

Chapter 223

More Powerful Than We Anticipated

In their hidden lair in the ruins of the Vane Estate, the leader of the local Builder cult, Zato, was fuming. One of the cultists had used a stone-shaping power to construct rooms in the subterranean cavern, of which Zato's personal quarters was the largest.

Timos, who had risen to his second-in-command, was waiting out the rage. He knew that while Zato seemed consumed in fury, once he had worked through his anger he would be ready to make more considered decisions. For the moment though, he was cursing the walls. The subject of his incoherent ranting was Jason Asano.

It was a name that now preyed on the minds of the cultists; the very idea of someone resisting the Builder's power sent chills through every cultist with a star seed. As volunteers, they had only surrendered a portion of their will to the Builder, compared the complete takeover that unwilling subjects suffered. They nonetheless had a direct connection to the unimaginable immensity of the Builder's power. The idea of someone withstanding that power filled them with dread.

The most infuriating part was that the cult hadn't even been responsible for the creation of the Rejector. Killian Laurent had seemed like an invaluable ally in getting the cult's resources out of the city during the purge and giving him what he needed to bring another person under the Builder's control seemed a small price to pay, given that he already had a star seed.

The results of this bargain had been a disaster. Not only did Asano withstand the star seed, but he was allowed to live, which was as grave a sin as was to be found in the cult. The results, from the exposed agents to the demoralised cultists were ample demonstrations of why. The promise of power was what had brought so many people into the cult in the first place. There was never a shortage of disenfranchised people looking for a place to belong and to escape the powerlessness of their lives. The Rejector was a living demonstration that the Builder's power was not absolute, and he was still running around and causing trouble. Normally, those incredibly rare few who managed to somehow outlast the star seed were put down, hard and fast.

Laurent's failure to kill Asano was only the beginning of his betrayal. The logistical assistance he provided the cult had not been in as good faith as they thought, being used to his own ends. Not many had the nerve to deal and then double-cross the cult. As it turned out, Laurent had used the purge as cover to prepare his own flight from the city. Many of the losses the cult suffered during the purge were actually fed to the Adventure

Society by Laurent himself, drawing attention away as he plundered the Silva family's wealth. Now Laurent was gone with a small fortune in money and resources, leaving the cult and the Silva family both to deal with the aftermath.

On top of the demoralising factor of the Rejector's mere existence was the impact he had on their operations. It was bad enough that he had somehow found a way into the astral space they were still months away from breaching themselves. It was worse that the Adventure Society had been able to use him to flush out some of the cult's key people still embedded in Greenstone. What's more, some of those uncovered had been taken alive, something that shouldn't have been possible. From what little information they gathered before completely severing their Greenstone contacts for safety was that the Rejector's encounter with the Builder had given Asano some power to shock their star seeds into inaction long enough to suppress the seed's power to detonate.

The fortunate thing was that Timos, who had facilitated most of those insertions years ago, had been fastidious in his precautions. He ran cult operatives in small groups, keeping them isolated from one another and the information compartmentalised. None of the people infiltrating the Adventure and Magic Societies had any information that could critically impact the cult's larger plans if revealed. The information flow had all been one way, through a network of dead drops.

The infiltrators could identify Timos, but as Timos has already been exposed that was no longer an issue. They could also reveal the very basics of the plan to claim the Order of the Reaper's astral space, but that, too, had largely been exposed already. Timos had kept them in the dark about the details not relating to their specific roles, which made their exposure only a limited liability.

The biggest loss was that their most valuable information sources in the city had been uprooted. The directors of the Adventure and Magic Societies had paraded all their key officials past Asano, who started picking them out like selecting fruit at a market. Zato and Timos had managed to get word out to some of their people who had either made their escape, or detonated themselves pre-emptively. But dead, escaped or taken alive, those people were no longer feeding the cult information. They had to assume their entire dead-drop information network was compromised and had closed it down entirely.

Eventually Zato calmed down, taking a seat on an ornate chair looted from the manor above before they destroyed it. He let out a long, slow breath, purging the residual rage and once again taking control of himself.

"I'm sorry you had to put up with that," Zato said to Timos. "I find it best to get all the anger out, rather than let it simmer and compromise my judgement."

“Understandable,” Timos said. “It’s another in a long line of setbacks, but this doesn’t compromise our ultimate plan.”

“A team of adventurers has gotten into the astral space,” Zato said. “All we have there are some unseeded recruits. You’ve seen the reports on the Rejector’s team. I don’t care if our people have double the numbers or if they’ve reached bronze rank. Asano, Geller and their team will tear through them like they were wet paper.”

“It doesn’t matter; their task is done. The beacon was emplaced months ago and the astral tunnel is well on its way to formation. Our astral magic specialists here have assured me that, at this point, the beacon is unnecessary. The tunnel’s destination is affixed. The Rejector can run around all he likes, take our people alive or even destroy the beacon itself. They could have gone into the astral space a month ago and still been too late to stop us. Short of finding us here and stopping the tunnel from this end, there is no keeping us out of the astral space.”

“But they’ll know we’re coming.”

A sinister smile played across Timos’ lips.

“Actually, I made sure the people we sent believe that the beacon is essential to our plans. A little extra precaution I put in place. Asano and his team can go ahead and destroy it and assume that has put paid to our plans. It just frees us up to move in unexpectedly, once the tunnel is finished.”

Zato chuckled.

“You know, I was one of those who looked down on your cautious nature,” he told Timos. “Yet you were the only one who even imagined things could go this badly for us. You have my gratitude.”

“Gratitude enough to let me finally kill Thadwick Mercer?” Timos asked.

“No,” Zato said. “Mercer knows Asano, which could be useful to us.”

“Thinking Thadwick could be of use is a large part of what got us here in the first place,” Timos argued. “I’ve already spoken to him at length about Asano but the petty-minded little scum is so biased that I don’t trust any of what he gave me.”

“Mercer lives,” Zato said firmly. “Why don’t you put that cautious mind of yours to work and see if you can’t find a way to make Thadwick an asset?”

Jason stepped out of the shadow gate. With his astral affinity, dimensional travel powers gave him an enjoyable rush. It seemed to be a lengthier transition than his previous portal experiences, even his previous use of the portal through which they just travelled.

-
- You have entered a zone of high magical saturation. Magical manifestations will occur at an increased rate.
-

Clive had a different opinion, which he demonstrated by stumbling out of the portal, and dropping to all fours and loudly throwing up. The others followed through the portal in quick succession. Humphrey was a practised teleporter himself, but still came out looking peaky.

“That was quite rough,” he said in a strained voice.

Neil came through and ended up in the same condition as Clive. Sophie followed after, giving a sympathetic wince over her beleaguered team mates. Like Jason, she had an astral affinity that made the transition exhilarating, rather than stomach-churning.

“Was Belinda sent to one of the other entrances?” Humphrey wondered aloud. A glance around them was enough to see they were on one of the portal towers that ringed the outside of the city.

“I don’t think so,” Sophie said. “She’s probably just sluggish in peeling herself off of Jory.”

“Good for them,” Jason said happily. “Who doesn’t love love?”

Belinda finally came through the portal, looking unwell but managing to hold down her lunch. By that point, Clive and Neil had crawled away from the mess they had made on the flat brickwork top of the tower. They were sat together, leaning back and looking queasy.

“Once we get that weird magic body like Jason, we stop being able to throw up, right?” Neil asked.

“Yep,” Clive confirmed. “I am now officially looking forward to it.”

“You and me both, brother,” Neil told him.

“We dodged the first arrow,” Humphrey said. “We arrived together and don’t need to regroup.”

“That was actually my main concern,” Jason said, sharing Humphrey’s relief. “Of all the uncertain threats here, my biggest fear was facing them in isolation.”

“We aren’t all well-suited to solitary operation, no,” Clive agreed. Being separated reduced their potential answers to any given situation. This was the largest potential threat they had foreseen, because it made every other threat more dangerous. They had made a number of contingency preparations for that eventuality, including tracking stones for all but Jason, who was untraceable.

“So, we don’t need the tracking stones for each other,” Neil said.

“They may be useful if we end up separated for some reason,” Humphrey said. “Keep them on hand. We should take a look at the ones we have for the cultists.”

“Speaking of which,” Neil said, “why couldn’t we check them from outside the astral space? Isn’t that how they knew the expedition had gone wrong? Tracking stones for the people in the desert astral space?”

“The difference is the astral spaces themselves,” Clive explained. “The desert astral space is naturally formed and has many, perpetually open apertures. The dimensional wall between our world and that astral space is paper thin, filled with holes. This astral space, by contrast, is artificially stabilised and very difficult to penetrate. It’s a rock face you need to drill through, hence the trouble we had returning.”

“That means they’ll need to find a different way to separate this astral space from our world, right?” Belinda asked. “Not the same technique they used before.”

“Almost certainly,” Clive said. “I have no idea what that will entail, however. It could be easier or could be harder. This astral space is smaller than the desert one. It’s one of the things we need to figure out.”

“We’re getting ahead of ourselves,” Humphrey said. “We should approach things in order. First, we take stock. Where are we and what is our situation? I’m concerned about the ambient magic.”

Most perception powers enhanced magical senses and aura senses somewhere in the first three ranks, along with a third power that was a precursor to the more unique upper-rank effects. For Jason that was seeing through darkness, for Neil it was sensing vulnerabilities. Humphrey already had both their magical and aura senses enhanced. Everyone but Sophie and Belinda had their perception powers at bronze already, with only Sophie lacking the enhanced magic senses. She wouldn’t have them until silver rank, when Neil and Jason would have their aura senses enhanced.

“I can feel all the extra magic in the air,” Jason said. “I figured that was normal. This place had always had a higher magical saturation, right?”

“Yes,” Clive said, “but the last time we came here, the magical density was the same as the Greenstone region. It’s now higher.”

“I didn’t realise that was even possible,” Jason said. He had never experienced a zone of different magical density, so he hadn’t recognised the change.

“Can you explain that for the guy who studied healing magic instead of astral magic?” Neil asked.

“Or the person who never studied magic at all,” Sophie added.

“Magical saturation is how much magic there is,” Clive explained. “It determines how many monsters, essences and awakening stones manifest. A monster surge is a temporary period of heightened magical saturation, which is why so many monsters appear.”

“Magical density is the quality of the magic,” Belinda said, picking up the explanation. “It determines that the rank of monsters that manifest, along with a bunch of other things. What rituals can be performed, whether certain magic items can function.”

“The heightened saturation we were expecting,” Clive said. “An increase in magical density means that all the monsters we’ll be facing will be more powerful than we thought. It also means they’ll stay around for longer. An iron-rank monster will naturally break back down into magic after a month. Depending on how long ago this change happened, the astral space could be thick with more powerful monsters that have been manifesting without breaking down.”

“How powerful do you think?” Humphrey asked, looking at the air around them. “I’d guess the new standard is low bronze.”

“I’d say that’s about right,” Clive said. “Greenstone’s density is about mid-iron, which is very low.”

“What do you mean by mid-iron?” Neil asked.

“Oh, that’s just a rating for the most common kind of monster that will appear. In Greenstone, iron-rank monsters are easily the most common, with semi-regular bronze and only very rare silvers. What we’re looking at here will mostly be low-end bronze, with some high-end of iron and bronze sprinkled in. Encountering a silver-rank monster will still be unusual, but with how many monsters we’re going to see, it’s an inevitability. Hopefully we’ll be strong enough to fight it by that point, or at least to run away.”

“We could chum Asano and have him lure it away,” Neil said.

“Because of his evasive abilities,” Humphrey said, nodding.

“Uh, sure, that’s why,” Neil said. Jason gave Neil a flat look, who wiggled his eyebrows back at him.

“We knew we would be dealing with unknown dangers,” Humphrey said. “This is just the first. If anything, the monsters being more powerful than we anticipated will be better for our advancement.”

“I think we may be missing the forest for the trees here,” Jason said. “More importantly than the monsters, something is raising the magical density of this astral space. That should be a foundational element of any patch of physical reality, right?”

“That’s right,” Clive said. “Altering it in an astral space would be orders of magnitude easier than a true world, but even so, the forces involved are disconcerting, to say the least.”

“It has to be something to do with what the Builder cult is up to,” Humphrey said. “I suggest we go find them and ask.”