.”

“Yes he does. I will be here a little while, and he should be returning with me. Allow me to extend that invitation to you and the young women taking sanctuary here. I believe a new city, far away, is exactly what they need.”

“From what they’ve been willing to tell me, that was very much the plan. Until I intervened. I did have another thought about how to keep Miss Wexler out of Lucian Lamprey’s grasp.”

“Oh?”

“Elspeth Arella can hand Lamprey a thief and no one will care less. If she tried to hand over an adventurer, though...”

“You want to make this girl an adventurer?”

“Why not? She a lot more ready for it than I was. She’s probably more ready than I am now. I’ve pooled together money enough that I can afford some low-rarity essences at auction. There’s one in a few days, and hoping the absentees let me get a good price.”

“Finding the essences is not the largest obstacle to that course of action.”

“But it an obstacle. You go through walls one at a time, Mr Bahadir.”

“You mean *over* walls.”

“I use my words with care, Mr Bahadir.

Emir laughed.

“You certainly run full-speed at a problem, Mr Asano. The perspective of youth.”

At a glance, Emir didn't look to be more than thirty years old. There was an agelessness to him, however, that Jason had seen to a lesser degree in Danielle Geller and Thalia Mercer. Most of Greenstone's other silver-rankers showed more of their age.

"I would hold off on that auction," Emir suggested. "With patience, opportunity may find you."

"That's right," Jason said, remembering something. "Farrah told me not to rush to pick up my last awakening stones. I got the impression it was something to do with what sent them here in the first place, but they wouldn't tell me more. I assume that's why you're here as well."

"Indeed I am. I've been looking for something for some time, across seas and continents. It's what I do. People know that something exists, somewhere, and they pay me to find it. And they pay well. Usually it's long-time gold or even diamond-rankers. The interests of those who live for centuries are far-reaching, sophisticated and esoteric."

"You work for diamond rankers?"

"I do. Not many people have met so many as I, let alone be given the chance to perform a service. They pay in more exotic currency than mundane coins."

"Like castles made out of clouds?"

"Exactly like that. You know, Mr Asano, if your attempts to convince people to kill you don't pan out, I think I can find some work for you, once you rank up once or twice."

"I'm not sure I'm willing to wait around for months while you check false leads. Rufus and his team are convinced what you're looking for is here. Presumably somewhere more intact than that complex out in the swamps."

"Yes, it was disappointingly empty of content. "Did you happen to take anything?"

"We took some combat dummy parts. My friend wanted to try and reassemble them."

"Did he?"

"Not yet. So what is this mysterious event you have coming up? Another complex, like I found, but more intact? I imagine going untouched for centuries would mean a good chance at essences and the like, with no one wandering through to nab them. Clive said we were unlucky not to find any in our find."

"I really shouldn't say more at this point, but you are very much on the right track. There are some unusual nuances to the exploration that mean I will require local assistance, which should be lucrative for everyone involved. From what I've been able to put together, anyway."

"Tantalising," Jason said. "You're certain I can't tease more out of you?"

“I’ve said more than I should already. After all, don’t they say the anticipation is better than the meal?”

“Only if all the cooks they know are terrible,” Jason said.

One of Emir’s staff approached them. From Jason’s limited experience, Emir’s people were an eclectic and casual bunch, but that did not extend to his chief of staff, Constance. The silver-ranker was Emir’s right hand, and exuded professionalism each time Jason encountered her.

“Sir. Elspeth Arella is at the entrance and has asked to see you.”

“She’s here personally? Not a messenger?”

“In person, sir, yes.”

“I’ll be right down, then.”

Constance nodded and left, Emir wistfully watching her depart.

“I’m rather desperately in love with that woman,” he said wistfully. “She wants nothing to do with me, of course. She’s seen me at my worst.”

“She’s aware of your affections?”

“Oh, yes.”

“She’s still willing to work for you, which is a good sign. I imagine she would have no problem making her way in the world outside of your employ.”

“Very much so; I have no idea why she stays with me. Except for the pay. And the travel. And the accommodations.”

He sighed.

“I’d best go see to the branch director,” he said. “Care to come along? You haven’t seen her since before you absconded here, have you?”

“I haven’t,” Jason said. “I don’t see the problem with tagging along.”

Sophie and Belinda were in an opulent, two-bedroom guest suite. The entire wall in front of them had turned into mist allowing them to look out over the ocean as they relaxed in plush cloud chairs.

“I don’t understand what’s happening anymore,” Belinda said. “Those cloud beds. I’ve never slept like that in my life. A week ago we were wondering if we’d still be alive right now, and look at this.”

“It’s nice,” Sophie said, “but what is Asano’s goal? What does he get out of bringing us here?”

“Maybe he really is just trying to help us,” Belinda said, drawing a flat look from Sophie.

“Yeah,” Belinda said. “It sounded stupid as I was saying it.”

Constance was waiting for Emir and Jason at the palace exit that connected to the shore by a cloud path. Emir matched across the walkway with Constance and Jason flanking him. Elspeth Arella was waiting on shore, alone.

“If your goal is to convince me to disgorge my guests,” Emir said without preamble, “then I’m afraid you’re wasting your time.”

“That can wait,” Arella said, not sparing Jason so much as a glance. “The expedition your fellow Vitesse adventurers are on. There’s been a problem.”

“What kind of problem?” Emir asked.

“Less than an hours ago, its members started dying. All we have is their tracking stones, so we don’t know anything else, but we’ve lost a silver ranker, multiple bronze-rankers and a slew of irons. Everyone we could use to send support in time is already on the expedition, so I’m here to ask if you or your people can help.”

Emir frowned unhappily, Jason matching his expression.

“Constance?” Emir asked.

“Hester has been to a number of areas in the region. I can see how close she can get us.”

“Do it, and ready the field team,” Emir ordered. The usual undertone of casual amusement absent from his voice. Constance immediately marched back toward the palace.

“I want to be part of this,” Jason said.

“You don’t have the strength,” Emir said. “Protecting you would cost us more than having you would help.”

“I know an alchemist with a stockpile of medical supplies and connections with the Healer. We could set up a recovery station outside the astral space while you go in and get them.”

Emir gave Jason an assessing look, then nodded.

“How fast can you get things together?”

“I can lend him some Adventure Society authority to speed things along,” Arella said. “I’ll have your friend Vincent meet you.”

“He still has a job?”

“He does today.”

Chaos reigned as the expedition campsite was attacked. There were very few living people amongst the attackers, all of whom were silver or bronze rank. Their features couldn't be seen under sandy-coloured robes, not even race. Only their auras gave away their nature as living beings.

The bulk of the enemy force were construct creatures that varied wildly varying in design. There were creatures like wooden puppets, awkward but numerous. Lumbering, stone golems walked amongst them, as much as two or three times the size of a person. There were strange creatures made of complicated, interconnecting parts. Some were the size and shape of people, others were more animal like, sometimes serving as mounts for the robed people. Behind them all was a towering behemoth of stone and metal; a ten metre tall, spider shaped, steel behemoth. It apparently had been held back so as not to alert the camp before the surprise attack. As such, it was still making its way forward from a distance.

Danielle quickly discovered there was no ordering the chaos. All she could do was find key people and try to direct them where they were needed most. In between, she stepped onto the field herself. She wanted to go after the robe-wearers she assumed were controlling the construct army, but too many people needed help against the artificial horde.

She paced herself, knowing her own limits. In a short fight, she was confident against any opponent, but her powerful abilities would exhaust her mana quickly. Aside from conjuring her dimension blade, she relied on skills and silver-rank attributes to mow through weaker enemies. She saved her most exhausting powers for critical moments, when the difference was life and death.

Around the battlefield, the more capable adventurers had reached similar conclusions to Danielle and were doing their best to help the others. Those that knew their abilities well and how to use them picked their targets accordingly. Thalia Mercer ploughed through crowds of constructs like a bowling ball, enemies bouncing away without slowing her down. She focused on the golems, which were big, slow and either bronze or silver rank. The bronze ones barely slowed her down, exploding into stone shrapnel as she literally smashed through them with shoulder charges. For the silvers, three times her height or more, she would rip off a limb and break the rest of the body apart by using it as a club.

Farrah and Gary had recruited Beth Cavendish and her team. Farrah had encased herself in obsidian armour and conjured a huge, obsidian sword. The blade was not a blade at all, but a pillar of jagged segments, like horrible teeth. The segments could break up and whip around on a cord of glowing magma. She swept it around, burning and

breaking apart the constructs. Mixing in devastating lava spells, she used her abilities to create space for weaker expedition members to fall back.

Into that space, walls of metal and stone rose out of the ground to form barricades. This was the combined efforts of Gary and Hudson, the human front-liner who was almost as large as Gary. The other members of Beth's team cleaned up any loose ends while Beth used spell after spell to keep feeding mana to Farrah. Her potent abilities were costly and hard to maintain as the battle dragged on, while Beth desperately replenished her as fast as she could.

Rufus, in the meantime, was flickering through the enemy like a ghost. He appeared and disappeared in rapid succession, moving unhindered. In his hand was a silver sword, under which constructs fell as he passed. These were simple humanoid forms, mostly wood on a metal frame. They were essentially combat dummies without the safety features. These were only incidental targets, however. His primary targets were the less common construct creatures, which were many and varied. They were larger than the humanoid, for the most part, and had been built to mimic various animals and monsters. As well as larger and tougher than their wooden, humanoid brethren, they were also faster and smarter. Where the others shuffled along with zombie-like shambling as they sought out living enemies, their forms very much followed function.

Rufus was tracking a specific one; a giant tiger made of intricate steel cogs. The bronze-rank clockwork cat was faster than its simpler brethren, wreaking havoc amongst the expedition's panicking iron-rankers, even claiming some of the bronze.

Rufus stopped his rapid, vanishing run. He dropped the conjured silver sword and a golden one appeared in its place. The cat locked its unliving gaze on him and launched into a high pounce. Its speed, so terrifying to the iron-rankers, was as good as standing still to Rufus.

As Rufus activated his speed of light power, the world seemed to freeze in time around him. The creature was stuck mid-pounce, hovering in the air. The power only afforded Rufus two seconds of accelerated time and he wasted none of it. He ran under the creature, pushing his peak, bronze-rank reflexes to the limit as he lashed out four times with his golden sword. Every movement left a trail of golden light in his wake.

Rufus returned to the normal passage of time and the cat was once again hurtling to the spot Rufus had just disappeared from. The golden trail showed every movement he had made in accelerated time, but it did the cat no good. It landed, helpless on the ground, each of its limbs cleanly severed. The severed limbs all glowed with golden heat where Rufus' sword had passed through.

The creature landed helpless on the ground, limbs scattered around. Rufus plunged his sword into its head, sinking it to the hilt. Then he ran the sword down the length of its body, leaving a trail of hot metal as he sliced it clean in half. He left his sword buried in the clockwork cat, conjuring a new silver one and vanishing.

Danielle kept an eye on the battlefield as a whole. They weren't turning the fight but their key people were sending the unintelligent automatons in to an increasing state of disarray. It was enough that she could start organising a withdrawal. In one corner of the battle, some of her people had erected barricades she could use as a launch point for the retreat. The trick would be holding the rest of the line as she wrangled those behind it. She spread out her aura senses, looking for the expedition leaders she would need to make it happen.

Chapter 109: The Tyranny of Rank

The retreat was going worse than Danielle had hoped, but better than she feared. The iron rankers had been pulled back behind the bronze and silver-rankers holding the line. Luckily, the other side had only a few essence users, their number made up mostly of constructs. The artificial creatures were not the match of an equal-rank essence user, but there were so many as to make up the difference. The enemy essence users were also reluctant to risk themselves by engaging directly, which helped Danielle's attempts to pull circumstances under her control.

They were not out of danger as the enemy continued to press, but the constructs were paying for their aggression. Pushing mindlessly against the increasingly-ordered withdrawal formation, they were being rapidly ground up. They were unrelenting, however, the unliving constructs having no morale to lose. There was not a lot of open space in the rainforest, but a battle line had managed to form in the now-destroyed remains of the expedition camp, which had been cleared of trees using essence abilities. That made for a relatively open field in which the defence was holding, while the rest of the expedition retreated into the tree line.

The battlefield situation was slowly shifting. The initial attack had sown chaos and death amongst the adventurers, most of their casualties coming in those early minutes. The battle slowly started to shift as the strongest adventurers came to the fore and the expedition leadership managed to give the defences some semblance of order. Once a rough-but-definite battle line was established, the construct creatures were being ground to pieces against it.

The rescue expedition formed up in the marshalling yard. Emir gave out directions, breaking the group into an incursion team and a support team. After that, he directed one of his people, a woman named Hester, to open a portal. She traced a circle in the air which started shimmering, revealing an image of a city on the far side. Emir stepped through with only a handful of others before the portal collapsed.

Hester was the closest Jason had seen to another Asiatic person in this world. He chatted with her as they waited for her portal ability to become available again. She told him she could only open the portal to places she had previously visited, which was normal for long-range teleport abilities. The closest place to the aperture the expedition had travelled was a city to the north called Boko.

The first task of the expedition had been to return the Ustei to the northern territories in their monstrous sand barge. The city of Boko was where Adventure Society decided to return the Ustei slaves, along with any women and children that had wanted out of the tribe. Many had been seized from small communities in the region in the first place.

The time between uses for Hester's power was based on range. At the distance between Greenstone and Boko, it would be available again after an hour, one of several limitations. The more powerful the people going through the portal, the fewer people could use it before it collapsed. Hester was silver rank, but her portal ability had already reached gold. This was the only reason her portal could transmit the gold-ranked Emir at all.

Emir and the silver-rankers that had gone through first would spend the hour requisitioning vehicles from the local Magic Society branch. Everyone else would go through the second portal Hester raised, including the silver and bronze-rankers Arella had rounded up. Unlike the initial expedition, these were the best Greenstone had left to offer, the top people from every family. They were all ready to go and rescue their family members, with no shirking or hesitation among them.

The support team included Jory, a number of priests from the church of the healer, plus various other volunteers with healing abilities. Rounding out the numbers were Adventure Society functionaries and officials going along to provide general support and assistance. Unless there were a lot of afflictions going around, that would be Jason's role as well.

The defensive formation of the expedition's retreating forces was built around key people who served as anchors for the less powerful. Silver-rankers had arrayed themselves against the strongest opponents but there were not enough silver-rankers to go around. The rest of the line had to make do with groups of more powerful bronze-rankers. One such location had Farrah, Rufus and Gary working in synergy to keep the enemy at bay as other adventurers withdrew. Farrah wreaked havoc on the main mass of the enemy, while Gary and Rufus intercepted the more powerful threats trying to stop her. Farrah had conjured for herself obsidian armour that glowed with internal heat. Gary conjured something similar, made of iron, becoming an immovable bulwark. Rufus was the unstoppable force to Gary's immovable object, dancing around stalled enemies as his golden sword carved through them.

The enemy leadership had thus far remained at a secure distance, riding their strange construct mounts and hidden under hooded robes. Finally, they acted as the battlefield conditions started to shift. They simultaneously leapt into the fray, striking out at

crucial points in the defensive line. The enemy leaders were all bronze and silver-rankers and their intervention pressured several critical points in the line.

A figure covered in robes moved on Farrah. Rufus saw it coming, gesturing at Gary and they rushed to intercept. It had a silver rank aura and its robes were filled with a strange bulk. Its movements were strange, its arms hanging limply at its sides. It lunged forward with a kick, Gary stepping up to intervene. He had a huge hammer in one hand and a shield in the other, which he raised in front of him.

Expertly, Gary angled his shield to deflect most of the kick's force. In spite of his huge strength, he was still sent stumbling backwards with a large dent in his shield. Gary's speed and strength were at the very peak of what a bronze-ranker could achieve, being the equal of most low-ranker silvers. Their enemy was as high in silver as Gary and Rufus were in bronze, so even Gary was heavily overmatched.

Rufus moved in to attack, quickly recognising that the arms hanging at its sides seemed to be crippled. It fought with kicks alone, moving and spinning with a speed bordering on gold-rank. Kicks alone were not an efficient means of fighting, however, and as Gary came back to the fore they teamed up to attack.

As they battled the silver-ranker, Farrah was hard at work holding the line. The adventurers around them were bronze and not as strong as her and her companions. They did not make up for holding the line in place of Gary and Rufus, giving the pair a wide berth as they battled the silver.

The robed enemy was being pushed by Gary and Rufus, largely due to using neither essence abilities nor its arms. Their attacks seemed to have little impact, however, as the bulk in the robes was apparently due to some kind of armour. It seemed to shrug off every attack that landed.

There was a brief balance, Gary and Rufus with all their abilities against the robed figure that only kicked. That balance was abruptly broken with a powerful kick getting past Gary's shield and landing square on the torso of his heavy armour. The armour deformed into his chest as he was sent tumbling across the ground, ribs shattered. Only his bronze-rank toughness as his heavy armour kept him alive, but he wasn't getting back up.

When their turn came, Jason and Jory walked up to the portal. They glanced at each other and stepped through. There was a rushing sensation that came with moving through the portal that felt just like his teleport ability. After they emerged, Jory staggered off and fell to his knees, throwing up. Looking around, Jason saw that Jory wasn't alone; many people had been unsettled by it. Jason noticed others that, like him, were unaffected, and

most of them were members of the celestine race. He remembered that his astral affinity racial gift was one he shared with celestines, which apparently gave a tolerance for teleporting.

The city of Boko reminded Jason of Old City, with plenty of desert stone in evidence. The air was drier here, without the proximity of the delta and the ocean; just breathing was drying out his mouth. He didn't have time to look around though, as there was work to be done. Emir had used his hour head start effectively, leaving sand skimmers waiting to carry them into the desert.

Rufus was now facing the silver-ranker alone. He didn't have Gary's reflexes but his skill was a level above their enemy. The robed figure followed the kick to Gary with one aimed at Rufus, who read the move in time to narrowly avoid it.

Rufus used his speed of light power, one of his strongest trump cards. Everything appeared to freeze around him, even his incredibly fast enemy. In this brief moment of grace, he lashed out multiple times against the robed figure. Even with his enemy at a standstill, Rufus' golden sword had little impact on the armour hidden under the enemy's bulky robes. Even a strike straight to the head bounced off, eerily without a clang in the time outside of time. His power lasted only a scant pair of seconds, Rufus inwardly cursing as it was wasted on cutting holes in the enemy's robe.

Time started moving at normal speed once again. The robes were torn and burned by Rufus' glowing golden sword, the rents revealing some kind of metal underneath. The remains of the robes were suddenly shredded as something burst from within, giving Rufus his first look at his attacker's true form.

The protection Rufus' blade had struck was not external armour, but metal grafted directly into flesh. Steel pushed into skin, heavy bolts using bones for anchor points. It was an abomination of living tissue and cold steel; even its head had plates bolted into the skull. Barely any flesh was visible under all the metal, just the jaw and some patches around the joints. There wasn't even enough living flesh to tell if it was a man or a woman.

There were four, wholly artificial arms emerging from its back. Long and inhuman, they were articulated at multiple points and were crafted from razor-sharp metal. They ended in oversized hands, each finger tapered to a point like a cluster of spearheads. The arms had been wrapped around the enemy's body, the source of the bulk under its robes. It was releasing these arms that had torn the robes asunder. The enemy's natural arms continued to hang limply as their metal equivalents flexed powerfully before stabbing out like spears.

Rank for rank, the only person who could match Rufus' skill on the battlefield was possibly Danielle Geller. Rufus' enemy certainly couldn't, but they were not rank for rank. Now the enemy had given up on hiding its true form, its speed and strength were backed up by powerful abilities and its uncanny metal arms. Rufus' skill allowed him to barely hold on in the face of a suddenly more powerful enemy but every moment was a desperate scramble to stay alive.

It was a clash of unsurpassed skill and overwhelming power. Perfectly executed attacks met defences that were no more than adequate, but so powerful that they were up to the task, regardless. What little damage Rufus manage to inflict was quickly guarded by a conjured metal shield. It only occupied one arm, leaving three to attack. The enemy's other abilities could rapidly repair the grafted armour, or even heal when Rufus' blade dug into flesh.

Like most humans, many of Rufus' abilities were special attacks. He used all his skills to maximise their effectiveness, every trick he had. Feinting to land an attack on a blind spot; moving to expose a weakness. The unprecedented threat drew out every scrap of capability. If their advancement as essence users were closer, the bizarre foe would have been utterly outclassed but this was not the case. There was no escaping the tyranny of rank.

As Rufus chained each attack into the next, the enemy was counterattacking. Its essence powers allowed it to transmute the arms into other forms, allowing for its own special attacks. It began by changing them into lance-like weapons for simple but powerful attacks. Rufus was able to predict the linear attacks and effectively dodge. It changed to ball-and-chain weapons but Rufus likewise anticipated their movement. Their weakness was the recovery time after attacks, which Rufus baited out before ducking out of range, then came back to counter.

The enemy changed tack again, moving back itself when Rufus was pulling away. Its arms became needle launchers spitting streams of tiny but deadly needles at him and forcing him to close in again. As he did, the arms became razor whips that slashed about wildly. They weren't as powerful at the ball and chain weapons but were relentless and unpredictable.

Every moment of the battle, Rufus was running on a knife-edge. Even glancing blows from his more powerful enemy meant serious damage and he was being ravaged by the increasingly tricky attacks. He was forced to stay close or even more needles would pincushion him, but that left him open to the lacerating whips, now dripping with his blood.

It was the ground under his feet that finally betrayed him. The rainforest of the astral space was full of wet ground, churned into mud by first the expedition camp and then the battle. Rufus slipped, just slightly but he had been fighting with no margin of error. A metal arm transformed into a blade and slashed upwards, and severing Rufus' sword arm. Stumbling in shock, Rufus was done. Another kick launched him away like Gary, but even in that state, his training-honed instincts kicked in. He threw himself to cushion the blow, which saved his life but only barely. Crippled and near dead, he was sent tumbling helplessly through the mud.

Chapter 110: Help Arrives

Emir and his people had already left the city by the time Jason and the others arrived. They were travelling over the desert on sand skimmers, although the desert was more rocks than sand. Once they reached the aperture to the astral space, they could use the tracking stones they brought with them to find the group quickly. They had every tracking stone from every member of the expedition packed into a dimensional bag.

It would take time to cross the desert and reach the aperture to the astral space, but Emir had a trump card. One of his people specialised in magical tools and could periodically push their skimmers to speeds well beyond their normal capability. The whole vehicle vibrated under him as it raced at a pace it was never designed for, but Emir was unfazed. All that concerned him was arriving in time.

Not every adventurer had managed to join up with the main formation as it withdrew. Whole teams had been cut off from the main force, isolated individuals falling quickly. Those that managed to remain in groups fared better but most paid a price in blood for their escape.

Humphrey was with Phoebe Geller, her brother Rick and his team. They were fighting their way out through a hell of magical automatons stained red with the blood of adventurers. Beset from all sides, Humphrey's huge sword carved the team a path. The big man, Jonah, bore the brunt of the enemy's attacks at the rear. Phoebe and Rick held the flanks, completing the cordon around the twin elf sisters. Just as it seemed like they were making progress, a new wave of construct monsters appeared and started moving in.

While Rufus and Gary were tied up with the silver-ranker, Farrah had been fending off every other enemy. Without their support, she was being pushed to the edge. Barely holding on against the encroaching horde, there was now nothing between her and the abomination.

On top of everything else, she was running low on mana. Dealing with the press of enemies had left her exhausted at the worst possible time. She was reduced to relying on her heavy armour and sword-whip, neither of which were a match for the abomination now bearing down on her.

The retreating forces reeled from the impact of the enemy leadership entering the fray. They had leapt from the strange constructs they rode as mounts and moved forward to attack the defensive line.

Danielle rushed around barking orders, personally intervening as needed. The line buckled in places, but was yet to breach. Spotting one of the silver-rank leaders, Danielle dove into the melee personally. She fought with a weapon conjured from her dimension essence called dimensional blade. It looked like a sword made of black lightning, limned in silver. It hissed and sizzled, the blade wild and flickering. There was no weight to it but it could cut through almost anything and caused destructive harm to anything it touched.

Quicker than lightning she launched a sneak attack, putting the robed figure onto the back foot. The enemy reacted by bursting out of its robes to reveal a hideously monstrous form.

The bulk of the construct army were similar to magical combat dummies; segmented section of limbs, head and torso, threaded onto a skeletal metal frame. Casting aside its robe, the enemy was revealed to be similar to such a dummy but with a horrifying difference. Instead of limbs of wood or stone, each wholly separate segment – hands, feet, arms, legs head – were all made of living flesh. Like a dummy, the limbs were carried on a human-like skeleton of steel rather than bone. Danielle only paused for a moment at the disgusting visage before resuming her attack.

They couldn't take the skimmers through the aperture, so once they arrived in the astral space, Emir and his people were on foot. Not all had the movement abilities to keep pace with Emir, but he didn't wait. Only two of his people, specialised in mobility, were able to keep up as they dashed in the direction the tracking stones were pointing them. They quickly discovered they were on some kind of island chain, but the water didn't slow them down. On the contrary, they moved faster over the calm water than the crowded terrain of the tropical islands.

Danielle drove the freakish enemy into retreat but she chose not to follow. The fight had drawn her attention from the larger battle and she needed to stop and reassess. Leaping high in the air, she used one of her time powers to slow herself down, floating as she scanned battlefield.

She looked for potential weak points in their formation, and people she could send to reinforce them. On a distant flank she spotted a second bizarre silver-ranker overwhelming

Rufus. It was another disgusting fusion of metal and flesh, half construct creature and half living being.

Even as she turned her full attention to the action, Rufus slipped and the fight was over. His arm was severed and his opponent kicked him away. Seeing the abomination turn to Farrah, Danielle teleported directly into the fray.

In the chaos of battle, Thadwick and his two offsidiers, Neil and Dustin, had been separated from the main force. Dustin had used his powers to protect them while Neil had kept them alive with his healing. Thadwick had been blasting powers blindly into the enemy at range, exhausting his mana.

“Replenish me,” Thadwick demanded.

“You can’t just keep throwing attacks into the pack,” Neil said. “We have to find a way to rejoin the group, not draw more enemy attention.”

Thadwick’s essences were lightning, wind, potent and storm, and he had used a preponderance of awakening stones of the magus to get more spells than the human affinity for special attacks would normally produce. His essence powers were all simple, straightforward and powerful, with an attendant high mana cost. What they were not was subtle.

Thadwick looked around, only now realised how isolated they were, in spite of warnings the others had given him.

“You need to hold them off so I can get back,” he told the other two, immediately running away from the enemy.

Neil and Dustin looked at each other.

“Dusty, did he just...?”

“Yeah, he did.”

“I am so done with that little turd.”

Danielle had seen Jason fighting in her mirage arena enough to envy the freedom with which he teleported. Even after years using her own ability, there was still a moment of disorientation on arrival. That moment proved to be everything as she arrived close to Farrah and the monstrous silver-ranker attacking her. That fleeting confusion was all too costly as four metal arms pierced into Farrah’s body like spears. Neither Farrah’s blade nor her armour were enough to block them, one of which buried itself in her head. Farrah’s corpse was still falling to the ground as Danielle recovered and attacked.

The four arms were fast, but like her enemy, Danielle was at the peak of silver rank. Her confluence essence was time and everything seemed to slow around her as her dimensional blade cut into her enemy again and again. It was in many ways a reflection of Rufus' fight. She was more skilled than her enemy and used expert technique to strike out with her conjured blade. She even had a power, similar to the one Rufus possessed, to briefly accelerate to a so fast where the world around her seemed frozen.

The difference between her fight and Rufus' was that she was not overpowered by the enemy. Instead of bounding off seemingly impervious metal, her weapon left savage gouges in steel and flesh both. She did not have to compensate for lesser strength and speed, instead easily outpacing her enemy. When she was struck, the injuries were much less dangerous to her silver-rank armour and toughness.

Suddenly she seemed to make a mistake, overextending as she lunged for her opponent's main body and leaving an opening for all four arms to lance into her body. It did not miss the brief but crucial chance, metal limbs piercing through her armour. Unexpectedly, they stopped dead as they hit her flesh, like they had struck an impervious wall. The enemy realised it had been baited even as she placed her hand on its chest. The wounds that it should have inflicted on her were instead unleashed on its own body by her power.

Heavily injured, the silver-ranker scrambled to escape. Danielle wanted to give chase but in the absence of Farrah, enemies were encroaching. No silver-ranker would go down easy and she didn't have time to press the fight so she reluctantly allowed it to flee. She moved to hold the line, calling for more people to assist. Once things had stabilised, she took stock. Gary was on his feet again but barely, staggering forward with a face full of fury. Danielle picked up Rufus' severed arm and pushed it into his chest.

"Rufus needs you now," she said firmly. "Farrah is past help."

Gary's face crumbled in agony and for a moment it looked like he would try and shove past her, but instead he nodded and turned to Rufus. Rufus was still on the ground, disoriented and in shock. His eyes darted back and forth unfocused, his face confused. Still holding the severed arm, Gary dismissed his conjured armour, picked Rufus up and headed for the backlines. He tried to yell for a healer but it came as a loud croak, his own torso having been savagely pummelled.

People were coming in to hold the line and the enemy leadership was pulling back. Whether from an unwillingness to lose all their constructs or from almost losing part of their leadership, it was enough that they started withdrawing from the engagement. Danielle retrieved Farrah's body, whose conjured armour had vanished on her death. Under the

feet of swarming constructs it had mangled unrecognisably and she sealed it away in an Adventure Society casket, which she then placed into her storage space.

Danielle wasn't happy with their position, having the water at their back. Organisation was still a mess, certainly beyond organising a crossing between islands under battle conditions. The advantage was that the beach was an open enough space to regroup and take stock. The only other open area was cleared ground of the camp, which they had paid such a price to escape from. They had lost another silver-ranker and some of the bronze, but most of those left were solid. The major loss was Farrah. Not only had she been a massive factor in the large-scale combat, but her companions were almost as valuable and her loss had gutted their morale.

The group still had their silver-rank healer, so reattaching Rufus' arm hadn't been a problem. The brutal kick that had sent him out of combat had ended up requiring more healing. Aside from the tiredness that came with the extensive healing, Rufus and Gary were physically good as new. Emotionally, they were wrecked, especially Rufus. Left sitting in the sand with other recovering adventurers, he just stared into space, saying nothing. Gary paced back and forth next to him; a volcano that could erupt at any moment.

The eruption, however, came from elsewhere. Thalia Mercer, who Danielle needed calm and collected, was exploding on a pair of iron-rankers.

"YOU LEFT HIM OUT THERE ALONE?"

"We didn't leave anyone," Neil said, standing up to Thalia's fury. "Your son told us to hold them back while he was already running for it. It's not our fault your..."

Thadwick's other lackey thumped Neil on the arm to shut him up. Venting a decade of frustration at that moment would likely get them both killed by Thadwick's furious mother. It looked like it might happen anyway until Danielle arrived, placing herself between Thalia and the pair.

"We need to go find him," Thalia told Danielle, the other pair vanishing from her consideration. Thalia regained some composure as she looked at her friend's face.

"I'm sorry," Danielle said, "but we're still taking stock. People who were isolated are still drifting in; he may well too. Sending more people out before we have headcounts is borrowing trouble when we already have a surplus."

"He's my son! If it were Humphrey still missing, would you be sending people out?"

"Humphrey is still missing," Danielle said, her face as hard as granite.

"Oh," Thalia said helplessly, after a lengthy pause.

"Did Cassandra come through alright?" Danielle asked.

“She’s taking a headcount of the family, right now.”

“I’m glad. I need your best right now, Thalia. Or at least your good enough, which is still better than most people’s best.”

Thalia nodded.

“Good. Now let’s start getting things under control.”

Humphrey eventually turned up, accompanied by Gabrielle and the brother-sister pairing of Rick and Phoebe Geller. The survivors of Rick’s team were with them, having lost two of their number. Henry Geller, their flame-wielding damage dealer, had died. Their big front-liner, Jonah, had held back the enemy to let the others escape, his ultimate fate unknown.

Emir and his people finally arrived. They were too late to intervene in the battle, but were a boost to the makeshift camp’s crippled morale. Once word passed that a gold-ranker had arrived to assist, hope was resparked in hearts full of fear. He alone was enough to prevent a repeat of the battle they had just escaped, and there were more silver-rankers on the way.

Emir met with Danielle, getting a rundown of events. There were still people unaccounted for, but the tracking stones in Emir’s possession allowed them to sort the missing from the dead. They organised teams to retrieve the living, with every recovery team having a silver-ranker for safety.

With the initial organisation done, Emir sought-out Rufus, Gary watching over him. Rufus’ blank eyes taking a moment to register Emir’s presence.

“I failed her,” Rufus said, his voice barely audible.

“No,” Emir said softly, moving to place a hand on his shoulder. “She died as well as any of us could ask. Comrades behind her, enemies in front of her and friends beside her.”

Chapter 111: Strange Star

Most of the ill-fated expedition was extracted back through the aperture that had been their entry point. On the other side was a recovery camp, ready and waiting. Only silver rankers and bronze-rankers stayed in the astral space, and not all of them.

Every member of the new, streamlined expedition had either arrived with Emir or been hand-picked by Danielle and Thalia. They drew back to the island that had their underwater aperture just offshore, using it as a staging point. As preparations were made to track down their missing people, a steady stream of departing expedition members waded into the water and through the aperture just below the surface. The tricky part was managing the people still unconscious after being healed from extreme injury. The adventurers with water powers were employed to see them through.

With the withdrawal from the astral space organised, the next priority was to retrieve the adventurers who had become separated from the group. Teams led by silver rankers set out, using tracking stones to find them. Only once that was done would they turn to finding and destroying the enemy.

With only the cream of the expedition remaining, bolstered by Emir's people, Danielle was confident of eradicating the construct army and its masters. Her greatest concern was actually finding them. The follow-up attack she had been fearful of never arrived, and the search teams hadn't run into anyone but missing expedition members.

"There's a problem," Emir said. He was in the command tent with Danielle and Thalia.

"You'll have to narrow that down," Danielle said without humour.

"We still have nineteen missing people are still alive, according to their tracking stones," Emir said. "The problem is that for five of them, their stone indicates they're still alive, but can't track them.

"Could they have lost their badges, or had them taken?" Thalia asked

"If they lost them, we'd still be able to track the badges. The best explanation we can hope for is that the astral space has regions that naturally mask tracking. I've seen it in astral spaces before, although they were all less stable than this one."

"Not unheard of," Danielle said.

"It could be racial gift evolution," Thalia said. "Our lost people certainly have the right conditions to trigger it."

"We know ability evolutions change an ability to meet immediate needs," Thalia said. "An ability that prevents them from being tracked would make sense."

“But five people, all getting skill evolutions at once, and all the same or similar abilities?” Danielle asked. “It would be great if that’s what happened and they’re all fine, but we can’t anticipate that being the case.”

“The alternatives get worse from there,” Emir said. “Something may have happened to them that changed their aura so much that they no longer match the aura imprint on their badges, which would break the tracking magic. Which would suggest the enemy found them and did something to them.”

“Who are the five?” Danielle asked.

Emir looked at Thalia with sympathy.

“I’m sorry, but they include Jonah Geller and Thadwick Mercer.”

Thalia’s face twisted but she kept herself under control.

“What are we going to do about it?” she asked.

“Once we have the ones we can track,” Danielle said, “we need to sweep this whole place anyway. The goal is still to find out what is happening to the astral space and stop it. If our people are still out there to find, we’ll find them.”

“And how long will that take?” Thalia asked.

“We’ve surveyed enough to know the astral space is only a fraction of the size of the world it’s attached to,” Danielle said. “We don’t leave until we retrieve all our people, living or dead.”

“Quite right,” Emir said. “And as it happens, my people are specialists at finding things over large areas that are often hidden with magic. Hope is by no means an outlandish choice.”

Thalia nodded.

“I want to hear as soon as we find anything”

“Of course.”

The support camp outside the aperture was an array of large tents set up near the aperture. The aperture was in a crevice in a rocky outcropping and people were coming out in a steady stream. On the astral space side, the healers were in triage mode, healing people up just enough to send them through the underwater aperture. The soaking wet adventures were then sorted into two groups. Those in need of further healing were taken to the recovery tents, while the rest were sent to the dormitory tents.

Vincent was in charge of the camp and had roped Jason in as his assistant. There wasn’t much call for Jason’s cleansing ability, just the occasional infection. Vincent was in

charge of making the actual decisions, with Jason's job being to sort out any problems with enacting them.

Jason's biggest responsibility was dealing with people who weren't happy with the arrangements and keep them from bothering Vincent. It was, Vincent claimed, the entire reason he chose Jason to assist him. Even after escaping the horrors of battle, there were some who felt the need to complain about the accommodations. These were the ones who never saw the frontline and were evacuated first.

"You expect me to stay in a tent with all these people?" a nobleman asked Jason.

"You were in a tent during the expedition," Jason said.

"A private magical tent! This is just a tarp with poles, and as for what you generously describe as beds..."

"Listen, mate, you've got three options. Option one is taking the accommodation and shutting your damn mouth. Option two is you sod off into the desert and find your own way home. Option three is you hang about making a nuisance of yourself and your mouth gets shut for you."

"You think you can treat me like this? You have no idea who you're..."

"Fellas!" Jason called out loudly, over the top of the nobleman. "We've got another option three."

A pair of adventurers came into the tent, their bronze-rank auras visibly impacting the nobleman, who they led away. After a very thorough talking to, he would be placed with the other troublemakers in an isolated group of tents with people watching over them.

Rufus and Gary were sent back with the other bronze-rankers Danielle deemed unreliable. Gary gave a brief explanation of Farrah's absence before Jason sent the pair to the healers for further treatment. Afterwards Jason was sleepwalking through his duties in a daze until Vincent had someone take his place. Suddenly free, Jason went looking for Gary and Rufus.

He found them in the dormitory tents, having been sent there after their healing was completed. Rufus sitting on a cot bunk, staring blankly into nowhere. He wasn't alone. Everyone in that tent had lost friends or family. It was a cluster of misery and shock.

Jason sat next to Rufus, not saying a word as Gary told the story in detail. Afterward, the three sat in silence for a long time, other adventurers bustling around them. Finally, Jason stood up, patted Rufus on the shoulder on shoulder and went back to work.

Emir and his people quickly rounded up the scattered adventurers. Even the five who couldn't be tracked were recovered in short order, found so badly injured that their auras barely registered, to even silver-rank senses. The search teams stumbled across all five while tracking the others.

Emir watched Thalia fussing over Thadwick. He was still unconscious after being healed and she was arranging Cassandra to take him back through the portal. Walking back into the command tent, Danielle was already present. There was a troubled frown on her face.

"Something the matter?" Emir asked. "Beyond the obvious, I mean."

"It was too easy," Danielle said. "Our search teams found all five without even looking. That makes the back of my neck itch."

"You think they were left for us?" Emir asked.

"How often does an adventurer's aura shift so much their tracker doesn't work?"

"I don't know," Emir said. "I've heard of it happening after intense trauma, and you saw the condition they were in."

"Have you seen it before?" Danielle asked.

"No."

"You haven't seen it once, and we have five at the same time?"

"It does sound suspicious when you say it out loud. We can have the Magic Society examine them."

"It won't be that easy," Danielle said. "Their families will resist. If something has been done to them, their families will want to quietly handle it. Letting the Magic Society look into it takes control out of their hands."

"That's incredibly short-sighted," Emir said.

"Welcome to the politics of Greenstone."

"What about the one from your family?"

"Once we return to Greenstone I'll use a speaking chamber to talk to his parents. They should have no priority beyond what's best for their son. The problem is the director of Greenstone's Magic Society branch. He'll definitely come down on the side of the families, to the point of refusing to have any of them examined."

"That's not good."

"No," Danielle said. "We may have to have Jonah examined ourselves and go from there."

“I have trouble believing people would choose ignorance. I would have thought they would want to know if something has been done to their family members. Perhaps we can convince them of that.”

“Have you not met people?” Danielle asked. “We love choosing ignorance. This is not the time to start a fight over it. Right now, everyone has lost people. It won’t pay to poke at raw wounds.”

“Then the best we can do for now is keep an eye on them. In the meantime, we have more work to do.”

Danielle nodded. Their original task was to investigate what was going wrong with the astral space, and what they found inside made finding the truth all the more important. She had tasked Emir with fetching back the scattered adventurers while she reorganised the expedition. The group was pared-down to its best and reinforced by Emir’s people, all of whom were not only capable, but experienced in exploring unusual environments.

With the missing adventurers retrieved, there were now teams thoroughly sweeping the islands. They were finding regular traces of the enemy’s activities, brining back various magical paraphernalia from abandoned work sites. It was quickly becoming evident that their enemy had been occupying the astral space for months, if not years. After the battle with the expedition, however, all signs pointed to a very rapid withdrawal. Every site they found showed signs of immediate evacuation.

“Thank you for this,” Cassandra said, squeezing Jason’s hand. He had organised a separate tent for the five adventurers whose tracking had failed. They were all restored to health, but would not wake for some time.

“The least I can do,” he said, giving her a tired smile. “Not the reunion I was expecting.”

“I need to get back,” Cassandra told him. “There’s still work to do.”

He nodded, looking around the bustling camp. There were over a hundred people now, many of whom seemed to feel like they should be in charge of it. His early, stop-gap measures were being overrun by sheer numbers and he could no longer shield Vincent from the pressure.

“There’s work enough here, too,” he said.

“I heard about your friend,” she told him. “I didn’t know her well, but I’m sorry. Are you doing alright?”

“No, but are any of us? We all lost friends. I’ll see you again when this is all done.”

The edges were marked by a rainbow-coloured void of chaotic energy, radiating a powerful aura that gave even Emir pause. The astral space, while certainly vast, turned out to be only a fraction of the size of the desert. Even so, there were hundreds of islands, of which the teams could thoroughly search around a dozen each day.

The enemy had fled, leaving most of their constructed army to harry pursuing forces. There were also ordinary monsters to contend with, but neither posed a real threat to the powerful search teams.

The enemy leadership themselves fled through various apertures. The teams followed them through, usually finding they had caused chaos on the other side before vanishing into various areas of the desert. Not all managed to escape, however, and the teams managed to capture two of the enemy leaders. Like the others they had seen, under the robes they were horrifying fusions of steel and flesh. The two leaders gave up no information, suiciding in explosive fashion on being caught.

Emir increased his personal participation in the search, hoping his gold-rank power would let him take someone alive. He approached an enemy camp alone, his aura restrained as his senses spread out. It had been a major encampment, once, with cleared land and wooden huts. Now it was mostly deserted, Emir sensing only one living aura and a plethora of constructs.

Emir closed in on the camp through the thick forest, finally close enough to take a look. He saw the one robed figure packing tools into a dimensional bag, surrounded by artificial guardians. Watching from hiding, Emir was holding an open suppression collar in one hand and a conjured staff in the other. The staff had a black, stone shaft with golden script running down it and golden caps at each end.

He slammed the base of the staff into the ground and copies of it erupted from the ground under every construct creature. The iron-ranked constructs exploded into chunks at the sheer force, the bronze likewise destroyed at a blow. The silvers survived, but were tossed into the air and Emir was already moving. He vanished from the spot, leaving an illusory afterimage behind as he appeared next to the startled human. Emir had already dropped the staff and used both hands to snap the suppression collar around the human's neck.

Emir's concern was that suppression collars took a few moments to adapt to the wearer and suppress their powers. The human's hands shot up to pull the collar off, but Emir slapped his hands away. Emir could sense the affect on the enemy's aura as the man's powers were suppressed. The enemy sneered at Emir, lunging towards him as Emir sensed a silver-rank power suddenly rising up inside the man. It wasn't the man's own

power, but something inside him. Emir retreated in an instant, leaving another afterimage in his place.

Huge, crystalline spikes erupted from the man in every direction, greater in volume than the man's own body. They ripped him to shreds from the inside, leaving a bloody carcass draped over a strange star of jagged crystal.

A half-dozen damaged, silver-ranked constructs fell out of the air. Emir moved in a blur as he conjured his staff again and smashed them apart before moving to examine the dead man and the bloody sculpture that had emerged from him. He could sense the magic had faded, leaving an inert object for him to examine.

"That's not something you just come across on the street," he muttered to himself as he looked it over. As he did so, he was joined by Constance, his chief of staff.

"This is what happened with the other two," she told him.

"It wasn't his power," Emir said. "It was some kind of object inside him. If we manage to catch up to another one, we'll need some way to negate it."

Chapter 112: The Accumulation of a Life

While the search for answers continued in the astral space, the support camp was suddenly swarmed with bronze-rankers Danielle and Thalia deemed insufficiently reliable to participate. There was also a pair of silver-rankers, one of whom was named Gloria Phael. She had no interest in running the camp but didn't want a commoner in a position of authority, so she rallied the bronze rankers, ousted Vincent and installed her son in his place.

The administrative skills of the new camp leader left something to be desired and since Jason had stayed on as his assistant, he did his best to keep things running smoothly. This quickly proved infeasible as the new camp leader had little interest in doing, or even hearing about things. This was remedied by having Jason removed as well.

Left idle, Jason spent his time with Gary and Rufus, who was still barely moving. He would robotically eat a spirit coin when prompted by Gary, but never talked. Gary took Jason aside because they were running out of coins and needed clean clothes. Their possessions had all been stored in Farrah's storage space.

Jason went and found Vincent.

"That worthless, wet sack of nothing actually had me confined to the tent," Vincent complained.

"Are they enforcing that?" Jason asked.

"No, but its still humiliating."

"That doesn't matter," Jason said. "Gary and I need to do something, so we need you to keep an eye on Rufus."

Vincent had been giving Rufus his distance, at Gary's suggestion.

"Of course," Vincent said.

He and Gary went out into the desert, finding a flat space of red, rocky earth Jason had been keeping Farrah's body in his own storage space since she was brought out through the aperture. She was in a magical casket that would preserve her until she was returned to her family. Jason once had the sombre task of placing another adventurer in an identical casket, and now understood why friends and family were not the ones sent to recover a fallen adventurer.

Jason started laying out a ritual circle with salt, with Farrah's casket at the centre. Using the powdered cores of lesser monsters, he tested the circle, correcting it again and again.

"I keep messing it up," he said, voice catching.

"Take your time," Gary told him. It went unspoken that Jason could have extracted the items from Farrah's storage space by looting her body like a monster. They both knew it could be done, but neither man suggested such a defilement.

Still trying to get the circle right, Jason had to stop. His vision was swimming with tears as he remembered Farrah instructing him on his very first magic circle.

"I was just thinking about when we summoned my familiar," he said. "Remember how we snuck off the other side of the manor so Anisa wouldn't find us?"

Gary laughed, reminiscent mirth weighed down with sadness. After days of sombre reflection, the sound was strange and alien.

"You wouldn't tell us what it was, but we knew she wouldn't like it, coming from an apocalypse stone."

"Farrah walked me through the ritual circle. It was a complex one for my first time."

"You passed out again. You were constantly falling unconscious, back then."

"Getting hit in the head with a shovel will do that. I sometimes wonder if I don't have some lingering damage from all that cranial trauma."

"We've wondered that too," Gary said and they shared a sad smile.

Jason finished the circle and performed the ritual by reciting an incantation. Items from Farrah's dimensional space started appearing around her casket. By the time it was done, it formed a small hill of crates, boxes, bookshelves, cupboards, wardrobes, furniture and various loose items.

"I don't have room for all this in my inventory," Jason said. "Some of it won't fit at all. She had a banquet table in there?"

"How big an item can you fit?" Gary asked.

"About the size of a regular dining table. Maybe half the size of that great long thing. Who needs a banquet table on hand?"

"You'd be surprised," Gary said. "It doesn't matter if you can't fit everything. There are dimensional bags in here somewhere. The banquet table should fit into a bronze-rank one."

They started sorting through everything; the accumulation of a life. They found the dimensional bags, placing Gary's things in one and Rufus' in another. That was only a portion of the pile; the rest they started putting in the remaining bags.

Jason brushed his hand along the spines of books on one of several bookcases.

"She always wanted me to pay more attention to magical theory," he said.

"Take them," Gary said. "She'd want you to have them."

“You’re sure?”

“Just make sure you read them,” he instructed Jason. “You have no idea how often she complained that you wouldn’t learn magic properly. She saw so much potential in you.”

“I don’t know about that,” Jason said, “but I’ll try to live up to it.”

Returning to the support camp, Jason and Gary were heading for the large dormitory tent where they had left Rufus. As they drew closer, they heard a commotion coming from the tent and people evacuating it.

“MY SON ALMOST DIED BECAUSE YOU COULDN’T HOLD THE LINE!”

Gary and Jason went into the tent. Rufus was standing, his expressionless gaze on a man who had clutched the front of Rufus’ clothes in a fist. He was yelling invective at Rufus, blasting out his bronze-rank aura. Everyone else had either backed-off or left entirely.

“What good were you?” the man continued to shout in Rufus’ face. “You couldn’t even protect yourselves!”

“I do not like where this is going,” Gary said, stepping forward.

“Still nothing to say?” the man kept yelling. “That worthless friend of yours wasn’t worth the dirt her blood stained!”

Rufus’ expression remained blank, but a golden sword appeared in the hand at his side. Gary’s hand was faster and stronger, clamping down on Rufus’ arm and holding it in place. Gary’s other hand formed a fist, which crashed into the face of the yelling man without Gary so much as looking at him. His gaze was on Rufus, who looked back at him blankly.

“You dare?” the man asked disbelievingly from the floor. Gary turned to face him.

“Leave. Otherwise, I will let him kill you.”

“He wouldn’t dare!”

“Look at him and say that again,” Gary said, stepping aside while keeping a solid grip on Rufus’ arm. Rufus looked down at the man and the man looked back. What he saw in Rufus’ empty eyes unnerved him more than the sword in Rufus’ hand and he scrambled away, out of the tent.

After a brief discussion, Gary and Jason decided that the camp was no good for Rufus. Vincent wanted to stay behind and try and help the camp, futile as his efforts may be.

Jason had supplied himself for the desert and they set out from the camp in the early hours, shortly before sunrise. Their destination was Boko, where Jason had first arrived via Hester's portal. The support camp was in the middle of nowhere but Jason had the city on his map and there was no danger of getting lost. It would be a trek of days without a sand skimmer, but that was largely the point. Nothing but quiet, empty space.

Rufus followed along passively as they walked. It was reminiscent of their journey through the desert when they first met. After hours of walking in silence, Jason started talking about their first encounter. Trapped with Rufus, Gary and Farrah in that basement, then the sacrifice chamber. The terrifying spectacle of Farrah's volcano powers. After the tale had run its course, Gary started telling stories from before Jason had met the trio. He told about how they met while fighting a zombie plague that had wiped out a massive town. He talked of other adventures they had undertaken together. He spoke of how they champed at the bit under the supervision of one silver-ranker or another.

"We had little chance to control our own fates," Rufus said. His first words in days startling the others into stopping.

"We came out here to get away from that," Rufus continued, "yet she died under the command of silvers. Because she followed me."

"Because of you?" Gary growled, voice thundering. "That's the biggest load of crap I've ever heard. You think she followed you around like a lost dog? Am I your pet cat? We came out here to control our own fates; you just said it yourself. She chose to be here, just like you. She knew the risks of this life and she died protecting people, like a hero."

Gary marched up to Rufus and shoved him hard, sending him stumbling back and falling over. Rufus pushed himself up on his elbows, only to be shoved down again by an enormous foot. Rufus looked up at Gary, finally shaken out of his blank expression.

"If I hear you try and take her sacrifice away ever again," Gary growled, "I'll beat you halfway to death and then you and me will be done."

Gary lifted his foot off Rufus' chest and stormed off. Jason walked over and crouched next to Rufus, who lay on the hard ground with a shell-shocked expression. Jason looked down at Rufus, then over at Gary, marching on alone.

"We all lost her," Jason told Rufus. "You're not the only one who gets to mourn."

Jason stood up and followed after Gary.

Emir emerged from the aperture into a camp that was in chaos. The original neat rows of tents had been added to in haphazard fashion, poorly adapting to the influx of people from the expedition.

“What in the world are they doing out here?”

He marched over to the management tent, only to find that it was missing. He extended his senses, the low-level anger in his aura bringing out goose-bumps in people all over the camp. He wasn't sufficiently familiar with Vincent Trenslow to pick his aura and didn't sense Jason anywhere in the camp.

He made his way to the closest bronze rank aura, terrifying its owner as he demanded the location of the management tent. It had been moved from its central location to an isolated rise outside the camp that had nice views and didn't smell of people. Emir stormed inside, where he found some bronze-ranker with his feet up as he reclined, eating grapes. The man shivered as he felt a gold-rank aura pressing down on him, almost falling to the floor as he scrambled to his feet.

“Who are you?” Emir asked.

“Cassius Phael, Lord Bahadir.”

“I'm not an aristocrat, Phael. Where is Vincent Trenslow?”

“Who?”

“The person in charge of this camp!”

“I'm in charge of this camp.”

“Why? Where is the person that used to be in charge?”

“No idea. We saw him off.”

“Saw him off?”

“We couldn't let him tell nobles what to do. He was just some common filth.”

“Like me?”

Phael went white as milk.

“How did you end up in charge?” Emir asked.

“My mother told me to do it,” Phael said.

“Oh, dear gods. What about Asano?”

“Who?”

“Trenslow's assistant.”

“The mouthy one? We got rid of him too.”

“Did Asano say anything about the five people whose tracking was lost?”

“Right, yes,” Phael said. “I found out he had people watching them. Can you believe it? The families they come from and he had people spying! Obviously, I got rid of them and warned the families.”

Emir looked at the idiot incredulously, taking a slow, calming breath.

“Do you know why Asano didn't tell me about any of this?”

“He did try to go see you, but we stopped him. He was obviously just going to complain and toady, so we made sure he didn’t bother you.”

Emir ran a hand over his face.

“Suddenly I see the flaw in putting all the competent people on one side of the aperture and the rest on the other.”

“Sir?”

“Phael, where is Trensflow now?”

“I had to have him confined to one of the dormitory tents,” Phael said. “He kept coming in to make stupid suggestions. I’m the one in charge, now.”

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” Emir said, keeping himself under control as his voice audibly teetered at the edge of breaking into a yell. “You are going to find Trensflow and tell him, along with anyone who objects, that I have personally placed him in charge of this camp. Then, figure out how to stay out of my sight, because if I ever see you again, I might just slap you so hard it changes your religion. Do understand what I’ve just told you?”

“I think so, sir. My family worships Vineyard, if that helps. He’s subordinate to the god of revels.”

“Oh, dear gods. Look, just tell me where I can find him.”

“The god of revels?”

“Trensflow, you cretin!”

Rufus trailed behind Gary and Jason at a distance for the rest of the day, the pair occasionally glancing back to make sure he was still there. Once darkness came, Jason and Gary made camp. They set out aura-suppressing tents that would shield them from the senses of unintelligent monsters and placed a warming stone that saved them making a fire. The arid air rapidly cooled once the sun went down, and while any adventurer could withstand it, they would rather not. Gary especially, as his fur had a natural ability to diffuse heat while offering little insulation.

Sitting on blankets on either side of the cylindrical heat stone, they were eventually joined by Rufus. His formerly blank expression now looked tired and haunted. They sat in silence for a long time before Rufus unexpectedly spoke.

“Remember that little village in the eastern reaches?” he asked Gary.

Gary looked at Rufus in surprise.

“The one with the flour mill?”

Rufus nodded and Gary burst out laughing.

“Am I missing something?” Jason asked.

“There was this flour mill,” Gary said. Farrah wasn’t always so accurate with her unruly volcano powers and she blew up a flour mill. The explosion did kill the monster, though.”

“What kind of storytelling is that?” Rufus asked Gary. “You jumped right to the end.”

“If you want to tell it properly,” Gary said, “then tell it.”

“I will then, Rufus said. “This was a few years ago, when Farrah and I had just hit bronze. Gary had been bronze for a few years when we met him, but he’d been slacking off.”

“I was focusing on my forge-craft, not slacking off.”

“So he claims,” Rufus said. “The three of us took this contract, way out in the eastern reaches. It was a long way and there weren’t a lot of takers, but it was a low-magic zone and we could go without supervision, so we accepted the contract.”

“I thought you told me coming out here was your first chance to take contracts without a silver-ranker over your shoulder.”

“Well, there was this one instance,” Rufus said. “It didn’t go very well.”

“They made us go back and deliver a bunch of food,” Gary said, “on account of having blown-up their flour mill.”

“What did I just say about jumping to the end?” Rufus asked. “So, we set out for the eastern reaches, and the mission seemed plagued from the start. One of the heidels went lame in the middle of nowhere, and none of us were healers. That was when we found out that heidels don’t respond well to healing potions...”

Chapter 113: You Need to Work on Making Enemies

The cloud palace was not only the largest magic construction in Greenstone but also the most sophisticated. This was demonstrable in ways large and small, from its ability to take multiple forms to the amenities incorporated throughout the structure.

In Belinda and Sophie's guest suite, there were several cooler cabinets, each with a front of translucent mist. Belinda went to the one specifically for non-alcoholic beverages and reached directly through the veil, her hand feeling the chill. She retrieved a frosty pitcher of fruit punch and took it back to the terrace table where she and Sophie had been spending their idle days.

"This is so strange," she said, sitting down in a meltingly soft patio chair made of blue and white mist. "Did you ever expect to experience something like this?"

"No," Sophie said, taking the pitcher and pouring out drinks into crystal tumblers. "It scares me."

"You're wondering that if it's this good now, how wrong will it go later?"

"I am. I don't know what game Asano is playing or how he intends to use us."

"It can't be worse than handing us over to Silva or that Magic Society guy," Belinda said. "Look around. The director of the Adventure Society doesn't dare come get us. If this is the company Asano is keeping, what does he care about Silva or even the local Magic Society? What would he possibly need us for?"

"Lots of things. None of which are good for us."

"Jory thinks Asano is doing this to help us," Belinda said.

"You don't seriously believe that?"

"I believe that he believes it. So does Clive."

After Asano and Bahadir departed, Clive had periodically appeared to visit Belinda, the two spending hours going over the various tools and tricks she employed in her career as a professional thief. They also toured the cloud palace and its myriad wonders. The palace was enormous, with multiple wings in all directions, connected to a central building by cloud pathways. The palace was unaffected by floating on the exposed water, with neither wind nor wave causing so much as a shudder.

There were dining rooms, ballrooms, bedrooms, bathrooms, ritual rooms, parlours, terraces, kitchens, studies, training halls, libraries, art galleries, it just went on and on. In the lowest levels, below the waterline, there were lounges with walls of translucent mist, allowing occupants to see out into the water. Very few places seemed out of bounds, with

the major exception being Bahadir's personal suite. It occupied the top four floors of the central building but almost all other areas were open to them. The other restricted areas were secure rooms containing various valuables. The two thieves naturally thought of robbing the place but were not foolish enough to try.

Experimentally, they went to the cloud path that led to the shore. None of the people Emir left behind attempted to stop the two women as they stood just inside the palace, looking out. The bridge to the shore was anchored directly in front of the Adventure Society reception building, beyond which were garden paths leading deeper into the campus.

"I really don't think they'll try to stop us leaving," Belinda said.

"They don't need to," Sophie said. "Do you really think we'd get out of the Adventure Society grounds without being snatched up?"

Rufus held out his glass.

"To Farrah."

Gary and Jason touched their glasses to his and they drank. The trio was in an open-air bar in one of the wealthier parts of the city of Boko. It had been a day and a half since they arrived and they had been exploring the city. It wasn't a port city like Greenstone, or as large. As such, the population wasn't as diverse, being made up almost entirely of humans. They were very dark-skinned, like the Ustei, but the cultures were clearly very different. The hairstyles in Boko weren't wild and crazy, and the clothes weren't a patchwork mess. The local fashion was loose and breathable, like that of Greenstone, but in more subdued colours. Earthy browns, yellows and reds dominated, compared to the kaleidoscope colours the Greenstone populace preferred.

Gary and Rufus shared more stories about Farrah, while Jason brought them up to speed on his activities in their absence.

"You want to make this thief girl an adventurer?" Rufus asked. "What was her name again?"

"Sophie Wexler. She's a celestine, no family ties in Greenstone, from what little I was able to get out of her."

"It's a creative solution," Rufus said. "At the very least it would prevent her from being quietly handed off to Lamprey in some backroom political deal. The Society would never allow that for a member."

“Lamprey’s fixation on her is the key,” Jason said. “It’s the lever Arella is tugging on. If we can definitively remove Wexler from Lamprey’s reach, that lever goes away. Her political value vanishes and she goes back to being just some woman from Old City.”

“The problem is her fugitive status,” Rufus said. “Until that gets resolved, you won’t be able to get her Adventure Society membership.”

“What if we did it here?” Gary asked. “She’s not a fugitive here in Boko, and they have an Adventure Society branch.”

“I thought about that,” Jason said. “There’s too much chance of Arella finding out and interfering. One communication to the branch director here and everything comes unravelled.”

“Then what’s the plan?” Rufus asked.

“The key is the service agreement between the Adventure Society and Greenstone,” Jason said. “The right to her indenture is clearly mine. So long as the Adventure Society legal advocate doesn’t roll over, there won’t be an issue. Which means we either need leverage on the advocate, or leverage on Arella.”

“The thing with her father being a crime lord isn’t enough?” Gary asked.

“I very much doubt it,” Jason said. “Rising above her criminal past to become an anti-corruption crusader is a narrative she can use to her advantage. It does make it harder for her to make any blatantly corrupt moves, though.”

“You may not have to do anything,” Rufus said. “The leverage may provide itself.”

“Oh?” Jason prompted.

“The Adventure Society recognises that politicking is a required part of administering a branch, but Society interests have to be protected above all else. We just lost a whole slew of adventurer, which means the Continental Council will be raining down in full force. There will be an inquiry that holds the Greenstone Adventure Society upside down and shakes it until all the goodies come out.”

“And Arella is the one responsible for the makeup of the expedition,” Jason said, realisation dawning. “Everyone wanted in, so she let in every political rival who wanted to go along, instead of building an effective team. Still, the blame could fall in a lot of places. I’m guessing it depends on who does the blaming.”

“It will depend on who the Continental Council sends,” Rufus said.

“The expedition was a mess,” Gary said. “Surely it has to fall on Arella. We lost so many because there weren’t enough strong people to shield the weak.”

The glass in Rufus’s hand shattered, his face full of quiet but hot-burning fury.

“Farrah died covering those people,” he said. “I’m done putting up with Greenstone’s worthless adventurers. I think I’ll pay Elspeth Arella a visit myself.”

“I would hold off unless you have a goal beyond yelling at her,” Jason said. “Don’t muddy the waters unless muddy water is useful to you.”

Danielle and Emir finally declared the expedition at an end. They withdrew all their people back through the aperture, along with everything they collected. Although the cost in blood was heavy, they succeeded in their goal of finding and stopping what disrupting the astral space.

A network of astral magic nodes had affected the whole astral space. They hadn’t figured out what it was for yet, but they didn’t need to; they just needed to take it down. They did exactly that, packing away large portions in dimensional bags for study and destroying the rest.

As people and supplies were loaded onto skimmers and sand barges, Emir and Danielle were looking at an object, waiting to be packed away. It was a five-sided column, the height of a person and covered in engravings, one of many waiting to be stowed away.

“So this is what was causing all the trouble,” Emir said. “How many are we taking?”

“Our people examined them,” Danielle said. “There are fifteen different types, so we’re taking three of each and destroying the rest. It’s the Magic Society’s problem now.”

“It is what they do,” Emir said. “I think it’s past time I added an astral magic specialist to my team.”

The columns had been the physical medium of the astral magic. No one in the expedition could even tell if destabilisation was the goal or a side-effect. They would also be taking the remains of several construct creatures, plus one construct they had captured intact. Their purpose and origins would eventually be teased out by the Magic Society.

“What about Rufus and Asano?” Emir asked. “Any word?”

“There was some kind of altercation,” Danielle said. “Shortly after, Gary and Jason took Rufus out into the desert and didn’t come back. According to Vincent Trenslow, they were heading for the city, so you should find them there.”

The return to Greenstone was going to take two paths. The vast majority of the people and supplies would take the skimmers and barges they brought with them back overland, with Danielle in command. Emir and his people would return the extra skimmers requisitioned from the city of Boko.

“Do me a favour when you head to the Adventure Society in Boko,” Danielle asked Emir. “See if the Ustei have been causing trouble since we turned them back out where they came from.”

When he arrived in Boko, his first goal was to arrange the local Adventure Society branch to send periodic, silver-rank patrols into the astral space. Left alone, the astral space should eventually return to normal functioning, replenishing the drying oases. After that, he would return to Greenstone via portal ability. Many of the more prestigious members of the expedition petitioned to join him but were refused outright.

When the last of the gear was packed up, both groups left the aperture behind. Emir and his people had the shorter journey, arriving at Boko within the day. He organised his people to return the requisitioned skimmers and see if they could find Rufus, Jason and Gary. Emir was on his way to the Adventure Society headquarters when something strange appeared in front of him.

➤ You have received a voice chat request from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

“What?”

Hester was the member of Emir’s staff who had opened the portal to Boko and back. She was widely travelled, which was an advantage to anyone with such a power. Portal-type abilities had several limitations, starting with destination. They could only be opened to locations that the one with the power had been before. There were also limits to who could use it, based on rank. The only reason she was able to create a portal the gold-ranked Emir could travel through was that her portal ability had reached gold rank, even though she hadn’t.

The portal she opened back to Greenstone deposited them at the Adventure Society campus, right next to the cloud palace. It was late in the afternoon and Emir led them inside where a large meal was quickly arranged. Emir’s people went about their business after that, except for Constance. She joined Emir, Jason, Gary and Rufus on a terrace. They took after-dinner drinks as they watched the sun set over the ocean.

Jason let out a loud sigh.

“I’m just now remembering the crisis I was dealing with before the other crisis,” he said. “I missed the essence and awakening stone auction. Is that mysterious thing of yours still coming up, Emir?”

“I’m going to push it back,” Emir said. “I was intending to rely on the Greenstone’s iron-rankers, but that clearly isn’t viable. The entire adventurer community here will be reeling from the results of this expedition. Even if that weren’t the case, the standards here are lower than I feared. A few stand-outs aside, the general level ability is woeful. I’m going to put out an open contract and ship more capable people in.”

“You’ll have some competition, Jason,” Gary said.

“Competition for what?” Jason asked.

“Something that will, for the moment, remain unrevealed,” Emir said. “Suffice to say, there is a place that only iron-rankers can go, in which there is a thing iron-rankers cannot use. Whoever brings that thing to me shall receive glorious prizes.”

“And this place will have essences and awakening stones?” Jason asked.

“If the conditions are what we believe, then yes.”

“Still,” Jason said, “if you’re moving it back, I’m going to need another source of essences.”

“You still want to make this thief girl an adventurer?” Emir asked.

“That, or send her so far from here it’s not worth anyone looking. Given how hard it would be to get her into the Adventure Society, that’s the direction I was leaning. That may change, depending on how much trouble Elspeth Arella is in.”

“A lot,” Emir said. “The Society doesn’t like to interfere with its branch directors but losing all those adventurers will be more than they’re willing to tolerate. Danielle Geller told me that she lodged a protest about the makeup of the expedition before it even left. That will make things all the worse for Arella. I will be astounded if she keeps her position.”

“Then I should act quickly,” Jason said. “If she has to walk the line, suddenly the rules people have been stomping over have some teeth. If I can lock in the indenture, that resolves her being a fugitive, and if I can then make her an adventurer, she’ll have the Society’s protection.”

“I’ve never heard of anyone getting their indentured servant into the Adventure Society,” Constance said. “The Society’s protection of its members would eliminate almost all control over them.”

“Jason has been making crazy choices to rescue people since literally the day we met,” Gary said. “You get used to him.”

“No you don’t,” Rufus said. “Jason, you need to work on making enemies of your own rank. You have the directors of the Adventure Society and the Magic Society after you, now.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “But how amazing will it be when I win?”

Chapter 114: Climbing Mountains

Jason walked through the halls of the cloud palace. Far from just white cloud-stuff, the walls, floors and ceilings were marked-out in sunset shades of rich blues, purples, oranges and golds. In some areas it was startlingly vibrant; in others, soft and subdued. Everything glowed with its own light, which Emir had told Jason was absorbed sunlight the palace could store-up and distribute as needed. The floors underfoot had a springiness that was still very stable, as if a very sensible engineer had been forced to design a bouncy castle. The total effect was like walking through a fairy tale.

A full wing of the cloud palace was dedicated to guest suites and Jason walked from his own to that in which Emir had placed Belinda and Sophie. The wide door was white, with the edges marked out in blue. Next to it was a small, circular patch of gold in the wall, which he pressed a finger into. It felt like pressing into a soft, downy doona.

He heard a pleasant chime from the other side of the door, like tinkling water. A few moments later, the door became translucent, revealing Sophie standing on the other side. She was wearing dark, practical clothing and her entire posture screamed the opposite of welcome.

“You’ll want to come in then,” she said, her tone trying to convince him otherwise.

“It’s time we had a talk,” Jason said, “but we don’t have to do it here. The palace is full of places for a nice chat.”

“It’ll be nice, will it?”

“Probably not, now you ask. I brought sandwiches if that helps.”

Sophie jerked her head in a reluctant invitation and Jason walked inside. Jason's suite was larger than any place Jason had ever lived in and Belinda and Sophie were occupying one that seemed very similar.

“Terrace,” she directed him, although not heading that way herself.

He could see the terrace through the walls, which had their opacity shifted to the point of being invisible air. It tussling Jason’s hair as he walked through it.

“That’s indoor/outdoor living,” he murmured to himself as he walked over to the terrace furniture. He took out a tray of sandwiches, plates, glasses and a pitcher of blended fruit drink before sitting down.

Belinda and Sophie came out just as he was pouring drinks. Belinda was dressed in light, summery clothes. She immediately sat down and grabbed a sandwich. Sophie didn’t reach for the food, looking at it with suspicion.

“Is this bread from Pantero’s?” Belinda asked after swallowing her first bite. Pantero’s was a bakery in Old City and had the best bread Jason had found in the city.

“It is,” he said brightly. “My friend Beth told me about it. They’ve been operating there for an incredibly long time. Her grandmother used to go there as a girl when their family owned that whole part of the city.”

“You’re talking about the Cavendish family?”

“That’s them.”

“Didn’t they leave the Cavendish district the better part of two centuries ago?”

“Something like that,” Jason said. “That’s the adventuring life, I suppose. You live long enough to see history for yourself.”

The easy smile fell from his face.

“If it doesn’t get you killed first,” he added darkly, clearly talking to himself.

“Did something happen when you went away?” Belinda asked.

“A friend of mine died,” he said.

“A close friend?”

“As close as I have in this world. She taught me so much about being an adventurer.”

“She taught you to fight?” Sophie asked.

“No, that was Rufus. He taught me to fight like an adventurer. Farrah taught me to live like one.”

He smiled, sadly.

“She’d call me out when I started talking out my backside. Which you may come to find is pretty often.”

He brushed the back of his hand over his eyes and gave them a grin that was only a little forced.

“None of that matters to you, though,” he told them. “You have your own troubles to deal with, which is why I’m here.”

“I thought your clever plan collapsed in a heap,” Sophie said.

“It did,” Jason said, “but times, as the song goes, are a-changing.”

“What song?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Jason said, waving a dismissive hand. “As it stands, I see this going one of four ways. The pair of you will have to choose between them.”

“And if we don’t like your options?” Sophie asked.

“That would be option one,” Jason said. “You put me and my schemes behind you, which is reasonable, given how they’ve gone thus far. You walk out of the cloud palace and seize your own fate. Option two is similar, but more appealing, I think. You still walk

away, but we send you far from here first. Our host has someone that can send you places so far from here it's not worth the effort of looking for you."

"A teleporting power," Sophie said.

"She opens portals, which is how we came and went just recently. Her name is Hester, and she seems quite nice. You can talk to her to pick out a destination, then we send you off. We'll send you off with a fist full of cash but that is all you will have, aside from each other. I imagine a couple of resourceful women like yourselves will have no trouble starting fresh."

"A clean slate is all we've been looking for," Belinda said.

"You can have it," Jason said, "if that's what you choose. Option three is to upgrade who is standing between you and Lucian Lamprey. You've seen that my efforts haven't worked out as well as I thought they would. Emir, on the other hand, is all the protection you could ask for."

"Why would he help us?" Sophie asked.

"The way you fight. The way we fight. He's interested in the origins of that style. If he finds out that you use it, I'm certain he'd fully take you under his protection. He'd want you to help him trace back its history, but I don't imagine that would be an onerous task."

"Is that how you know him?" Belinda asked. "You're helping him find the history of the fighting style?"

"No. I met Emir because he's a friend of a friend. He doesn't know that either of us can use the style, but I'm of little use to him because I learned it from a skill book."

"You learned that from a skill book?" Sophie asked, her expression turning curious as it broke out of stern suspicion for the first time since he arrived.

"I've fought people who used skill books before," she said. "Fighting you didn't feel like that."

"I've had additional training to fully incorporate those skills," Jason said. "Unless you learned to fight from a skill book too, turning to Emir might be a good option for you."

"Why haven't you told him already?" Sophie asked.

"Not mine to tell."

"You expect us to believe that?"

"No," he said, giving them a smile instead of trying to convince them further.

"What's option four?" Belinda asked.

Before answering, Jason picked up a sandwich and took a generous bite, chewing thoroughly before swallowing. He washed it down by emptying his glass, then slowly poured himself another.

“Really?” Sophie asked and he flashed her a grin.

“I got this from a guy who makes blended fruit drinks here on the Island,” he said.

“Not cheap, but what is on the Island?”

Belinda sipped at her glass curiously, eyes going wide at the sweet, pleasant taste.

Sophie glared at her, leaving her own glass untouched.

“There was meant to be an auction while I was gone,” Jason said. “All the big spenders were away, though, so they ended up cancelling it. That means the brokers have a few essences and awakening stones available for relatively reasonable prices.”

“Why are you talking about essences?” Sophie asked. “I don’t care how reasonable the prices are; they’re way beyond what we have. We weren’t stealing for the money and margins were slim because high-end jewellery and the like is easy to trace. After expenses, we were barely breaking even. Are you offering us a loan?”

“Option four,” Jason said, “is the original plan. I take you, Sophie, as an indenture. That eliminates your fugitive status, meaning that with a couple more essences, you can sign on to the Adventure Society. You’ll be shielded from Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva for good. At least, for the purposes they originally intended. Nothing I’ve heard about either suggests they are above petty revenge.”

“You didn’t answer her question,” Belinda said. “How are we meant to afford essences?”

“A loan would not be an inaccurate characterisation,” Jason said. “Joining the Adventure Society would offer you many protections, including from me, but the indenture would still stand.”

“You want me to work it off,” Sophie said.

“Exactly. And once you’re an adventurer, you’ll find opportunities abound. If you’re willing to work for them.”

“What does that mean?” Sophie asked.

“I’m not entirely sure, to be honest,” Jason said. “There is some kind of competition coming up, organised by our host. He has told me that there are essences and awakening stones to be had. Even if you don’t get three for your friend, here, you’ll still be an adventurer. It would only be a matter of time.”

“How would that even work?” Belinda asked. “I thought indenture was off the table.”

“I told you earlier: times are changing. You probably didn’t hear, shuttered away like this, but the big expedition went wrong. Very wrong. A lot of adventurers died, which is why we left to help.”

“Were you any help?” Sophie asked.

“Sophie!” Belinda scolded.

“You seem too weak to help a big adventurer expedition,” Sophie said, unrepentant. “You barely caught me.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Mostly I just told people where to put up tents until some silver-ranker got rid of me.”

“So what does this expedition have to do with the indenture?” Belinda asked.

“Because it went wrong,” Jason said, “there’s going to be an inquiry. There’s a Continental Council that oversees Adventure Society business continent-wide. After the mess that happened, they’re sending a team here to conduct some kind of audit on the whole Adventure Society branch.”

“I get it,” Sophie said. “People will actually have to follow the rules for once.”

“At least for a small window of time,” Jason said. “It’ll be back to business soon enough but until then, the director won’t be able to sell out the Society’s legal agreement with the city. Which means I can ‘recapture’ you and the indenture hearing is back on.”

“Why?” Sophie asked. “Essences, indenture hearings. Why would you do any of that for us? Are you trying to tell me that Jory is such a good friend to you that you’d go this far over some girl he likes?”

“You know I’m sitting right here,” Belinda said.

“I’m not sure you’d believe me if I told you why,” Jason said. “I’d guess you believe maybe one word in ten coming out of my mouth.”

“If that,” Sophie said. “Tell us anyway. You learn a lot about a person from how they lie.”

Jason chuckled, leaned back in his chair and took another long drink. The amused half-smile he used to mask his emotions was replaced by a slightly sad, sober expression.

“When I first came here,” he said, “I was lost. More lost than you can imagine. I knew no one; nothing made sense. I was tired, beaten and had people trying to kill me, all while doubting my own sanity. My friends helped me get on my feet. They taught me, supported me. Put up with me. They helped me take control of my life.”

He paused for a long time, looking out at the ocean. Sophie was about to say something, but Belinda gestured to wait.

“One of them is dead now,” he said. “I think she would like me trying to do the same for someone else. Or maybe she’d yell at me and tell me to sort my own problems out before looking to someone else’s.”

He smiled sadly, but genuinely, his eyes twinkling with moisture. He wiped them and stood up.

“I’ll leave the lunch,” he said. “Talk over what you want to do and tell me when you figure it out. Or vanish and tell me nothing. Up to you.”

He headed through the invisible wall of their suite and made for the door.

“How long do we have to decide?” Belinda called after him and he stopped.

“As long as you can convince Emir to have you,” he said. “If you want to be an adventurer, the sooner the better. I’m not the only one who spotted cheap essences, and the next Adventure Society intake is in nine days. We need to have the indenture hearing, pick out some essences and shove them into you before that.”

He left Belinda and Sophie sitting at the table with a bunch of sandwiches and blended fruit drink.

“If he’s a liar, he’s a good one,” Belinda said.

“He is liar,” Sophie said. “And he is a good one.”

“You think he’s playing us? I don’t see what he would get out of that.”

“Some political game we don’t know enough to see.”

“I don’t know,” Belinda said. “Jory and Clive aren’t like the people we usually deal with. Maybe he isn’t either.”

“Does he feel like that to you?”

“No,” Belinda said. “Those two are easy to read. Asano is more like dark water. You see things in there, but you can’t tell if what you saw was real.”

“I’ve seen people like him before,” Sophie said. “They know you won’t believe what they say, so they tell you five stories and let you figure out which is true.”

“And how do you do that?” Belinda asked.

“That’s the trap; none of them are.”

“So those options he gave us. You don’t think they’re real options?”

“Maybe,” Sophie said. “Maybe he wants us to think they’re our only options.”

“Our current options are to leave or hope we don’t get kicked out,” Belinda said. “If you have something better than what he’s offering, I’m listening.”

“You know I don’t. But I don’t trust him.”

“At this point, we have to trust either him or fate. It wasn’t fate that put us in a magic castle. It was him.”

“That’s what he wants us to think,” Sophie said.

“Maybe we can talk to some of the other people here,” Belinda said. “Get a better sense of him.”

“That’s a good idea,” Sophie said. “Information isolation is our biggest weakness right now.”

“That’s our biggest weakness?”

“The biggest one we can do something about. Press Clive about him, next time he comes by. In the meantime, we can find out who else in this place knows him.”

Jason was leaving the cloud palace when he ran into Emir and Constance coming back. They stopped to chat halfway across the platform connecting the cloud palace to the shore.

“Did you talk to my other guests?” Emir asked.

“I just came from there.”

“And?”

“My guess would be they choose to get sent far from here.”

“The adventuring life not tempting?”

“They don’t trust me,” Jason said. “Probably a smart choice. My first plan didn’t exactly work out.”

Emir chuckled.

“You need to work on that,” he said. “I wasn’t happy to find the camp I put you and Rufus’ friend in charge of being run by some imbecile.”

“You didn’t put us in charge of that camp,” Jason said. “It just kind of worked out that way. Until it didn’t.”

“Are you sure?” Emir asked. “It feels like I put you in charge.”

“You’re the only gold-ranker here,” Jason said. “It probably feels like everything happens because you wanted it to.”

“He’s right,” Constance said. “You didn’t put them in charge.”

“Well, if Constance says so, it must be true. What are you up to now?”

“Does no one believe what I have to say, today? I’m off to see Elspeth Arella. I’m going to explain why the indenture hearing is going to go the way I want.”

Constance, who was normally a detached professional, creased her brow in confusion.

“You know you’re still an iron-ranker, right?” she asked.

“I do,” Jason said.

“And you’re going to march into the office of the silver-rank branch director of the Adventure Society and tell her what to do?”

“I am.”

“Which, if I understand correctly, is exactly what you did last time. After which, she immediately played you for a fool.”

“That would be an accurate summation, yes,” Jason said.

“I hope you aren’t going to be throwing around Mr Bahadir’s name.”

“I have a little more decorum than that,” Jason said. “I have my own levers to push, thank you.”

“Very well,” she said, her expression still a warning.

“We’ll let you get to it,” Emir said. “Good luck.”

They parted ways, Emir and Constance returning to the palace. Out of sight from outsiders, Constance’s posture became more relaxed.

“Rufus was right,” Constance said. “That boy is mad.”

“That’s the things about climbing mountains,” Emir said. “The first thing you need is someone foolish enough to try it.”

“I never saw the point of that as a recreational activity,” Constance said. “Putting a suppression collar on yourself and clambering up an edifice? If they’re that keen on danger, why not fight monsters, like regular people?”

“The point is that they are challenging themselves to do what others think can’t be done,” Emir said.

“That man Koenig who used to work for you when I first started. He liked to climb mountains, didn’t he?”

“He did, indeed,” Emir said. “He was quite the enthusiast.”

“What happened to him?”

“He fell off a mountain and died.”

“Don’t a lot of people die trying to climb mountains?”

“Yes,” Emir said. “Yes, they do.”

Chapter 115: Nothing Can Hurt You Like Hope

The door to Arella's office opened itself as Jason approached and he walked right in. Sitting behind her desk, she made a gesture and the door closed behind him. He stood in front of the desk, looking around.

"You've changed the artwork."

"I'm surprised you showed your face," she said. "I suppose I shouldn't have expected any bounds on your arrogance."

"That's probably fair. I should thank you, though, for the object lesson in the pitfalls of being arrogant. Your mistake was the same every time; you never consider how your actions hurt other people. The thief you tried to hand over to Lamprey. The iron-rankers you made look buffoonish at their inability to catch her. Your own officials being squeezed between you and the Duke. That was already hurting you, but the expedition? There's plenty of blame to go around but we both know that you're in line for a hearty serving. You alienated your allies and made deals with your enemies."

Arella looked at him with open disgust.

"You really never tire of hearing your own voice, do you?"

"I do like to monologue, don't I? Next thing you know, I'll be building a weather machine in a mountain fortress carved into the shape of my own head."

"You also like to babble nonsense. What are you here for, Asano?"

"Are you still going to revoke my membership?"

"You know I'm not."

"All those eyes on you make petty revenge a little harder, don't they?"

"If that's all you want, then get out."

"There is one thing," Jason said. "There needs to be a new sentence-dispensation hearing for the thief. I need to know you won't try and sabotage it again."

She gave him an angry glare.

"You know full-well that I can't interfere. Not if I want to still be in this office a month from now."

"You say that, but the last time I was in here was to ask for the same thing. You said it would go smoothly but I bet you had a messenger on their way to Lamprey before I was out of the building. I'm here for assurances."

"You think you can make demands?"

"I tried cooperation. And yes; I think I can make demands."

“I could crush you into paste without getting out of this chair.”

“Could you, though? You’re a smart woman, director. Not as smart as you think, but enough to know the consequences of that. You’ve disillusioned your allies while I keep making friends. I told you that your mistake was not caring who your games hurt. Kill me and you won’t just lose this office; you’ll die in it.”

She reached out an arm in a clutching motion, her silver-rank reflexes too fast for Jason to react. His aura was ground down to nothing, then an invisible force picked him up, lifting him into the air as it squeezed him from every direction. The crushing force wracked his whole body with pain.

“You’re so sure of yourself,” she said. She was still reclined in her chair, hand held out toward him.

“Yes,” he croaked, looking back with defiance. She squeezed all the harder until his muscles felt like pulp, his bones on the verge of breaking. His head was ready to pop like a pimple.

She floated up, out of her seat and over her desk until they were face to face. Hers held a sneer, while his was turning purple.

“Power trumps everything,” she told him. “It doesn’t matter how clever you are or how well you can manipulate the rules. Schemes and laws are nothing in the face of complete and absolute power.”

“Do it then,” he choked out. “Are you powerful enough to handle the consequences?”

She opened her clenched hand and he dropped to floor, immediately collapsing. She floated down and gently on the floor, looking down on him as he gasped and spluttered.

“Get out of my office,” she told him.

Jason pushed himself achingly into a sitting position, then stood up with a groan, looking her straight in the eye.

“I told you,” he said. “I came for assurances.”

She let out a disbelieving laugh.

“You’re bold for someone hiding behind the strength of others.”

“You do what you can with what you have,” Jason said. “Something I imagine you know very well.”

She sneered.

“You said assurances. What kind of assurances do you want?”

“You misunderstand,” Jason said. “When I said I’m here for assurances, it was to give them, not receive.”

“What are you talking about?”

“If you don’t keep your hand off the scale for the sentence-dispensation, then that inquiry coming up will be hearing from me.”

“The secret is already out, Asano. People know my family history.”

“Not that,” Jason said. “I mean the fact that an Adventure Society director undertook no small effort to prevent the completion of a contract she herself posted. You’ll be lucky to keep your membership after that, let alone your position.”

“You have no proof.”

“You were sloppy. Too reliant on no one guessing what you were up to. You think the inquiry won’t find anything, once they know to look? Even if you start cleaning up the moment I walk out of here, how many bodies will you have to drop? Are you sure you can get them all? I don’t think you can. There are too many threads and chasing them all down would just make more.”

Her hand twitched up, then down again. He gave her a predatory smile.

“Killing me only hurts you,” he said. “You know that, and you have much bigger problems than me. Danielle Geller isn’t back, yet, but you’ll know about it when she is. I told you your mistake was not considering the collateral damage of your plotting. She once thought quite highly of you but she lost family out there.”

Arella’s face scrunched up in reluctance and unreleased fury.

“What assurance do I have that you won’t burn me with the inquiry anyway?” she asked, biting off her words.

“The last time I came in here asking you to uphold the rules, I trusted you and got burned for my trouble. This time, you have to trust me.”

She forced out a nod.

“I’ll direct the advocate to defend the tenets of the service agreement with the city,” she said, biting her words off unhappily.

“All I wanted to hear,” he said and immediately turned for the door.

“Asano,” she called out and he stopped to look back.

“You really would have stood between Lamprey and this girl, wouldn’t you?” she asked.

“Is that why you sold me out? You didn’t think I had the resolve?”

The anger seemed to wash out of her, shoulders slumping and face suddenly haggard, in spite of its silver rank perfection.

“Call it a lesson learned. Things won’t be going well for me in the near future, but I will climb back up.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Jason said.

“I also won’t forget the iron-ranker that walked into my office to put his foot on my neck when I was down.”

Belinda watched with concern as Sophie paced back and forth on the terrace. Her friend rarely showed her anxiety, which meant she was running close to the edge.

“If they’re really willing to send us far from here,” Sophie said, “I think we do that, then get far from where they sent us. Put them and this whole city behind us.”

She sped up her pacing, running her hands through her hair. Normally she tied it back in a pony tail, but today it was loose and wild.

“That’s assuming we can trust going through some portal they set up,” she continued, “which we absolutely can’t. Maybe the best option really is leaving and making our own way from here.”

Belinda got up from her chair, placing herself in Sophie’s path, who stopped, looking up as if surprised she was there at all. Belinda took her in a hug, Sophie’s arms slipping around her in turn, gripping her like a security blanket.

“You know we can’t walk out of here as fugitives,” Belinda said softly. “Even if we got out of the Adventure Society grounds, which we wouldn’t, there was a reason we turned to Ventress for protection. If we go out into the city, things are worse for us now than they were then.”

Belinda let go of Sophie and went through the invisible wall into their suite.

“I’m having a drink,” she said. “So are you.”

The sprawling main area of the guest suite was one open space, but had areas divided up for lounging, dining, a kitchen and a bar. Belinda snagged a couple of glasses and a bottle, bringing them back outside. They sat down and Sophie took the first shot without tasting it, before sipped at the second.

“You realise this bottle cost more than most of the things we’ve ever stolen,” Belinda said.

“I thought we’d half-emptied this bottle. Did you get it from the cooler cabinet?”

“I got it from the bar. You know there’s a floor cabinet and two wall cabinets with drinks in addition to the bar?” Belinda asked. “How am I meant to remember where any given bottle came from?”

“You know there’s a wine room,” Sophie said.

“No, where is it?”

“You know the floaty things that lifts you to the upper floor?”

“Yeah.”

"If you hit that gold patch next to it on the wall twice, it goes down instead."

"This place is crazy."

Sophie looked at the glass in her hand, then at the cloud palace around them.

"Everything about this whole experience is crazy," she said.

"It'll be hard to give up," Belinda said. "If that's the way we decide to go."

Sophie frowned.

"You think we should go along with Asano's plan."

"You know I'll follow you, whatever you decide," Belinda said.

"You get just as much say as I do," Sophie insisted.

"Great," Belinda said, standing up. "I'll go find Asano and we can get you some essences."

"Hold on," Sophie said, half-standing in her seat. Belinda flashed her a grin and sat back down.

"What happened to I get as much say as you?" Belinda asked.

"As much," Sophie said as she gave Belinda a flat look. "Not more."

"You know I was only half-joking," Belinda said. "Even if we get so far from here we don't have to deal with Silva or Ventress or Lamprey, do you really want to go from this back to stealing?"

"We're good at stealing."

"What if we're good at something else? What if we didn't have to live by the whims of some sadistic crime lord? You know that wherever we went, there will always be a Clarissa Ventress or Cole Silva. If we turn down this chance, that will be our lives. Forever."

"We could do something else," Sophie said. "Something legal."

"Like what? Open a shop?"

"We could be locksmiths," Sophie said. "That's assuming even the offer to send us away is real. We've been stuck in this box, only hearing what they want us to hear. They could be using us for anything."

"Why would they bother?" Belinda asked. "Look at where we are. Look at who they are. Look at what we're drinking! What could we possibly offer Bahadir that he can't just take? At what point does this much effort in service to some elaborate ruse become less plausible than they just want to help us? I think we've crossed that line. What they're offering may seem outlandish to us, but clearly that isn't the case for them. They're adventurers, making adventurer money."

Sophie took a deep breath as she considered what Belinda had to say.

“My instincts are still screaming at me to run,” she said. “The better things seem, the worse it will be when the floor falls out from under us. Nothing can hurt you as badly as hope.”

Belinda looked at her friend from under raised eyebrows.

“Really, Soph? Nothing can hurt you like hope. Is that how you want to live your life?”

“When were our lives ever different? We both had dead parents and massive debts when we were still children.”

“That’s exactly why I think we should take a risk,” Belinda said. “We were already risking everything on these crazy jobs, and for what? The chance to go somewhere else and have different crappy lives? I don’t want to go back to stealing for whatever murderous lunatic is in charge of wherever we end up.”

She gestured at the sky palace around them.

“I want more of this. This is worth risking everything for.”

Sophie looked at her friend for a long time. She took the bottle, poured herself a large drink and gulped it down.

“Alright,” she said finally.

“Alright?”

“Yeah.”

A huge grin broke out on Belinda’s face.

“Sophie Wexler, adventurer.”

“Don’t get carried away.”

“Your going to be an adventurer!”

“This could all still go horribly wrong.”

“That means I’m going to be an adventurer too, sooner or later.”

“You’ll have to earn how to fight,” Sophie said. Despite her best efforts, a smile was creeping its way onto her face.

“I know how to fight,” Belinda said.

“Kicking a guy in the beans and then running for it is not fighting.”

“It got me this far.”

Chapter 116: See You in Court

Elsbeth Arella was in the family home she had spent very little time in, even as a child. Raised by her mother in secret, now the secret was finally out and she was free to come and go as she pleased. Those precious, clandestine visits to her father, Dorgan, were in the past; she could casually come by to take tea in one of his courtyards.

“Your mistake was your need to feel in control,” Dorgan told her. “You had a choice between letting Asano bear the brunt of Lamprey’s ire, or cutting a deal with Lamprey yourself.”

“I didn’t think Asano could stand up to Lamprey.”

“The boy is arrogant and reckless,” Dorgan said. “He would have stood up to Lamprey. Probably not successfully, but that wouldn’t have mattered. If Lamprey put the boy down, that would have given you all the leverage you needed. You didn’t choose that path, because it felt passive. You wanted events to move by your hand, so you took the initiative and went to Lamprey.”

“It felt right,” Arella said.

“Our feelings are not always the wisest guide. Even if it had gone well, dealing directly with Lamprey wouldn’t have given you anything you couldn’t get by waiting. All it brought you was a risk, the consequences of which you subsequently suffered. Now, with the unfortunate fate of the expedition, you have been left critically exposed.”

She nodded.

“I was impatient,” she said. “What do I do next?”

“For now, you must be above reproach,” he told her. “Every rule, every stipulation. This is not the time to push for new goals. The inquiry will remove you or not. Only once the decision is made will we know the way forward.”

“If they remove me, everything we’ve done will be wasted.”

“Not everything,” he said. “Our connection is in the open now and while it may not be endorsed, it is tolerated. If we have to start again, we will. Who doesn’t like a redemption story?”

“I really want to crush Asano under my heel,” she said. “If he hadn’t caught the thief...”

“If he hadn’t, it was past time for you to arrange her capture anyway. You had already let it play out too long. Asano was the perfect foil with which to jab Lamprey and the mistake was yours in not using him properly.”

“He stormed into my office to demand I help him with his damn agenda. Twice!”

“Don't make Lamprey's mistake and become fixated on someone unimportant to your ultimate goals. If you really must do something about Asano, then be patient. After the inquiry is done we can act, but at a careful remove. If we move deftly, then once he is dead the vengeance of his friends will fall on those whose removal will advantage us.”

“How do we do that?” she asked.

“Lucian Lamprey and Cole Silva are kindred spirits. When the time is right, we can help them make a connection.”

“What about Lamprey's dealings with Clarissa Ventress? Her and Silva hate each other.”

“Ventress failed to deliver what she promised to Lamprey months ago. By the time we choose to act, I would be astounded to find her still alive.”

Rufus and Gary had been highly motivated to find out who was behind the activities in the astral space. The various magical paraphernalia discovered there would only arrive once the expedition returned overland, but Rufus could not be talked into waiting. He roped Gary into scouring Magic Society records and the library at the temple of knowledge for any reference to the bizarre enemies they faced in the astral space. The first time their friends had seen them in days was when they arrived at the courthouse, showing their solidarity for Jason.

Belinda remained in the cloud palace for safety while Jason took Sophie into court for the sentence dispensation hearing. Until her docket was called she was required to stay the courtroom gaol in the basement to await her hearing. Jason took Gary along, who stayed to watch for any last-minute schemes while Sophie was trapped and isolated. As Jason was leaving, one of the guards stopped him. The guard threw an uncertain glance in the direction of Gary, who was leaning against the wall by Sophie's cell.

“He can't stay here,” the guard said.

Jason looked over at the huge, hairy form of Gary, then back at the guard.

“You'd best go tell him, then, because damned if I'm doing it.”

Leaving the nonplussed guard in his wake, Jason went back upstairs. On the ground floor, just outside the courtroom entrance, he spotted Vincent and Rufus talking to someone. Vincent spotted Jason in turn and waved him over.

“This is Rupert Cline,” Vincent introduced. Rupert was a neatly put together man of around thirty, with an iron-rank aura. “He was the one who gave us the warning about Arella and Lamprey.”

Jason shook Rupert's hand.

"Thank you for that," he said. "You kept a pair of young women from an unpleasant fate."

"We're Adventure Society right?" Rupert asked. "Standing between people and the bad stuff what we're for."

Jason flashed a grin.

"Yes we are," he said happily. "It's nice to meet a fellow idealist."

Vincent and Rufus shared a sceptical look, noticed by Jason.

"What?" he asked them.

"It's just strange to see you meeting someone and acting like a sensible person," Vincent said.

"That's hurtful," Jason said.

"I heard about what you put Clive through when you first met him."

"Jory told me to do that. Clive thought I was counterfeiting spirit coins or something."

"He did?"

"Yeah. Never really came up again after I told him I was an outworlder."

"What's an outworlder?" Rupert asked.

They chatted until Rupert had to go inside and Jason, Vincent and Rufus went upstairs to the viewing gallery. They took seats to await proceedings to begin. Jason's knowledge of courtrooms was sourced heavily on television. The Greenstone court was less like an American legal procedural and more like a British period drama. The gallery was mezzanine viewing, looking down the courtroom.

As they waited, a man with a silver-rank aura arrived in the gallery. Despite being an elf, muscles bulged under his expensive clothes. He was wearing a Magic Society pin, fancier than the usual and embossed in a strange metal that shimmered with rainbow colours. The man stopped on his way to a seat, turning to look at Jason.

"So you're Asano," he said.

"Yep. You must be... actually, I have no idea who you are," Jason said.

"I'm Lucian Lamprey."

"Doesn't ring a bell. I see you're in the Magic Society. Are you one of those guys who work in a booth identifying magic items?"

"What? A booth?"

"Haven't heard about that yet? You're probably new, so that's alright. You should make sure and learn about all the services the Magic Society offers though. Wouldn't want to get fired."

“I’m the director of the Magic Society.”

“You’re Pochard Finn? I thought you’d be thinner.”

“Pochard Finn is my deputy. I’m Lucian Lamprey.”

“Still doesn’t ring a bell. Are you sure?”

Lamprey opened his mouth to shoot back when he saw Vincent and Rufus stifling laughter. Lamprey moved closer, looming over the still sitting Jason.

“You should know better than to mock me,” Lamprey warned.

Jason craned his head back to look up at Lamprey’s face.

“Mate, you’re hardly in a position to point out what others are doing wrong. Using the power of your position to force women into sleeping with you? That’s about as sleazy as it gets. Is it even necessary? You’re super ripped; I bet there are plenty of people who respond to that. Is it a charm deficit? Just keep the mouth shut, bathe regularly and do the strong but silent thing. You’ll get some takers.”

A sinister smile cross Lamprey’s face.

“You were always going to pay for this, Asano. For your mockery, I’ll make sure you pay slow.”

“Like a layaway plan? You seem like the kind of guy who’d shaft me on the interest. I’d rather pay for doing the right thing than roll over and let someone like you do whatever he likes.”

“There will come a day when I remind you of those words. We’ll see what you say then.”

“Probably something about carb-loading. What do you bench?”

Lamprey shook his head, looking at Jason like he was a mad person before walking off to take a seat at the other end of the gallery.

“Why would you provoke him like that?” Vincent asked.

“He was coming after me either way; he said it himself. I’d rather he do something angry than something smart.”

“You play dangerous games, Jason,” Rufus warned. “Someday you’re going to pay for that.”

“I know.”

Sophie was brought up from the basement cells and placed in the prisoner dock, where she would have to stand for the duration of the proceedings. Jason realised that he’d never really stopped and taken a good look at her. They’d met briefly under normal circumstances, months ago, but most of their encounters had come when she’d been cornered, bloodied and dirty.

He had seen her enough to know she preferred simple clothes, more fitted and practical than the normal fashion. Today was no different, wearing white that appealingly set off her dark complexion. They showed-off the physique of an athlete, sleek and strong.

Physically, she was a study in contrasts. Her silver hair was tied back in a simple ponytail, bright against her chocolate skin. Her features were delicate, for such an indelicate woman; rather than make her seem fragile, there was a sharpness to them. A promise of danger in her silver eyes that moved around the room, taking everything in. He noticed them linger on the exits.

As she looked around the room she met Jason's gaze and held it, her eyes full of challenge. She was surrounded by power, her fate in the hands of strangers and yet she stood upright, proud and fearless. Jason understood in that moment why men like Lamprey and Cole Silva had such a need to possess or destroy her.

"You know, Rufus," Jason said. "I think she might be prettier than you."

"She's not," Vincent said.

"Thank you," Rufus said as Jason chuckled.

The hearing moved swiftly; the real decision-making had already happened behind closed doors. The Adventure Society advocate, Rupert Cline, asserted the Adventure Society's right to claim her indenture through the Adventure Society member who captured her and the magistrate agreed without challenge. Lamprey had apparently given up, knowing it was futile.

Soon after, Jason, Gary, Rufus and Vincent were leaving the courthouse with Sophie. There was a silver tracking bracelet on her wrist, but she was otherwise unfettered.

"We should go," Rufus said to Gary. "We've been away from our investigation long enough. We need to find who these people that killed Farrah were."

Gary threw Jason a look.

"Actually," Jason said, "I was hoping you could help me with something. I want Sophie in the next Adventure Society intake. I need your expertise to get her ready."

"I already have something to do," Rufus said.

"Rufus, you don't have enough information. Wait until the expedition returns with everything they collected. Clive is their astral magic guy and he'll tell us what he finds. That means you'll know where to look instead of stumbling blindly. When the time comes for action, you'll be rested and ready."

A look of reluctance crossed Rufus' face, but Jason pre-empted him.

“What would Farrah tell you to do?” Jason asked him. “Would she tell you to work hard or work smart? Do what you’re good at now and do the next thing when it’s ready to be done.”

Rufus looked unhappy but nodded.

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “Sophie, you’re in for a treat. He’s reluctant to tell people, but Rufus’ family actually runs a school for adventurers...”

The other looked at Jason as he trailed off.

➤ Contact [Phoebe Geller] has entered communication range.

“What is it?” Gary asked.

-
- Contact [Rick Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Hannah Adeah] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Claire Adeah] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Thalia Mercer] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Danielle Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Cassandra Mercer] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Humphrey Geller] has entered communication range.
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“The expedition,” Jason said. “They’re back.”

Chapter 117: Six-Month Lease

The arrival of the expedition was a mix of welcome, relief, commiseration and loss. Rufus and Gary waded into the chaos while Vincent headed for the administration building and the immense amount of work about to be dumped on him. Lacking anything else to do, Sophie trailed along behind Jason to the marshalling yard.

They found the Gellers, Rufus and Gary moving to talk to Danielle. With the arrival at the marshalling yard, her job as expedition leader was finally over. The strain was showing, even through the vitality of silver rank. As Rufus and Gary greeted her, Jason sought out the iron-rank Gellers. He met a tired-looking Humphrey with a broad smile and a warm handshake.

“Welcome home, mate; glad you made it. It was a bit touch-and-go there, from what I hear. Sorry I wasn’t there to help.”

“I’m not,” Humphrey said. “I’m glad you didn’t have to go through it. Life and death were separated by not much more than luck. Everyone lost people and we were no exception.”

Jason knew a lot of the iron-rank Gellers by sight, and some familiar faces were missing. The one he knew best was Henry Geller, who he had fought in their now-infamous mirage chamber clash.

Rick Geller came up and shook Jason by the hand.

“I want to thank you,” he said. “What you did to us in the mirage chamber; we were better prepared for when things went truly wrong. We had lived with the idea of losing people and still moving forward. It was worse for real; so much worse. We held it together, though, even after losing people. You helped us get ready for that.”

Claire Adeah was one of the two elf sisters on Ricks team. Of them all, she had resented Jason’s actions in their mock battle the most. She stepped up next to Rick and offered Jason her hand and he shook it.

“Rick’s right,” she said. “I didn’t like what you did, back then, but it was nothing next to the real thing.”

“I’d like to say that was my intention,” Jason said. “Honestly, though, I was just looking for a way to win.”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Rick said. “You helped us stay alive when we might not have otherwise.”

“No, that’s on you,” Jason said. “You got as many people as you could out of there when much stronger adventurers were dying.”

Rick nodded.

“We heard about your friend,” he said. “You should look around you, right now. A lot of these people wouldn’t be here if she hadn’t bought them the time to survive.”

Jason looked around, seeing the faces of strangers.

“I’d trade them all to get her back,” he said. “Does that make me a bad person?”

“It makes you someone lying to yourself,” a voice came from behind him. He turned as Cassandra fell into his embrace.

“If you really had the choice,” she whispered into his ear, “you’d let her save those people.”

“It doesn’t feel like that,” he whispered back.

They drew apart, their hands held together between them.

“How did your family come out?” he asked. “How’s your brother?”

“We lost people, but not many as some. Thadwick woke up on the way back. He’s... different.”

“Coming that close to death can change you,” Jason said.

She nodded.

“It’s like he’s finally seen how empty all the nonsense he built up around himself is. How much all the things he cared about were just worthless bluster in the face of real power. I think this will be good for him, in the end.”

“We should take what good we can from all this mess,” Jason said.

“I do have one question,” Cassandra said with a sweet, tired smile.

“What’s that?”

“Why is that very attractive young woman staring at us?”

“No idea what you’re talking about,” Jason said innocently.

“No?” Cassandra asked, turning her head to examine Sophie. “You didn’t notice the extremely pretty woman with the silver hair and the tracking bracelet.”

“Oh, her.”

“Yes, her.”

“She’s new.”

“Yes, I imagine I would have spotted her before. She stands out.”

“You don’t need to bother about her.”

“Don’t I, now?”

“Not at all. That’s just my nubile slave girl.”

“WHAT?” came Sophie and Cassandra’s simultaneous exclamation, to a backdrop of Jason’s wild cackling as a gaggle of people started talking over one another.

“I’m not a slave!”

“You have some serious explaining to do, Asano!”

“Jason, I think you’re my hero now.”

“What I have can’t be taught, Rick.”

“Just try treating me like a slave I will drown you in your own...”

“HEY!”

Rufus’ booming voice cut through the noise as he marched over.

“What is going on here?” he asked. “Jason, what did you do?”

“Why do you assume it was me?”

“Was it you?”

“Well, yes, but where’s the faith?”

“What were you thinking, causing a commotion here?”

“I thought people could use some normalcy,” Jason said. “What’s more normal than two women fighting over a sexy man?”

“You can have him,” Cassandra told Sophie.

“Don’t want him; you can keep him.”

“That’s hurtful,” Jason said, looking between the two.

“Jason, this isn’t the time for your nonsense,” Rufus said.

“Rufus, this is exactly the time. There will be days and days of mourning the lost.

These people just got home safe and they need just a few moments to celebrate surviving. A little laughter; a little joy. There won’t a lot of that for a while.”

“I don’t agree with you at all,” Rufus said, then sighed and gave him a sad smile.

“Farrah would have, though,” he said. “Just be respectful of people.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. He gave Rufus a rare, earnest smile; a far cry from his usual ones where he looked like he was up to something. He turned to Cassandra.

“Do you have to go home, or do you have some time for a debonair gentleman caller?”

“Oh, you have some questions to answer,” she said. “You’ll be answering them now.”

“I’m an open book,” Jason said. “Come along, slave girl.”

“I’m not your slave!”

“She’s a rental,” Jason said as they started extricating themselves from the busy marshalling yard. “Six-month lease.”

“You didn’t rent me!”

"I have a receipt."

"It's an indenture contract."

"Why do you even have an indentured servant?" Cassandra asked.

"Well, you know how you said I should catch that thief?"

Cassandra looked over at Sophie.

"That was you?"

"It was," Sophie said unhappily.

"Frankly, I'm surprised he caught you."

"It was his friend who figured out how to ambush us."

"It was a team effort," Jason said. "And since I was team leader, the credit is primarily mine."

"What team?" Sophie asked. "There were only two of you."

"Senior partner, then."

"Does Standish know you were the senior partner?"

"I think he intuited it," Jason said.

"I think you're full of crap," Sophie said.

"I like her," Cassandra said. "But how did she end up indentured to you?"

"Ah," Jason said. "That is a tale of vicious crime lords, shady politicians and a handsome adventurer, generous of spirit..."

Rick Geller watched Jason saunter off, shamelessly boasting to a pair of beautiful women.

"I want to be just like him," he said wistfully, then received a hard thump on the arm. He yelped, turning to see, Claire had been the one to hit him.

"What was that for?"

"The man is infuriating," Sophie said. She was back in her shared suite with Belinda. They were standing at the terrace rail, enjoying the cool ocean breeze.

"How so?" Belinda asked.

"He keeps calling me a slave."

"Does he treat you like a slave?"

"That's not the point."

"It really is," Belinda said.

"He called me a nubile slave girl."

Belinda burst out laughing.

"That is not funny!"

"You're complaining about being called a slave while you live like a princess, complete with enchanted castle."

"Yeah, well... you don't know what he's up to."

"You're right," Belinda said. "He didn't want you around after the indenture hearing?"

"He's down the hall with his upper-class lover. I'm not sticking around for that, whatever the terms of indenture are."

"He has a lady friend? What's she like?"

"She's a Mercer. Main family too; not one of the branches. Obnoxiously good-looking."

Belinda groaned.

"I know what the pretty ones are like to deal with," she complained.

"She seems alright. Wait, was that directed at me?"

"It makes sense that she's a big nob," Belinda said, ignoring Sophie's question. "Look at the company Asano keeps."

"What's his background?" Sophie asked. "What have you managed to dig out of Standish?"

"A job offer, actually. Clive asked me to come work with him. Assuming that all this political stuff gets settled."

"What does he want you to do?"

"Be a research assistant, which I'm pretty sure means taking care of all the mundane stuff he doesn't have time for. He's expecting to be very busy, soon."

"Are you sure he isn't looking for something more intimate?"

"He had a thing for that friend of Asano's who died. He's not hiding it very well, just throwing himself into his work."

"Are you going to take the job?"

"Of course. In the Magic Society, I can learn more about that Lamprey guy. Asano might think he has all this handled, but I doubt we've heard the end of it."

"What did you get from Standish about Asano?"

"According to Clive," Belinda said, "Jason isn't even from this world."

"What does that mean?"

"Well, you know the world?" Belinda asked.

"Of course I know the world," Sophie said. "It's a big round thing. We're standing on it."

"Actually, we're standing on the cloud palace."

"And the cloud palace is sitting on the world. By your reasoning, you aren't standing on the ground if you're wearing shoes."

"That's actually a good point," Belinda conceded with a frown.

"You don't need to sound surprised," Sophie said.

"Sorry," Belinda said. "What were we talking about? Right, the world. Generally, you think about the world as being everything, right?"

"But you're saying it isn't."

"That's exactly what I'm saying. Asano comes from a whole other world that's apparently out there."

"A whole different world," Sophie mused.

"Yes," Belinda said. "Uh, but no."

"What?"

"Well, it's a different world. Except, it's the same world. But different. It's complicated."

"I can tell by the fact that the only part of that I could follow was that the rest of it was complicated. You said he came from another world."

"Yes."

"But then you said that this different world is the same world."

"No. Except, yes. They're different versions of the same world. Like when we helped Donzo with the fake spirit coin racket."

"I can't believe I let you talk me into that. You're saying Asano comes from a counterfeit world?"

"No, both worlds are real."

"Then it's not a terrific comparison."

Belinda glared at Sophie.

"Maybe if you ever read a book that went three pages without the phrase 'glistening thighs,' I wouldn't have to dumb it down so much."

"Oh, so I should have been reading all that boring nonsense you collect in case I ever became the nubile slave girl of some guy from a world knocked out by some godly equivalent of Donzo making fake money in his bathtub?"

"Exactly," Belinda said.

They looked at each other and both erupted into laughter. They wandered into the lounge area and crashed down together on a couch.

“How is this our life?” Belinda asked, reclining back into the soft, cloudy furniture. “It’s like things kept getting worse and worse, until they so bad they came right around the other end to amazing and we somehow live in a magic palace, now.”

“This is just temporary. We need to be ready for what comes next.”

“What comes next is you getting amazing magical powers,” Belinda said. “You know I blame you for all this.”

“How is this my fault? Also, you just said this is amazing.”

“If you shaved off all that shiny, silver hair, you might not get creepy guys chasing after you.”

“You want me to run around bald?”

“You could wear a wig to cover it up,” Belinda said. “It would have to be an ugly one, though, or it would defeat the purpose. Bald would be best, thinking about it.”

“I’ll do it if you do,” Sophie said.

“And give up these natural curls? No thank you.”

The room chime rang and Belinda went and pressed the gold patch on the wall that turned the door translucent. On the other side was Jason.

“If you’d like to come with me, ladies.”

“What happened to your lady friend?” Belinda asked.

“She only just got back and has her own responsibilities. Our reunion was short but sweet.”

“Stamina issues?” Sophie asked, walking up behind Belinda.

“My stamina is just fine,” Jason said defensively.

“Sure it is,” Sophie said.

“I’m perfectly virile, thank you very much.”

“Where do you want us to go, exactly?” Belinda asked.

“I have assembled a panel of seasoned adventurers for advice and a catalogue of goods that are available – and affordable – from the brokers at the trade hall. It’s time for your friend to choose her essences.”

Chapter 118: The Perks of Being an Essence User

Jason introduced Sophie and Belinda to his panel of seasoned adventurers. It turned out to be comprised of Emir and Clive, who they knew, plus a bald, dark-skinned man that they didn't. He was handsome, lithely muscled and carried himself with an air of straightforward competence. Even with him just sitting at a table, Sophie read the subtle cues that told her he would be dangerous if he needed to be.

The assured sense of capability he gave off was the exact opposite of what she read from Asano. In her encounters with him, Jason had variously come across as casual, dangerous, friendly, manipulative, vulnerable, controlling and buffoonish. She had no idea which, if any of what she had seen was genuine.

The room was a small dining room, by cloud palace standards, with a wall open to one of the ubiquitous terraces. The three adventurers were on one side of the table, Jason and the two women taking seats on the other.

"You know Emir, and Clive, of course," Jason said. "Emir is the most experienced adventurer in the city, and Clive works for the Magic Society. He's spent no small amount of time cataloguing essence abilities, mine included."

"Speaking of which," Clive said, "I really would like to hear more about that execute ability of yours..."

"Not the topic of the day, Clive," Jason said, gesturing for him to stop before he became too enthused. "The last member of our impromptu advice panel is Rufus Remore."

"The one who taught you to fight," Sophie said, giving Rufus a second look.

"Someone's paying attention," Jason said. "Rufus comes from a prestigious academy, so he knows quite a lot about matching people to essences. Rufus, this is Sophie Wexler and Belinda Callahan."

Rufus nodded a greeting.

"Can the three of you explain to me why this is happening?" Sophie asked and Belinda slumped forward.

"Really, Soph?"

"I still don't understand why Asano is doing any of this," Sophie said. "Why bother, for some people he hardly knows?"

"You've known him the longest, Rufus," Emir said. "I have to admit to sharing the young lady's curiosity."

All eyes turned to Rufus, who was thinking over a reply.

“The day I met Jason,” he said, “We were all caught up in circumstances I can only describe as dire. This was especially true for him, who had no idea what was happening or why. As you will no doubt learn for yourselves, Jason can be quite resourceful when it matters most and he managed to get himself free. He got out of his cage and had a clear run at freedom.”

“He’s exaggerating,” Jason said. “I would have been easily caught.”

“So he says,” Rufus countered.

“Did you say cage?” Belinda asked.

“Yes,” Rufus said. “My team and I were in quite the unfortunate circumstance, except for one thing: we met Jason. He didn’t take that run at freedom. Instead of escaping, he walked back into the sacrifice chamber of a blood cult. He was outnumbered and outmatched but he walked right in. He did that to rescue three strangers, which is the only reason I’m alive to tell you this story.”

“I needed them to get me out,” Jason said. “If I didn’t get them out I would have died by cultist or by desert. Rufus just likes to put it down to altruism.”

“Yes I do,” Rufus said.

“You really expect us to believe he’s doing this out of the goodness of his heart?” Sophie asked.

“You can believe what you like,” Rufus said. “You can still just walk away.”

“No,” Belinda said, giving the others a plastered-on smile. “She’s going to clamp those lips together before she talks us out of the best opportunity we’ve ever had.”

“Her caution is well placed,” Emir said. “In all my time as an adventurer, I’ve never encountered a situation like this. I would be suspicious, as well.”

“What’s it going to be, ladies?” Jason asked. “If you want to walk away, I won’t stop you. Your indenture isn’t violated unless I say so, which I won’t. We can still put you through a portal to a destination of your choosing.”

“No,” Belinda said, putting a hand firmly over Sophie’s. “We decided to accept your offer.”

Sophie glanced unhappily at Belinda, then gave Jason a reluctant nod.

“Alright, then,” Jason said, pulling two sheets of paper from his inventory. “This first sheet is a list of all the essences that are available and that I can afford. The second list is awakening stones with the same conditions, although if I can afford those at all will come down to which essences we go with.”

“You don’t seem short of money,” Sophie said, eyes moving over the cloud palace around them.

"This place is mine," Emir said. "Jason's plans for you are his, as is the cost of carrying them out."

"You're saddled with the poorest adventurer in the cloud palace. That's not a complaint, mind you. I have far more money than most; I just happen to keep exalted company."

"Except for us," Belinda said.

"Give it time," Jason said with an encouraging smile.

He picked up the first list and they started going through the essences. Hours passed as they discussed the value of various combinations, what they offered and what would be required from their user. Sophie already possessed the swift essence, along with the single ability that awakened when she acquired it. She had never gained a second ability in the more than half-dozen years since. It was more than enough to raise that one ability to bronze rank, even without training or monster cores.

They needed to select two more essences for Sophie to complete a combination. Emir offered the insight of experience, having seen many essences in action. Clive had a tablet with the full list of recorded abilities from the Magic Society and years of cataloguing such abilities. He was the best equipped to describe the kind of powers each combination was likely to awaken. Rufus had seen many people at his family's school learning to use their abilities and understood the skills and training required to make the most of various power sets.

"The balance essence has a high-skill requirement," Rufus said.

"And by skill, he doesn't just mean quick hands or combat technique," Emir said. "Many skill-based abilities do require them but it isn't always about reflexes and muscle memory."

"Timing, judgement and the ability to anticipate are all key," Rufus said. "When Jason was chasing you, you got away, yet woke up to find him waiting for you. You think that was an accident? He sent you to where he knew he could find you. That is the kind of skill that makes for great adventurers."

"Thank you," Jason said brightly.

"Potentially great," Rufus corrected. "Very, very eventually."

"That's less nice, but I'll take it."

"The difference between simple abilities and skill abilities is their effectiveness when used inexpertly," Rufus explained. "Simple abilities are easy to use and broadly effective, even with an inexpert user. A bolt of lightning that tracks enemies isn't hard to get right."

Skill abilities fall flat if not employed correctly. Use them the right way, in the right moment, though, and they can turn a fight on its head.”

“Swift and balance is an interesting essence pairing,” Emir said. “Danielle Geller has those essences and knows how to use them well. Of course, you won’t be able to match her dimension essence. Even her family was lucky to get a hold of that.”

“I also have the balance essence,” Clive said. “My abilities are very spell-oriented and require more anticipation and timing than agility or martial ability. As a celestine, you can expect most of your abilities to be of the utility type, rather than spells or special attacks.”

“What kind of utility?” Belinda asked.

“As with everything else,” Clive said, “it depends on the essence and the awakening stone involved. With the swift essence you already have, Miss Wexler, you can expect movement abilities and effects conditional on mobility. The balance essence is trickier to predict. My powers, for example, are about balancing risk and reward, rather than finesse. Lady Geller, on the other hand, does require finesse, along with judgement and timing. The reward for all that challenge is abilities that can overturn a fight in an instant.”

“You’re saying skill abilities are better if you have skills,” Sophie said, “and simple abilities are better if you’re crap at everything.”

“That’s not exactly right,” Emir said. “Simple abilities are more useful in more situations. In most circumstances, the best solution is the simple one. If you’re building a team of adventurers, the last thing you want is to have a roster full of skill specialists. You mostly want people who have simple abilities and know how to leverage them effectively, with some high-skill people splashed in.”

“Take Jason as an example,” Rufus said. “He has to work harder to efficiently eliminate monsters most adventurers find easy. It takes him more skill and effort just to achieve the same result, let alone be better. His strength is handling monsters that many adventurers couldn’t beat at all. That makes him a valuable addition to a team with a preponderance of simple abilities, while he would have little to add to a team already loaded up with high-skill power sets.”

“So you’re highly skilled, are you?” Sophie asked Jason sceptically.

“I caught you,” he shot back.

“The effectiveness of any power set comes down to the user, whatever the power,” Emir said. “My abilities, for example, fall on the simple side of the scale. Some martial technique helps, but they are fast, powerful and useful in almost any scenario. Against someone who uses high-skill abilities, I need to pressure them so their abilities that are

hard to execute become impossible. If I succeed, I win. If I don't, the fight is turned around on me in a key moment and I lose."

"I think something that has been overlooked," Clive said, "is that every adventurer has a power set of twenty abilities. While most people tend to skew one way or the other on the skill-simplicity scale, very few are all simple or all skill-based. Even if you end up with a lot of high-skill abilities, you will likely have a handful of more straightforward ones. They won't be the most exciting, but you'll find yourself using them the most, leveraging them to set up your more specialised ones."

"He's right," Rufus said. "My more exotic powers tend to finish fights, but it's the simple and reliable ones that make that possible."

"You also need to understand that you don't really get a choice in which way you go," Clive said. "Randomness is inherent to awakening essence abilities. People with an excess of time and access to experts sometimes try and slant the results, but even the most expensive and laborious efforts have mixed results at best. Some people just end up with high-skill abilities, and an essence like balance makes it all the more likely."

"I will say this, though," Rufus said. "It's been my experience that people get the abilities to which they are naturally inclined."

"Yes," Emir agreed. "I have found that people are reflected in their power set. Mine, for example, is ostentatious yet effective. Rufus' is beautiful and dangerous. I don't really know about Jason and Mr Standish."

"Jason's powers are alternately deceitful and flashy, leading to a miserable, inexorable demise," Rufus said. "There's a recording floating around of him maniacally tormenting a group of powerful adventurers as he brings them prolonged, horrifying deaths."

Everyone turned to look at Jason.

"It was in a mirage chamber," he said. "None of them actually died."

"Something you need to understand," Emir told Sophie, "is that whatever the nature of your abilities, every essence combination is powerful in the right hands. We just need to find the right essences for your particular hands."

"He's right about every combination having the potential for greatness," Rufus said. "Even the ones you might dismiss. When I was a boy, a man came through my family's academy with the duck essence. Everyone thought he was a joke, myself included. I couldn't understand why my grandfather took this boy from the countryside and placed him in our school. I learned the hard way that if you know how to use it, every essence is a threat."

“That’s why I asked Rufus to be part of this,” Jason said. “He grew up watching people come into their abilities.”

“Jason has apprised us of your strengths,” Rufus said. “Mobility and fighting skill are where he said you excel.”

“You think you can judge me?” Sophie asked Jason, then turned to Rufus.

“Did he say I fight better than him?” she asked.

“He did,” Rufus said.

“Oh,” Sophie said. “Maybe he can judge me.”

“You’re being very rude to the people trying to be our benefactors,” Belinda said through gritted teeth.

“If politeness is where they draw the line, then they aren’t exactly reliable benefactors,” Sophie said.

“That’s an attitude I recognise,” Clive said, looking at Jason. Rufus agreed with a chuckling nod.

“If you’re confident you can develop the skills,” Emir said, pulling things back on topic, “then the balance essence might be a good fit.”

“Speed and skill are exactly what I’m looking for,” Sophie said.

“Alright,” Emir said. “That leaves one last essence. The adept essence is the obvious choice if skill is where you want to focus.”

“Rather than push harder into one aspect,” Rufus said, “it might be better to diversify. Something that still synergises while offering different kinds of abilities.”

“That’s a good point,” Emir said. “I’ve seen people who overspecialise and end up with five answers to one problem and no answers to the rest.”

“Wind essence,” Clive said confidently, tapping the list. “There’ll be at least one mobility power and it’ll be different from what the swift essence will give out. Some elemental control would definitely expand her power set, but wind will better match speed and skill than earth or fire would.”

“You make a compelling argument, Mr Standish,” Emir said and Rufus nodding his agreement.

“What confluence essence does the swift, balance and wind combination produce?” Rufus asked.

“Mystic,” Clive said, not bothering to look it up. “If you wanted something more aggressive, you could swap out balance for a might essence it would produce the onslaught confluence.”

“Not a good idea,” Rufus said. “Onslaught is best for humans with all those special attacks.”

“Not an option anyway,” Jason said. “Might essences get snapped up quickly, so there's none on our list.”

“Mystic is definitely the superior choice for a celestine,” Clive said. “Mystic can awaken some very interesting utility powers, in which they excel.”

“Mystic is a common confluence essence,” Rufus said. “That isn't just because so many combinations produce it, though. A lot of useful abilities come out of the mystic essence. It's an easy and effective choice, especially when you're working with common essences.”

“I have the mystic essence myself,” Emir said. “Staff, might, magic and mystic. All three of my combination essences are common. Two of those are highly sought after but still common, yet I've been nothing but happy with them.”

“Mr Bahadir is right,” Clive said. “The mystic essence is well known for producing the kind of abilities that are rare in other essences.”

“What kind of abilities would I get from these wind and mystic essences?” Sophie asked.

“Mystic is wide open,” Clive said. “The awakening stones you use would be the defining factor; similar to the balance essence, but even more so. As for the wind essence, you can expect something movement-related, as well as some kind of elemental control. Probably a combination of both. A flight power is quite likely.”

“A flight power?” Sophie asked.

“That's right,” Clive said.

“Flight, as in being able to fly?”

“That's how flight works, yes, Clive said.

“So that would be me, able to fly?”

“Yes. That would be you. Flying. With your flight power. That makes you fly. Am I overcomplicating this?”

“Seems straightforward to me,” Jason said. “Wish I'd known flying was on the table before I used the first essences I came across.”

“Just to be absolutely clear,” Sophie said, “I would have the power to fly.”

“You'd most likely be restricted to gliding at iron-rank,” Clive said. “Eventually, though, yes.”

Sophie and Belinda looked at each other, then back across the table.

“That's the one,” they said together.

“A definitive choice, if I’ve ever heard one,” Emir said with a chuckle.

“It has some other advantages, too,” Jason said. “The wind essence is common, but not as sought-after as a magic or a might essence. It leaves room in the budget for some awakening stones.”

“I was looking at that list,” Rufus said, picking it up off the table. “There are some interesting common picks on here. An awakening stone of the eyes is a good shot at giving a perception power.”

“I was looking at this,” Clive said, pointing out an item on the list.

“A set of two awakening stones of the hand and two awakening stones of the foot,” Rufus read. “The price is right but I’m not so sure about those stones.”

“You said yourself that every ability is good in the right hands,” Clive said. “My understanding is that Miss Wexler is quite the pugilist. Many people look down on awakening stones of the hand, but they’re well-known for awakening empty-hand abilities and attacks. Miss Phoebe Geller used a number of them and was quite satisfied with the results. They’re exactly what an unarmed combatant wants in an awakening stone.”

“I’ve seen Phoebe Geller in action,” Jason said. “I saw her make elementals explode with a punch.”

“Awakening stones of the foot can also awaken unarmed attacks but also movement abilities and are similarly worthwhile to someone focused on unarmed combat,” Clive said. “To the right essence user, which I believe Miss Wexler is, this collection of stones is very underpriced. These four stones, plus the stone of eyes and she would be well on her way to establishing her ability set.”

Emir and Rufus looked at each other, then at Clive.

“Not bad, Mr Standish,” Emir said. “Not bad at all. Thoughts, ladies?”

“Sounds right,” Sophie said. “Moving, punching, kicking. Those are my areas of expertise.”

“That would be five abilities, plus the four from using the essences,” Jason said. “Almost half your abilities awakened out of the gate is pretty good. If that’s settled, then, I’ll go straight to making purchases. I’m not the only one bargain hunting, after all.”

He stood up, then looked at Sophie.

“I make a lot of money, but this still won’t be cheap for me. The next six months, you’ll be doing a lot of work to pay this back. A lot of work.”

“That may be the first thing I’ve heard you say that I’m halfway willing to trust,” Sophie said. Jason flashed her a grin.

“If you’re willing to trust me this early, you might not have been paying attention.”

He swept out of the room dramatically, Clive and Rufus shaking their heads.

“Do any of you understand that man?” Sophie asked in Jason’s absence.

“Definitely not,” Rufus said.

“I haven’t known him very long,” Emir added.

“I’m still unclear on why he accused me of sleeping with his wife,” Clive said. “He doesn’t have a wife. Neither do I, for that matter, which did not stop him from accusing himself of sleeping with her.”

Jason suddenly stuck his head around the door.

“I just remembered,” he said. “Not sure if anyone mentioned, but one of the perks of having a full essence set is you don’t have to poo anymore.” His head retracted as he set off down the hall again.

Emir, Rufus, Clive, Belinda and Sophie all looked at the empty doorway.

“I’m changing my answer,” Emir said, breaking the silence. “I’ve just now known him long enough to realise I absolutely do not understand him at all.”

Chapter 119: This is the Moment

The Adventure Society campus became a continual series of memorial services. There were so many dead that group memorials were being held one after another. First came the largest groups, made up of the least influential adventurers who had passed. The memorials took place on the north shore, where they could be easily overseen from the high terraces of the cloud palace. Gary and Rufus, as expedition members themselves, made their way out of the cloud palace to attend each and every one. Jason, Emir and the adventurers among Emir's staff could all be found on the terraces at various times, looking on at the sombre proceedings.

After the larger group memorials came the smaller ones, each of the most prominent families having a service for the people they lost. Jason and Emir attended the service for the Geller family and Jason for the Mercers. He stood close by Cassandra, who held his hand tightly. Thadwick didn't give Jason so much as a glance.

Rufus and Gary chose not to have Farrah memorialised until they took her home. Her casket was stowed away somewhere deep in the cloud palace. Rufus had notified her parents over water link, looking twice his age after. Neither Gary nor Rufus went back to the lodgings they had shared with Farrah. Jason went to settle accounts with Madam Landry and collect their things.

Before he took Sophie to perform her essence rituals, Jason took her and Belinda up to the terraces to see one of the memorials.

"Becoming an adventurer is an opportunity," he told them, "but it's also a danger."

"You think we don't know danger?" Sophie asked.

"Of course you do," Jason said. "You know the worst kind; the malevolence you can only find in people. Monsters are different. They don't hate you. They just want to kill you. An intelligent enemy can obsess over you. Pursue you relentlessly. But you can manipulate a malevolent enemy. You can reason with them, play on their fears and desires. That doesn't work on a monster. One of you is better at killing than the other and that is the only question between you. No hesitation, no doubt. It's a simpler danger than an avaricious crime lord but one that can't be talked down or negotiated with. A monster's only objective is to kill you."

The two women looked at Jason. He was leaning on the railing as he looked at the memorial below without really seeing it. He continued to talk, gaze still caught in the distance.

“This life can kill you without giving any recourse,” he said. “It can and does take even the best of us. Being an adventurer can give you everything you ever wanted. Wealth, respect, power. For some, that’s all there is. They take it all without paying the price, but they aren’t really adventurers.”

He tapped an arm on the terrace railing.

“You’ll see amazing things, like a palace made of clouds. On almost any given day, there’s no better life than being an adventurer. But there are some days, if you’re a real adventurer, where you earn all the others. You make the hard choices and put everything on the line. You walk through the fire so no one else has to.”

He finally turned to face the two women.

“Rufus gave me this speech the night before I got my completed my essence set, and now I’ve given it to you. You’ll have to choose for yourselves what kind of adventurers to be.”

“You don’t make being what you call a real adventurer sound very appealing,” Belinda said.

He gave them an odd smile, weary and a little sad, but with an underlying satisfaction.

“I wake up every morning, proud of who I am,” he told them. “I go out into the world, never regretting that I didn’t at least try and be the person I want to be. I face dangers and make mistakes. Sometimes I get beat, and sometimes I win. I stand up for what I believe in, whatever it costs me. When you give everything you have to be who you want to be, that’s freedom, whatever your circumstances.”

He turned his head to look down at the memorial currently happening below.

“If wealth and power are all you want,” he said, “then you can have them. Make all the safe choices and reap the rewards. Many adventurers do just that and, objectively, it’s the smart choice. But if you want to see who you really are, what you’re really capable of, you have to push yourself to the limit. There’s no better job for that than being an adventurer.”

Turned from the railing, looking at them straight on.

“You get the essences either way,” he said. “You have six months to decide what comes after. For now, Clive should have the room ready.”

On the way to one of Emir’s ritual rooms, they passed through one of the walkways connecting two wings of the palace. It was high up on the towers, spanning over the sea below. It was broad, with open-air sides and doubled as a garden. Flowering vines grew

directly out of the cloud-stuff, lush green leaves and bright blossoms lining the sides of the walkway. Jason laughed as they walk through it.

“I don’t think I’ve gone a day in this palace without a pleasant surprise,” he said.

“Good,” Belinda said. “It’s not just us, then.”

“How do you find your way around?” Sophie asked. “We’ve gotten lost more than once.”

“One of my abilities maps all the places I go,” Jason said absently as he stepped to smell the flowers. “Can you smell that? This is amazing.”

“You think flowers are amazing?” Sophie asked.

“He stores this entire palace in a bottle not much bigger than your head and still successfully cultivates flowers. Where’s your sense of wonder?”

“Speaking of scents,” Belinda said, “what’s the perfume you’re wearing?”

“I’m not wearing one,” Jason said.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed,” Belinda said. “Lots of men wear scents.”

“I’m not worried about being embarrassment,” Jason said. “I’m really not wearing a scent.”

“Humans don’t smell like that,” Belinda said. “Just a little bit of sweat and they smell like leather left in a damp cupboard. You smell more like an elf or a celestine, but even more so. Fresh, like, um...”

“Springtime,” Sophie said as Belinda searched for the right word.

“Yeah,” Belinda said, looking at Sophie with surprise. “That’s exactly it.”

“I’m not human,” Jason said. “This is just how I smell.”

He resumed his way along the cloudy garden path and Belinda shared a look with Sophie.

“He smells like springtime,” Belinda said.

“So what?” Sophie asked and followed after Jason.

The ritual room had the usual walls and ceiling made of cloud, but the floor was a single slab of black stone, cut perfectly level and smooth. Given that the room was around half the size of a basketball court, Jason was impressed. Clive was waiting for them, with a magic diagram drawn on the floor with lines of golden light.

“Clive is going to be doing the rituals,” Jason said. “We’d be here all day if it were me and he’s the expert, in any case.”

Clive's essence ability, Enact Ritual, made drawing-out and performing rituals much more convenient. Jason looked over the diagram, which had two magical circles partly

overlapping as its core. Jason's knowledge of ritual magic included several essence rituals, but this was more complicated than anything he knew.

"I thought essence rituals were meant to be the simplest ones," Jason said.

"This is a double-essence ritual circle," Clive explained. "The idea is that absorbing more essences at once promotes inter-essence synergy. It's yet to be proven effective due to our limited understanding of how abilities are selected, but it doesn't hurt to try."

"Two at once?" Sophie asked warily. "Will there be any side-effects?"

"None at all," Clive said. "In fact, while studies have never been able to prove an increase in synergy, they have discovered that simultaneous absorption alleviates the purging effect compared to sequential absorption."

"When you hit iron rank, your body will be improved through magic," Jason said. "Part of that improvement is dumping out all the bits it doesn't like in the form of gunk."

"Gunk?" Sophie asked.

"Lots of gunk," Clive confirmed and pointed over at the side of the room where there was a small door. "As soon as you've absorbed your essences, go straight through there before it hits you. Belinda, you should join her as she may pass out. There is a shower in there for once she's done, and Jason kindly provided some of his crystal wash supply that I also left in there. There is also an extensive closet, from which Mr Bahadir said you may take anything you like to keep."

"You might not even need the crystal wash," Jason said as Sophie and Belinda wandered over to take a look into the next room. There was a shower large enough to lay down in, plus benches and cabinets.

"The shower will probably be enough," Jason continued.

"That is a lie," Clive said. "You will absolutely need the crystal wash. Won't she, Jason?"

"Yes," Jason sullenly conceded.

"If you knew Jason," Clive said, "you would realise that he would rather part with those essences than his crystal wash. Speaking of which, do you have them?"

Jason took out the two essences had procured, along with five awakening stones, laying them all out on a bench sitting against the wall. The essences were cubes, shining with colour. The wind essence was a roiling mass of white mixed with streaks of pale grey and blue. The balance essence had its colours divided in a dead-straight line in the middle. The colours of each side constantly shifted in contrast to the other: Red and blue, black and white, green and purple. Most of the awakening stones were a plain peach colour by comparison, while the last looked like an oversized glass eye.

“That one’s kind of creepy,” Belinda said, looking at the eyeball one.

“How do we even know those are what they say they are?” Sophie asked.

“Really?” Belinda asked, turning on her. “Are trying to get them to change their minds?”

“I wouldn’t worry,” Jason said. “Clive takes his experiment subjects from villages in the delta where people will just assume a monster got them.”

“What?” Clive asked.

“We still don’t know why Asano is doing any of this,” Sophie said. “If he’s in this to help us, then why give me essences when throwing us through a portal would get us away from everything?”

“Sophie!” Belinda scolded.

“No,” Jason said, his voice suddenly hard and cold, arresting everyone’s attention. The signature amused insouciance fell from his expression, his relaxed posture becoming firm. He locked his eyes with Sophie across the chamber.

“It’s hard for you to trust,” he told her.

“So?” she said, glaring back.

“The real answer is half-measures. I agreed to help you. Sending you away to live the same lives again just leads you to the same end. If I’m going to save you, then you’re going to stay saved, which means that when I’m done with you, you need the means to protect yourselves.”

He arrived in front of the bench with the essences, placing a hand on each.

“In this world, that means essences,” he said, picking them up.

“They are the line between acting and being acted upon,” he continued as he walked back toward Sophie. “They are the difference between dominion and obedience. Justice and iniquity. Controlling your destiny and being a pawn of fate.”

He held the essences out in front of her.

“Why doesn’t matter,” he said. “All that matters is the choice you make, right now. Sometimes the moments that define our lives go unnoticed until later. This is not one of those. I am offering you the chance to literally grasp your destiny. Take it or walk away, knowing that this is the moment in which everything that comes after is decided.”

He stood there, still holding out the essences.

Sophie looked at the essences in his hands, then up at his face. He gave her a goofy grin.

“What are you?” she asked him. “A fool? A madman? A liar playing games only he can see?”

“Yes,” he told her, eyes sparkling. “I once met a woman who thought that essences shape who you are but she was wrong. Essences are power, and power doesn’t change you. It reveals you. Give someone the power to be who they always wanted and you will see who they always wanted to be. This is who I am, good and bad. This is your chance to be who you want to be, not who you have to be to survive.”

Her response came in a soft voice; the first time Jason has seen her vulnerable.

“I don’t know who I am without that.”

“Do you want to find out?” he asked gently.

She nodded, placing her hands on the essences he was still holding out for her.

Chapter 120:

Iron Rank

In the ritual room, Clive was rubbing his hands together.

“Now for the good part,” he said.

“The good part?” Belinda asked.

“Jason has an ability that he shamelessly squanders,” Clive said. “He could be a one-man revolution in how we categorise powers but he refuses to come and work for the Magic Society.”

“That would be the Magic Society run by the guy who wanted Miss Wexler for what I can only assume to be a creepy love dungeon?” Jason asked.

“Oh,” Clive said, looking between Sophie and Belinda. “I’m probably not going to sell you on the virtue of the Magic Society then.”

“Not likely, no,” Sophie said. She was still holding the two essences she had accepted from Jason.

“Hold on,” Clive said, turning to Belinda. “Why did you accept the job as my assistant, then?”

“To find out more about Lamprey, obviously. Also, it sounded pretty interesting and no one is looking to put me in a... love dungeon.”

“I guess Jory didn’t show you all the renovations,” Jason said, which got a laugh from Sophie. Jason’s head swivelled around to look at her in surprise.

“What?” Sophie asked.

“I’ve never heard you laugh before,” Jason said.

“You have a problem with the way I laugh?”

“Not at all,” he said. “It’s just that our normal interactions range from you saying you don’t trust me to you kicking me in the head.”

“She’s like that with everyone,” Belinda said.

“I guarantee you that Jason’s worse to deal with,” Clive said.

“How am I worse? I’m affable. And I didn’t just make up that kicking me in the head thing.”

“He’s definitely worse,” Clive said to Belinda. “You have no idea what he put me through when we first met.”

“Jory told me to do it,” Jason said.

“He told you to tell your landlady that I slept with the wife you don’t have?”

“He left the specifics to me, but yeah.”

“Why would he do that?” Clive asked.

“You were investigating me for forging spirit coins or whatever.”

“You made counterfeit coins too?” Belinda asked Jason.

“Wait,” Clive said, turning to Belinda. “You made counterfeit spirit coins?”

“Er... no.”

“I think it’s time to use that ability, Clive,” Jason said. He opened his contacts list, selected Sophie, Belinda and Clive and sent party invites.

➤ You have received a party invitation from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

Sophie and Belinda were startled by the sudden appearance of screens in front of them. Belinda started waving her hand in the air in front of her.

“Party invitation?” she asked. “Like where everyone dresses up?”

“More like where people form a group to go fight a monster,” Jason said. “This is an ability I have that I can share with other people. It lets you know things about the world.”

“What kind of things?” Sophie asked.

“Accept the invitation and find out.”

She barely hesitated before nodding, to Jason’s relief. Sophie was like an alley cat that had been kicked so many times it didn’t trust you when you tried to feed it. Shortly afterwards she was staring wide-eyed at one of the essences in her hands.

Item: [Wind Essence] (unranked, common)

Manifested essence of the wind (consumable, essence).

- Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.
- Effect: Imbues 1 awakened wind essence ability and 4 unawakened wind essence abilities.
- You have absorbed 1/4 essences. Once absorbed, an essence cannot be relinquished or replaced.

“I don’t see anything,” Belinda said and Jason offered her his hand to shake. As they touched, a window appeared in front of her.

-
- Jason Asano (outworlder).
 - Essence User (iron rank).
-

“One of the features is that you can identify things by touch. You don’t get much from people, but it’s useful for items.”

He looked over at Clive with a frown.

“As you can see.”

Clive was pulling a series of racks out of his storage space, laden with items. He started picking them up, one by one, scribbling in a notebook in between.

“Clive,” Jason said.

“Yeah?” Clive asked absently, not looking up from what he was doing.

“Did you save a up a bunch of items you wanted to catalogue until they next time we were in a party?”

“I figured if I asked, you’d say no.”

“Of course I’d say no.”

“That’s why I thought to myself: ‘what would Jason do?’ Obviously, he’d just do it without asking and then point out that no one said he couldn’t.”

“That’s what I’d do, is it?”

“Of course it is,” Clive said. “Also, I’d like to point out that no one said I couldn’t.”

Jason groaned.

“Look, we need to get on with this ritual,” he said. “Pack it up for now and you can do some more while she’s recovering before we move onto awakening stones.”

“You promise you’ll let me finish at the end?” Clive asked.

“Yeah, alright,” Jason conceded. “It’s not like I actually have to do anything. I just don’t want you treating me like I’m administration software.”

Jason looked at the racks of items Clive had pulled out.

“Do you even have time to be doing this? I was surprised you even agreed to help with the essence ritual. I thought you’d be neck-deep in what they brought back from the expedition by now.”

“I won’t be allowed to see it for at least a few days,” Clive said as the racks started vanishing back into his dimensional space. “Whoever figures out what they were after will look very good in the eyes of the wider Magic Society. Lucian Lamprey is motivated entirely by personal benefit and I’m the son of eel farmers. First look at what they brought back goes to the Magic Society members he wants favours from.”

The mention of Lamprey arrested Sophie and Belinda’s attention.

“I think you may have extended the definition of benefits in an unsavoury direction,” Belinda said.

“Do you think your colleagues will find the answer?” Jason asked.

“Highly unlikely,” Clive said. “Greenstone’s Magic Society is almost as rotten as its Adventure Society. It’s basically a social club for people who like magic toys, with only a handful of genuine researchers. There aren’t a lot of experts per field and I suspect it will require actual expertise in astral magic. Aside from me, the only other astral magic scholar in Greenstone was Landemere Vane. Who you killed.”

“That sounds a little accusatory,” Jason said.

“It would have been nice if you had killed someone stupid. He was a capable magical scholar.”

“He didn’t list his accreditations before trying to kill and eat me.”

“Did you just say eat?” Belinda asked.

“I certainly did,” Jason said. “You two don’t have a monopoly on being caught in bad situations.”

While Clive put away the racks of paraphernalia, Jason moved over to Sophie. She was still staring at the essences in her hands with fascination.

“Now you know,” he said.

“Know what?” she asked, looking up at him.

“How I see the world.”

“Is it like this for everyone, where you come from?”

“No. I lost my humanity when I came to this world. This is what I got in trade.”

She watched his expression as he looked at the essences in her hands. He was clearly caught up in some memory, his mask of perpetual amusement briefly absent.

“You’ve been through your own troubles, haven’t you?” she asked softly.

He looked up, flashing her a grin as his usual visage returned.

“Nothing that rakish charm and dashing good looks couldn’t handle.”

She frowned, searching his face for something authentic.

“I can never tell what’s real with you,” she said. “I’ve known manipulators before. The good ones use vulnerability as a weapon.”

“When I first met Cassandra, I told her that there was only one way to use vulnerability as a weapon.”

“That was a lie.”

“Yes.”

“Leave her with a question and plant the seed of seduction,” Sophie said. “I’ve seen it work before.”

“It was just some flirty banter,” Jason said. “It wasn’t some kind of organised campaign.”

“Of course it wasn’t. Men like you try to turn the world into a story, even with friends and lovers. It’s like breathing; you don’t even realise you’re doing it.”

“You seem to think you know me pretty well,” he said.

“I’ve known plenty like you. Some are subtle, others outrageous, like you. Keeping people off-balance so you can tip them over. You’re not special, Jason Asano.”

Clive had finished packing away his things. He stood with Belinda, observing Jason and Sophie across the room. They couldn’t hear the softly worded exchange but watched their body language. They stood right in each other’s faces, neither looking away. Their bodies had confrontational stances but were close together, the cubes in Sophie’s hands filled most of the space between them.

“That’s trouble,” Clive said to Belinda.

“Yep,” she agreed.

“I hope Jason doesn’t do something stupid.”

“If he doesn’t keep his hands to himself, she’ll break them.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Clive said. “Jason has very specific views on power relationships, and while his values might be strange, they’re important to him. He’s not Lucian Lamprey.”

“Then what kind of stupid are you talking about?”

“Look at the choices he made to get you here,” Clive said. “What iron-ranker would face down a silver in order to turn a pair of thieves into adventurers?”

“I still don’t know why he would go this far for strangers. He made his big speech but that felt more like he was telling a story than telling the truth.”

“Farrah,” Clive started, his throat catching. “I think she was the only one that really understood him.”

“That’s the woman that died?”

Clive nodded.

“When I first met Jason I wanted to understand him better. I mean, a man from another world. For an astral magic scholar like me it’s the opportunity of a lifetime. Farrah told me that under all the... Jason, he feels constantly exposed. Beset on all sides by powers that could easily destroy him.”

“I know that feeling,” Belinda said.

“And he recognises that. It’s why he wants to help.”

“It’s that simple?”

“He has bit of a hero complex.”

“That kind of thing gets people killed,” Belinda said.

“Probably,” Clive said. “But where would you be right now if he didn’t have it?”

Clive left Belinda at the edge of the room, moving up to the magic diagram. He directed Jason to get out of the way with Belinda and Sophie to step into the magic circle. He had her hold her hands out from her sides with an essence cube in each hand. He took out a magic wand and started waving it like he was conducting an orchestra. The air in the room started to stir, centred on the diagram and Sophie within it. It swirled around her, whipping her silver ponytail.

“Is this how your’s went?” Belinda asked Jason, quiet, so as to not interrupt.

“I didn’t have an essence ritual,” Jason said. “I just absorbed my essences with my vast magical powers.”

“Because you’re some weirdo from another world?”

“Pretty much,” Jason said, wondering once again how accurate his translation power was.

The wind was continuing to pick up as it stormed about in the enclosed ritual chamber. There was a sonorous hum and they could feel a prickling on their skin. The sharp taste of ozone filled their mouths. Light from the magic diagram on the floor started floating up in golden motes, drawn into the two essences cubes. As the light sank into them, the essences started shedding dust that floated into the air, also faintly glowing. Slowly at first, then with increasing pace, the essences dissolved, riding the wind to shroud Sophie in a magical squall. Rainbow light started appearing in the squall, sinking into Sophie’s obscured body.

The last of the essences turned to glowing dust, swirling around Sophie. Suddenly the wind stopped dead and the glowing dust stopped glowing, dropping to the ground. The magic circle faded as the now powerless dust scattered across the stone floor.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Wind Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 2 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 50% (2/4 essences).
 - [Wind Essence] has bonded to the [Power] attribute, changing [Power] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all wind essence abilities to increase the [Power] attribute.
 - You have awakened the wind essence ability [Wind Blade]. 1 of 5 wind essence abilities have been awakened.
-

“I love this part,” Clive said.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Balance Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 3 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 75% (3/4 essences).
 - [Balance Essence] has bonded to the [Recovery] attribute, changing [Recovery] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all balance essence abilities to increase the [Recovery] attribute.
 - You have awakened the balance essence ability [Equilibrium]. 1 of 5 balance essence abilities have been awakened.
-

“That didn’t feel bad at all,” Sophie said.

“Essence rituals are very gentle,” Clive said. “It’s only if you shove the essence inside yourself without one that the experience is a harsh one.”

“You’re just bitter that you didn’t get to see me do it,” Jason said.

“That’s true,” Clive said as he read the description of Sophie’s first new power.

Ability: [Wind Blade] (Wind)

- Special attack.
 - Cost: Low mana.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
 - Effect (iron): Create a cutting projectile of air.
-

“Special attack,” Clive said. You probably won’t get many, so each one is valuable.”

Ability: [Equilibrium] (Balance)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
 - Effect (iron): Meditate to slowly accrue instances of [Integrity], up to an instance threshold based on the [Recovery] attribute. Instances quickly drop off when meditation ends.
 - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

“See, this is great,” Clive said, jotting in his notebook. “Jason, you really should be helping out the Magic Society with this ability. People have an instinctive sense of their

abilities, but they aren't always great at verbalising them. The time and inaccuracy this saves is fantastic."

"Eyes on the prize, Clive," Jason said.

"Right," Clive said, refocusing on Sophie. Three intangible, translucent cubes floated out of her body, interposing on one another until they formed a single cube floating in front of her. Still insubstantial, it had a vibrant blue colour.

"The confluence essence," Clive said. "Take it."

Sophie reached out and the intangible object became solid at her touch. It began dissolving into blue smoke in her hands, which seeped into her body until it was gone.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Mystic Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 4 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 100% (4/4 essences).
 - [Mystic Essence] has bonded to the [Spirit] attribute, changing [Spirit] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all mystic essence abilities to increase the [Spirit] attribute.
 - You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Strong Soul]. 1 of 5 mystic essence abilities have been awakened.

"Strong soul sounds good," Belinda said, reading the description.

Ability: [Strong Soul] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
- Effect (iron): Disruptive-force damage dealt to you reduced by a large amount; other damage dealt to you is reduced by a small amount. Resistance to dimensional and astral effects and energies is increased. You can physically interact with incorporeal entities.

"How does having a strong soul make you take less damage?" Belinda asked.

"My advice is to just be glad it does," Jason said. "My damage reduction power is stabbing them in the back. How do you feel, Wexler?"

Sophie was still reading the last system message.

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- You have absorbed 4/4 essences.
 - All your attributes have reached iron rank.

 - You have reached iron rank.
 - You have gained damage reduction against normal-rank damage sources.
 - You have gained increased resistance to normal-rank effects.
 - You have gained the ability to sense auras.
 - You have gained the ability to sustain yourself using sources of concentrated magic.
-

She stood awestruck in the middle of the chamber, rubbing one hand over the back of the other, feeling her skin.

“This feels incredible,” she said, her usual undertone of cynicism completely absent.

“You need to go into the side room,” Clive told her.

“What?” She asked, looking over at him, distracted.

“The side room,” Clive repeated. “Now.”

“I feel fine,” Sophie said. “Better than fine.”

“Give it a moment,” Jason said, stepping up next to Clive.

“I don’t see what you’re...”

Sophie’s words cut off as her face went pale. She sprinted for the side room, slamming a hand on the golden mark that opened the door. She rushed inside and the others heard her violently throwing up.

“I’ll go check on her,” Belinda said.