

## 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?”

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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.

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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.

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“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.

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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.”