

## Chapter 177:

### Glory

Despite the best efforts of his team to unnerve him, Jason used his final awakening stone, albeit with eyes closed and whispering to himself.

“Don’t turn into a blob, don’t turn into a blob, don’t turn into a blob...”

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- You have awakened the doom essence ability [Avatar of Doom]. You have awakened 5 of 5 doom essence abilities.
  - You have awakened all doom essence abilities. Linked attribute [Spirit] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank doom essence ability.

#### Ability: [Avatar of Doom] (Doom)

- Familiar (ritual).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Summon an [Avatar of Doom] to serve as a familiar.

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“Another familiar power,” Jason said. “I’m turning into a pet character. I don’t suppose anyone knows what an avatar of doom is?”

“It isn’t something I’ve heard of,” Clive said, pulling out his monster archive tablet. After looking through for a few moments, he shook his head.

“Not here,” he said. “You get that with summoned familiars quite a lot, though, seeing as they’re all beings from the deep astral. It’s an endless supply of bizarre and terrifying horrors.”

“We don’t know it’ll be terrifying,” Jason said.

“It’s called an avatar of doom,” Neil said. “I doubt it’s going to be a healer-type familiar.”

“That’s an option?” Jason asked. “Having your own personal healer?”

“My sister has one,” Humphrey said. “But she’s a summoning specialist, so she has one of just about everything.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Jason said, looking over the summoning ritual requirements.

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[Shadow of the Reaper] summoning ritual material requirements:

- 108 [Radiant Quintessence Gems (Iron)].
  - 108 [Void Quintessence Gems (Iron)].
  - 1296 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins].
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“These ritual materials are awful,” Jason said. “Void and radiant quintessence?”

“Ouch,” Clive said. “That’s going to be worse than the other one.”

“Lucky we just got a haul of treasure, then,” Sophie said. “That plant quintessence might be common, but we have piles of the stuff, and it’s bronze-rank.”

“That’ll put a dent in the price,” Jason acknowledged.

“The problem will be sourcing the materials,” Clive said. “I know the Magic Society has some radiant quintessence, although it won’t part with it cheaply. I think the void quintessence will be your main obstacle. It’s actually harder to get at iron than it is at higher ranks.”

“We can worry about that later,” Jason said. “It’s someone else’s turn to use their stones.”

“Right,” Clive said. “I’ll set up a ritual while you all decide who goes next.”

“We still need to organise my stones,” Sophie said. “I’ll wait until later.”

“Sensible,” Humphrey said. “Would you like to go next, Neil?”

“Is there any chance of Neil turning into a blob monster?” Jason asked Clive hopefully.

Clive hummed thoughtfully as he used his power to draw out a ritual circle.

“If I recall correctly,” Clive said, “you have open spots in the Shield and growth essences, right, Neil? The avatar stone could have some blob-related results in the growth essence. As for the Reaper, stone, who knows?”

“That’s comforting,” Neil said. “I was more looking for another summon, or maybe a buff spell. A shield golem would be nice.”

“Shield golem?” Jason asked. “That actually does sound awesome. I hope you get that.”

Neil’s ritual of awakening went off without incident in Clive’s capable hands.

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- You have awakened the growth essence ability [Hero's Moment]. You have awakened 5 of 5 growth essence abilities.
  - You have awakened all growth essence abilities. Linked attribute [Spirit] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank growth essence ability.

Ability: [Hero's Moment] (Growth)

- Spell (boon, recovery).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Bestow a powerful boon on an ally, increasing all attributes and resistances by a significant amount. They receive damage reduction, their maximum mana and stamina are increased and they gain ongoing mana and stamina recovery. They ignore the effects of rank-disparity. When this effect ends, they are temporarily debilitated, suffering the inverse of all previous effects.

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"There's that buff you were looking for," Jason said. "That'll turn Humphrey into a monster."

"I think the more interesting application will be Neil's summon," Clive said. "We've barely tapped into what we can do with it. You may or may not remember that when heavily damaged, it undergoes a transformation based on what it was subjected to before the change. Imagine what it would get out of having that spell used on it."

"That's an interesting point," Humphrey said. "One of our strategic thin spots is our summons. We have a few strategies build around Jason's leech swarm, but mine and Neil's summons have been rather underutilised. Once we add in Jason's new familiars, we'll have quite the selection of allies at our command."

As Clive set up the next ritual, the others postulated Neil's last ability.

"The only unawakened ability I have is from the shield essence," Neil said. "What kind of ability will come from a stone associated with death?"

"Another one of your quick bubble-shields?" Jason guessed. "It could have retributive damage, like your burst shield ability."

"What about a death wall?" Humphrey said. "I remember during the last monster surge I was up on the outer walls with my father. A swarming pack of margolls came pouring at us and one of my family members put up this sheet of energy. Every monster that went through it died on the spot."

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- You have awakened the shield essence ability [Reaper's Redoubt]. You have awakened 5 of 5 shield essence abilities.
  - You have awakened all shield essence abilities. Linked attribute [Power] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank shield essence ability.

Ability: [Reaper's Redoubt] (Shield)

- Spell (dimension).
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 6 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Take allies into a dimensional space briefly while flooding the area with death energy, dealing disruptive-force damage, necrotic damage and inflicting [Creeping Death].
- [Creeping Death] (damage-over-time, disease, stacking): Inflicts ongoing necrotic damage until the disease is cleansed. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

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"I know I'm new at this whole adventurer thing," Sophie said, "but that ability sounds really strong, right?"

"That's the same affliction as my ability," Jason said. "Must be a favourite of the Reaper."

"The fact that it takes six hours before becoming available again suggests it certainly is strong," Humphrey said. "The other ability takes a whole day. Judgement of when to use your powers will be key, Neil."

"Nothing new there," Neil said.

"The utility of that new ability will depend on how close we have to be to Neil to be taken into the dimensional space," Humphrey assessed. "I don't think being left behind for those other effects would be a pleasant experience."

"It feels like I can take in anyone within about a dozen metres," Neil said. "I think we can work with that range."

Essence users all had an instinctive understanding of their abilities as the awakening stones imprinted them on the user's soul. Even without using them, there was an intrinsic understanding of an ability's properties. This was only ever hampered in unusual instances, like Jason and his shadow teleport.

Until he had broken through the mental block to give himself completely over to magic, Jason had been unable to make the shadow-jump work. Even then, however, he

had an understanding of how it should work. Neil's estimate of his new power's parameters was therefore considered trustworthy.

After Neil, they moved onto Humphrey. The awakening stone of the Reaper gave him a special attack, unsurprisingly for a human.

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

Ability: [Spirit Reaper] (Magic)

- Special attack (melee, dimension, drain).
- Cost: Low mana and stamina.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Inflicts additional disruptive-force damage and drains mana. Has additional effect against incorporeal or semi-corporeal creatures.

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"An attack specialised in fighting incorporeal opponents," Humphrey said. "I might have been disappointed if I hadn't just spent weeks fighting those vorger creatures. Magic weapons could affect them, but not well."

"Also, don't overlook the use of disruptive-force damage at breaking through magic defences," Neil said. "It can break down magical shields like mine much faster than normal."

They moved on to Humphrey's final stone. He had chosen an awakening stone of rebirth, hoping for a recovery power that would increase his staying power in an extended fight or let him run at full steam for longer in a short one. He had chosen it specifically, on the advice of his mother, she wanted him to avoid the flaw in her own ability set. Her powers were outrageously potent, but at a cost of rapidly consuming mana and stamina. In short bursts, she was close to invincible within her rank. Extended conflicts would leave her vulnerable, however; too drained to use her formidable abilities.

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- You have awakened the might essence ability [Immortality]. You have awakened 5 of 5 might essence abilities.
  - You have awakened all might essence abilities. Linked attribute [Power] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank might essence ability.

Ability: [Immortality] (Might)

- Special ability (healing, recovery).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: 24 hours.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Instantly restore a large portion of health, mana and stamina. Amount restored is based on how depleted health, mana and stamina are when the ability is used.

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“Seriously?” Jason asked. “I was happy with my shadow-arm power and this guy gets immortality?”

“In fairness,” Sophie said, “what would you say if asked whether you or Humphrey deserve the better power?”

“I’d say me, obviously,” Jason said. “I’ll lie through my teeth if there’s immortality in it.”

“You’ll lie through your teeth if there’s a halfway-decent lunch spread in it,” Neil told him.

“That’s fair,” Jason acknowledged cheerfully.

“Congratulations,” Clive said to Humphrey, slapping him on the arm. “You just acquired what may be the single most sought-after power in the world. Of course, it won’t actually bring you back from the dead until gold rank.”

“So, it’s real immortality?” Sophie asked.

“It’s a famous power, for obvious reasons,” Clive said. “The Magic Society has extensive records on it. There are various limitations on its power to bring back the dead, of course. It’s rumoured those limits are reduced or even eliminated at diamond rank, but I don’t have the authority to access those kinds of records.”

“Looks like Humphrey won the essence power lottery,” Jason said.

“You should remember that you’ve already come back from the dead,” Clive said to Jason, grabbing the attention of the group.

“It’s an outworlder thing,” Jason said dismissively. “Clive can explain while we go shopping.”

Jason turned to Sophie.

“You said Belinda was checking out the market, right?”

“That’s right,” Sophie said.

“Let’s go see if we can find her, then.”

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A market had sprung up in the adventurer camp between the cloud palace and the nearby town. Adventurers had come from the trials with dimensional bags overflowing with loot and Greenstone’s brokers had anticipated exactly that. A series of tents, even bamboo buildings hastily erected with magic had formed an impromptu trade fair. Jason’s voice chat allowed them to contact Belinda and arrange a meeting place, but Constance intercepted Jason and the others on their way out of the cloud palace.

“Jason,” she said. “Emir would like to meet with you about the priests you liberated.”

“Oh,” he said, frowning. “Alright. You lot go ahead to the market and I’ll meet up with you later.”

Jason followed Constance to Emir’s tower-top office. It was the same as his previous visit, a flat space under a translucent dome, broken up by pools of water with plants growing from them. To Jason’s surprise, the head of the Adventure Society Inquiry team, Tabitha Gert was there. She gave Jason an assessing glance but said nothing, leaving with Constance via the elevating platform as soon as Jason arrived.

Emir was sitting behind a desk that, like his chair, was made of cloud-stuff. On the opposite side of the floor, a similar chair rose from the floor as Emir waved at Jason to join him. Jason sat down, glancing at the piles of paper in Emir’s desk.

“As it turns out,” Emir said, following Jason’s gaze, “no small part of treasure hunting is logistics. I signed up for the world travel and derring-do, yet somehow ended up buried in administration. I still need to present you the cloud palace but I want to carve out a proper amount of time for that. Such an unusual item requires a certain amount of instruction that I don’t intend to rush, and there are other concerns to be going on with.”

“You need something from me regarding these priests who escape the trials?” Jason asked. “You brought in their churches right?”

“Yes, although there are inevitable problems. One is with our old friend the church of Purity, of whom a full quarter of the priests belong.”

“Did Cal check out the Vane estate?” Jason asked.

“He did. From what he can tell, it was the regrouping point for the Builder cult members that scattered after escaping the desert astral space. They moved on afterwards, however.”

“Did he find enough to put the clamps on the church?”

“No,” Emir said. “They can just claim they hadn’t been doing anything with the site due to its isolation and that they knew nothing.”

“That’s a shame,” Jason said. “I almost feel bad handing these priests over to the church.”

“Not an issue, as it turns out,” Emir said. “The church has declared them tainted from their time in the astral space. I suspect they don’t want a bevy of fresh faces while they’re in the middle of conducting a huge conspiracy.”

“Don’t underestimate good old intolerant zeal,” Jason said.

“Either way,” Emir said, “we have a hundred confused, time-displaced, freshly excommunicated clergy.”

“How does that even work?” Jason asked. “Did Purity show up and take their essences?”

“Yes, those that had divine essences and awakening stones.”

“So what happens to them now?”

“Either they are received by another church or they replace their missing essences with regular ones. Fortunately, they’re only iron-rank, so the loss of their essences isn’t crippling. You saw the Interim Director leaving; she will be organising what to do with them.”

“She didn’t look eager to involve me in the process,” Jason said. “What do you need me for?”

“It seems that the being administering the trials informed them that you were the one who stood up for their release. They, and the church representatives who actually welcomed their lost people back, are rather keen on meeting you.”

Jason groaned. “Why did he have to go and tell them?”

“Don’t you want your moment of glory?” Emir asked with a smile.

“I’m more comfortable claiming unearned glory than getting the real thing,” Jason said. “All I did was ask the guy to let them go and he said yes. Hardly worth making a fuss over.”

“Consider it practice,” Emir said. “Adventurers become the heroes to many, and I doubt these are the last lives you’ll save.”

“I suppose,” Jason said. “Next time I save someone, though, I’m telling them my name is Humphrey.”

Emir laughed.

“Have you used your awakening stones yet?” Emir asked, changing the subject.



“Constance caught us just coming from a ritual room,” Jason said. “We need to sort out Sophie and Belinda’s stones and essences, plus I have two familiar summonings worth of materials to get. I’m not holding out hope of getting the quintessence I need locally.”

“I might be able to help with that,” Emir said. “Have your team refrain from selling their goods here. There’s going to be a flood of essences and awakening stones, dropping the price. Buy what you can here for cheap, and I’ll have Hester portal you somewhere you can sell your spoils at a tidy profit. You’ll also be able to access a larger market for what you need.”

“That would be amazing, thank you,” Jason said.

“Go meet with the church representatives and I’ll arrange things with Hester. Constance will be waiting to show you the way.”

“How are things going with you and Constance?” Jason asked. “She seems to be warming up around you.”

“Well, I think,” Emir said. “Our longer than expected stay here has everyone acting a little more casually. Something is holding her back, though, and I can’t for the life of me figure it out. I thought perhaps it was that she works for me, but that isn’t it.”

“Maybe it’s her rank,” Jason suggested. “She might not want to take that step in your relationship until you’re on the same level.”

“It’s an interesting idea,” Emir said.

“Have you tried asking her?” Jason asked.

“It’s not that easy,” Emir said. “We’ve been dancing around each other for a long time now. There’s a lot of heavy air in the space between us.”

“You shouldn’t be taking advice from me, anyway,” Jason said. “I’m barely older than your granddaughter. She used the skill books alright?”

“Oh yes,” Emir said. “She’d have trained through the night if I let her. I had to pry her away from Gabriel to make her go to bed. He dotes on her almost as much as I do.”

“I’ve been wondering about something,” Jason said. “I recall you having certain views on children, yet you have a granddaughter.”

“I had a son I never knew about,” Emir said. “The result of a youthful dalliance, before I even had my essences. The young lady in question never told me and I didn’t find out until he died, during the last monster surge.”

“I’m sorry,” Jason said.

“My son’s wife died with him, leaving only my granddaughter, Ketis. She went to live with her grandmother, my son’s mother, but she was not a woman of means. She knew who I was, but never sought me out for money. From what I hear, she raised my son into a

fine man. She only reached out for Ketis' sake. Her grandmother is well taken care of now, of course. Money, essences and enough monster cores to rank her up to bronze. Ketis will have her from some time yet."

"And Ketis herself will get the best of everything."

"Not everything," Emir said. "I would like for her to end up more like your friend Humphrey than your friend Thadwick."

"You know Thadwick? Oh, he was one of the ones the cult seeded."

"I don't know if you've heard," Emir said. "The cult has taken him again, in the time you've been gone."

"Why?" Jason asked. "No offence to the bloke, but he's not good to anyone for anything."

"The cult has been driven into hiding," Emir said. "Deeper hiding. We've managed to identify and curtail many of their operations in the city. They've been using Thadwick's knowledge of the considerable holdings of the Mercer family to make supply raids."

"Not even Thadwick deserves to have one of those things inside him," Jason said.

"Didn't he try to kill you?"

"Yeah, but he botched it, like everything he does. His family must be going wild, looking for him."

"Indeed they are," Emir said.

"Well, it's not my business," Jason said, getting up from his chair. "All this cult nonsense is above my pay grade and I have enough to be going on with. I think I'll go get this business with the priests over with."