

Chapter 244

Ambitions

Over the last week, the ambient magic in the astral had taken on a strange cadence. Like ripples on still water at the footfalls of a great beast, the very space around them was agitated. It grew stronger day by day, until even Sophie could sense it, and she had no magical senses at all.

The monsters were apparently affected, being driven to unusual behaviour. Some hunkered down in the deepest holes they could find. Others gathered into large packs of disparate creatures that would ordinarily be at each other's throats.

When the team found these groups in the early stages of their formation, before their numbers swelled, they would swoop in and wipe them out. As days passed, though, they found themselves avoiding the groups altogether. The numbers had simply grown too large to take on; whole armies of bronze and silver-rank monsters, dwarfing anything the blood weaver had accumulated.

Another reason that team had holed-up in the cloud house was that the changes to the ambient magic started to affect their powers. Sometimes they wouldn't work, other times their effects were unpredictable, mixing up allies and enemies. Fortunately, the vampiric flesh abominations the blood weaver had turned were some of the last. The team knew they had cleared the last one when the soul compass span aimlessly around.

"The strange affect on our powers will pass once the tunnel opens and the dimensional membrane becomes becomes stable," Clive said. "That, or the whole astral space will collapse and we'll be annihilated. Definitely one of the two."

"I don't suppose you'd care to lay odds?" Jason asked.

"I have no idea," Clive said. "My understanding is incomplete, at best. I wasn't going to say anything, but I never figured out how they intend to stabilise the tunnel at this end."

"Uh," Belinda said, "wouldn't that mean that it would essentially shred the dimensional membrane, flood the astral space with magic and it'll do that collapsing thing you mentioned."

"Yes," Clive confirmed.

"And you can't figure out why that won't happen?" Jason asked.

"That's right," Clive said. "But I'm stumbling in the dark, here. We're talking about magic that I barely understand and I've only seen parts of what they're doing."

"That's comforting," Neil said. "As far as you can tell we're all going to die, but you know so little that you might be wrong."

“Pretty much,” Clive said.

“I think I have some cake left,” Jason said, opening his inventory. “If I’m going to be obliterated into astral nothingness again, I’m doing it with cake.”

“What do you mean again?” Neil asked.

Jason was sitting on the roof of the cloud house, talking into a recording crystal.

“So, I’m pretty sure that this whole place won’t just blow up. If it does, you’ll never get to see this, so I’ll make a confident assertion and either come off as right or you’ll never know, so I’m a winner each way.”

He turned the crystal around to point at the sky. There was a large patch that shimmered, sometimes showing a whole different sky. Stars at night, dark clouds, a strange purple.

“We can see the tunnel now, so Clive thinks it’s a matter of hours.”

He sighed, turning the crystal back on him.

“I hope we’re ready for whatever comes through. The last time people went up against the cultists on a large scale, I lost a friend. And that was when the opposing forces were fairly matched. I don’t even know how much I’ll be able to contribute. If they have a bunch of construct creatures, I may not be a lot of help.”

Jason tilted his head like he was listening for something.

“Well, time to go. There probably won’t be another one of these until it’s all over, one way or another.”

He stowed away the recording crystal.

“I’m all done, Belinda,” he called out and Belinda made her way up the stairs on the outside of the house.

“How did you know it was me?” she asked.

“Aura.”

She shook her head. “I need to work on my aura retraction,” she said.

“What’s up?” he asked, waving a hand to make a cloud chair rise up for her to sit on.

“You recording another message for home?” she asked, deflecting his question as she sat in the soft seat.

“I was,” he said.

“Do you think you’ll ever get to show them to your family?”

“I hope so,” he said. “I have fences to mend, there. I have no idea how I’m going to explain any of this. I’m not even sure that my powers will work. My world is magically barren.”

Belinda let out a tired breath, looking up at the sky.

"This is going to be quite something, isn't it?" she asked. "Whether that thing kills us all, or spews out a bunch of evil pricks, this is the last bit of quiet we'll get before things get very busy and very dangerous."

"Yep," Jason agreed.

"It might be a last chance to maybe settle some things that have maybe been hanging over us for a while," Belinda said. "Personal stuff, between members of the team."

"I don't think that's a good idea," Jason said.

"Oh, come on. You know she likes you."

"I know," Jason said. "Which leads me to the question of why you're the one up here."

"She's not exactly good at making herself vulnerable," Belinda said. "She doesn't know what to do."

"I think it's best left alone," Jason said. "Even if we put aside the tangle of issues around how we met, which we can't, it isn't... I don't..."

He sighed.

"Sophie's good at cutting through the nonsense to get to the point. That's something people like me need in their lives. And she's gorgeous, obviously, but that's where the attraction ends for me. I want her in my life and in my team. Neither of us make easy friends, I don't think, but we both make good ones. That's what I want. All I want."

"Ah, crap," Belinda said.

"Yeah," Jason said. "That about covers it."

"What do we do?"

"Nothing," Jason said. "She has to decide for herself what course she's going to take."

"And if that course leads straight to you?" Belinda asked.

"Then she and I will have an awkward conversation and we'll go from there. Frankly, she needs to find herself as an adventurer before she starts adding complications, anyway. Not the running around, hunting monsters part of being an adventurer. She's a natural at that."

"Yes she is," Belinda agreed.

"I mean the place in society that being an adventurer brings. The power and privilege. The money. That's where she's going to need you."

"I'm not just her sidekick, you know."

"I know."

“I have my own hopes and ambitions. I don’t want to just spend my life following her around.”

“I never thought you did,” Jason said. “But you’re the one having this conversation, when it really should be her.”

“She’s just not good at certain things,” Belinda said. “She doesn’t handle them well. I don’t want her to run off, or kick the snot out of you or something.”

“I appreciate that,” Jason said. “So, where do you see yourself landing, down the line? Assuming we survive to escape this mess.”

“I’m liking this adventuring job,” Belinda said. “Not so much the hunting down monsters, but roaming around, tackling interesting problems. I guess I want to end up somewhere between Clive and Emir. Well-studied, but not bound up in the Magic Society, the way Clive is. Taking interesting jobs for large quantities of money, but going out there myself, getting my hands dirty. I don’t want to be a spider in the middle of a web, like Emir.”

“A life of excitement, travel and adventure,” Jason said. “That sounds exactly like the direction the team should be going. Maybe you should be in charge.”

“That works for me,” Belinda said. “I can have Sophie follow me around and clean up my messes for once.”

The sky distortion was directly over the centre of the city. The team had chosen to wait out events from atop a building at the outskirts of the central region, on one of the last intact buildings before the thick ring of jungle took over. Jason had set the cloud house up on the roof. Unlike many other aspects of magic, the cloud flask seemed unaffected by the changes in ambient magic. Clive explained that they had only seen a fragment of the true artistry behind its construction.

When the ground started shaking like an earthquake, they all made their way outside.

“Should we get down off this building?” Neil asked. “It feels like the building is going to collapse.”

“Lets go up on the cloud house roof” Jason said. “I’m pretty sure it will slow-fall us down if the building gets earth quaked out from under us.”

“Pretty sure?” Neil asked.

The team made their way up onto the roof of the cloud house, itself on the roof of a tall building, giving them a good vantage.

At the very centre of the city was the crater that was once the Order of the Reaper’s trial tower. They couldn’t see the ground level there due to the intervening buildings, but

they heard a cacophonous shattering of earth and stone, then a huge cloud of dust and dirt rose up, spreading over the city. Sophie's toxin-purging aura creating a field of clean air around the team as the cloud washed around and past them.

After a few moments, the cloud settled enough for the team to once again see out over the city. In the space over the crater was a giant stone ring, floating horizontally in the air. It was thick and some hundred metres across, slowly ascending through the air in the direction of the sky anomaly.

"I don't remember seeing that," Sophie said. "It feels like we would have noticed something that large."

"It must have been buried," Humphrey said. "That cloud was kicked off when it pushed itself out."

"Any ideas, Clive?"

"All I can offer are guesses," Clive said. "I'm assuming some manner of terminus point for the tunnel, to stop it from annihilating the astral space."

"That's good news," Neil said. "We'll survive long enough to get wiped out by a cultist army."

"Maybe it will stabilise the magic," Clive said. "Open up the portals and give us a chance to escape."

"Escape isn't an option," Humphrey said. "Unless the limit on iron-rank entry has been changed, we're the only ones with the strength to stop the cult. Bringing in more iron-rankers would be animals to the slaughterhouse. The monsters would get them before the cultists."

"Assuming we do have the strength," Belinda said.

"I am assuming that," Humphrey said. "It's the only chance we have of stopping whatever it is they're doing, which we very much want to do."

The team watched the ring slowly rise into the air.

"I believe it is called a ring gate," Shade said, emerging from Jason's shadow. "I've heard of them, but never seen one in operation. As Mr Standish surmised, it is likely the anchor point of the physical reality bridge spanning across the astral between this space and your world."

"An artificial astral space aperture," Clive said.

"Yes."

"You didn't feel like mentioning this before?" Neil asked.

"My knowledge in this area is limited," Shade said. "Even now, I postulate."

The ring continued its ponderous rise into the sky.

“How long has that thing been there, hidden under the ground?” Sophie wondered.

“During my return here, it has become clear that many things were kept from me when I was made administrator of this place,” Shade said. “We have gone places I did not know existed, and were apparently barred to the vessel I inhabited at that time.”

“They didn’t want you to know,” Jason said.

“I believe that to be the case,” Shade said. “It seems to have an age and purpose that goes well beyond the training ground it served as during my tenure here. The Order of the Reaper, and my previous summoner, clearly hid that history and purpose from me.”

“Should we, I don’t know, get ready to attack?” Neil asked. “Catch them as they arrive?”

“No,” Humphrey said. “We have to assume that we’ll be outnumbered and that the enemy will have at least some silver rankers amongst them. We have to make every move with careful deliberation.”

“Insurgency rules,” Jason said. “Guerrilla tactics. Find vulnerable points, soften them up. Create a chance to strike critical points.”

“Exactly,” Humphrey said. “We’ve been tramping over this place for the last five months. We know it better than they do, and we use that.”

“The first thing we need is information,” Clive said.

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “We need to see what come through that ring.”

“It is in the sky,” Sophie said. “Maybe they’ll all just fall down and die.”

“That would be nice,” Humphrey said. “Somehow, I don’t think it’s going to be that easy.”

In the sky of the astral space, the ring finally came into contact with the shimmering anomaly. Immediately, the anomaly began to shrink down, pouring into the space within the ring like water going down a drain. The anomaly concentrated, what was originally an occasionally shifting skyscape becoming a roiling mass in indiscernible power within the ring.

Then, the roiling stopped. A wave of magic flooded over the city like the blast wave of an explosion as the space inside the ring became the still, dark blue of the sky before sunset. Watching from far below, reeling from the magical blast, Jason and his team watched as a figure that seemed incredibly tiny at that distance fall out of the ring. Shrouded in blue light, it drifted slowly toward the ground.

More figures emerged, dropping through the ring and falling to the ground in rapid succession. The team counted dozens, and it was more than just people. There were large

boxes, likewise slowly falling under the power of the blue light, all descending toward the ground at the heart of the city.

“That’s a lot,” Neil said.

“Yep,” Jason agreed.

“Can we handle all that?”

“We will,” Humphrey said.

“So, what now?” Sophie asked. “We need more information, right?”

“We do,” Jason said. “I think I’ll start by taking a look at what they’re up to.”