

Chapter 176:

Relief

On his return to the cloud palace, Emir's first action was securing the scythe. His second was seeking out Jason and his team on the balcony terrace and enjoying a light lunch.

"Join us," Jason said as Emir arrived.

"I'm a little busy right now," Emir said.

"Are you sure?" Jason asked. "We've got gold plum soufflé."

"Well," Emir said. "I suppose we can talk over lunch."

"So, have you come to give us some top-end awakening stones?"

"Actually, I've come to give you four hundred and nineteen time-displaced priests who came out of the archway very confused and asking for you by name."

"Oh, right," Jason said. "Shade actually came through on that. Are you really leaving them to me to deal with? I'd have thought you'd be all over those people and what they knew."

"Actually, yes," Emir admitted. "I have a historian on staff who practically had a fit when I told her about them. I think we'll end up thoroughly debriefing them, then turning them over to their various churches to deal with. Whatever we may think of certain religious organisations, right now, I don't see much of a better option."

"They may not all want to go back," Jason said. "I could see some of them being disillusioned by what they went through."

"Not everyone is as cavalier with the churches as you, Jason," Emir said. "If any of them do put their faith aside, you can coordinate with the Adventure Society to sort it out."

"I imagine they'll take it out of my hands," Jason said. "It sounds like more of a three-star adventurer problem, which is too difficult for simple old me with my solitary star."

"True," Emir said, earning him an affronted look from Jason. "And about those rewards, I'll have Constance bring you a list of the awakening stones we have. You can choose any five you like."

"What about the cloud palace?" Humphrey asked. "That was the reward that had all the adventurers salivating."

"Obviously there's only one cloud palace to be had," Clive said. "It's a bonded item, so you'll need to decide which of you it will be bonded to."

"That'll be Jason," Humphrey said. "He's the one that got the scythe, after all."

"We should at least talk about it," Jason said.

“We did,” Humphrey said. “We all agreed.”

Jason looked around at the team and they all nodded.

“If you don’t want it, I’m happy to take it off your hands,” Sophie said.

“No, that’s fine,” Jason said. “I’ll take it.”

They were able to choose five stones, which was one for each team member. A legendary stone was the nearest thing to actually selecting a specific power, which made picking from a selection of legendary stones an unparalleled luxury. Constance brought them a list of the stones in Emir’s supply, which turned out to be startlingly large.

Neil and Jason both selected awakening stones of the avatar, known for most often producing summoning powers and powerful buffing abilities. Humphrey selected an awakening stone of rebirth, hoping for a powerful recovery power. Sophie, on Constance’s advice, selected an awakening stone of the celestials. Clive chose an awakening stone of karma, the same as his confluence essence, although he would not be able to use it.

They waited in the guest wing lounge as Constance left and came back with a long wooden box, the top of which she slid off to reveal five awakening stones, sitting on velvet.

“We had three of these, originally,” Constance said as she handed the stone of the celestials to Sophie. “They were created from an outworlder’s ability, like Jason’s, and I’ve never heard of them appearing anywhere else. The only reason they appear in the Magic Society records at all is that we allowed the Magic Society to examine them.”

“So you don’t know what their power inclinations are?” Clive asked.

“The other two were both used by celestines,” Constance said. “In both cases, the abilities enhanced their natural racial gifts.”

Clive handed his stone to Sophie.

“It should pair well with your balance essence and give you something formidable,” he said.

Sophie looked down at the stones she was holding in each hand. Each one was valuable on a level she could barely conceive of. Even most essences would not fetch as high a price as these, should someone squander them on the open market. She looked up at Clive who placed his hand over her, closing her fingers as she tried to hand it back. He gave her a warm smile.

“This is just the beginning,” he told her. She looked around uncertainly but found supporting smiles all around. Even Jason looked uncharacteristically sincere, without his usual expression of thinking of a joke no one else knew about.

“So, whose stones to we use first?” she asked.

“Jason’s,” Clive said. “I want to see what those two reaper stones produce. Also, he’s faster, because he doesn’t need a ritual.”

“Actually, I do want to use one,” Jason said. “Shade said I should incorporate this into a ritual.”

Jason tossed an object to Clive, a square of obsidian with a scythe engraved in silver, along with writing he couldn’t read. Clive looked at it, then up at Jason.

Item: [Reaper Token] (transcendent rank, legendary)

??? (consumable, ???).

- Effect: ???
- Effect: ???

“This is an astral blessing token,” he said. “For the Reaper, right?”

“Yep,” Jason said.

“What’s an astral blessing token?” Sophie asked.

“Its something great astral beings give out to bestow blessings, as signs of approval,” Clive said. “They trigger racial gift evolutions, just like the one we all went through. I used one of these myself, back when I was Humphrey’s age.”

“So, it’s like those star seeds?” Neil asked, shrinking away.

“No,” Clive said. “The blessings are harmless. The great astral beings give them out for all kinds of reasons, to those that venerate them or that they approve of. Some astral beings have even given them out to those who work against their interests because they are enemies worthy of respect.”

“And you use them as part of an awakening ritual?” Jason asked, thinking of the other token in his possession. The one the goddess of knowledge claimed would send him home.

“Some you can,” Clive said. “They tend to arrange for specific abilities if you do. That’s something only transcendent beings like gods can arrange. Every token has an additional effect, and some can only be triggered in certain ways. If Shade told you to use it with an awakening ritual, it should probably be with one of the Reaper stones.”

“Agreed,” Jason said. “How did you get your token, Clive?”

“It just showed up one night while I was studying,” Clive said. “There was this patch of moonlight in my room, even though the curtains were closed, and there it was. My mentor knew what it was and helped me use it with my next awakening ritual.”

Clive frowned in thought.

“That’s one interesting point,” he said. “Your token came from your ability, right? A quest reward.”

“That’s right,” Jason said.

“That shouldn’t be possible,” Clive said. “Your quest system’s ability to produce items is just another loot power variant. It shouldn’t be able to produce an astral blessing token. Only great astral beings can do that.”

“Maybe I’m secretly a great astral being,” Jason said. “I could have knocked up a crappy body, chucked in some fake memories and shoved a chunk of my consciousness into it to get a mortal perspective. Or for laughs, whatever.”

Clive’s eyes went wide in horror as he stared at Jason.

“That... no... that can’t be... no... but... no. Wait... no... that can’t be right.”

“Mate, calm down,” Jason told him. “I’m not secretly the Reaper.”

“But, I mean, conceivably...”

“No,” Jason said firmly. “These beings can just make the tokens appear if they like, right? Surely the Reaper, having about a squillion times more power than me, could have tweaked my ability to produce it this one time. Just a reward for getting his magic farming tool.”

“Yeah,” Clive said, nodding to himself. “That makes more sense.”

“Exactly. Now, do you know how to incorporate this thing into an essence ritual?”

“Oh, Absolutely,” Clive said, perking up. “Let’s get into a ritual room and do this.”

Clive was as good as his word, setting up a more elaborate magic circle than he had for Sophie’s awakenings. Jason stood the middle, the awakening stone of the Reaper in one hand and the Reaper token in the other.

“Ready?” Clive asked him.

“Yeah,” Jason said.

“What are you hoping for?” Clive asked.

“Well, apparently Shade is looking for a new gig,” Jason said. “I thought he’d make an awesome familiar.”

“Seriously?”

“Why not? Colin’s great, don’t get me wrong, but the conversation isn’t exactly sparkling.”

Clive shook his head and conducted the ritual. It went as normal, aside from the Reaper token melding into his body along with the awakening stone, and felt to Jason no different to absorbing them normally.

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- You have awakened the dark essence ability [Shadow of the Reaper]. You have awakened 4 of 5 dark essence abilities.

Ability: [Shadow of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Familiar (ritual).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Summon a [Shadow of the Reaper] to serve as a familiar.

“That looks like a winner,” Jason said. “I think I might have actually done it?”

As the others read his ability through the party interface, Blue-grey light started shining from Jason’s body.

“As expected,” Clive said.

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- [Reaper Token] has been consumed.

 - Outworlder racial ability [Mysterious Stranger] has evolved to [Dark Rider].

Ability: [Dark Rider]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Mysterious Stranger].

- Language adaptation.
- Essence, awakening stone and skill-book absorption.
- Immunity to identification and tracking effects.
- Shadow-based familiars may take adopt the form of a mount appropriate to the environment.

“Oh, a mount power, sweet,” Jason said. “Now I don’t have to farm all that gold.”

Then he looked at the requirements for the summoning ritual his new familiar power would require.

[Shadow of the Reaper] summoning ritual material requirements:

- 343 [Dark Quintessence Gems (Iron)].
- 2401 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins].
- 500 grams of [Midnight Onyx Powder].
- 1 [Midnight Jade].
- 24 small, square [Night Stone] plates.

“Mat farming isn’t entirely off the table it seems.”

“What are you talking about?” Sophie asked.

“The ritual to summon my new familiar. It takes a bunch of stuff I don’t have.”

“It should have been the same for your first familiar, right?” Clive asked. “Even more costly, if anything. Your first familiar is an apocalypse beast, after all?”

“Did you just say apocalypse?” Neil asked.

“Don’t worry about that,” Jason said. “It’s fine.”

“Apocalypse?” Neil asked again.

“I said it’s fine. Tell him it’s fine, Clive.”

“He’s right,” Clive said. “Until he reaches diamond rank, it definitely won’t be able to wipe out an entire world’s worth of life.”

“WHAT?”

“Clive, I said to tell him it's fine, not anything about scouring the world of life, which Colin would never do.”

“He might,” Clive said.

“He wouldn’t eat the plants, would he?” Jason asked.

“Oh, you’re probably right,” Clive said. “Do you still have the book from the blood cult? It might be in that.”

“Yeah, Farrah gave it to me when she was done with it. Because of my familiar. Actually, the blood cult is why I had such an easy time summoning Colin. They took off with all the high-end goods but left behind a pile of iron-rank materials. And being a blood cult, there was plenty of iron-rank materials to knock out the ritual. When Rufus was splitting the loot he gave me a spare set in case something happened and I had to resummon the little guy.”

“You’ll have to do some shopping,” Humphrey said. “In the meantime, how about your other awakening stones?”

“Oh, yeah,” Jason said, rubbing his hands together, then plucked another awakening stone from his inventory. “Another Reaper stone. I’m running out of chances to get that necrotic affliction I’ve been after, and I think this is the one.”

After the ritual he used to absorb his last stone, quietly absorbing the next one seemed anticlimactic.

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- You have awakened the dark essence ability [Hand of the Reaper]. You have awakened 5 of 5 dark essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all dark essence abilities. Linked attribute [Speed] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank dark essence ability.

Ability: [Hand of the Reaper] (Dark)

- Conjunction (disease).
- Cost: Low mana-per-second.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
- Effect (iron): Conjure a highly flexible, semi-substantial shadow-arm that can extend or shrink. Conjured items can be conjured into the shadow hand. Can be used to make melee special attacks. Special attacks made using the arm inflict [Creeping Death] in addition to other effects.
- [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

A huge grin spread across Jason's face. The lack of a necrotic damage affliction in his repertoire of abilities been preying on his mind increasingly as his available slots diminished. The relief at closing the gap in his power set was like finally taking a wee after desperately holding it in for too long and he let out a contented sigh.

"That power sounds strange," Sophie said, reading the description. "It also sounds creepy. A flexible hand sneaking about?"

"It seems like it'll be versatile," Humphrey said. "You can use it to make special attacks, but also just increase your ability to reach. It's no telekinesis power but I imagine you'll get some use out of it."

"I'll give it a try," Jason said. He reached out with his arm, which transmuted into the same shadow-stuff his cloak was made of. It extended out to slip around Humphrey's ankle like a constrictor snake.

"I can use this in combat for more than just making attacks," Jason said and yanked back hard with the shadow arm. Humphrey didn't budge, Jason instead yanking himself off his feet and falling to an undignified heap.

"It doesn't seem to increase my strength at all," he said from the floor.

"You'll need to test it extensively to see what you can and can't do with it," Humphrey told him. "For now, move onto the next stone."

“Right,” Jason said. “I can knock out the last one and someone else can jump into the spotlight.”

He took out the last stone, the awakening stone of the avatar.

“It’s going to be a doom power,” Jason said. “Do you think it will be some super-hideous affliction?”

“I think it’s more likely to be a summoning power,” Clive said. “Maybe one that runs around, causing afflictions for you?”

“I already have Colin for that,” Jason said.

“Other than summons,” Clive said, “avatar stones are known for enhancement and transformation powers. If it’s from the doom essence, maybe it turns you into a blob of pustulant flesh that spurts gobbets of poisons from the sores all over your body.”

Everyone gave Clive a wary look.

“What?” Clive asked.

“That isn’t actually an option is it?” Jason asked.

“Sure it is,” Clive said encouragingly. “I’ve read a case study about someone with a very similar power. It was actually a fascinating case because the permanent nature of the transformation made it resistant to suppression collars.”

“Permanent?” Jason asked, his face wan.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Neil said happily, giving Jason a pat on the back. “If it’s really bad we can push you around in a wheelbarrow or something.”

“I’m not going to be the one pushing it,” Sophie said.

“You’re his indentured servant,” Neil told her. “I think it has to be you.”

“The guy I read about was more or less humanoid,” Clive said, “so that shouldn’t be an issue.”

“More or less?” Jason repeated.

“He certainly had something that could pass as legs,” Clive said.

“Maybe I should find an awakening stone more special-attack oriented,” Jason said.

“Don’t let them talk you out of using such a precious stone,” Humphrey said. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. We would never push you around in a wheelbarrow.”

“Thanks,” Jason said gratefully.

“We’d have someone make a little magic cart,” Humphrey continued. “Probably with something to seal in the smell, because I have to imagine it would be bad.”

“Oh, it definitely would,” Clive said. “Instead of sweating, the guy secreted this oil that kept him cool and killed insects, but was apparently very pungent.”

“Alright, you all need to stop talking,” Jason said.