

Chapter 161: A Well-Informed Man

The City of Fallen Echoes was teeming with monsters. On their second day, Jason and Sophie had an encounter almost hourly as they made their way. Sometimes they followed streets, other times they went across rooftops. Either way, there was no shortage of monsters willing to come after them.

There were similarities between the jungle-covered city and the delta where they usually hunted monsters, with the muggy heat and the lush plant life. The monsters they encountered were similar, if not the same. They fought snake monsters, spider monsters and, especially unpleasant, a snake-spider the size of a transit van that slithered on its hairy abdomen and had eight snake heads instead of limbs.

The big difference between fighting monsters in the delta was in numbers. The magically-saturated astral space produced far more monsters than the outside world. Jason and Sophie had already realised this, but as they surveilled their potential next encounter, the point was really rammed home.

Crouched on a rooftop, Jason and Sophie looked down at a teeming mass of margolls. They had both handled the dog-headed humanoids in the past, but they were looking at a throng of monsters four times the size of a normal pack.

"I count forty-one," Jason said quietly. From six storeys up they had a good vantage. There was little breeze to carry their scent and the poor eyesight of the creatures made being spotted unlikely. The ravenous creatures had just taken down a smaller group of monsters and were loudly feasting on the bodies, jostling for position around the corpses.

"That was my count, too," Sophie said. "What do you think?"

"Honestly? I want to try it. We have to do it right, though. If we just fight them on the street they'll overrun us."

"You're looking at that building, across the way?"

"I am," Jason said. "We complicate the environment. Bottlenecks, escape paths. Bunch them up until their numbers help us more than hurt us."

"How do you want to lure them?" Sophie asked.

"They're aggressive, relentless and not all that bright. I say we just drop down and run straight in. They'll chase us all through the building and we escape from the roof if it gets too much."

"Split up or stick together?" she asked.

"Lady's choice."

“Split up. I’ll do better finding a choke point and holding my ground, while you’ll do better on the move.”

“Sounds good,” Jason said. “Just make sure you always have an exit and keep in touch through the voice chat. Calculate your risk.”

They leapt off the building, drifting over the street to land in front of the one they had chosen on the other side. The margolls smelled them before they landed and were already looking around as they touched down and rushed for the building. They dashed through the open doorway into darkness, Jason immediately vanishing as Sophie made for a set of stone stairs that rose along one wall. Everything else in the large room had long since rotted away, except vines and mushrooms that thrived in shadows more than the bright sun outside.

Stopping halfway up the stairs, Sophie turned and began a slow, fighting retreat. The margolls were forced to face her two at a time, the rest stuck crowding behind. She fearlessly met the attack of their huge claws, and powerful jaws, trusting her powers to shield whatever body part she used to block. She retaliated with brutal punches and savage kicks, sending crippled margolls tumbling off the side of the stairs. When she bought herself some room she would send a wind blade slicing its way down the stairs, the monsters shoving for position had no space to dodge.

The margolls gathered at the bottom of the stairs howled their frustration as they pushed each other in the race for prey. Some swiped at each other with their wicked claws as they fought for access to the stairs, others tried climbing the vines growing on the side of the stairs. The dark interior of the building was not as overgrown as the exterior, but there was growth enough that some of them eventually made their way up. Sophie kicked them back down as their heads popped up over the side of the stairs but it drew her attention from the monsters in front of her. Unwilling to let herself be flanked, she backed up the stairs to the next level, where she fled in search of a new bottleneck.

In the large room, the margolls left at the back started to notice something wrong. They were catching snatches of a scent that vanished as quickly as it appeared. They noticed one of their number, dead on the ground, far from the commotion of where the woman was kicking them back down the stairs. A second backline margoll fell dead with no more sound than its body hitting the ground and a third soon followed.

Margolls had poor eyesight, relying much more on their sense of smell. Having just come in out of the bright sun, their vision was all the worse. Several more of their number were silently slain before they noticed the dark figure moving amongst them, appearing and disappearing just as quickly.

The monsters milled in confusion. Their baseline aggression, their large numbers in a relatively tight space and the frustration of enemies they couldn't pin down were becoming a toxic brew as some of them started turning on one another. If it weren't for Sophie being forced to fall back, letting the monsters vent up the stairs in pursuit, the margolls may well have killed each other.

Sometime later, Sophie and Jason were on the rooftop, fighting the last of the margolls. Despite having their numbers whittled down as they pursued the pair through the building, the savage monsters never faltered in their furious assault until the last of them had fallen. Jason and Sophie then made their way down through the building, finishing off those too crippled to continue the chase. Jason touched each one to tag it for looting.

➤ *Would you like to loot [Margoll]?*

He would only accept once they were away from the bodies and the stink they would produce as they dissolved. As they scoured the building, Jason made a pleasant discovery. A dark cube lay in an alcove under a stairwell, in a place that the light outside would never reach. If it weren't for his ability to see in the dark, he would have never seen it at all.

Item: [Dark Essence] (unranked, uncommon)

Manifested essence of darkness (consumable, essence).

- *Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.*
 - *Effect: Imbues 1 awakened dark essence ability and 4 unawakened dark essence abilities.*
 - *You have absorbed 4/4 essences.*
 - *You do not meet the requirements to use this item.*
-

"Nostalgic," he mused to himself.

"What's that?" Sophie asked, walking up to him.

"I found an essence," Jason said. "It's a dark essence, which was my first."

"Should go for a good price, right?"

"It should," Jason said. "It's only uncommon and there'll probably be a glut of essences on the market after all this, but dark is a popular one. It has great utility and is the last word in stealth essences. You should take it when we split up the loot after all this

is done. The essences Belinda wants are all common, so you can probably trade this for two of them, or at least the magic essence and some solid awakening stones.”

They went out on the street, in front of the building, before Jason accepted all the loot messages. Soon, rainbow smoke was streaming out of windows from the plume rising up of the building generated by all 41 bodies being converted at once.

-
- 41 [Monster Cores (Iron)] have been added to your inventory.
 - 410 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 60 [Dog Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Myriad Quintessence Gems] have been added to your inventory.

 - 410 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 60 [Dog Quintessence Gems] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 10 [Myriad Quintessence Gems] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
-

Sophie stepped back, her loot-dodge timing having improved enough that the three bags fell to the ground in front of her.

“So, your power conjured the bags, right?” she asked.

“Yep,” Jason said. “As I understand it, a looting power like mine or Neil’s takes the magic from the monster as it merges with the ambient magic and makes items with it. Usually magical manifestations like spirit coins or these quintessence gems we just got, but sometimes items.”

“Belinda said Clive spent a whole day examining one of those bags to see if there was anything special about it.”

“That does sound like him,” Jason said.

Sophie opened up one of the bags, taking out a quintessence gem to examine. It was like a diamond, almost spherical but covered in tiny facets.

Item: [Myriad Quintessence] (iron rank, legendary)
Manifested essence of multiplicity. (crafting material, essence).

- Effect: Crafting material for items with multiplicative attributes.
-

“Pretty,” Jason said as she held it up for him to see. It caught the bright sunlight, refracting rainbow colours.

“Legendary rarity,” she said. “Should be valuable, right?”

“I imagine so,” Jason said. “The myriad essence is legendary, too. Emily, the archer from Beth Cavendish’s team has it.”

“She’s the celestine?” Sophie asked.

“That’s right.”

Sophie dropped the gem back into the bag and handed her loot to Jason for storage. He took out a notebook and recorded all the loot for splitting up later. As he wrote in it, Sophie craned her head back to watch the rainbow smoke from more than forty monsters rising up from the building.

“All those monsters,” she said. “It’s like this place has a monster surge going on.”

“It essentially does,” Jason said, putting his notebook away. “A monster surge is a weeks-long increase in magical saturation.”

“You haven’t experienced one, right?” she asked. “They don’t have them in your world?”

“We don’t have monsters at all,” Jason said. “I’ve only been learning about how they work studying astral magic with Clive. I hope he’s doing alright.”

Clive had become worried once he realised that none of his team had arrived with him through the archway. As people started forming makeshift teams, he didn’t expect to find anyone looking for his eclectic selection of powers. His unconventional abilities worked best when used in conjunction with people who knew and were prepared for them. A hastily-formed team would do better with a ranged attacker with straightforward powers that they could readily adapt to.

He considered pulling a Jason and “adjusting” the perspective through which he described his abilities but immediately dismissed the idea. Worse than no one wanting him on their team would be getting abandoned in the middle of a monster-infested city for misrepresenting what he had to contribute.

One of the people present had the exact opposite problem. He wasn’t a large man, his slight physique reminding Clive of Jason. If the man’s blond hair and fair skin hadn’t marked him as one of the foreign adventurers, the impressive equipment Clive recognised did. Once equipment passed a certain level of expense, it started to move from ostentatious back to unremarkable, and this man’s equipment looked very unremarkable indeed. Clive knew it to be the kind of expensive that was wasted on iron-rank gear unless you had so much money to throw around it was laughable.

The man looked to be wearing light and simple clothes, but Clive picked out the subtle signs in the way the cloth draped that signalled incredibly powerful reinforcement magic. It was the kind of armour favoured by adventurers with mobility and high-skill power sets. He had a sword at his hip, with a ring at the top of the scabbard that most would

dismiss as part of the design. Clive recognised it as a magic item that would impart extra damage to the first strike after drawing the blade. The man's jacket was made of supple leather, protective without being constrictive. Clive knew from the odd way it conformed to the body shape underneath that it was a dimensional jacket, much like that used by Emir Bahadir.

The other foreign adventurers clearly knew who he was, all clamouring to form a team with him. To Clive's surprise, the man's eyes picked him out. Clive watched as the man walked away from the people inviting him to their groups and straight over to Clive.

"You're Clive Standish," the man said.

"That's right," Clive said. "I'm not sure who you are but you're wearing more expensive gear than I've seen on a bronze ranker."

The man let out a friendly chuckle.

"Which means either someone didn't trust me to survive," he said, "or thinks I'm worth it."

"You're worth it," Clive said. "If someone doesn't have the skill, you spend that money very differently."

The man laughed again and held out his hand for Clive to shake.

"I'm Valdis. You live up to your reputation, Mr Standish."

"Clive is fine," Clive said. "I have a reputation?"

"I like to keep informed. The authorities in Greenstone know a lot more about the Builder cult than most provincial areas and your contributions have been a very large part of that. Word just hasn't gotten around yet because of how closely information is being held, right now."

"But not from you, it seems," Clive said.

"My father has some small standing overseas, which affords me a little more influence than I really deserve."

"My father's an eel farmer, which affords me more long, slimy fish than I really want."

Valdis laughed once more, clearly more comfortable with their circumstances than most of the adventurers present. Clive was noticing the unhappy looks from the adventurers who had been courting Valdis' attention.

"Would you like to form a group with me, Clive?"

"I should warn you," Clive said, "my abilities can be a bit complicated. My damage comes in bursts and a lot of my abilities require anticipation and set up."

"Your confluence is the karmic essence, if I recall correctly, yes?"

“Yes,” Clive said. “You really do like to keep informed. I have some retributive damage buffs and a lot of mana recovery. Mostly I attack with staves and wands but I have a big, versatile attack spell.”

“I know someone with the karmic essence,” Valdis said. “She says that judgement and timing are the keys to success.”

“I’d have to agree,” Clive said.

“I’m a classic swordsman myself; sword, swift, adept, master. More mana-intensive abilities than you’d expect with that combo, though, so I’ll look forward to that mana recovery you mentioned. Assuming you want to join me.”

“Definitely,” Clive said.

“Great,” Valdis said, rubbing his hands together as he turned his attention to the group listening in on them. “Let’s find ourselves some team members.”

Chapter 162: The Danger is Us

In the time they had spent allowing Sophie to recover, some other groups had moved deeper into the city. They started seeing traces of that as they went, the plants and building showings traces of essence abilities having been used on them. They knew they weren't far behind another group when they found monsters that had yet to dissolve into smoke.

"Can you loot them?" Sophie asked.

"Probably not," Jason said, touching a finger to the dead monster.

➤ This monster kill was not yours. You are unable to loot this monster.

"Nope," Jason said. "It only lets me loot when the killer is me or someone in my party."

"Does Neil's ability have that restriction?"

"Not exactly, but the monster has to die inside his aura, so it works out about the same."

"Should we veer off our straight line?" Sophie asked. "We aren't going to get much training in if all the monsters we find are dead."

"May as well," Jason said. "So long as we're going more or less the right way, it should be fine."

The pair started finding their most effective tactical patterns as days passed and they encountered monsters almost hourly. It was mostly some variation on Sophie grabbing the monsters' attention while Jason moved into flank. Sometimes she would lead them around, other times standing her ground or staging running fights through buildings.

Every day in the city was like weeks of monster hunting outside it, with both Jason and Sophie unrelenting in the hunt. For Sophie, it was a chance to grab at power, both the share with Belinda and to give herself freedom from anyone who tried to control her fate.

For Jason, it was the culmination of a long wait. He had been putting off advancement and getting more awakening stones in the anticipation of Emir's grand event. He was now determined to complete his power set with the best awakening stones he could find. If nothing else, he was determined to get the necrotic damage affliction that had been absent from his kit from the beginning. Rufus kept telling him it would come, but with each new awakening stone it had remained elusive.

As the days passed, they also encountered other adventurers. None were people they knew well, if at all, but the Greenstone adventurers tended to recognise Jason, or at least his cloak. The encounters ranged from the friendly to the wary, with the foreign adventurers being especially careful.

From the brief interactions, Jason and Sophie realised the foreign adventurers were most wary of each other, with concern over rivals trying to remove the competition directly. Given that all the groups were now mixed, Jason and Sophie agreed that they were better off out of it and sticking together.

Each night, they would alternate meditating, sleeping and keeping watch. Sleep got the shortest shift, as they both had effective stamina recovery powers that kept them powering forward through the day. Not to say that there wasn't distraction in the downtime.

"What are you doing?" Sophie asked as she crawled, bleary-eyed, out of the aura tent.

"I'm trying to teach Colin to spell," Jason said. The leech collective was laid out in the shape of the word PLURB.

"I think he might be evil after all," Jason said. "He only gets the rude words right."

Their abilities improved rapidly, just the first few days seeing almost every ability Jason had advancing at least a level. His lowest abilities, his conjured dagger and his execute power, advanced twice. Sophie's abilities advanced even faster, having started off lower.

On the fifth day, they once again encountered an adventurer, but this one was dead. Sophie frowned as she crouched down to examine the body. He was a male leonid, much of his fur burned off in patches matching localised scorch marks on his clothes and skin.

"I've seen this before," she said. "Bodies, left like this."

"A monster you've seen?"

"No," she said. "A person. There's an arena fighter they call fire fist. One essence, one ability, like me. You can guess what it is from the name. He liked to play with his opponents; take his time, killing them. This is what it looked like when he did."

"You think someone did what I did, with you? Gave him the essences to become an adventurer?"

"I doubt it," she said. "The last I saw of him was when I left him dangling from a cage by his broken arms. People aren't inclined to lift up losers."

"You never actually met Thadwick Mercer, did you? I see your point, though. Maybe it was a monster with fire powers."

“I don’t think so,” Sophie said. “Enough adventurers are worried about people thinning out the competition that it’s likely a real concern. Also, I’m not sure this is an environment likely to produce fire monsters. Plus, I think this body has been stripped of magic items. The boots are gone and these clothes are under-armour padding. There isn’t any magic jewellery and no dimensional bag.”

“Fair points,” Jason said. “If he was a Greenstone adventurer, he might have just been poor. I don’t think there were any Greenstone participants who were leonids, though. They were all in the foreign group and the worst of them were equipped as well as the best local.”

“Whether a monster or a person did this,” Sophie said, “this man was mostly likely in a group. If his companions didn’t take him, they were either driven off or killed. We should look for more bodies.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Let’s hope we don’t find any.”

Every adventurer with a storage space or dimensional bag was carrying a number of specialised caskets for storing corpses. The Adventure Society, in acknowledgement of the risks the iron-rankers faced, had placed a reward for anyone who retrieved the remains of the fallen. The reward had been high to incentivise the return of the dead but not so high as to incentivise murder for profit.

They found a second dead leonid out on the street and a third leonid, even worse for wear than the others, in a nearby building.

“This was definitely torture,” Sophie said as they crouched over the third corpse. “There aren’t any big burns like with the other body. Whoever did this took their time.”

“Look at bruising on the wrists and ankles,” Jason said. “They were tied up. The neck, too, but not as bad. Whatever was around it was padded. Like a suppression collar.”

He stood up, frowning and Sophie did the same.

“They took this man’s powers, tied him up and then tortured him,” Jason said. “This wasn’t just taking out the competition. Whoever did this wanted something. Information?”

“There’s no way to know what the foreign adventurers have going on between them,” Sophie said. “I know you like to get your head around things but don’t get distracted by something we don’t have enough information about. For all we know, it could just be sadists getting their thrills or some weird leonid hater.”

Jason nodded. “You’re right. This is an easy place to get away with blaming the deaths on misadventure.”

“So, what do we do?” Sophie asked.

“We put him in a casket,” Jason said, “then we see if there are any more before we keep going. It’s not like we weren’t being cautious already.”

“And if whoever did this tries to do it to us? Trying to capture them and lug them around why we finish the trials and take them back won’t work.”

“No, it won’t,” Jason said. “Rufus once told me that when you’re out on an adventure, sometimes all the justice you get is putting the other guy down. So, if we get attacked, we put them down. All the way down.”

“Good,” Sophie said. “I was a little worried you’d want to try some half-measure that would put us in danger.”

“No,” Jason said grimly. “We need to make sure that the danger is us.”

The giant lizard monster lunged at Humphrey, its huge jaws open wide. Humphrey opened his own mouth in turn, fire blasting from it into the monster’s gaping maw. It wasn’t critical damage to the bronze-rank monster but the flame licking the inside of its mouth made it flinch back and snap its mouth shut. This exposed the rest of its face and Humphrey stepped forward, swinging his most powerful special attack into the side of the monster’s head, cracking bone and bursting one huge eye.

It was the turning point in the fight, the rest of the group pouring attacks into the staggered monster until it fell still.

“Impressive as expected, from Danielle Geller’s son,” Lowell said.

Lowell was one of the foreign adventurers and had the good fortune to have four of his six team members arrive on the same tower. Humphrey had joined them for the journey to the centre of the city where he could rejoin his own team but Lowell had other ideas.

“I know you have some affection for that team of locals you put together,” Lowell said, “but clearly you’re a good fit with us.”

“I’m quite happy with my current team,” Humphrey said coldly. His normal social graces were being steadily eroded by Lowell’s constant efforts at recruitment, which had moved from the oblique to the direct.

“I understand that,” Lowell said, “but to be frank, your time is wasted with the inferior team.”

“Agreed,” Humphrey snarled. “But I was separated from them by the archway, so I’ll have to make do.”

“Wait, what?” Lowell asked, his smarmy veneer cracking. “You think some grab-bag of provincials is better than us?”

“Actually,” Carly interjected, “he’s just running out of patience with you disrespecting his team. Sorry about Lowell, Humphrey. He’s a good guy but he has trouble seeing things from other people’s perspectives. He gets an idea in his head and it’s hard to dislodge.”

“Carly’s right,” Hampstead agreed. “If I was Geller, I’d have already dislodged your whole damn head, Lowell.”

“It’s fine,” Humphrey said. “Let’s just keep moving.”

Outside the astral space, Emir’s cloud palace was sitting on the lake. Rufus was with his parents, who were strongarming him into relaxing properly for the first time since Farrah died. They recruited Farrah’s parents just to make sure he had no recourse.

It was morning and they were taking tea with Emir and Constance, looking out over the lake and the picturesque towns and villages around it. The bright, lush greens of the shoreline were an appealingly stark contrast to the desert beyond. There were too many of the small communities to count, around a lake that was practically an inland sea.

“Sky Scar Lake,” Farrah’s mother, Amelia, mused. “I wonder where the name came from.”

“It’s a local legend,” Constance volunteered. “It’s said that people settled this land long ago but angered the gods, who struck them down. The force of the gods’ wrath withered the land, turning fertile ground into desert and producing the hole that became the lake as we see it today.”

“There are elements of truth to that,” Emir said. “There were indeed people who settled here long ago and they were struck down. By the churches, rather than the gods themselves, but still. Of course, the desert and the lake were already here, when this all happened.”

“I’d love to visit some more of those villages,” Amelia said. “The ones nearby have been quite delightful. It would be nice to see some not quite so thrown into a tizzy by the sudden appearance of a giant, floating palace at their doorstep.”

“You wouldn’t know it,” Rufus’ father Gabriel said, “but there is actually a less grandiose form of the palace. I’d bet Emir hasn’t used it since our adventuring days, though, back when we made him use it.”

“I’m hosting a grand event,” Emir said. “It requires grandeur.”

“Emir, you think putting on socks requires grandeur,” Gabriel said.

“That’s because I have exceptional socks,” Emir said. “It’s not my fault you don’t treat your feet with the care they deserve.”

One of Emir’s staff came in, whispering something to Constance, who frowned.

“Can I borrow Rufus for a moment?” she asked. She and Rufus were soon walking through the cloud palace together.

“What is it?” Rufus asked.

“Adric Dorgan is here,” she said.

“In person?”

“Yes.”

“He must have found something, to come in person.”

Constance led Rufus to a receiving room where Dorgan was waiting. She left the two men together and departed.

“Dorgan,” Rufus said as they sat. “I take it from your personal presence that you have something.”

“Yes and no,” Dorgan said. “Partly I came because I didn’t think they’d let any of my people through the door. I’ve been doing as you asked and I’ve definitely turned things up. I keep running into strange dead ends, however.”

“Strange how?”

“Someone is hiding things. Someone with the kind of power and influence that I would normally jump back from like a scalded snake. Even I know what’s at stake here, though, so I kept digging.”

“And?”

“And I started losing people. Someone is disappearing any of my people that touch on certain areas and they clearly don’t fear reprisal. I’m not going to keep sending people to their deaths.”

“That’s fair,” Rufus said. “So, what have you managed to get?”

“I have a lot of pieces that don’t quite fit,” Dorgan said. “Private shipping expeditions with way too much secrecy. Bribes in amounts that boggle the mind. Whole companies set up, doing one quiet job and then closing down again, all to hide whoever was really behind the deals. If you look at it all together, it very nearly adds up to something.”

“You came out here for a reason,” Rufus said. “What do you need from me?”

“I need someone to ask the questions I can’t,” Dorgan said. “To poke the dark corners my people keep vanishing into.”

“Anything more specific?”

“Whoever is covering this thing up on the top end is powerful and influential,” Dorgan said. “More than the local powers can manage because they have foreign influence and no small amount of it. I can’t go looking harder than I have into who they are. If you can find that out for me, then I can maybe put all the parts into place. I can’t look in the dark

corners, but if I know who they are, I can follow their open activities. I have enough of the shady stuff that if I know what legitimate activities to watch, I think I can bring you something you need.”

Rufus took a long, slow breath, his eyes glued to Dorgan’s face.

“I might know who you’re talking about,” Rufus said. “Nothing is confirmed, however, and telling you would be no small thing. This is information that is still very restricted and we’re keeping it that way until we have some proof. We haven’t even shared our suspicions with the Adventure Society, yet.”

Dorgan got to his feet, Rufus doing the same.

“Well, when you get around to telling people, you come see me,” Dorgan said. He took a paper folder from his jacket and handed it to Rufus.

“This is everything my people were able to find, with some observations from me about what various bits of it could mean. Until that information you’re sitting on gets a little less restricted, this is as much as I can do for you. I’m not saying I won’t help, just to be clear be clear. I’m saying I can’t.”

Rufus was leafing through the notes as Dorgan spoke. He looked up at the crime lord, giving him an assessing gaze.

“Please wait here,” Rufus said. “I’ll have some refreshments sent in while I talk to some people.”

Rufus left and when he returned, Dorgan was enjoying tea and scones.

“Dorgan,” Rufus said, without preamble. “I’m going to tell you something and you are going to do your very best in all your dealings to obfuscate the fact that I did.”

“Alright,” Dorgan said warily, putting down his teacup and getting up from his chair.

“You said you needed to know what influential power was hiding things.”

“That’s right.”

Rufus visibly steeled himself, taking a long pause before speaking again.

“Church of Purity,” he said quietly.

Dorgan’s eyes grew wider and wider as the implications of what Rufus had said settled in. He ran his hands through his hair and started pacing back and forth before he stopped and turned back to Rufus.

“What kind of madness have you dragged me into?”

Chapter 163: Surplus to Requirements

Jason and Sophie continued their way through the city. More cautious than ever, they exposed themselves to long sightlines as little as possible. Sometimes they used narrow streets to hide themselves from above, at other times, rooftops, to hide themselves from below.

Helping them remain unobtrusive was the quiet nature of their essence abilities. Only the sound burst accompanying Sophie's wind blade made any real noise and, compared to the cries of the monsters they fought, it wasn't especially loud.

The evening of the day they had found the three dead leonids, something finally happened that they had been waiting for.

-
- Party member [Neil Davone] has entered communication range.
 - Voice chat with [Neil Davone] had been restored.
 - Full [Party Interface] functionality has been restored to party member [Neil Davone].
 - Party member [Neil Davone] has been located on ability [Map].
-

"Neil?"

"Jason?"

"Good to hear from you. Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I've got Jory with me, plus another guy who's a pretty good front-line. We could use a good damage dealer, but you'll do."

"Oh, thanks for that vote of confidence. It's just me and Wexler, here. Humphrey's probably fine but I hope Clive's alright."

"Hello Sophie," Neil said.

"Neil," Sophie reciprocated. "We'll need to figure out where we each are."

"I've got that covered," Jason said.

He pulled up his map, quickly locating Neil.

"Looks like your east and a little south of us," Jason said.

"This place has an east?" Neil asked.

"It may have been arbitrarily designated by my map power, I'm not sure. Find somewhere to hole-up and We'll come to you."

Jason and Sophie reoriented themselves, heading in the direction of Neil's location on the map. They had been moving around for around ten minutes when they received a

chat from Neil. It had the whispered tone that came with a communication sent silently, via a thought.

“Someone is here,” Neil’s voice came. “From the way they’re acting, I think they were following us and got thrown when we stopped to wait for you.”

“Hang tight and we’ll get there as fast as we can,” Jason said.

“What does hang tight mean?” Neil asked.

“Come on, you can get it from context,” Jason complained.

“Clear communication is important in tactical scenario,” Neil said.

“Boys, we can sort this out later,” Sophie said. “Asano, shut up. Neil, we’ll be as quick as we can.”

Sophie and Jason gave up on stealth for speed, rushing along streets as quickly as they could. Jason was no match for Sophie’s speed, even just using her abilities passively. Once she started using them actively, navigating the complicated terrain like it was a track course, only his shadow teleporting allowed him to keep up. At each junction he checked his map and kept them on the right heading.

“They found us,” Neil said through voice chat.

“We’re getting closer,” Jason said. “A few more minutes.”

Jason and Sophie had no more speed to pour on as they raced through the overgrown streets.

“We’ve got a fire user, a wind user and a big guy with a hammer,” Neil kept them updated. “Jory is laughing like a loon for some reason I don’t under... oh, damn.”

“What happened?” Sophie asked.

“Give me a second,” Neil’s hurried voice came back.

“We’re doing okay,” Neil said a few moments later, his light with surprise. “Keane, that’s a our front-liner, is holding off their big guy just fine. “The two women with the elemental powers are throwing everything at us but Jory is soaking up all their elemental attacks and using them to fuel his own abilities. What’s that guy doing, spending his days in a clinic?”

“Just hold on,” Jason said. “We’ll be there soon.”

“Shouldn’t be an issue,” Neil said. “They just keep throwing elemental attacks... what in the world is that?”

“Neil?” Jason asked.

“The other adventurers are running,” Neil said. “There’s a wave of some ghost-looking things coming down the street. I think they might be those things the shadow guy warned us about.”

“The vorger,” Jason said.

“Yeah,” Neil said. “The people we were fighting had movement powers and bolted, but we can’t move faster than these things are going.”

“Regroup and protect each other as best you can,” Jason said. “Sophie and I should be well-equipped to handle them. Probably.”

“Probably?” Neil asked.

“It’s better than definitely not.”

Jason and Sophie spotted the vorger before they spotted Neil, Jory and the other man they picked up. The vorger looked like something between a fog bank and a swarm, their forms white and ethereal, taking all manner of shapes. Some looked like animals, others monsters or even humanoid shapes, although Shade had told them the shape didn’t matter. Whatever their form, it was the touch of the creatures that would warp and distend flesh.

Jason and Sophie got a look at the results, sprinting past what used to be a person, judging from the pieces of armour and scraps of cloth on the hideous blob of flesh. They didn’t pause, continuing the rush to help their companions.

“I think we found one of your run-off adventurers,” Jason told Neil through voice chat. “The big guy, from your description. I guess he wasn’t as fast as the others.”

In the midst of the vorger swarm, Neil was alright for the moment, but things were rapidly getting worse. His mana shield power held off any vorger who rushed at him but each time the bubble-like barrier flashed, it ate away at his mana to keep him safe. Keane had left his sword in its sheath. His hands were both occupied by a large shield, a translucent, blue object that was obviously a magical construct. He used it to intercept and push back the vorger as they swept in at him and Jory, who was crouched down beside him.

Jory’s leg had been brushed by one of the creatures and was locked into a folded position, forcing him to kneel down. In front of him, vials and little bottles were lifting themselves out of his belts and pockets, disgorging liquids and powers to float together. Unlike the black blob that had formed the last time he used the ability, this one was a shimmering, pale blue.

“I’ll show you flesh warping,” he muttered and the blob streamed into his mouth. His body grew skinny and long, his limbs stretching out. Sweat oozed out of his skin, coating him in a shimmering oil. He stood up, his elongated leg no longer afflicted. He started flailing his arms around like whips, the vorger dissolving into nothing at the touch of the oil coating Jory’s limbs.

For his part, Neil decided to act before his mana was so drained he could no longer cast spells. Even as the vorger continued lashing themselves against his mana shield he started chanting.

“Come forth, wheels of fortune; let destiny, fair and foul, be brought upon those here to receive it.”

In the air above Neil’s had, three stone wheels, translucent and immaterial, came into being. They were stack horizontally atop one another and each had a series of images inscribed on their edges. Most of the images were of vorger, but each wheel also had an image of Neil, Jory and Keane’s faces.

Ability: [Reels of Fortune] (Prosperity)

- Spell (this ability has variable subtypes, contingent on effect).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 10 minutes.

- Current rank: Iron 7 (41%)

- Effect (iron): Conjures three immaterial reels. Channel mana into the reels to generate random effects on random individuals within the area. If an individual is affected more than once by the same use of the reels, the effect is increased for each reel.

Just conjuring the reels had eaten a good chunk of his dwindling mana and he immediately spent even more, channelling it into the reels. By their nature, the reels had mixed reliability at best, but as Neil’s mana plunged, he was betting everything on how much the vorgers’ numbers stacked the odds.

He had chosen to use the reels, not just for its potential power but because they were so outnumbered by the vorger that the odds had become skewed. This was borne out as the wheels stopped turning and the images on the front lit up, each one showing a vorger.

Strange lightning shot out of the wheels a black streak limned in white, chaining through the vorger, one to another. Each vorger struck burst into nothing, like mist under the bright sun. For each vorger that dissolved, a matching image disappeared from each of the wheels, but there were so many of them that the difference was slight. As the vorger rapidly died, Neil and everyone else was rejuvenated as the dying vorger triggered Neil’s aura power.

Ability: [Spoils of Victory] (Prosperity)

- Aura (recovery, conjuration).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 8 (19%)

- Effect (iron): Allies within your aura recover mana and stamina for each enemy that dies within your aura, as well as a minor healing effect. You can loot enemies that die within your aura.

Neil's depleting mana was noticeably replenished as the vorger rapidly died. With his mana pool restored, Neil's mana shield was, once again, a safe refuge from the ghostly creatures. It also helped Keane, who had suffered a number of vorger strikes, in spite of his conjured shield. The healing uncramped joints that flesh-warping attacks had locked up.

Neil channelled more mana into the wheels and they started turning again.

While Neil and Jory were in the process of turning the tables, Jason and Sophie finally reached the fight, ploughing straight in at full speed. Jason's sword was already out, slashing away at the ghost-like vorger.

-
- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Vorger].
 - [Vorger] is immune to [Bleeding].
 - [Bleeding] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Spell Breaker].

Instances quickly stacked up on Jason's sword and it was soon slashing apart the vorger with ease while Sophie's unarmed attacks had a similar effect. She was also seemingly impervious to the vorgers' touch, while Jason enjoyed his own protection.

-
- Special attack [Vorger's Touch] has inflicted [Vorger's Flesh Warp] on you.
 - You have resisted [Vorger's Flesh Warp].
 - [Vorger's Flesh Warp] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].

As Jason and Sophie appeared in the fight, their faces also appeared on the reels, but the second turn of the spell also ended in triple vorger. This time an energy wave rolled out of the reels and touched the closest of the vorger. Its translucent body turned from

white to black, then it exploded. A nearby vorger caught in the explosion similarly started turning black and exploded in turn. The effect kept chaining until it finally petered out, the vorger spreading out until the explosions no longer caught them. Between the explosions and the previous chains of dark lightning, Neil had eradicated a full third of the vorger swarm.

The next turn of the reel rested on images of two vorger and a picture of Jory's face. An explosion in the midst of the vorger took out a further chunk of their number, although not close to as many as the three reel effects.

-
- [Human] has been affected by [Reels of Fortune]. Duration of ability [Alchemical Abomination] has been increased.
-

The vorger fought to the last but accomplished little. Jory's new form was as immune to their attacks as Jason and Sophie, all three laying into the vorger with abandon. The magical protections of Neil and the other man, Keane, still held, protecting them until the fight was over.

In the end, Jason and Sophie felt rather surplus to requirements. They shredded their share of the ghost creatures but most were eradicated by Neil's spell, followed by Jory and his weird shape-changing power. Once the vorger were gone they regrouped, relieved to have weathered the ordeal so well.

"Good to see you," Jason said, clapping Neil on the shoulder as Jory greeted Sophie warmly.

"We should find a quiet place to spend the night that isn't here," Jason said.

"We need to be careful," Neil said. "Those people are still around somewhere."

"I think we might have passed one who didn't run fast enough," Sophie said. "There was a big blob of flesh back there that I think used to be a person."

"He got killed?" Neil asked.

"The vorger do not kill," Shade said, his shadowy figure suddenly standing next to them. "They alter."

They all turned in the direction from which Jason and Sophie had come. Shambling towards them was a flesh monstrosity, a four-legged, asymmetrical mound that as much undulated forward as walked.

"Wexler," Jason said, looking at the creature. "Am I imagining things, or is that thing a lot bigger than when we ran past it?"

Chapter 164: A Worse Plan

Clive's team were making their way up through a building that became more precarious as they went. It was the tallest building they had encountered in the city, almost as tall as the archway towers on which they had arrived. This section of the city was more akin to forest than jungle, with the remnant buildings in the shadow of towering trees.

The building they were climbing up through stood higher than the trees around it. It held its structural integrity despite one especially tall tree growing right up through the building itself. The building appeared to be some kind of elaborate palace. The expensive construction gave it a sound foundation but every floor they climbed showed increased signs of collapse.

"I'm starting to think the danger outweighs the promise of treasure," Clive said.

"If his Highness says we should check it out, we check it out," Abarca said.

Abarca, Campos and Hildebrand were the team members Valdis had picked out to join them. Valdis had suggested a voting system rather than picking a leader for their makeshift team. The three agreed immediately, as they had with every subsequent idea Valdis had come up with.

Valdis, it turned out, was a prince from the diminutive but influential Kingdom of Mirrors. Small, affluent and geographically blessed, it had neither expanded its borders nor been had its borders encroached upon in more than eight centuries. This was due to the diamond-ranker known as the Mirror King, who founded the kingdom and ruled it through to the present day. Through the centuries, the Mirror King had a series of queens, reportedly doting on each, even as they grew old and died beside him. Valdis was one of the current queen consort's sons.

Valdis was convinced there must be some great treasure at the top of the towering edifice and the other three agreed on principle. Clive had known there was no point arguing with Valdis' three yes-men but was compelled to ask what made Valdis so confident.

"No one tells the story of the thing they found in the safe, sensible place," Valdis told him. "A grand treasure atop a crumbling palace with a mighty tree growing right through it? That's a story that gets you waking up in someone else's bedchamber, Clive my friend."

Valdis threw a friendly arm around Clive's shoulder.

"Stick with me and you'll have yourself a wild time."

“I’m pretty confident that we’ll be having a wild time, regardless,” Clive said. “I’m mostly interested in surviving to tell that story.”

Valdis just laughed and continued on, confidently leading the way. Clive liked Valdis, whose reckless enthusiasm reminded him of Jason. Clive had let himself be dragged by Jason into enough things he ended up enjoying that he wasn’t opposed to Valdis’ idea. That same comparison also compelled him to be the voice of reason.

They navigated the main part of the building, the most intact section, without incident. Then they reached a set of six towers, interconnected at various heights by different walkways. It reminded Clive of the Mercer family home, whose interlocking towers were a signature of the Greenstone skyline.

The towers were not as solid as the building below them, which became all the more evident as they ascended the crumbling stairs inside them. They started with the most intact-looking tower, but internal damage forced them to switch towers via the walkways more than once. The walkways, however, were even sketchier than the towers. Once fully enclosed tunnels, sections of the floor had long given way.

They crossed one at a time, Clive trying to convince himself he was imagining the feeling of the bricks shifting under every step. Valdis lightly pranced through, using a light-step power usually used for water-walking that reduced the pressure he placed with each footstep. Clive was not so blessed, carefully wending his way past the holes in the floor.

The first two tunnelled walkways were crossed without incident. They reached the third to discover it had mostly entirely collapsed away. The roof was gone, as were most of the walls and a large section in the middle of the floor. The only thing connecting one side to the other across the gap was a mostly intact section of wall.

“This is really not a good idea,” Clive said. “I think we should call it off.”

“We’re almost there,” Valdis said.

Above them was a huge, stone platform, the towers holding it up like the legs of a giant beast. Valdis was still convinced something amazing awaited them at the top. Looking at the missing middle section of the walkway, though, even the other three were becoming wary.

“Surely, there’s a way to get us all across,” Valdis said. “Clive, you’re clever. I bet you can figure something out.”

Clive frowned.

“Yes,” he said reluctantly. He opened his storage space, a circle of runes he reached through to start plucking out items. He took out four pitons, a hammer and two lengths of rope.

“We fasten the ends of these ropes at each end,” Clive explained. “One high, and one low. We run them along the wall where the gap is, edging our way along the low one as we use the wall and the high one for balance.”

“So, you need me to go over and fasten the other end,” Valdis said.

“Yes,” Clive said. “I would like to point out that you’re the only one of us with a slow fall power, so your enthusiasm isn’t tempered like the rest of us.”

“It’ll be fine,” Valdis said, and for most of the crossing, it was. Valdis used a wall run to cross the gap and secured the ropes at the other end, allowing Clive, Abarca and Campos to cross. The final member of the group, Hildebrand, let nerves get the better of him, the rope slipping through his fingers as he fell. Clive rushed to the edge, his gaze moving from Valdis to the falling Hildebrand as he quickly incanted a spell.

“Exchange your fates.”

Hildebrand vanished, his mid-air position now occupied by a startled Valdis. Hildebrand was standing in the spot from which Valdis had been looking over the edge himself. Clive grabbed the disoriented and still screaming Hildebrand before he fell off again.

Abarca and Campos were still yelling at Clive by the time Valdis made his way back up. Without the others, Valdis had made much better time than when they had ascended together, both Abarca and Campos express their relief at his reappearance.

“What’s the issue?” Valdis asked. “You knew I had a slow-fall power. That was some sharp thinking, Clive.”

“I told you this was dangerous,” Clive said.

“And I told you it would be fine,” Valdis said. “Did these guys give you a hard time?”

“It’s doesn’t matter,” Clive said.

“Should I go back and grab the rope?” Valdis asked.

“We have to get back down, remember?”

“Right, yes.”

After the slow and almost disastrous crossing of the walkway, they were able to climb the tower all the way to the top. The stairs emerged through the floor of the massive platform that spanned the towers, which looked to have been cut from a single piece of stone. There were six statues in the middle of the platform, standing in a circle and facing inward. They each had a plinth in front of them with various items, but the group’s attention was drawn to the centre of the circle.

In the middle of the circle was a large creature, a wingless dragon the size of an elephant, with powerful legs and a tail that ended in a wicked stinger. Its scales were

brown and grey, matte to the point that it looked rather like a large rock. The creature had sensed them, languidly getting up from where it had been sunning itself in the middle of the platform. Stretching its limbs, it eyed them hungrily.

“Mountain wyrm,” Valdis said, the usual amusement absent from his voice. “A little one, only bronze rank, probably, but still powerful. It can draw strength from stone to heal and toughen itself. Honestly, I don’t think we can beat it here. The rest of you go back down and I’ll distract it for as long as I can, then jump over the side. Use your escape medallions if you have to.”

Clive and the others had all chosen the path of wisdom, receiving the life-preserving items from Shade. Only Valdis had taken the courage option.

Hildebrand didn’t hesitate at Valdis’ words, bounding back down the stairs. Abarca and Campos followed, after a quick glance at Valdis’ determined gaze, locked on the monster.

“Edge!” Clive yelled, running away from the stairs and towards the side of the platform.

“What?” Valdis asked, looking at Clive in confusion, before grinning in realisation and also running.

“Are you sure that will work?” Valdis called out.

“Probably,” Clive called back.

“Probably?”

“You have a better plan?”

“You heard my plan.”

“That was a worse plan,” Clive yelled. “You go over the side, either way.”

Valdis easily caught up with Clive. Behind him, the wyrm was moving in their direction on powerful legs, but its heavy body moved no more quickly than Clive did and they made it to the edge of the platform well ahead of it. Clive came to a stop, pulling out a silver spirit coin.

Clive knew the bronze-rank monster would likely resist his spell. Consuming a spirit coin to boost his attributes past the monster’s rank to silver would make Clive’s spell more likely to take effect. It presented a dangerous risk-reward proposition, for if his spell failed anyway, he would be left weak and helpless in front of the monster.

Clive shoved the coin in his mouth without hesitation as Valdis leapt off the side of the tower. Clive looked between him and the dragon, casting his spell as he felt the power of the coin surge through him.

“Exchange your fates.”

-
- You have used spell [Juxtaposition] on [Valdis Volaire] and [Lesser Mountain Wyrn].
 - [Lesser Mountain Wyrn] has resisted. [Juxtaposition] does not take effect.
 - Spell cooldown is reset due to spell failure.
-

“Crap.”

He tried again.

“Exchange your fates.”

“Exchange your fates.”

“Oh, come on...”

He could feel the fleeting power of the about to drain away. He looked at Valdis, drifting slowly downward, then back at the draconic monster that was almost upon him.

“Exchange your fates.”

The monster vanished, replaced with Valdis. Valdis ran over and they looked over the side, seeing the monster crash through the tops of the trees below. Clive dropped to his hands and knees at the edge of the platform, panting in exhaustion as he looked over the side.

“Think it’ll kill it?” he asked. “Maybe the trees will cushion its fall.”

“Maybe,” Valdis said. “If it survives, it can heal itself up with the stone on the ground.”

-
- You defeated [Lesser Mountain Wyrn].
-

“No, it’s dead,” Clive said with relief. He had no interest in facing the monster again after they went back down.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

“I should probably go get those three before they try that rope again, then.”

“You go right ahead,” Clive said, rolling onto his back to lay spreadeagled on the platform. “I’m just going to lay here for a bit.”

Valdis eventually returned with the other three who, despite Valdis’ assurances, poked their heads up over the edge of the stairwell warily before coming all the way up. Valdis walked back over to Clive.

“Ready to get back up?” Valdis asked.

“No.”

Valdis laughed, holding out a hand to pull Clive to his feet. Clive groaned as he went to examine the ring of statues. The statues were around twice Clive’s height, each one

depicting a different person. From the equipment carved onto each statue, they were all adventurers. The most interesting part was that each stature had a plinth in front of it, on which rested what looked to be actual versions of some of the gear the statues had. For each statue, there were two pieces of gear, waiting to be claimed.

Each of the five adventurers gravitated to certain gear. Valdis to a sword and scabbard, Clive to a staff and wand. The other sets were an orb and circlet, a cloak and dagger, a sword and shield and a single glove, paired with an amulet.

Clive saw no magic with his perception power but didn't rule out some trap too powerful for his ability to pluck from hiding. He pulled out some tools, examining the plinth carefully, even as the others had already started picking up items. When he was convinced any traps that might be present were beyond his ability to uncover, Clive turned his attention to the staff and the wand.

The staff was carved from a dark coloured wood, engraved with magical symbols. On the end was a bass cap, with a large purple gemstone set into it. The wand was a blue metal rod with intricate lines worked into flowing patterns that ran down its length.

Clive had his own ability to identify magic items which, like most such abilities, worked by giving him a sense of the item's properties when he touched them. Compared to the way Jason's power gave a visible explanation he found it disappointing.

While out of range of Jason, powers like the voice chat and identifying items didn't work. To Clive's delight, however, the party interface power combined with Clive's own identification ability to restore that functionality. Thus, he was happily able to read the properties of the staff.

Item: [Spell Lance of the Magister] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

The staff of an ancient sorcerer, this weapon is focused on priming enemies for a potent magical assault (weapon, staff).

- Requirements: The power to wield magical tools.
- Basic attack: Explosive disruptive-force bolt. Inflicts [Spell Impetus].
- Basic attack: Disruptive-force beam. Consumes mana. Sustaining the beam on a target periodically inflicts [Spell Impetus].
- Effect: Increase the mana consumption when casting a spell to increase the effect. Effect is further increased if wielding both [Spell Lance of the Magister] and [Magister's Tithe].
- [Spell Impetus] (affliction, magic, stacking): All resistances are reduced. When the recipient suffers an offensive spell from someone wielding [Spell Lance of the Magister], all instances of [Spell impetus] are consumed to increase the effect of the spell.

The Magister was a potentially mythical figure, whose actual existence was hotly debated. Many items and abilities were named for him or her, including two of Clive's own abilities. Regardless of the history, finding a growth weapon made the trip to the astral space a success, whatever else he encountered. He took a look at the wand.

Item: [Magister's Tithe] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

The wand of an ancient sorcerer, used to sustain combat effectiveness (weapon, wand).

- Requirements: The power to wield magical tools.
- Basic attack: Disruptive-force bolt. Inflicts [Mana Siphon].
- Basic attack: Mana draining beam. This effect is increased if wielding both [Spell Lance of the Magister] and [Magister's Tithe].
- [Mana Siphon] (affliction, magic): The strength of mana drain effects against the recipient are increased.

Clive stared in awe at the items in his hands. A matched set of legendary growth weapons were so good he would do well to shut up and not tell anyone, so as not to get robbed. He placed them in his inventory and turned to find four people holding out items. Valdis gave him a wry smile.

"You can identify items, right?"

Chapter 165: No One Has That Coming

In the aftermath of the fight with the vorger, Jason and Sophie had no time to catch up with Neil and Jory. The flesh abomination lumbering in their direction posed a new, albeit very slowly approaching, problem. They stood together, watching as it didn't so much walk in their direction as vaguely amble. It was basically a huge, vaguely spherical mound of muscle, skin and fat on four short, blobby legs. Scraps of clothing and pieces of armour could be seen wedged into fatty crevices where layers of flesh and skin had folded on top of themselves.

"Is it attacking us?" Neil asked.

"It will move sluggishly until it is engaged," Shade said. The shadowy entity who governed the trials had chosen to make a reappearance. Also with them was Keane, the adventurer who had been travelling with Neil and Jory.

"So we could just leave?" Neil asked.

"Yes," Shade said. "If you were alone, I would advise you to do so. Your collective capabilities should be sufficient to kill it, however, so I ask that you do. The soul within is trapped in excruciating pain, denied the release of death until its flesh prison is destroyed."

"Is that one of the people that attacked us?" Jory asked.

"It was," Shade said. "He did not flee as swiftly as his companions."

"Forget it, then," Neil said. "He had it coming."

"No one has that coming," Jason said.

"He was trying to kill us."

"And if he'd still been fighting you when we arrived," Jason said, "I'd help you kill him right back. But death is one thing and having your soul trapped in pain for eternity is another."

"I agree," Jory said firmly.

"Sophie, new guy," Jason said. "What do you think?"

"Put him down," Sophie said. "You were right about no one deserving that."

"Am I the new guy?" Keane asked.

"Yeah," Jason said, "but it's three to one already. Your vote doesn't matter any more, sorry."

Jason looked at the hideous blob abomination. It had at least five times the amount of flesh a person would have.

"Shade, do you not have conservation of mass, here?"

“We do,” Shade said. “We also have magic, so the laws of physics are more like strong suggestions. It's best for everyone if you adhere to them, but if you are truly reluctant, there are still modes of recourse.”

“You know about the laws of physics?” Jason asked.

“I have been a familiar many times, across many worlds. I know much.”

“You must be handy to have around,” Jason said. “And you've done a lot of familiaring, you say? I don't suppose you're looking for a new gig?”

“My time here ends when all the trials are passed. Pass the trials, gain the right essence ability and we'll see.”

“Oh, nice,” Jason said. “What kind of awakening stone would that take?”

“All who survive this stage of the trials shall receive an awakening stone available nowhere else,” Shade said.

“Clive will be glad to hear that,” Jason said.

“Doesn't he have his full set of abilities already?” Neil asked.

“Yeah, but you know what he's like. Give him something new and he's a kid at Christmas.”

“What's Christmas?”

“It's a religious holiday that we appropriated to stimulate the economy once a year,” Jason said.

“That thing is getting closer,” Sophie said. “Slowly, but it's getting closer. Shade, can you tell us again about the best way to fight it?”

“A flesh abomination will adapt to how you engage it. If you are fast it will become faster. Strong, and it will become tougher. Hide and its senses will improve. Attack from afar and it will develop ranged attacks. Its weakness is that it cannot be all things at once. If it becomes fast and flexible, it becomes vulnerable to cutting attacks. If it develops a chitinous exterior, it becomes inflexible and slow. I advise you to use Jason Asano's necrotic powers as the main source of damage. Whatever changes it makes, flesh is flesh, and flesh can die.”

Jason surveilled what was about to be their battleground. It was typical of what they had seen in the city; jungle filling the space between overgrown buildings. The broken stone road had soil and roots pushing up through the pavers, along with plants and full-blown trees. The footing was unsure and the terrain complex with plenty of shadows he could use.

“Alright,” he said. “Sophie, you start us off. Get it picking up the pace to chase you around so it's nice and squishy. Then, Neil, you tie it up so I can introduce it to Colin. Sound good?”

“Works for me,” Sophie said.

“If it’s bronze rank, I won’t be able to hold it for longer than a few moments,” Neil said. “You’ll need to get your timing right.”

“Call it and I’ll be ready,” Jason said. “Jory, stick with Neil. New guy, put yourself between Jory, Neil and the bad guy.”

“Not a problem,” Keane said. “I’ve been doing it for days.”

“Everyone knows their job, then. Sophie, will you kick things off?”

Sophie flashed him a grin and dashed in the direction of the abomination. She leapt high into the air, kicking off the top of the misshapen lump of flesh before landing on the other side, hitting the ground at a run.

“Reckless,” Jason said, shaking his head.

“Then why are you grinning?” Neil asked.

“I have a soft spot for poor but flamboyant choices.”

The creature reacted quickly, its body rapidly morphing. It shrank, moving into the shape of a fleshy beetle with six legs and scurrying after Sophie. Growing out of its back were four, long, skinny arms. Lengthier than its entire body, the arms were articulated by multiple joints.

“That is very disturbing,” Jory said. “A giant flesh bug with four arms sticking out of it? I think the worst part is all those extra elbows.”

Sophie led the creature on a merry chase, running away and deflecting the long, grasping hands when they came close enough to grab at her. After its initial transformation, the changes in the creature had slowed but not stopped. As it chased after Sophie, it made incremental changes to its form to help in the pursuit. The body continued to shrink the legs changed shape to better handle Sophie’s speed and rapid shifts in direction. Its arms, which she continued knocking away, went from eerily human hands to long fingers with webbing stretched between them.

“Get ready to go,” Neil told Jason, who nodded.

Neil chanted a spell and the overgrown plant life started sprouting masses of vines, lashing out to wrap around the creature. Its many arms and legs were bound up, along with its long body, completely arresting its movement. Jason emerged from a shadow, slicing the back of his hand with the razor hidden in a wristband for the purpose. From the wound, a pile of Colin spewed out onto the flesh abomination, the leeches immediately digging in with their horrifying rings of teeth.

System messages scrolled before Jason’s eyes in rapid succession, notifying him of the afflictions Team Colin was placing. Most were resisted but Jason’s familiar power was increasing, as was his resistance-penalising aura. He gleefully noted that as many as one

in three afflictions were taking hold, which was better than previous bronze-rank encounters. With sheer numbers of Team Colin, the flesh monster was quickly loaded with afflictions.

Colin only had a few moments to lay in afflictions before the abomination altered its form, undertaking another massive, rapid transformation. Shifting from the horizontal alignment of a hexapod to an upright biped, four of the six legs shrank away while the remaining pair grew bulky and strong. Its body became larger and heavier, the fleshy exterior growing thick, tough skin with protrusions of razor-sharp bone poking through. The four arms grew shorter but more powerful, the webbed hands replaced with savage claws. The result was something like a hairless, four-armed gorilla, covered in elephant skin with bony blades growing out of its body.

The new skin was too much for the leeches to bite through. The blade-bones sliced through many of the vines and it pulled itself free of the rest brute strength. The vines tried to entangle it again but the creature powered free of their grasp, shedding leeches like droplets of water in the process.

During the transformation, Jason was not idle, taking the opportunity to lay in with his spells. They lacked immediate impact and were repeatedly resisted but were quick to cast. By the time the abomination broke free and resumed its angry pursuit of Sophie, Jason had afflicted it with his key powers.

The abomination was now loaded up with ongoing necrotic damage from Colin, plus bleeding and blood poison that would reapply the bleed effect every time it absorbed enough healing to end. This was important as the abomination had altered itself to accelerate healing in an attempt to adapt to Jason's afflictions.

The other pillars holding up Jason's house of affliction were the sin affliction, which increased all necrotic damage suffered and inexorable doom, which added to any affliction in place. The combination of leech necrotoxin and the necrosis-accelerating sin both increasing over time was a multiplicative escalation of the damage, while the bleeding and anticoagulant leech toxin kept the monstrosity's regeneration in check.

The escalating effects of Jason's afflictions had placed the abomination's life on a clock. That left the question of how much damage the abomination could inflict before that clock ran out. In the immediacy, the creature's inevitable demise was not apparent as the abomination thrashed at the leeches still falling off its body.

Jason retreated to the shadows and recalled the leeches, which started disappearing as they contacted the blood on the hand he lowered to receive them. They were quite spread out, however, and could only slowly make their way to his hidden position. The flesh monstrosity lacked the intelligence to follow their direction to Jason's hidden location.

His cloak melded him perfectly into the shadow, hiding him even from whatever senses the flesh monster relied on without eyes or ears.

The abomination furiously stomped on leeches to little avail, as they had been quite scattered by the monster shaking them off. Unable to catch the elusive Sophie, it stopped. Its four arms and the bony protrusions retracted as its body returned to a more blob-like shape, while keeping the thick hide. Welt-like marks started appearing all over its surface, with tiny bone needles shooting out in every direction a moment later.

Keane used his shield to shelter Jory, Neil and himself. Neil had cast his giant's might spell on Keane shortly after Sophie had begun combat and the shield-bearer was twice his normal size, as was the conjured shield in front of him. It was Sophie, Jason and Colin who should have taken the brunt of the attack, but Neil was on the ball, a bubble-like shield snapping up around Sophie. It only lasted a moment but a moment was all she needed to shift behind a tree with her mirage step power. The after-image left behind by her ability didn't seem to fool the abomination's eyeless, earless senses and it didn't keep attacking her.

Jason's hidden position meant Neil couldn't see him to provide another shield, leaving Jason as the only person who didn't avoid the attack. The needles that dug into him were light but they were also a bronze-rank attack. They pierced through his cloak and, in many places, the armour underneath. All Jason had time to do was turn his body away from the attack and shield his face before the needles struck, ducking behind a tree as more of the bone needles poured out of the abomination.

Team Colin took the worst of it, with only a fraction of the leech mass having returned to Jason before the rest were skewered with bone needles. Some, still clinging to the abomination, had been shot off by needles. Most were exposed on the ground and riddled with needles.

Generally, Jason didn't have to worry about the welfare of team Colin. Very few monsters had the kind of area attacks that could pose a danger to the regenerating leech swarm. Jason had only absorbed a fraction of Colin's full mass, which would take a day or two to replenish itself in the safety of Jason's bloodstream.

As the accelerated healing Jason received from Colin was based on how much of the mass was currently residing in his blood, the effect would be significantly reduced until the leech swarm recovered. Fortunately, the healing they offered had grown stronger as Jason's familiar power advanced, so what was a reduced effect now was similar to when he first obtained the ability.

While all the afflictions were locked in and its death was now inevitable, the abomination was, for the moment, still full of life. The necrosis was causing patches of

blackened flesh to ooze blood but the monstrosity did not yet appear impeded. Of its opponents, Jason and Sophie were hidden and what remained of the leeches were dead. That left Keane, Neil and Jory to its attentions and there was no hiding Keane's enlarged body. The abomination morphed again, bulking up and dropping to four powerful legs as a huge, bony spike emerged from the front. It now resembled a rhino whose entire head was a horn and it started charging directly at Keane.

It was building up speed quickly as it charged, but it was no match for Sophie who emerged from her hiding spot and raced ahead of it. Putting herself between the monster and the others, she was suddenly thrown violently sideways as Jason emerged from a nearby shadow, crash-tackling her out of the way, letting the monster pass.

"What are you doing?" Sophie yelled at him as he extricated herself from his rough embrace.

"Your ability can only stop so much, remember?" Jason yelled at her. "Trust your allies."

Sophie glared at him, then down at the arm, remembering the broken mess it had been the last time an attack overwhelmed her defensive power. That had taken even her magic power the better part of a day to heal and the flesh monster's charge would certainly have been more powerful.

Neil, Jory and Keane had been moving and fighting through the city together for several days. With monsters so thick on the ground, that was enough time and enough fights to find each other's combat rhythms. It was an unusual mix, with no dedicated damage dealer, but Neil and Jory both had powerful buffs that could turn Keane into a walking fortress.

Already giant-sized from Neil's spell, Neil gave him another spell, bolster, that would enhance his next active essence ability use. Jory, meanwhile, had a cluster of small, clear orbs floating around him. Materials started floating out of his pockets and belts, floating in front of him. Trace elements mixed with a substance he conjured out of thin air, resulting in a small, red blob that one of the orbs floated over and absorbed. The orb then flew over to Keane, passing straight through his armour and being absorbed directly into his flesh.

Jory had three powers that were the basis for his effectiveness as a field alchemist. The orbs were an ability called eldritch eyes, which could deliver potions across a battlefield, to enemies and allies both. The orbs also allowed him to safely scout at a distance, a valuable support skill for any team.

His telekinetic power, potion mystic, allowed him to alter and combine ingredients without touching them, turning Jory into a walking alchemy workshop. It wasn't an ability

that replaced a real workshop for making proper potions, but for working on the fly it was perfect.

The reason Jory could throw out potions without exhausting his materials was the universal reagent ability. It conjured a versatile potion base he could use to make short-lived potions using only trace elements, letting him save materials compared to regular potion-making. These quick potions rapidly became inert if not used, but took only a fraction of the materials a regular version of the same potion would. This allowed Jory to massively output potions, a key element of both his clinic's financial viability and his sustained effectiveness in the field.

So long as he didn't overuse his material-hungry shape-changing power, he could carry enough materials for numerous encounters. With the versatility of his potions, Jory could be a makeshift healer, buffer, debuffer and even throw around some afflictions using poison and other noxious concoctions.

Between Jory and Neil's buffs, Keane was as ready as he could be for the monstrosity bearing down on them. Just before it hit, Neil's burst shield power bubbled into place around Keane. Keane used a power of his own that absorbed the force of an attack and turned it back on the attacker, which was boosted by Neil's earlier use of the bolster power.

Not even the combination of buffs, Neil's shield power and Keane's enhanced ability were enough to fully withstand the raw force of the bronze-rank abomination's attack. Neil's shield popped as easily as the bubble it looked like, while the shield in Keane's hands warped and shattered, the conjured object dissolving into nothing as it broke apart.

All their efforts in stacking defence were not in vain, however. Keane had leaned into the blow and while he was sent stumbling backwards, he stayed on his feet. The retaliatory force of Neil's burst shield and Keane's damage reflection power had blunted the abomination's terrifying momentum. Attack and defence were both spent and for a brief, oddly still moment, Keane stood looking at the motionless monstrosity.

The moment passed, Keane conjuring a fresh shield as the monster started changing its form once more. Keane backed off, keeping himself between the abomination and the two supporters behind him as Sophie renewed the attack, opening with a wind blade before laying in with attacks. Her unarmed strike powers offered only limited damage but her two special attacks added damage to every strike. The nature of that damage was such that one type or the other would always be effective, regardless of her opponent's protections.

With Sophie once again on the attack, the monster engaged her, shifting thick-legged quadruped with eight arms emerging from every side of its body. The arms were long and

multi-jointed like they had seen before, but this time ended razor-sharp blades of bone. Sophie held her ground, a combination of stubbornness over Jason's earlier intervention and a need to give the others time to reposition.

Bone blades lashed out at her but she dodged or deflected them with arms, legs, even her head. So long as she actively intercepted the attacks, her powers absorbed the damage. The monster might be bronze rank, but it could put only so much power into such rapid, multitudinous attacks.

With Sophie successfully fending it off, the abomination did what it always did, shifting its form to adapt. Its arms changed into tentacles, still sporting blades at the end. It reduced the power of each attack while making them more flexible and hard to predict.

Sophie countered by activating her between the raindrops ability, which enhanced her reflexes for a high mana cost. The result was that rather than defend less effectively, she handled the tentacles with more ease than she had the arms.

The mana consumption of the power was high but several mitigating factors allowed her to keep it up. One was the natural ability of the celestine race that reduced the mana cost of ongoing abilities. Another was Neil, using a replenish spell to restore her mana, and Jory, quick-brewing a mana potion and floated to her in an orb. Her confrontation has allowed them to regroup behind Keane, ready should it turn on them again.

Faced with a continued inability to harm Sophie, the abomination started shifting again, but the effects of Jason's afflictions finally made themselves known. As it tried to change shape again, its skin cracked like a rotten egg, complete with hideous smell. Black fluid spilled out onto the ground, filling the air with the only smell any of them had encountered to rival rainbow smoke for sheer nauseating power. As the monstrosity collapsed, Sophie ran off to throw up, having caught the largest dose.

The abomination flopped wetly on the ground in a pool of its own blacked, runny flesh. It had adapted to the exponentially accelerating necrosis by isolating it, continuing the fight even as it grew inside like a hyper-accelerated cancer until there was nothing left to contain it. The group watched from afar, cloth held over their noses as what was a person, an hour ago, melted into a black, red and purple puddle.

"Thank you," Shade said, once again appearing amongst them. "There are many that suffer so, in this place. I am grateful for any that you can put to rest."