

Chapter 221

The World Needs People Like You

Jason and his team made preparations for their entry into the astral space, with some preparations being more important than others.

"I just can't make that much crystal wash," Jory said. "A lot of my workshop is tied up in making the lesser miracle potions, now."

"We'll be spending months in that place, hunting down these abominations," Jason said. "There's hundreds of them."

"Your cloud house uses crystal wash more efficiently than just tipping it over your head, right?"

"Yeah," Jason reluctantly acknowledged. "It adds a diluted amount into the shower."

"There you are, then. Look, I'll delay a few orders and give you everything I can, but there's only so much I have to give."

"That's all I can ask for. Thanks, mate. Belinda told you we're having a big blow out barbie before we go, yeah?"

"She did."

"Alright, then. Best head off."

Jory and Jason went back out through the waiting room, where the Chief Priest of the Healer was just coming in.

"Mr Asano, Mr Tillman," he greeted.

"Chief Priest," Jason greeted, before heading out.

"If you have a moment, Mr Tillman," the Chief Priest said, "I would like to discuss something with you."

"Of course," Jory said, leading the Chief Priest into the break room in the back. "Can I offer you refreshments, Chief Priest?"

"I'm fine, thank you."

"Are you sure? Jason's frosted frost pepper squares aren't to be missed."

"Very well," The Chief Priest acceded and Jory put some tea on to brew as he plated a few of the sweet slices from the chiller.

"The reason I've come to see you today is to discuss the future of the clinic, here," the Chief Priest said.

"Oh?" Jory prompted, warily.

"The Healer is extremely happy with what you've accomplished here. He believes it is time for you to look at training someone to take over and move on."

Jory frowned.

“You’re trying to kick me out of my own clinic? I realise and appreciate that the Healer sanctified it, but that doesn’t give you the right to make me leave.”

“You misunderstand, Mr Tillman,” the Chief Priest said. “What you’ve done here, studying the local resources and finding the best way to make effective and affordable medicines, is a joy to my god. There are many alchemists within the church, but your dedication to those who need the most, rather than those who can afford the most, fills him with delight. He wants you to do it again, and teach others to do the same. We want the Tillman method to be spread across the world, and we’ll give you all the funding and resources you could possibly need.”

Jory looked over at the Chief priest, then turned back to the task of brewing the tea, thinking over what the priest had said. He poured out a pair of cups and brought them over with the plate of slices.

“I’m not sure how to respond to that,” Jory said. “I don’t know if I have the kind of expertise to teach others.”

“Your humility is a credit to you, Mr Tillman. Yes, you do not have the skills of a master alchemist, but you are far from incompetent and we will help you develop your proficiencies further. What is important to my god, however, is not your ability, but the way you think. We can produce the alchemists; what we want is the vision. Your vision.”

“I... I never considered anything like you’re describing. I mean, the whole world?”

“The world needs people like you, Mr Tillman. We would very much like to give you to it.”

Jory bit absently into a confectionary slice, lost in thought. The Chief Priest did the same as he waited for Jory to think things over.

“Oh, these are rather good,” the priest said.

Jory took a moment to gather his thoughts while the priest appreciatively devoured his slice as swiftly as decorum would allow.

“Why now?” Jory asked as the priest wiped his fingers on a napkin. “There’s a monster surge coming up and crazy cultists running all over the world. It seems like a bad time for a new endeavour.”

“If you wait for everything to be perfect,” the priest said, “you’ll never do anything at all. We’ve been watching you, Mr Tillman, through your recent and rapid changes of circumstances. First you were able to build your new facility, then you obtained the public endorsement of my god and the support of our church. Now, your new enterprise with the miracle potions is already bringing in wealth.”

“So, this is because I have more resources?”

“No, Mr Tillman. Compared to our church, the scale of your resources and operations are inconsequential. What matters is character. What did you do after you went from a struggling alchemist trying to help people to a moneyed and respected member of the community? You worked even harder to help people. More research into expanding your existing range of cheaper medicines. Hiring people to work on production so you could extend your operations without comprising care. We’ve been watching, Mtw Tillman, and we like what we see. You have made a place for yourself in my god’s affections.”

Jory had an awkward and embarrassed expression as he searched for an appropriate response.

“Thank you?”

“No, Mr Tillman, thank *you*.”

The priest stood up.

“Take some time to think about our proposal, Mr Tillman. When you’re ready to discuss it further, or if you have any questions at all, don’t hesitate to come find me.”

Half-turning to go, the priest paused, glancing down at the plate on the table and it’s remaining slices.

“Can I take one of these?”

Jason looked at the combat robe set out on the standing rack. It was mostly the scaled, matte black of umbral snakeskin, with grey leather trim. It was darker than his current combat robes, keeping the grey/black colouration but reversing it, switching the black from the embellishments to the main colour. It maintained the sleek, draping lines, enhanced by the scaled texture of the snakeskin. It looked to compromise toughness with flexibility in a ratio he was very happy with.

“I know you have been satisfied with your existing combat robes,” Gilbert said, “so I didn’t diverge too wildly with this design. That said, I took advantage of the umbral snake leather you provided, and was able to tailor the outfit to your personal needs, rather than an off the rack item. I added marsh hydra leather to the umbral snake hide and the lining is deep wrym silk, which I was quite lucky to get my hands on. It did add to the cost a little, but I’m confident that you’ll find the expense reflected in the results. The aesthetics I largely maintained, although obviously the material has made for a darker result. I designed the look to compliment your famous cloak power.”

Jason reached out to touch the robes.

Item: [Dark Hydra Robe] (bronze rank, epic)

A full body armour, carefully hand-crafted from the leather of an umbral mountain snake and a marsh hydra, lined with deep wyrm silk. (armour, cloth/leather).

- Effect: Increased resistance to damage. Highly effective against cutting and piercing damage, less effective against blunt damage.
- Effect: Rapidly repairs damage. Can reconstitute itself from near-total destruction.
- Effect: Heal over time effects have increased strength and duration.
- Effect: Increases natural poison resistance. Abilities that enhance poison resistance are enhanced.
- Effect: Weapons conjured while wearing the robes inflict [Umbral Snake Venom].
- Effect: Adapts to fit the wearer, within a certain range.

- [Umbral Snake Venom] (damage-over-time, poison, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until poison is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

“Bert, you have well and truly outdone yourself,” Jason said.

“I aim to please, Mr Asano.”

“Then you overshot, because I’m delighted.”

With a potential stay of months in the monster-infested astral space, Jason and his team anticipated reaching bronze during their stay. There was a good chance that a lengthy stay would make them miss the monster surge, but months in the magically saturated astral space would be like a private monster surge that never ended. As the astral space was short on shopping outlets, they were buying equipment now. They would each need at least some basic bronze-rank gear to make the most of their new rank.

Humphrey’s expenses were slight, as he conjured his most critical equipment. Since he was from the wealthiest family, he took on the costs of most of the team’s general pool of consumables. This was mostly healing and mana potions of both bronze and iron-rank. Rather than go to Jory, he largely purchased high-cost, high-yield potions from the trade hall.

He did buy a supply of miracle potions from Jory, although it was a low-cook, low-batch potion. Jory spared them what he could, letting the Adventure Society contact his far-flung customer base to explain why their were delays in shipping. Most of the customers for the miracle potion were distant, but the demand was high.

Sophie and Belinda, but mostly Sophie, had earned some money adventuring. To that they added the nest egg once intended to fund their escape from the city. Sophie purchased the armour made from leftover umbral snake leather, although the design was different to Jason's. She preferred a fitted but still supple outfit, in this case with chitinous plates supplementing the snakeskin where flexibility was not required. It offered some extra protection over critical areas, looking to Jason like sexy tactical armour.

Belinda had a few costs, as her role-switching powers required some basic gear for different roles, including wands, light armour, heavy armour, a bow, a shield and a selection of melee weapons. This kind of equipment was outside of her knowledge base, so Gary served as her expert guide. He helped her pick out some reliable, basic gear at good prices, making sure she wasn't fed a lemon.

Belinda also had her own familiars that would rank up at some stage, but didn't have the cash Jason did during their trip to the markets of Jayapura. She only had enough materials to summon her familiars once at bronze rank.

Clive and Neil both had growth items, courtesy of Clive's efforts on their first trip to the astral space. Much like a familiar re-summoning, the ritual of bronze ascension each one required came with expensive material requirements.

Of all the team, Jason had it the worst in terms of expenses, although he made no complaints. His growth items and familiars were a blessing than many adventurers would and did envy, and he firmly believe that every coin spent on them was completely worthwhile.

Jason had blown a huge chunk of his money on summoning materials for his familiars, which were his first priority. Compared to his equipment, they were his allies, valuable and important. Nothing took precedence in Jason's mind over giving them everything he could after the support they had given him. Their comforting presence within his soul had been a boon during his recovery, and without Colin, especially, there may not have been a soul to recover.

He had made sure that he had enough to summon them at bronze-rank and resummon them once more if something happened to them. With the Adventure Society supplying the materials for Colin's rank-up ritual, he had enough to summon the already-bronze leech monster twice more times.

Between those materials and what he had spent feeding materials into his cloud house, he had largely expended his funds. If not for the huge monetary reward from the final quest before his quest system went away, he would have had trouble affording anything.

Luckily, he was able to conjure his own weapon, saving the cost of that. He restricted himself to upgraded versions of his existing armour and boots, courtesy of Gilbert and Filbert, respectively. Supplying the main material for his armour also brought down the cost, although it remained a premium product with a premium price. Aside from those, Jason bought a large supply of cheap consumables, mostly potions from Jory and a large supply of the throwing darts that he used.

His last notable expense was a pair of skill books. They were common topics, therefore not too expensive. One covered the basics of alchemy and the other and artifice, the construction of magical items. They gave him none of the expertise of Jory or the man who supplied his darts. They were a contingency, should he find himself able to scrape together the materials for some consumables, but lack for a craftsman. More than the books themselves, it was the basic tools of artifice and alchemy that were the larger cost.

Jason had been trepidatious about using skill books again, after the last time triggered flashbacks. Mercifully, using the iron-rank books proved less stressful than the bronze-rank book he had used previously and did not trigger any flashbacks.

In the conference room next to the office of the Adventure Society director, Jason's team was lined up along one side of the table. On the other was Elspeth Arella.

"The Cavendish family have declined to let Beth Cavendish and her team join you," Arella said. "A lot of capable adventurers died the first time around, and that was a matter of weeks, rather than months. There also weren't Builder cultists to contend with."

"Then who is being tapped to supplement us?" Jason asked.

"There has been some discussion of that," Arella said. "Once we realised that Humphrey's familiar would take up one of the available spaces We considered bringing in four-person team from outside the city, we ultimately decided that your team would go alone. Assume you are still willing to do that."

"Of course we are," Sophie said fiercely. Jason and Arella might have reached an amicable détente, but Sophie still harboured resentment over Arella's attempt to sell her off to Lucian Lamprey.

"Did you manage to find out which people were left behind when the trial ended?" Clive asked.

"We did," Arella said. "All locals; none of the people Bahadir brought in from outside. We've been looking into their families and other connections. For most of them, their teams thought they were dead. If your familiar is accurate about them still being alive but remaining behind, then we have our cultists."

“How capable are they in a fight?” Humphrey asked.

“Not great,” Arella said. “Decent by Greenstone standards, but we all know about Greenstone standards. The danger they represent is not to be underestimated, however. With the amount of time they’ve spent in there, they will almost certainly be bronze rank by now. They also have the numbers. If all thirteen are still alive, that’s better than two to one against you.”

“Our best bet would be to bide our time once we get there,” Neil said. “Get some of our own people over the line to bronze-rank before taking the fight to them.”

“The problem is, we don’t know how much time we have,” Clive said. “We don’t know exactly what they’re doing in there, or how they’re doing it.”

“Well, finding out will be something we have to figure out,” Jason said.

“We can offer you one possible advantage,” Arella said. “Everyone who went into the astral space had their aura signatures checked. We couldn’t test for star seeds specifically at that point, but anyone with an aura signature that didn’t match their existing record was excluded.”

“Meaning the cult probably sent through people who didn’t have seeds,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Arella said. “It means that if any of them haven’t reached bronze rank, their tracking stones will still work, if you take them with you into the astral space. If they’ve all reached bronze rank, though, the change to their aura will obviate the power of the stones. Adventurers need new badges at each rank for a reason.”

“The stones should still tell us if they’re alive or dead though,” Clive said. “That’s not nothing. The Order of the Reaper’s astral space is a dangerous zone and some or all of them could very well have perished.”

“That would be the most fortuitous result,” Arella said. “Whatever circumstance you walk into, however, your ultimate goal is the same: Find out what they are doing and stop it. This is that exceptionally rare three star iron-rank mission. We can’t predict the situation, so the specifics of how you go about that are for you to decide.”

“Trust the person on the ground,” Humphrey said.

“That was how your mother put it, yes,” Arella said. “She has a lot of faith in you.”

“It does sound dangerous,” Belinda said.

“Still better odds than what we were looking at a year ago,” Sophie told her. “We’d just come under Ventress’ protection, with Silva breathing down our necks.”

Sophie turned to Arella.

“Any word on Silva?”

Jason knew that long-term incarceration was a rare form of punishment in his new world. Punishment was more immediately punitive, often through fines and seizures to the wealthy, or indentured servitude for the poor. For the powerful, denial of access to the services like the Magic and Adventure Societies could be very harmful. Execution was also available for more heinous crimes.

“Yes,” Arella said. “He will be returned here, with Lamprey being sent to his own birth city. Both will be receiving skeletal suppression.”

Clive let out a low whistle, while Humphrey and Neil winced. It wasn’t a form of punishment Jason had heard of.

“What’s skeletal suppression?” he asked.

“It’s like a suppression collar,” Clive said. “Except instead of a collar, the magic is inscribed directly onto the skeleton. Permanent loss of powers. It’s an incredibly invasive and painful procedure derived from necromancy techniques. It’s a controversial punishment that many, including the church of the Healer, think should be outlawed.”

“It’s usually a death sentence anyway,” Neil said. “People who receive that kind of punishment usually have enemies. Once they’re cut loose without any power, those enemies catch up with them fast.”

“Works for me,” Sophie said. “I’m exactly the kind of enemy who’d like to catch up with him.”

“What about the cultist I caught?” Jason asked, forcibly changing the topic. “Has he coughed up anything useful?”

“The Adventure Society’s Continental Council sent people to work on him,” Arella said. “They’re doing so as we speak and haven’t told me much, yet. They did say that there seems to be an awareness amongst the Builder cultists of you, Jason. They call you the Rejector.”

“That’s not a cool nickname,” Jason said. “Why couldn’t it have been something more awesome, like ‘the Defiant,’ or ‘Captain Tremendous.’”

“You actually want people to call you Captain Tremendous?” Sophie asked.

“Doesn’t everyone want that?”

“This conversation has officially crossed my idiocy threshold,” Arella said, getting up. “This meeting is adjourned.”

Chapter 222

I'm Very Big on Cowardice

As Emir's team came closer to opening the portal, the decision was made to move the team to the site under the lake. Jason's ongoing availability would be useful for the final push to open the portal and the team needed to be ready to go. They weren't exactly sure when Emir's researchers would finally succeed and the team had to be packed and waiting.

Even if they navigated the dangers and returned safely, it would be months before they saw family and friends again. There was a large barbecue party in the park district the day before, friends and family making big farewells before the more private ones that would take place the following morning.

Having been the organiser, Jason played smiling host, shaking hands and chatting with the friends he had made over the better part of the last year. Danielle Geller told him to look after her son, but also himself. Neil's mother harangued him about not getting her boy into any trouble.

The event started before lunch, continued through the afternoon and on into the evening as the barbecues were fired up again for dinner. Over the course of the day, Jason would discreetly slip away, though, watching from afar or wandering through the pretty gardens of the park district alone. Jason had made close, amazing friends, but as he watched them with their families, he was reminded that he hadn't known any of them longer than a year.

Jason's powerful and controlled aura allowed to hide his inner turmoil effectively from most of the people present. A silver ranker would have to rudely explore his aura, and the gold rankers followed decorum and had their auras non-intrusively alert for danger without probing the people around them. This was true for all but Arabelle. Her sensitive and powerful aura senses shamelessly, if subtly, examined Jason's condition. To her surprise, Jason sensed her intrusion and gave her a flat look.

During one of Jason's little disappearances, she sent Gary after him, rather than follow herself. The big leonid was also one of the few with no family present, with even the wanderlustful Emir having his granddaughter. Sophie and Belinda were the others, the pair having considered each other their only real family for years.

The park district was a combination of open, grassy spaces and feature gardens. Gary found Jason sitting alone in a small gazebo in a garden that artfully showed off the more attractive plant life of the delta. It was rather like a small version of the Geller Estate.

“It feels like we haven’t seen so much of each other in a while,” Gary said, sitting down next to Jason. “Even when I’m living in your houseboat.”

Rufus’ reaction to Farrah’s death had been loud and immediate. Gary’s mourning of their friend had been slower, affecting more of a lasting change. He was more sober and withdrawn, and there was still uncertainty about his team, now just him and Rufus. Farrah had been the glue holding their trio so neatly together and, in her absence, they hadn’t really done any adventuring as a pair. Rufus had worked out his anger through a series of solitary monster hunts, while Gary threw himself into craftsmanship.

Gary was older than Rufus and Farrah, like Jory having spent much of his time at iron rank on his profession as a weaponsmith. In the wake of Farrah’s death he had retreated back into his profession, using the hammering of steel and the heat of the forge to still the thoughts in his head. It was a meditative process as he produced one weapon after another.

Rufus had split his time between the academy annex project with the Geller family and the investigation into the Builder cult. Gary had, in turn, spent most of the last few months working with the Magic Society on the Builder cult’s construct creatures, looking for effective ways to combat what seemed to be the cult’s main fighting force.

Gary had made a weapon for Jason that would be effective against construct enemies. His subsequent work didn’t share the same care and time that went into Jason’s sword, instead focusing on volume. Greenstone’s weapons market had become flush with anti-construct weapons that were inexpensive and reliable.

Slowly the pair had started to come back together. Rufus had reached out to Gary to help with the construction of his training complex. It was not high-skill work and it could have been any decent smith, but Gary had taken to the task with enthusiasm.

More recently, with Jason’s team about to enter the astral space, they had come together to help the team prepare. Rufus took them through everything they knew about the cult, while Gary took them through everything they knew about the cult’s weapons. Any advantage they could get over the cult or their construct monsters could be the difference between life and death. Gary had also helped the team prepare equipment for bronze rank. Belinda had received the most help, ending up with a number of Gary’s personal creations at very friendly prices.

Jason and Gary sat together amiably in the gazebo.

“Nothing seems to fit together quite right with her gone, does it?” Jason asked.

“No,” Gary said. “It’s like I’m waiting for things to go back to normal, when it already has. I just don’t like that normal has a big, Farrah-shaped hole in it. I don’t even know

when my team became such a big part of who I am, but it feels like a part of me went with her.”

Jason couldn't find any words to support him that didn't sound trite, so instead he briefly leaned into the big man; a simple gesture of solidarity.

“She'd be proud of you, you know,” Gary said. “The adventurer you've become.”

“I was so bratty to her,” Jason said with a sad, reminiscent laugh. “Moralising at her, when I didn't know a damn thing. She must have thought I was a spoiled child.”

“The thing about children,” Gary said, “is that they're innocent. She didn't want you to lose that.”

“I don't think I've succeeded,” Jason said. “There's a lot of blood on my hands, now.”

“Arabelle told me that there is only so much value to be had in looking at the things we've done,” Gary said. “In the end, all they can do is help us decide what we're going to do next. That's what matters.”

Jason nodded. He wasn't the only one Rufus' mother had guided through dark times.

“What's next for you?” Jason asked Gary.

“Well, Rufus is here for a while, with the training complex he's doing. Our contract with Emir has really been over since he got here. I was thinking it might be time to go home, help them ride out the monster surge. Home, home, not Vitesse.”

“You have family back home?”

“Yeah, I'm thick with them,” Gary said. “Becoming an adventurer has really helped them out, and I've been able to send home essences for more of them. It's kept me away from them too, though. I think it might be time to go back for a while.”

“I squandered my family,” Jason said. “I only really saw my sister anymore. She's a lot older than me and my brother and didn't really grow up with us. She lived close to me with her husband and little girl and tried to mend fences between me, Mum and my brother. I didn't realise what I was throwing away in refusing to let go of the past. Not until I came here and no longer had the choice.”

“Once you're done with the astral space, you can come visit my family,” Gary said. “You'll get all the mothering you could ask for and then some.”

“I'd like that,” Jason said. “Our plan is to go to Vitesse, after we get back out. We're staying focused on the task in front of us, though.”

“The way it should be,” Gary said. “Treasure your team, Jason. Adventuring is a dangerous business, and you're about to face about as much danger as this job has to offer.”

Each of Jason's team members went through their own farewells. For Humphrey, it was an almost formal affair. The Gellers had been sending their young people out into lives of adventure for hundreds of years and Humphrey felt the weight of them all as he took his place amongst that tradition. All his family members were present to wish him well. There might be various factions within the family, but adventuring was a sacred duty to them all.

For Neil and Clive, it was also a matter of large family affairs. For all the differences in the station of eel farmers versus mid-tier aristocracy, they were unaware that each was experiencing oddly similar circumstances at the same time. Their families gathered in boisterous celebration, with both being fussed over by their mothers. Both were also warned not to 'let that Asano boy lead you into trouble.'

"Mum," Clive said. "I know Jason well. I know the things he's been through and the things he's done. You've met him yourself, multiple times. You were talking to him yesterday."

"He does seem like a nice boy."

"Then why is it that you always seem to think that something Aunt Helen heard from some guy is somehow a more reliable source of information than me?"

As those with families were getting their farewells, Belinda spent her last morning with Jory. Sophie roamed the streets of Old City, aimless and alone. Like Jason, she had no family, while lacking his ability to make such fast friends. With her looks she had always been good at getting attention, but with her circumstances, it had rarely been welcome.

If not for Belinda, she would have been completely alone in the world. She had no family, not that she knew of. She didn't even know the name of the city she had been born in, her father having brought them to Greenstone after her mother's death when she was a small girl.

Until the revelation that the martial arts her father taught her was the inheritance of some ancient order of assassins, she had never been curious about where she came from. Now she awaited Emir's investigation into her background, as interested in the results as he was.

The idea of an apparently famous treasure hunter helping her find her background was one of many strange things that had come from falling into Jason Asano's field of influence. He had turned much of her understanding and experience on its head. Suddenly she was surrounded by people who didn't live lives of trying to take everything they could, because they didn't need to. They already had it. She had always resented the rich and

powerful, but being amongst them gave her the unfamiliar sensation of people wanting nothing more from her than companionship. A friend and an ally, rather than a tool or a object of lust.

There was a strange charisma to Asano that affected the people around him. It was like he could obviate social hierarchy through sheer force of personality, putting farmers and thieves shoulder to shoulder with princes and nobles. It had brought her into a strange world of possibility that even now felt delicate, as if it could all be snatched away in a moment.

With a blast of air that startled the people around her, she launched herself up to a rooftop and sat down on the edge. Her dimensional bag took the form of a vest, from which she took out an envelope, worn from handling. Inside was her indenture contract; the symbol of six months during which she was ostensibly enslaved, yet had given her freedom and opportunity. That period had taken her from desperation and hopelessness to a world of potential. She turned the envelope over in her hands, looking at it without opening it, before putting it away again.

She had more friends now than she knew what to do with. Humphrey, righteous and kind, with an unwavering sense of responsibility. Clive, smart like Belinda, but filled with a boyish curiosity. Neil, whose sensible practicality would have blended in most places, but stood out in a group of extreme personalities. Then there was Jason. Strange and unpredictable, yet also fierce and principled. Capable of inflicting terrible horrors, yet would go to great lengths to help not just a friend, but a stranger.

Her feelings about Jason were complicated. He was compelling, yet infuriating. Clever, yet foolish; naïve, but also cunning. He would hide his virtues and proudly announce his failings. He seemed to have neither pride nor honour, yet she had come to realise that he was filled with his own versions of both.

More and more, she found herself wondering what he thought of her. Friendship? Pity? He had always maintained a certain distance, painfully aware of the indenture contract. It was as if he didn't understand the degree which he had turned it from a cage into a tool of liberation, despite it being his plan in the first place.

She wasn't what he was drawn to in a woman, she knew that. He had seen her with his lover, Cassandra, and his flirtations with the sapphire-haired celestine princess. He was attracted to sultry, socially aggressive women, rather than ones who were standoffish and the regular kind of aggressive.

She had felt his gaze from time to time, but she had also sensed him trying to be respectful. He knew that things she had been through and the kinds of men she had

known. He was almost infuriatingly different from the men who had been pursuing her for most of her life.

In some ways, Jason reminded her of Jory. For a long time, Jory been the only decent man in her and Belinda's lives. Even Old Man Silva, whose protection she had enjoyed for years, was a man she had no illusions about. He told her he thought of her as a daughter, but treated her as a pet. Like many men of power, he looked at other people as possessions.

While Belinda was drawn to Jory's kindness and generosity, Sophie had been more compelled by clever, playful men. In her world, though, such men had inevitably been predators, with more than one lover learning the hard way that she wasn't prey.

She stood up, using her powers to climb the tallest building in the area and look out over Old City. For most of her life it had been her whole world, and she wondered when it had started to seem so small. Now, just one world was no longer enough. Soon she would be headed to an otherworldly city of ancient assassins and ambitious cultists.

She checked her watch, which had been annoyingly expensive, but the cheap ones tended to lose time in her dimensional bag. She laughed, thinking about the kind of problems she had now, compared to when she had lived in the streets below. Her thoughts returned to Jason.

Jory had wanted to help her, but Jason was the one who found a way. He looked at her seemingly insurmountable problems and went from hunting her down to transforming her world for no more reason than she needed him to. He did it in the face of her suspicion and hostility and he did it so thoroughly that it rewrote her entire future. She thought about his smug, smirking face, the impish grin and made an admission to herself.

"Damn it," she muttered.

Jason and his team moved into the strange, ruined village at the bottom of the lake, water pressing down on the magical dome above them. While Emir maintained the palace on the surface of the lake above, Jason set up his cloud house under the dome. Rather than the adaptive version he had been using, he tried the more ostentatious version. The result was a large, two-storey building with that same beautiful sunset colours of the cloud palace, without being so vast and grandiose. He had to return it to the flask before each attempt of the portal, otherwise he would have to leave it behind.

Jason had invited Jory along who had elected to join them until they left, spending a few extra days with Belinda. The team even offered him a chance to come along, which no few adventurers would have jumped at but he firmly declined. One trip to the astral space

was enough to confirm to Jory that he was a healer and an alchemist out of choice and only an adventurer out of necessity.

The archway they had used to enter the astral space was still there, a sleek, obsidian object that looked much the same as Jason's shadow gate power. The archway was now surrounded by the largest and most complicated magical diagram Jason had ever seen. Multiple times a day, Clive would trot Jason out to try and activate the portal with the latest permutation of the diagram.

As days became a week, Jason became used to his power fizzling out. When it finally worked, then, he was almost startled. A dark line of dark energy appeared at the bottom of the arch, rising up to fill the archway and establish the portal. Watching on, Emir's eyes glistened with triumph and he congratulated his team, who were standing around with Clive, celebrating their success.

The rest of the team had been on standby for each attempt and rapidly gathered themselves together.

"Jason and I will go first," Clive said, "as we have the best chance of getting back if something goes wrong. The rest of you quickly follow, as we don't know long the portal will remain stable."

"We've all discussed what to do if we're separated," Humphrey added. "If you find yourself alone on the other side, you know what to do."

Jason turned his gaze to Emir, trying to impart all the gratitude he felt in a simple nod, receiving Emir's smiling nod in return. He took a steeling breath, then stepped through the portal, practically pushed by Clive, who followed right after. Humphrey and Stash were next, followed by Neil, all picking their way carefully through the magical diagram on the floor. Sophie looked at Belinda, arms wrapped around Jory.

"You heard the man," Sophie said. "Don't take too long."

Sophie made her own way across the room, glancing back before stepping through the shadowy gate.

"I know you're still thinking about the what Healer asked of you," Belinda told Jory, moving her arms up from his waist to around his neck. He opened his mouth to speak but she put a hand over it.

"You need to stop thinking and just do it," she said. "I don't want to get back and find you where I left you, Tillman."

Jory's eyes sparkled and she took her hand away.

"Yes, Ma'am."

She gave him a lingering kiss and made her way across the circle to the portal, when he called out to her.

“Stay safe!”

“Don’t worry,” she said, flashing him a grin. “I’m very big on cowardice.”

“I’ve heard Jason say the same thing,” he told her. “And he’s a big, fat liar.”

She stepped through the portal and the smile sank from Jory’s face. He sighed, then looked up at the dome above him, holding off all the water.

“How do I get out of here?”

Chapter 223

More Powerful Than We Anticipated

In their hidden lair in the ruins of the Vane Estate, the leader of the local Builder cult, Zato, was fuming. One of the cultists had used a stone-shaping power to construct rooms in the subterranean cavern, of which Zato's personal quarters was the largest.

Timos, who had risen to his second-in-command, was waiting out the rage. He knew that while Zato seemed consumed in fury, once he had worked through his anger he would be ready to make more considered decisions. For the moment though, he was cursing the walls. The subject of his incoherent ranting was Jason Asano.

It was a name that now preyed on the minds of the cultists; the very idea of someone resisting the Builder's power sent chills through every cultist with a star seed. As volunteers, they had only surrendered a portion of their will to the Builder, compared the complete takeover that unwilling subjects suffered. They nonetheless had a direct connection to the unimaginable immensity of the Builder's power. The idea of someone withstanding that power filled them with dread.

The most infuriating part was that the cult hadn't even been responsible for the creation of the Rejector. Killian Laurent had seemed like an invaluable ally in getting the cult's resources out of the city during the purge and giving him what he needed to bring another person under the Builder's control seemed a small price to pay, given that he already had a star seed.

The results of this bargain had been a disaster. Not only did Asano withstand the star seed, but he was allowed to live, which was as grave a sin as was to be found in the cult. The results, from the exposed agents to the demoralised cultists were ample demonstrations of why. The promise of power was what had brought so many people into the cult in the first place. There was never a shortage of disenfranchised people looking for a place to belong and to escape the powerlessness of their lives. The Rejector was a living demonstration that the Builder's power was not absolute, and he was still running around and causing trouble. Normally, those incredibly rare few who managed to somehow outlast the star seed were put down, hard and fast.

Laurent's failure to kill Asano was only the beginning of his betrayal. The logistical assistance he provided the cult had not been in as good faith as they thought, being used to his own ends. Not many had the nerve to deal and then double-cross the cult. As it turned out, Laurent had used the purge as cover to prepare his own flight from the city. Many of the losses the cult suffered during the purge were actually fed to the Adventure

Society by Laurent himself, drawing attention away as he plundered the Silva family's wealth. Now Laurent was gone with a small fortune in money and resources, leaving the cult and the Silva family both to deal with the aftermath.

On top of the demoralising factor of the Rejector's mere existence was the impact he had on their operations. It was bad enough that he had somehow found a way into the astral space they were still months away from breaching themselves. It was worse that the Adventure Society had been able to use him to flush out some of the cult's key people still embedded in Greenstone. What's more, some of those uncovered had been taken alive, something that shouldn't have been possible. From what little information they gathered before completely severing their Greenstone contacts for safety was that the Rejector's encounter with the Builder had given Asano some power to shock their star seeds into inaction long enough to suppress the seed's power to detonate.

The fortunate thing was that Timos, who had facilitated most of those insertions years ago, had been fastidious in his precautions. He ran cult operatives in small groups, keeping them isolated from one another and the information compartmentalised. None of the people infiltrating the Adventure and Magic Societies had any information that could critically impact the cult's larger plans if revealed. The information flow had all been one way, through a network of dead drops.

The infiltrators could identify Timos, but as Timos has already been exposed that was no longer an issue. They could also reveal the very basics of the plan to claim the Order of the Reaper's astral space, but that, too, had largely been exposed already. Timos had kept them in the dark about the details not relating to their specific roles, which made their exposure only a limited liability.

The biggest loss was that their most valuable information sources in the city had been uprooted. The directors of the Adventure and Magic Societies had paraded all their key officials past Asano, who started picking them out like selecting fruit at a market. Zato and Timos had managed to get word out to some of their people who had either made their escape, or detonated themselves pre-emptively. But dead, escaped or taken alive, those people were no longer feeding the cult information. They had to assume their entire dead-drop information network was compromised and had closed it down entirely.

Eventually Zato calmed down, taking a seat on an ornate chair looted from the manor above before they destroyed it. He let out a long, slow breath, purging the residual rage and once again taking control of himself.

"I'm sorry you had to put up with that," Zato said to Timos. "I find it best to get all the anger out, rather than let it simmer and compromise my judgement."

“Understandable,” Timos said. “It’s another in a long line of setbacks, but this doesn’t compromise our ultimate plan.”

“A team of adventurers has gotten into the astral space,” Zato said. “All we have there are some unseeded recruits. You’ve seen the reports on the Rejector’s team. I don’t care if our people have double the numbers or if they’ve reached bronze rank. Asano, Geller and their team will tear through them like they were wet paper.”

“It doesn’t matter; their task is done. The beacon was emplaced months ago and the astral tunnel is well on its way to formation. Our astral magic specialists here have assured me that, at this point, the beacon is unnecessary. The tunnel’s destination is affixed. The Rejector can run around all he likes, take our people alive or even destroy the beacon itself. They could have gone into the astral space a month ago and still been too late to stop us. Short of finding us here and stopping the tunnel from this end, there is no keeping us out of the astral space.”

“But they’ll know we’re coming.”

A sinister smile played across Timos’ lips.

“Actually, I made sure the people we sent believe that the beacon is essential to our plans. A little extra precaution I put in place. Asano and his team can go ahead and destroy it and assume that has put paid to our plans. It just frees us up to move in unexpectedly, once the tunnel is finished.”

Zato chuckled.

“You know, I was one of those who looked down on your cautious nature,” he told Timos. “Yet you were the only one who even imagined things could go this badly for us. You have my gratitude.”

“Gratitude enough to let me finally kill Thadwick Mercer?” Timos asked.

“No,” Zato said. “Mercer knows Asano, which could be useful to us.”

“Thinking Thadwick could be of use is a large part of what got us here in the first place,” Timos argued. “I’ve already spoken to him at length about Asano but the petty-minded little scum is so biased that I don’t trust any of what he gave me.”

“Mercer lives,” Zato said firmly. “Why don’t you put that cautious mind of yours to work and see if you can’t find a way to make Thadwick an asset?”

Jason stepped out of the shadow gate. With his astral affinity, dimensional travel powers gave him an enjoyable rush. It seemed to be a lengthier transition than his previous portal experiences, even his previous use of the portal through which they just travelled.

-
- You have entered a zone of high magical saturation. Magical manifestations will occur at an increased rate.
-

Clive had a different opinion, which he demonstrated by stumbling out of the portal, and dropping to all fours and loudly throwing up. The others followed through the portal in quick succession. Humphrey was a practised teleporter himself, but still came out looking peaky.

“That was quite rough,” he said in a strained voice.

Neil came through and ended up in the same condition as Clive. Sophie followed after, giving a sympathetic wince over her beleaguered team mates. Like Jason, she had an astral affinity that made the transition exhilarating, rather than stomach-churning.

“Was Belinda sent to one of the other entrances?” Humphrey wondered aloud. A glance around them was enough to see they were on one of the portal towers that ringed the outside of the city.

“I don’t think so,” Sophie said. “She’s probably just sluggish in peeling herself off of Jory.”

“Good for them,” Jason said happily. “Who doesn’t love love?”

Belinda finally came through the portal, looking unwell but managing to hold down her lunch. By that point, Clive and Neil had crawled away from the mess they had made on the flat brickwork top of the tower. They were sat together, leaning back and looking queasy.

“Once we get that weird magic body like Jason, we stop being able to throw up, right?” Neil asked.

“Yep,” Clive confirmed. “I am now officially looking forward to it.”

“You and me both, brother,” Neil told him.

“We dodged the first arrow,” Humphrey said. “We arrived together and don’t need to regroup.”

“That was actually my main concern,” Jason said, sharing Humphrey’s relief. “Of all the uncertain threats here, my biggest fear was facing them in isolation.”

“We aren’t all well-suited to solitary operation, no,” Clive agreed. Being separated reduced their potential answers to any given situation. This was the largest potential threat they had foreseen, because it made every other threat more dangerous. They had made a number of contingency preparations for that eventuality, including tracking stones for all but Jason, who was untraceable.

“So, we don’t need the tracking stones for each other,” Neil said.

“They may be useful if we end up separated for some reason,” Humphrey said. “Keep them on hand. We should take a look at the ones we have for the cultists.”

“Speaking of which,” Neil said, “why couldn’t we check them from outside the astral space? Isn’t that how they knew the expedition had gone wrong? Tracking stones for the people in the desert astral space?”

“The difference is the astral spaces themselves,” Clive explained. “The desert astral space is naturally formed and has many, perpetually open apertures. The dimensional wall between our world and that astral space is paper thin, filled with holes. This astral space, by contrast, is artificially stabilised and very difficult to penetrate. It’s a rock face you need to drill through, hence the trouble we had returning.”

“That means they’ll need to find a different way to separate this astral space from our world, right?” Belinda asked. “Not the same technique they used before.”

“Almost certainly,” Clive said. “I have no idea what that will entail, however. It could be easier or could be harder. This astral space is smaller than the desert one. It’s one of the things we need to figure out.”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Humphrey said. “We should approach things in order. First, we take stock. Where are we and what is our situation? I’m concerned about the ambient magic.”

Most perception powers enhanced magical senses and aura senses somewhere in the first three ranks, along with a third power that was a precursor to the more unique upper-rank effects. For Jason that was seeing through darkness, for Neil it was sensing vulnerabilities. Humphrey already had both their magical and aura senses enhanced. Everyone but Sophie and Belinda had their perception powers at bronze already, with only Sophie lacking the enhanced magic senses. She wouldn’t have them until silver rank, when Neil and Jason would have their aura senses enhanced.

“I can feel all the extra magic in the air,” Jason said. “I figured that was normal. This place had always had a higher magical saturation, right?”

“Yes,” Clive said, “but the last time we came here, the magical density was the same as the Greenstone region. It’s now higher.”

“I didn’t realise that was even possible,” Jason said. He had never experienced a zone of different magical density, so he hadn’t recognised the change.

“Can you explain that for the guy who studied healing magic instead of astral magic?” Neil asked.

“Or the person who never studied magic at all,” Sophie added.

“Magical saturation is how much magic there is,” Clive explained. “It determines how many monsters, essences and awakening stones manifest. A monster surge is a temporary period of heightened magical saturation, which is why so many monsters appear.”

“Magical density is the quality of the magic,” Belinda said, picking up the explanation. “It determines that the rank of monsters that manifest, along with a bunch of other things. What rituals can be performed, whether certain magic items can function.”

“The heightened saturation we were expecting,” Clive said. “An increase in magical density means that all the monsters we’ll be facing will be more powerful than we thought. It also means they’ll stay around for longer. An iron-rank monster will naturally break back down into magic after a month. Depending on how long ago this change happened, the astral space could be thick with more powerful monsters that have been manifesting without breaking down.”

“How powerful do you think?” Humphrey asked, looking at the air around them. “I’d guess the new standard is low bronze.”

“I’d say that’s about right,” Clive said. “Greenstone’s density is about mid-iron, which is very low.”

“What do you mean by mid-iron?” Neil asked.

“Oh, that’s just a rating for the most common kind of monster that will appear. In Greenstone, iron-rank monsters are easily the most common, with semi-regular bronze and only very rare silvers. What we’re looking at here will mostly be low-end bronze, with some high-end of iron and bronze sprinkled in. Encountering a silver-rank monster will still be unusual, but with how many monsters we’re going to see, it’s an inevitability. Hopefully we’ll be strong enough to fight it by that point, or at least to run away.”

“We could chum Asano and have him lure it away,” Neil said.

“Because of his evasive abilities,” Humphrey said, nodding.

“Uh, sure, that’s why,” Neil said. Jason gave Neil a flat look, who wiggled his eyebrows back at him.

“We knew we would be dealing with unknown dangers,” Humphrey said. “This is just the first. If anything, the monsters being more powerful than we anticipated will be better for our advancement.”

“I think we may be missing the forest for the trees here,” Jason said. “More importantly than the monsters, something is raising the magical density of this astral space. That should be a foundational element of any patch of physical reality, right?”

“That’s right,” Clive said. “Altering it in an astral space would be orders of magnitude easier than a true world, but even so, the forces involved are disconcerting, to say the least.”

“It has to be something to do with what the Builder cult is up to,” Humphrey said. “I suggest we go find them and ask.”

Chapter 224

Fate Can't Wait to Kill Us All

The astral space was an island city of ancient stone buildings, reclaimed by jungle. Broad boulevards were covered in vines, grass growing up between displaced pavers. Buildings that were three, four, even five storeys tall, ranging from nearly intact to little more than rubble strewn around the lush, verdant greenery. Strange, magical plants could be seen. Bulbous, purple growths, adhering to the sides of buildings. Huge, towering trees, incongruent with the jungle around them. They stretched up, higher than any of the buildings, clutching at the sky with leafy fingers.

As they had in their initial foray into the city, the team had arrived on one of the portal towers that ringed the outer edge of the city. Situated where the island shore met the water, each tower had an archway akin to the one through which they had arrived. Their's was still open, an obsidian arch filled with dark energy. There was something eerie about the power within it. Not a mere absence of light, but a void that sought to devour it.

Jason's power allowed ten travellers before the power was expended. It remained active, only seven having passed through, including Stash. Perched on Humphrey's head in the form of a small bird, Stash was bobbing his head around with curiosity. The transit did not seem to have impacted the little dragon at all.

"So, who built this city?" Neil asked. "I mean, did this used to be a chunk of world, like the ones the Builder keeps tearing off? Or did someone come along and build this huge city in this astral space? Was is that order of assassins?"

"It was not," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. "This city was as you see it when the Order of the Reaper first discovered this place and began working to stabilise it. Even these towers, which were used to connect it to your world, were already in place, waiting to be used."

"They were already here?" Clive asked. "We've been postulating that the primary function of the towers was to serve as the connection to our world. If they predate the people who used them that way, then it suggests that this astral space was attached to another reality in the past, or perhaps to ours and was severed somehow. Oh, that's fascinating."

"Fascination is a luxury for later," Humphrey said. "What matters is the Builder cult."

"That may be what I'm talking about," Clive said. "We already know that the cult has access to astral magic that makes our own look like a child's sand drawings. What we're talking about, with this astral space, is reality engineering. The Builder is the greatest

reality engineer is existence and beyond. Is the Builder trying to claim this astral space, or reclaim it? Where did the Order of the Reaper get the knowledge to do what they did here? It wasn't from our world."

"Are you suggesting that the Order of the Reaper, or perhaps even the Reaper itself, somehow stole this astral space from the Builder?" Jason asked.

"I wouldn't engage in that kind of postulation without significantly more to go on," Clive said. "I need to examine this tower, quite thoroughly."

"Not yet," Belinda reminded Clive. "The portal, first."

"Right, yes."

Belinda still served as Clive's on and off research assistant, although the stipend that earned her was inconsequential, relative to adventuring money. She had proven good for Clive, as she was very detail oriented, while he liked to careen from one big idea to the next.

His previous assistants had never been able to meet Clive's standards, leading to clashes and problems. There were reasons he had never advanced beyond Greenstone in spite of his talent. Belinda helped him bring ideas to fruition instead of getting bogged down in the details he had been dismissive of, while she found, in Clive, an enthusiastic magical tutor. As Jason well knew, Clive was downright ebullient when it came to sharing the study of magic.

Clive and Belinda went over to examine the still-open portal. They needed to know if it was safe to return to their own world, and how easy it would be to reopen the portal from this side. They set out a series of carved stones around the portal. They looked like dice; six-sided cubes with a sigil engraved onto each face.

Clive took a pair of wands, handing one to Belinda, and they started waving them about. The cubes floated up into the air and started turning, over and over until they stopped again, one of the engravings of each cube lighting up. Clive hastily scribbled in a notebook before the pair started waving their wands again.

"I would strongly advise against trying to go back through this portal," Clive said after several sequences of this.

"It seems normal," Humphrey said. "As much as any of this is. It looks like Jason's portal power."

"But it isn't," Clive said. "We used Jason's power to incite the portal into opening, but this is not Jason's ability, whatever it may look like. This archway was able to serve as an anchor, allowing the portal to originate from the other side. Whatever power is affecting the ambient magic of the city is having a disruptive effect on anything originating on this side,

though. Trying to go back from this side, even though this already-open portal, would be less like stepping through a door and more like jumping into a meat grinder.”

“So, we’re trapped here?” Neil asked.

“I don’t know about trapped,” Clive said. “Everything we learned while figuring out how to open the portal suggested that leaving should be much easier than intruding in the first place. If I can determine what is going on with the magic, I’m confident I can compensate for it. We can likely trigger the exit without even needing Jason’s power to get things started.”

“We have to assume that whatever is affecting the magic is part of what the cult are doing,” Humphrey said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “The first step to solving this puzzle is figuring that out and finding a way to stop it.”

“I vote we start by killing them all and go from there,” Sophie said.

“You’re probably right,” Jason said with resignation in his voice. “We need to question them, if we can, but I don’t see a diplomatic resolution as a likely outcome.”

“It’s never good, going in knowing that you’re going to be killing people,” Humphrey said. “You shielded the team from that before, Jason, but I won’t let you, this time. We’re adventurers, and adventurers fight monsters, even when they’re people. We all need to come to terms with that.”

Belinda and Neil shared a look, neither having killed anyone before. The others gave them sober but encouraging smiles of reassurance.

“I’d like to start by investigating this tower quite thoroughly,” Clive said. “They are most likely the medium for whatever the cult are up to.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “How long will that take?”

“I know this isn’t a great answer,” Clive said, “but it’ll take as long as it takes. Once I’ve started, I can probably get you a better estimate.”

“Once *we’ve* started,” Belinda corrected.

“Just so,” Clive agreed.

The others were at loose ends as Clive started pulling out magical paraphernalia him and Belinda to use. They ended up sitting at the edge of the tower, legs dangling over the side.

With the strange beauty of the overgrown city laid out before him, Jason took a deep breath of the hot, heavy air. It was rich with the scent of plants and earth, mixing with a gentle, salty breeze coming off the water. He had mastered the art of not breathing but he

did it anyway, for the pure pleasure of the sensation. He relished the feel of the warm sun on his skin.

“I know we’re here to fight evil and whatnot,” Jason said, “but damn if I don’t love this job, sometimes.”

Jason spotted the rest of the team sharing a glance.

“What’s that about,” he asked.

“It’s just good to see a real smile,” Neil said. “You’ve been forcing them for a while now, which takes a lot of the fun out of mocking you.”

Sophie thumped Neil on the arm.

“Hey...” Neil complained.

Before Clive and Belinda started their investigation, Humphrey had Clive take out the tracking stones for the cultists. They didn’t expect to get actual locations, since not only were the cultists most likely bronze-rank after all this time, but the tracking stones traced their Adventure Society badges, not the people themselves.

“They might still have their badges,” Clive said. “They needed them to get in here in the first place. Remember Emir’s people checking the aura signatures on them against Magic Society records?”

“Once they stayed behind, they new their Adventure Society days were done,” Neil said. “I bet they tossed their badges away the second they got here.”

Whether the Cultists kept their badges or not, the tracking stones would at least keep track of who was alive or dead. Even after their aura signature changed enough from ranking up to desynchronise them from their badges,

“Five of them are dead,” Clive said.

“That’s a big win for us,” Sophie said. “It went from six on thirteen to six on eight.”

“Don’t go thinking that makes things easy,” Humphrey warned as he saw the lack of activity from the stones. “The rest aren’t tracking, which means they’re bronze-rank.”

“Or they got turned into flesh abominations,” Belinda added.

“Yes,” Humphrey agreed. “Even if they aren’t the strongest essence users, the tyranny of rank is not something to be dismissive of. We all watched Jason take out one bronze-rankers, but that was just one. A whole cluster of them together is a multiplicative danger, not an additive one.”

“Humphrey, you’ve given us this speech before,” Neil pointed out. “So has your Mother, your sister, Mr Bahadir, Gabriel Remore...”

“And you’ll hear it again before we’re done because it matters,” Humphrey said. “I’m bringing every single one of you out of this place alive.”

“Don’t say things like that,” Jason admonished. “That’s a huge death flag. You might as well pull out a picture of your girl from back home, explain that you’re about to be a father and that you’re two days away from retirement.”

“Jason, this is serious,” Humphrey said.

“I am serious,” Jason said. “How would you feel if I said that nothing can possibly go wrong?”

“Definitely don’t say that,” Neil said.

“Don’t go tempting fate,” Sophie agreed. “Fate can’t wait to kill us all.”

Clive and Belinda almost seemed to be going over the huge tower brick by huge brick, starting with the top of the tower and making their way down the stairs that wound their way around the outside. Despite the size of the tower, there was no apparent way inside, or any indication whether it was solid or hollow.

“This is really what we’re doing?” Neil complained. “All this build up over going back into the astral space, squaring off against monsters and cultists, and what are we doing? Standing around while Clive looks at bricks.”

“That’s Neil you can hear whinging,” Jason said into a recording crystal. There was a long gap in Jason’s recording crystal travelogue, from just before his kidnapping until he finally felt ready to resume them.

Neil walked over to peer into the recording crystal.

“Jason’s family,” Neil said. “Next time you are going to send us someone, send us someone better. You have a brother, right, Jason?”

“Sod off,” Jason said, pushing Neil out of frame.

Sophie was meditating, knowing that her aura control was not as strong as most of the team. Humphrey patrolled the edge of the tower, looking out for threats. At his heels, Stash was transforming into a series of increasingly adorable puppies. Occasionally he would change into something stranger, such as a replica of one of the Berts, but with a huge moustache.

“I’m really one person pretending to be a lot!” Stash declared enthusiastically.

“Stash!” Humphrey scolded. “What did I say? The Bertinelli brothers are all different people.”

“No!” Stash yelled, turning back into a puppy and sprinting to jump into the lap of Sophie, in her meditative pose. She smiled without opening her eyes, reaching down to scratch the puppy behind the ears as he snuggled into her.

Belinda returned to the top of the tower, calling everyone together. They gathered up and followed her down the stairs to the base of the tower, where Clive was using his power to draw out an incredibly sophisticated ritual diagram on the wall.

“What did you find?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m not sure,” Clive said absently, still drawing the diagram. He waved his finger in the air like a pen and golden lines appeared within the diagram to match. “Some kind of hidden door, although I can’t tell if it’s a cupboard or the whole thing is empty.”

Eventually Clive finished the diagram and chanted out an opening spell. A section of wall soundlessly slid back into the tower and slid up, revealing a large, dark space beyond. The others could make out a shape from the light coming through door, only Jason seeing clearly. He stepped up and looked around the interior of what turned out to be the hollow tower. He realised what the looming shape taking up most of the space was and his eyes went wide.

“What is that?” Humphrey asked, peering into the dark.

The lump of metal the size of a car they were looking at was the front half of a giant, metallic foot.

Chapter 225

Running Towards Something

Clive tossed out some glow stones that floated up into the darkness, illuminating the huge figure that occupied the interior of the tower.

“A giant statue?” Neil postulated.

“Not a statue,” Clive said. “There are articulation points on the ankles and knees. I can’t see clearly from down here, but likely all the other joints, as well. This is some kind of golem. A ridiculously enormous golem.

The air inside the tower was cold and clammy. Jason stepped forward and touched a hand to the chilly metal foot.

-
- ??? (world engineer).
 - Construct (diamond rank).

 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
 - ???.
-

Clive quickly followed to see the same message, the others doing the same. All but Sophie, who lacked enhanced magical senses, could sense an incredible but dormant power within.

“What’s a world engineer?” Neil asked.

“I have no idea,” Clive said.

“I suspect it’s best for everyone if none of us ever find out,” Neil said. “I don’t know about you, but I’m getting a very Builder feeling off of this thing.”

“You can sense it too?” Jason asked.

“What?” Neil asked. “No, I just meant, you know, world engineer, giant construct. It kind of screams ‘Builder’ right?”

“I can feel an echo of the Builder in this thing’s power,” Jason said. “This belongs to it.”

“Then why did the Order of the Reaper have it?” Humphrey asked.

“Shade?” Jason asked.

“I do not know,” Shade said. “The existence of these constructs was unknown to me.”

“It seems this place has more secrets than anyone realised,” Humphrey said.

“We thought they were just trying to take the astral space,” Clive said. “Are these things the true goal?”

“Maybe it’s both,” Jason said. “The Builder wants these back, which is what it’ll get if it claims this astral space.”

“It doesn’t matter what the Builder wants,” Sophie said. “It doesn’t change what we want. We’re here to stop the cultists, whatever they’re up to.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “The important part of this discovery is to figure out how it helps us.”

“I’m not sure it does,” Clive said. “I don’t have the resources, or frankly the knowledge to begin unravelling what this thing is, what it’s for or what it’s doing here.”

“It at least tells us what to do next, right?” Sophie asked. “Even if we don’t know exactly what they’re up to, it’s going to involve these towers. We already thought that, and this just makes it all the more evident.”

“She’s right,” Humphrey agreed. “Our first move should be to make our way around the outskirts of the city and check out all of these towers. The cultists may well be set up at one of them.”

“We can also see if all the towers hold one of these things,” Clive said.

“Do we know how many towers there are?” Neil asked.

“Twelve,” Clive said. “Each around eight kilometres apart.”

“Alright, Clive, see if you can’t seal this thing back up and we’ll leave.”

Clive called back the glow stones he had sent floating up into the tower and the team left. Once he removed the magical diagram he had used to open it, the doorway closed again, leaving no trace it was ever there.

“I know the original idea was to make our way from tower to tower on foot,” Belinda said, “but from the top of these towers we can see some of the others. Should we be portalling or teleporting or whatever?”

Jason was not the only member of the team to unlock a mass-transit power with a bronze-rank ability. Clive could open a portal, while Humphrey could now teleport people as a group. Their carry capacity and cooldown for each was the same as Jason’s gate portal.

“We want to come at each tower as quietly as we can,” Humphrey said. “Teleporting into the middle of eight bronze-rankers is a good way to get killed. We should stick with going on foot and have Jason scout it out.”

Jason's stealth abilities had become quite formidable by the time all his powers were awakened. His cloak helped him blend into shadows and he received further boosts from his familiars, Shade and Gordon. For each body subsumed into Jason's shadow, Shade could mask one giveaway element like scent, heat or even muffle Jason's movements against sensitive ears. While Gordon was subsumed into Jason's aura, Jason's ability to retract it completely was enhanced. Combined with Jason's current aura strength, even most bronze-rankers would be unable to sense it.

They set out from the tower, in the direction of the next. The shoreline was made up of large rocks that were not easily navigable, so they followed the overgrown streets. Even then, the terrain was not easy going. They could have moved faster, after all the mobility training they had done, but Humphrey insisted on slow but steady. They were expecting monsters and worse, and he didn't want them stumbling into too much danger at once.

Sophie ranged ahead as two of Shade's three bodies watched their flanks, while the last took its place as Jason's shadow. Jason's tactical map and voice communication made sure everyone could be alerted the moment a threat appeared.

Sophie was not a stealthy scout like Jason but her mobility was incomparable. Whether running up the sides of buildings or sailing between them, she was the embodiment of agility and grace. Sometimes she would blast herself into the air with a burst of wind and glide above them, using further bursts to throw herself higher. In this way, she could effectively fly, scouting ahead with the vantage that offered. She was also seemingly inexhaustible. Her celestine nature reduced the ongoing mana costs of powers, while her avatar of speed power reduced those costs even further.

"She's really getting a handle of her powers," Jason said, looking up in admiration. "She's like a bird on the wing."

"They used to call her the Nightingale, in the fighting pits," Belinda said. "If only they could see her now."

They had a soul compass that would point to the closest thing with a soul, except for themselves, who had been filtered out. That meant cultists or flesh abominations, which could very well be the same thing. It would not forewarn them of monsters, however.

They had already determined a policy of how to handle monster encounters. To begin with, they would fight anything they didn't recognise all together, even if it was iron rank. Once they had an idea of what they were up against, they would start sending out their members who could best handle, or best learn from any given encounter.

The astral space's magical saturation promised monsters, which it quickly delivered. It was only eight or so kilometres from one tower to the next, yet they had two monster

encounters on the way. The first was a pair of bronze-rank monsters that were quite tough, but no match for the team's rapidly growing capabilities. The next was a cluster of bark lurkers, a type of iron-rank monster commonly seen in the delta. It was normally a solitary creature, but they encountered a half-dozen, all at once. They were very hardy creatures and proved more difficult to deal with than the two bronze-rank ones.

They sat around on strewn, moss-covered rubble, resting after the fight.

"Looks like we might be fighting all together for a bit," Neil said. "Those extra numbers are rough."

"That's the magical saturation at work," Clive said. "The weaker the monster, the more of them we can expect to see."

"What about something that already travels in packs?" Neil said. "Will there be a whole army of them?"

"Probably," Clive said.

"Jason fought a bark lurker during our field assessment," Humphrey said.

"Back then, my afflictions were the best way to handle them," Jason said. "Your special attacks seem to be doing just fine, now."

"I envy those high damage attacks," Sophie said.

"I like your retaliation power," Humphrey told her. "You stopped that thing like it had run into a cliff face."

Bark lurkers were largely slow, but would make charging rush attacks. One of them tried to use it on Sophie, to unfortunate effect. Her balance essence ability, moment of oneness, could absorb attacks for a brief moment, then return their power back on an enemy. She had jammed her fingers into a gap between the thick carapace plates of the bark lurker and unleashed the full power of its own charge onto it.

"I'm not sure it was as harsh as you say," Humphrey told Neil. "We will need to be pushed further than these fights did, if we want to cross that line into bronze," Humphrey said.

"Speak for yourself," Belinda said. "I found those plenty rough enough."

"I'm sorry," Humphrey said to her. "I know this will be harder on you than any of us. We all awakened our powers more slowly than you, and worked our way up through easier fights than you have and will continue to face. All the more, since your powers are a lot more sophisticated than a set like mine."

The others nodded.

"You've had it harder than all of us," Jason said. "You went out on a road contract before you were even a member of the Adventure Society. It must be fairly overwhelming."

“It’s been a lot of changes,” Belinda acknowledged, then shared a look with Sophie, before turning her gaze back to the team. “We know what it’s like to be running on a knife edge, though. At least now, we’re running towards something, instead of away.”

Between rough terrain and monster fights, it took the team hours to close the distance to the second tower

They reached the second tower, finding it with no more signs of cultist activity than the first. Clive, now knowing what to look for, was able to find the hidden door quite quickly, revealing another enormous golem.

The sun was descending over the city and it was unlikely they would make the next tower before dark without picking up the pace.

While the others were at the base of the tower as Clive closed the door back up, Jason and Humphrey made their way to the top, looking out to the next tower.

“What do you think?” Humphrey asked. “Do we camp here, or push it?”

“Neither,” Jason said. “We shouldn’t camp near the towers. The cultists probably don’t know we’re here but let’s not make it easy for them, just in case. We pick somewhere more hidden and defensible between here and the next tower.”

“Alright,” Humphrey agreed.

Jason set up his cloud house. Choosing the adaptive version, it took on the appearance of an overgrown stone building, blending perfectly into the surroundings.

The next morning, Humphrey roused the team not to press on, but for the day’s training routine.

The training took up a solid chunk of the morning, going from physical training to movement training to combat training to mental training. They had brought along the set of weights Jason had inherited from Farrah, which were simple but would serve them through bronze rank.

“We’re in a strange dimension full of monsters and treasure,” Neil’s complained, “and I’m here doing arm curls?”

“The best are the best because they don’t slack off,” Humphrey told him.

“Do I have to be the best?” Neil asked. “Couldn’t I just be pretty good, but with a sexy wife?”

Sophie led the way with mobility training, the strange terrain actually making for a good training ground. Jason guided the team through meditation, aura training and the mental exercises that Farrah had taught to him.

They kept up the slow but steady pace, monster after monster and tower after tower, with no sign of the cultists. They would check two or three new towers each day, depending on the terrain and how many monsters they encountered. Each tower seemed to have one of the huge golems inside.

They couldn't travel for more than a few hours without encountering monsters. Of a night they would retire to the cloud house, a much more luxurious accommodation than what they had for the Reaper trials. That was still only a limited respite, as each night, some magically-sensitive monster would find the house and attack it.

What limited damage they were able to do before the team emerged to handle the problem, the house would repair easily. It did mean Jason needed to replenish the magic expended to do so, by dropping spirit coins into the cloud flask as if it were a slot machine. The raw magic of the coins was exactly what the house needed to reconstitute any damage.

They were frugal with their supplies. They did not use crystal wash, instead showing off what were inevitably blood and gore-caked bodies in the cloud house showers every evening. Food was in short supply, the team having allocated the room in their personal storage spaces and dimensional bags for critical adventuring supplies. They sustained themselves on spirit coins, Jason hoarding his small stock of actual food to celebrate rank-ups, when they eventually came.

"At this point, it seems like they haven't set up around one of the towers," Humphrey said on their fourth night in the city, as the team was sitting in the lounge of the cloud house.

"Where do we check next, then?" Neil asked. "The centre of the city, where the last trials were?"

"It's as good a place as any," Humphrey said. "What can we expect to find there, Shade?"

"The trials tower should be quite thoroughly destroyed by now," Shade said. "The magic maintaining the tower's integrity was withdrawn with the completion of the trials. Without control over the dimensional spaces within, they most likely devoured themselves and the bulk of the tower with them. There may be some things of value in what remains. It is possible that treasures unclaimed during the trials were not annihilated and could still be waiting to be excavated."

"Now we're talking," Neil said. "Hidden secrets, buried treasure. Now, that's an adventure."

The soul compass was not a flat object, but spherical, with the needle, floating magically within. The needle moved on a central pivot point, like a regular compass, but could also indicate verticality. Its moved slowly, suggesting that the closest soul was still some distance away.

“I think it’s safe to say that the cultists are deeper into the city,” Clive said.

“We’ll still check the last two towers today, just in case,” Humphrey said. “Tomorrow, we head for the centre.”

“And the loot,” Neil added.

They had already encountered some treasure, in the form of three awakening stones they had picked up along the way. They hadn’t been looking, but with so many enhanced magical senses on the team, they were easy to find by simple proximity.

Although the flesh abominations and cultists remained distant, the monsters were still attacking with enthusiasm. The team was reminded that those were not the only threats the astral space had to offer when Sophie dropped lightly to the ground in front of them.

“Vorger,” she warned. “Lots of them. It was like a cloud bank moving in.”

Jason used the lightness of his cloak and the leaping power of his magical boots to reach the top of a building in a few easy jumps. He looked out at the incorporeal, ghost-like astral creatures bearing down on them as the team made preparations below. They drew closer and closer as he stood and watched, until it was like a wall of whiteness moving through the sky.

Jason’s aura erupted out of him like a tsunami, washing over the vorger. The astral beings were themselves like ragged scraps of soul, so he made a soul attack against them. There was a piercing shriek of noise and a horrible tearing sound, and then the vorger were gone, as if they had never existed at all.