

Chapter 122: Children

Sophie brushed a hand over the first of the three awakening stones Clive and Jason had laid out on the bench.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Focus] (unranked, uncommon)

An awakening stone containing an undistracted power. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 11 unawakened essence abilities.

“That is the most common of the three,” Clive said. “The Magic Society grades stones on a scale of one to five stars, based on how frequently they are known to appear world-wide. We work with brokers and the Adventure Society to try and catalogue them all. Jason’s ability also seems to grade them into five stages of rarity, but not numerically. The stones you’ve used thus far were all common, or one star. Uncommon is two star.”

Sophie touched the next stone, with was blue with streaks of white.

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

An awakening stone containing the freedom of the open sky. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 11 unawakened essence abilities.

“Epic,” she said.

“Four star, the second highest rarity,” Clive explained. “After it took so long to catch you, the Adventure Society raised the reward to a four star awakening stone for each person on the team that caught you.”

“They had to make it a limit of six after people started forming giant groups,” Jason said.

“After we caught you,” Clive said, “there were some issues, as you may recall. Jason and I collected our rewards yesterday evening and we were given a selection of four-star stones.

“The second-highest rarity,” Belinda said. “Are they the kind of stones you used?”

“Actually, I used all one and two star stones,” Clive said. “I was given an epic four-star essence, however. A rune essence. Very valuable.”

“Who gave you that?” Jason asked. “There can’t be a lot of epic essences in an eel farm.”

“My mentor,” Clive said. “He was the director the Magic Society; the predecessor to Lucian Lamprey’s predecessor. He took me out of the delta, gave me an education. Showed me the value of what we do at the Magic Society. I became an adventurer just in time for the last monster surge, when I was sixteen. He died during the surge and after it was over I never tried my hand at adventuring again until just recently. I threw myself completely into the Magic Society, but our branch here isn’t the same as it was back then.”

“I don’t imagine Lamprey fostering a positive institutional culture,” Jason said.

“No,” Clive said. “I’d say the one before wasn’t any better, but Lamprey really does set a new low.”

“I’m not even in the Magic Society and I know that much,” Belinda said.

Jason turned his attention back to the stones.

“Stone of the sky, he said. “I considered picking that one and using it myself.”

“It’s very highly sought after,” Clive said. “The chances of awakening some kind of flight power are very good. I’m a little surprised our Adventure Society here had one.”

“Turns out I already have a flight power,” Jason said. “Clive told me. I’m super looking forward to it, now, but it won’t let me fly until silver rank.”

“Jason has a number of abilities we have very little information on,” Clive said. “We do have thorough records on a number of them, however, and his cloak ability will let him glide at bronze rank and fly at silver. It won’t be as effective as a more dedicated movement power but he will fly.”

“I should probably look up what my abilities do at later ranks,” Jason said.

Clive turned on him in disbelief.

“That’s what I’ve been telling you!”

“Are you sure?” Jason asked. “Doesn’t ring a bell.”

As Clive started turning red, Jason turned to Sophie.

“Clive picked this one, in the end, since we were giving them to you. It’s your best bet at a flying power.”

“There are no guarantees, though,” Clive said, still glaring at Jason. “It could just as easily give you a special attack effective against enemies in the air.”

“Don’t be a downer, Clive,” Jason said.

“I’m just managing expectations,” Clive said. “Take a look at the last stone and then we’ll begin.”

Sophie reached out and touched the last stone, which was clear with such clarity as to be hard to see.

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

An awakening stone possessed of a cleansing power. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 11 unawakened essence abilities.

“This will almost certainly give you some kind of cleansing ability,” Clive said. “You don’t have any obvious essences for it, so it could come in many forms. It might be a balance ability that transfers afflictions to your enemies or a swift ability that lets you recover from afflictions faster. It might be some other ability with a self-cleanse as a secondary effect.”

“How valuable are these epic stones?” Belinda asked.

“Each of them is more valuable than all the other stones put together,” Clive said. “The sky stone is more valuable than either of the essences you used.”

“And you’re just giving them to me?” Sophie asked.

“Your indenture contract is six months,” Jason said. “By the time it’s over, you’ll have been an adventurer for longer than I have, as of right now. You’ll earn them, believe me.”

“The question,” Clive said, “Is what order do you want to use them in? Do you want to start off with the potential flight power, or save that for the end?”

“Even if you get one,” Jason warned. “You probably won’t be able to fly well. My friend Humphrey can fly, but it costs him so much mana he can’t do it for long.”

Clive nodded.

“He’s right” Clive said. “At iron rank, the power will either be restricted by cost or the type of flight, like gliding. It will get cheaper or more useful as you rank up.”

“Speaking of which,” Jason said. “You didn’t use any monster cores to raise the ability you already have, right?”

“No,” Sophie said. “Before my father died, he left my one essence with Belinda’s father, who performed the ritual once I was old enough.”

“My dad didn’t have any essences himself, but he knew a good hodgepodge of different magical fields. He knew that monster cores would mess up her essence development and warned her off them,” Belinda said.

“Sounds like a good guy,” Clive said.

“He was a drunken prick whose sole act of decency was not selling off that essence before giving it to Sophie,” she said. “He tried to rob Cole Silva’s father and failed badly. Silva killed him and I was saddled with making restitution.”

“How do you know when you’re old enough to use an essence?” Jason asked. “Also, what happens if you try and you’re not old enough?”

“There’s a simple test for whether your body can handle it,” Clive said. “Usually that’s sixteen or seventeen, but I’ve heard of as low as fourteen and as late as nineteen or twenty. As for what happens if you aren’t ready, well, I’ve heard horror stories. Magical deformities. People using children in essence experiments to try and unlock the secrets of essences.”

Clive shook his head.

“Not every Magic Society branch is the best group of people, obviously,” he said. “Even the worst of us will put a stop to that, though.”

“Well, no worries here,” Belinda said. “Sophie’s practically a spinster.”

“I’m twenty three.”

“Me too,” Jason said. “Actually, it’s been about four months. I think I missed a birthday.”

“I’m going to set up the next ritual,” Clive said. “Pick which stone you want to use.”

“Do the sky stone last,” Belinda said. “If you actually get the power to fly, we can head straight out and try it.”

“Good idea,” Jason said. “Work your way up to the big finale.”

Sophie nodded and Clive got to work, quickly setting up and performing the ritual using the uncommon stone of focus.

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- You have awakened the swift essence ability [Avatar of Speed]. You have awakened 2 of 5 swift essence abilities.

Ability: [Avatar of Speed] (Swift)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Your movement abilities have increased effect and reduced stamina and mana cost.
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"That seems a bit underwhelming," Belinda said.

From the middle of the fading ritual circle, Sophie exploded into motion. She swiftly ran to the side of the room and up the wall, turning to run along the wall and around the room multiple times.

"Well, that's quite a thing," Clive said as the others watched her go around, swerving side to side on the wall in little jukes that didn't seem to slow her down.

"Is she normally that zippy?" Jason asked Belinda.

"Not sure," Belinda said. "When she goes running, the first thing she does is run away, so I never get to see much."

Sophie leaped off the wall, flipping in the air and landing in a crouch.

"That may be the sexiest thing I've ever seen," Jason said.

"You know you said that out loud, right?" Clive asked.

"I'll stand by it."

Belinda looked at Jason from under a sceptically furrowed brow.

"You think a woman back flipping off a wall is sexy?" she asked him.

"Yep."

"You're weird."

"I'll stand by that, too."

Sophie stood up and walked over to them.

"Good ability," she said.

"Avatar abilities are often good," Clive said. "They embody an aspect of an essence, making you very good at a specific thing. In this case, movement abilities."

"I like being fast," Sophie said. "The ability I've always had makes me fast, and this makes me faster."

"Can you show us that ability?" Jason asked.

"How do I do that?"

“It’s pretty instinctive. You just want to, basically.”

After a brief moment, the ability appeared in front of them.

Ability: [Free Runner] (Swift)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Increased speed. Low stamina and mana per second cost to run on walls and water. Momentum must be maintained on walls or water to prevent falling.

- Effect (bronze): Enhanced balance and spatial sense.

“Enhanced balance and spatial sense,” Jason read. “That would let you move very fast through a complicated environment. Super parkour.”

“Parkour?”

“In my world it’s what we call the practice of moving through complex spaces with efficiency and speed. People train to be very good. I’m guessing that ability of yours makes you very, very good at it.”

“Yes,” Sophie said plainly. He could see she wasn’t boasting but simply stating a fact. She neither wanted nor needed his validation. He chuckled.

“That’s a classic, skill-oriented power,” Clive said. “It seems simple and underpowered but lets you do something you’re good at very well.”

“Let’s see about the next one,” Sophie said. “Set it up.”

Clive did just that, performing the ritual of awakening with the stone of purgation.

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- You have awakened the wind essence ability [Cleansing Breeze]. You have awakened 2 of 5 wind essence abilities.

Ability: [Cleansing Breeze] (Swift)

- Aura (holy, cleanse).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. This is a holy effect. Negates poisons in the air; this is a cleanse effect.

“Aura,” Clive said. “That is a big win.”

“It is,” Jason agreed.

“Why is that?” Belinda asked.

“Aura manipulation is an important skill for adventurers,” Clive said. “You can only learn it once you have an aura power, although any aura power will do.”

“He’s right,” Jason said. “Aura control is one the things that differentiates a capable adventurer from a scrub.”

“A scrub?” Sophie asked.

“You might know it as a buster,” Jason said. “Doesn’t matter; you can get it from context.”

“It’s an unexpected ability for the wind essence,” Clive said. “I would have expected something from the mystic essence. It’s also the exact opposite of Jason’s aura.”

“Will they conflict?” Belinda asked.

“No,” Clive said. “Jason’s aura only affects enemies, while Miss Wexler’s only affects allies. So long as they’re on the same side, it won’t be a problem.”

Clive and Belinda looked between Jason and Sophie, who were giving each other assessing looks.

“I wouldn’t rule out problems just yet,” Belinda said.

“It’s a holy ability, too,” Clive said. “That’s matches well with the celestine holy affinity.”

“I thought they had astral affinity,” Jason said.

“They have holy too,” Clive said. “Still not as many as elves, who have life, nature and magic affinities, which is why elves make such good healers. I’ll set up the next ritual.”

Jason stood next to Clive as he used his essence ability to draw golden lines on the floor.

“How likely is it really that she picks up a flight power?” he asked quietly. “I’ve heard a lot of people say that you can’t go making predictions, yourself included.”

“Looking at all twenty abilities, that’s correct. It’s why the best approach is to select a more general direction for your power set. Pick out your essences and leave the specifics to fate. There’s always one or two abilities you can confidently see coming, though. For example, there are certain awakening stones that have a higher change of producing auras if you have a lot of abilities and no aura yet. Another example is all those feast stones you used, Jason.”

“I didn’t tell you about that.”

“Farrah did. The combination of feast stones and the blood essence meant that a health-draining power was almost a certainty. It could have been any of a wide slew of health-draining powers but you were almost certain to get one of them. If you combine a celestine’s natural aptitude for utility powers, the wind essence and a sky stone, that’s as

close to a guarantee of a flight power as you'll get. You couldn't ask for a better chance, except for maybe with the wing essence."

Jason moved away from the circle, pausing next to Sophie.

"Good luck," he said, then joined Belinda out of the way against the wall.

Clive performed the ritual no differently than any of the others.

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- You have awakened the wind essence ability [Leaf on the Wind]. You have awakened 3 of 5 wind essence abilities.

Ability: [Leaf on the Wind] (Swift)

- Special ability (movement, dimension).
- Cost: Moderate mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Glide through the air; highly effective at riding the wind. Can reduce weight to slow fall at a reduced mana cost. Ignore or ride the effects of strong wind, even when this ability is not in active use.

Clive let out a boyish laugh.

"You've got it," he said. "I'll have to look it up to make sure but I'd bet my library that's a flight power."

Jason took out a tablet and looked up the ability.

"Yep," he said. "It was the third one down on the list of wind essence flight abilities. From what I'm seeing here, you glide at iron and sort of fly-glide at bronze. Riding the wind, that sort of thing. You'll have full-flown flight at silver, then go back to wind-riding at gold, but you'll be controlling the wind. Doesn't say about diamond, which is no surprise."

Sophie and Belinda looked at each other, grins spreading on their faces.

"You can fly," Belinda said.

Sophie nodded. "I can feel it."

"The next move is obvious, then," Jason said. "Let's go jump off a sky palace."

"You might want to be a little cautious," Clive said. "Until she gets a handle on the ability."

"Boo!" Belinda jeered.

"Did you just boo me?" Clive asked.

"And so she should," Jason said. "Boo!"

"You're acting like children."

"We're about to go jump off the roof," Jason said. "Of course we're acting like children."