

Chapter 63: Sunk-Cost Fallacy

Jason was trying something new on his morning run to Jory's clinic. With his cloak of shadows around him, he used its ability to reduce his weight to accelerate his progress. It required careful control, kicking off each step with his full weight, then reducing it to let the force propel him. At first it didn't work at all as he hopped into the air or tripped and fell.

Slowly getting a handle on it, he developed an unusual stride. His steps came less frequently, but with a lunging power that sent him skimming almost weightlessly over the ground. The disadvantage was that the weight-reduction slowly consumed his mana. By the time he arrived breathlessly at Jory's, the little mana bar at the edge of his vision was as empty as his stamina. He was as exhausted mentally as physically.

When Jason staggering in the back, Jory quickly brought out someone for Jason to use his power on. The patient looked worse than Jason, pale-skinned and walking strangely. He was accompanied into the room by a deeply unpleasant smell. Jason held out a weary hand, mumbling the incantation for the spell.

"Feed me your sins."

-
- You have cleansed all instances of disease [Dysentery] from [Human].
 - You have cleansed all instances of disease [Syphilis] from [Human].
 - Your stamina and mana have been replenished.
-

Both Jason and the patient let out sighs of relief.

"Thankyou sir," the man said to Jason as Jory led him out. "I couldn't really make it here without soiling myself a little."

"Oh, we noticed," Jory said.

"Did I hear him say something about sins?" the man asked Jory.

"Don't worry about that," Jory said. "You just go home and get yourself cleaned up."

Jory came back to find Jason leaning against the wall. The few afflictions he had drained from the patient weren't enough to fully restore him.

"What happened to you?" Jory asked.

"I'm trying a new thing with one of my abilities. Something to help me travel faster. I'm going to pick up my first contract today, and most of them will be out in the delta."

"Why not hire a heidel from the livery stable? That's what most adventurers do."

"They creep me out," Jason said. "They're like a horse, except horribly, horribly wrong."

“I don’t know what a horse is, but why do you think heidels are creepy?” Jory asked.

“They are creepy.”

“There’s a leech monster that lives inside you, and you think heidels are creepy?”

“Yeah, well... actually, that’s a pretty good point. Still, I can think they’re creepy if I want; it’s a subjective position. Can you help me out with some cheap stamina and mana potions?”

“That’s not a problem,” Jory said. “Making those on the cheap were some of the earliest results of my experiments. They won’t as strong as the more expensive sort, though.”

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “I just need something to top me off a little. I’ll save the high performance stuff for combat.”

“I have crate-loads of the cheap stuff,” Jory said. “You can have them at cost.”

“Thanks,” Jason said. “I’ll be spending more time out in the delta now. I probably won’t be able to make scheduled appearances so often.”

“Don’t worry,” Jory said. “The clinic got along just fine before you came along.”

“I’m not saying I won’t be here,” Jason said. “It’s just the timing might get a little erratic.”

“Any time you can spare, I’ll appreciate,” Jory said. “Things will be a bit hectic once the expansion starts, anyway.”

“How’s that going?” Jason asked.

“I bought the building next door,” Jory said. “I’m going to have the two buildings connected, using this one as the clinic and putting a huge alchemy facility in the other. Construction starts in a few days.”

“Best bring on the next patient,” Jason said. “I want to get through them and head up to the jobs hall.”

“Not a problem,” Jory said, heading for the door, then pausing, looking back at Jason.

“Having you been passing weird spirit coins?” Jory asked.

“Those one I gave you should have been legitimate,” Jason said.

“Not those,” Jory said. “Iron rank stuff. Janice said some Magic Society guy came in looking for you.”

“Is that bad?” Jason asked.

“Not unless you’ve been passing counterfeit coins,” Jory said.

“I don’t think they’re counterfeit,” Jason said. “Just personalised.”

“What do you mean, personalised?” Jory asked.

Jason took out a coin checked it was one of his and tossed it to Jory, who looked it over.

“Is that a picture of you?” Jory asked, peering at it.

“Yep,” Jason said.

“Wait a second,” Jory said, heading for the stairs. He came back down with a stone plate, with six gems set into it. He sat it on a bench and placed Jason’s coin on it. The second gem immediately lit up with the blue-grey colour of an iron spirit coin.

“The coin’s fine,” Jory said. “They’re all like this one?”

“They are,” Jason said.

“Looting ability?” Jory asked.

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“No wonder you don’t mind healing people for free,” Jory said. “You can basically punch coins right out of monsters. I’m going to go get some more sick people for you.”

“Wait,” Jason said. “What do I do about the Magic Society guy?”

“The coins are the real deal,” Jory said, “so don’t worry about it. You’re an Adventure Society guy, now. There’s something of a friendly rivalry between the Magic Society and the Adventure Society, at least between people who aren’t members of both. If he shows up, feel free to stick it to him. Just do what you normally do to people.”

“What do I normally do to people?” Jason asked.

“Confuse them until they want to punch you in the face,” Jory said.

The jobs hall was an annex of the main administration building on the Adventure Society campus. Compared to the overbearing immensity of the trade hall, it was a small and discrete. Inside was a moderate sized room divided into rows by standing bulletin boards. There were a few adventurers amongst them, perusing the posted contracts. To the right of the entrance was a stairwell going up, while the left had a man behind a desk. The familiar looking man was leaning back in his chair, dozing lightly in the warmth of the afternoon.

“Afternoon, Bert,” Jason greeted.

He had learned that when it came to the Berts, the best way to identify them was to feel out their auras, which were almost, but not quite as identical as their faces. This was Albert, an Adventure Society functionary Jason had met before.

“Mr. Asano,” Albert greeted. “You’re not in for your first job, are you?”

“I am, as it happens.”

“You know, there’s another young fellow doing the same.”

“Oh?” Jason said, looking around. He spotted Humphrey emerging from behind a bulletin board.

“I thought I heard your voice,” Humphrey greeted.

After exchanging small talk, they started exploring the bulletin boards. It was the first visit for both of them, but Humphrey had been preparing to be an adventurer his entire life. He acted as a guide as he showed Jason through the various sections.

“This floor is all iron-rank contracts,” Humphrey explained. “It starts at one-star contracts down this end, with three-star on the far side of the room. That section is usually empty, though. Most iron-rank contracts are ordinary monster hunting.”

He pointed out the stairs.

“Upstairs is bronze rank. There isn’t a spot for silver rank, since there isn’t enough call for it.”

They started strolling through the rows, glancing over contracts.

“Contracts can be closed or open,” Humphrey explained. “A closed contract can only be taken by one person, on a first-come, first-serve basis. You take the notice, register it at the desk, and off you go. Open contracts are a lot less common, where any number of people can join in. Usually that’s a widespread infestation of lesser monsters, with rewards per kill.”

“I’ve killed a few lesser monsters.”

“They aren’t a big problem unless they come in numbers,” Humphrey said. “Any farmer with a pitchfork can handle most of them.”

“Not all of them, though,” Jason said. “Have you ever seen a malicious hedgehog? Shoots spikes out of its body.”

“I’ve haven’t,” Humphrey said.

“I suppose you don’t get a lot of hedgerow omnivores in this climate.”

“When it comes to choosing a contract, not all are created equal,” Humphrey said, continuing his explanation. “Once a contract has languished for a couple of weeks, it gets assigned to members on a compulsory basis. As to who gets the assignments, that’s all internal politics. There have been some rumblings since the new director came in. There are a lot of nominal Adventure Society members who don’t take any contracts suddenly finding contracts assigned to them.”

“I’ve heard there’s been some internal conflict,” Jason said. “The new person in charge, trying to purge some of the corruption.”

“My perspective has been somewhat peripheral,” Humphrey said, “not being a member until now. My mother likes the new director, though.”

“That’s a good sign,” Jason said.

“The new director had been making a lot of changes,” Humphrey said, “even here in the jobs hall.”

“Such as?”

“Contracts come from the general population,” Humphrey said. “From people who have a problem, usually a monster problem, that requires an adventurer. People of means can offer incentives, so that their contract is taken up more quickly. As you might imagine, there’s a lot of competition for the more lucrative contracts.”

“The new director banned incentives?” Jason asked.

“No, they’re still there,” Humphrey said. “It’s just that there used to be a special notice board up the front with all the incentivised contracts, because they were the ones people were most interested in. The new director put an end to that and had the incentivised contracts posted with all the rest. I’m not really sure what that accomplishes, other than taking up people’s time.”

“It’s actually a smart move,” Jason said. “Once people have put in a certain amount of effort into something, they feel like they need to follow through, or their effort was wasted. They call it the sunk-cost fallacy, where I come from.”

“Sunk cost?” Humphrey asked.

“Think about that board you described,” Jason said. “The one with all the most lucrative contracts on it, sitting up the front. I bet you’d get a lot of people who come in, saw that board was empty, and walked away. Now think about if they have to comb through all the boards to find those high-paying contracts. After having spent that much time looking, at least some of those people will take a contract, even if they don’t find one with bonuses. Otherwise, they feel like they’ve wasted all the time they spent looking.”

Humphrey frowned as he looked at Jason.

“Does it ever bother you?” Humphrey asked. “Manipulating people, I mean. Like with Thadwick Mercer. If you were actually arguing with him would be one thing, but provoking him because a public argument helps your social standing?”

“Manipulation isn’t bad, in and of itself,” Jason said. “Look at it this way: if you have the choice between manipulating someone into doing the right thing, or punishing them for doing the wrong thing, which is more moral? Pushing someone onto a better path and having the right thing done, or having the wrong thing done and hurting the person for doing it? Righteous honesty says to be upright and put the moral decision onto the other person. But what is more important? Feeling righteous, or putting a little more good into the world?”

“You have to give people the chance to make their own mistakes,” Humphrey said. “Otherwise, you’re just trying to control everything, even what’s right and wrong.”

“There is always someone controlling what’s right and wrong,” Jason said. “Look at you, for example. How do you feel about benefiting from a society where the vast majority of the population are exploited for the benefit of you and people like you? The same people who govern the structure of society are the one who benefit the most. That’s true everywhere, your world or mine.”

“I was brought up to believe that nobility is as much duty as privilege,” Humphrey said. “That the advantages we have come with a lifelong responsibility to earn the everything we’ve been given.”

“That’s commendable,” Jason said. “But Thadwick Mercer received every opportunity you did, and he doesn’t strike me as the lifelong responsibility type. How many of your peers are like you, and how many are like him? How is that fair to the people of Old City or the delta? Do you think someone living in a hovel would turn down a mansion because they would have to live up to the responsibility that came with it? Someone like Thadwick isn’t inherently evil, but he’s part of a system that tells him he deserves more than other people, just for being born. Do you think he’s right to think that?”

“Of course not,” Humphrey said.

“But you’re the same,” Jason said. “That responsibility you were talking about? That is you, striving to be better because the world tells you that you’re better and you feel responsible for living up to that. I respect that choice, but it is a choice. If you wanted to slack off and exploit people, there’s very little to stop you. Not everyone gets the chance to live up to that privilege.”

Farrah, had she been present, would have recognised Jason ramping up into full-blown, morally superior proselytising. Not being there to stop him with a sharp punch to the face, Jason’s rant continued.

“You think criminals just woke up one day and thought, ‘gee, I sure would like to take other people’s stuff?’ They turn to crime because it’s that or they go hungry. Their children go hungry. That’s something you and I never had to deal with. We get to choose to be good or bad, because we don’t have to spend our time breaking our backs just to eat or have a roof over our heads. People live their whole lives with nothing but that struggle, birth to death. But we never had to deal with that, and it’s not likely we ever will.”

Humphrey shook his head.

“So what are you suggesting?” he asked. “Revolution? Bring everything crashing down? It’s easy to point at the injustices of the world and use that as an excuse for whatever behaviour you’re trying to get away with.”

“I don’t have an answer,” Jason said, deflating from his self-righteous high. “I’m like you, Humphrey. I’m trying to do my best with what I have. In your case, that’s talent, wealth, looks and privilege. As for me, I’m good at people.”

“You mean good *with* people,” Humphrey said.

“No,” Jason said. “I meant what I said.”

Clarissa Ventress’ bodyguard Darnell led Sophie into the garden, where Ventress was enjoying tea on a terrace.

“Sophie, dear,” Ventress said. “It’s been so long since I’ve heard from you.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“With that little request of mine, yes. But as I recall, what I instructed were high-profile thefts in the midst of public events. It’s been weeks, and I haven’t heard about a thing. If you were doing as you were told, I really should have.”

“Your part in planning this operation,” Sophie said, “was to tell us to do something breathtakingly idiotic. Our part was to figure out how to do that without being caught immediately. Our part is harder, so it takes longer. Unless your intention was for us to march over to the Island and mug the first rich-looking person we see.”

Darnell moved forward threateningly as Sophie raised her voice, but Ventress waved him back.

“But I don’t think that’s what you wanted,” Sophie said. “That might get you out of our deal when I’m hauled away by the guard, but everyone will know that you sold me out. Where would your precious reputation be then? Stop sending your goons to drag me back here, Ventress. You’re only slowing me down.”

“Two weeks,” Ventress said. “I want to hear about your first bold caper within two weeks, or I will consider you as having failed to live up to your side of our little pact. At which point, I will throw you to whichever wolf leaves the thickest slab of meat at my door. And if I hear you try to run out on me...”

She gave Sophie her best serpentine grin.

“...there are men in this city with tastes that would make someone even as hard as you turn soft, Sophie dear.”

Sophie looked ready to spit venom, but kept her lips pressed tightly together. She stared daggers at Ventress, who smiled back as if Sophie’s glare was good for the skin.

“Can I go now?” Sophie asked, biting off every word.

“Of course, dear,” Ventress said. “Two weeks; don’t forget, now.”