

Chapter 197

Adequate

Jason took one look at the spartan dormitory of the Magic Society outpost and pulled out his cloud flask. The low, blocky building of desert stone contained little more than hard cots.

He chose the adaptive version of the cloud house and mist started spilling out of the flask. It formed into five small buildings in a ring, similar on the outside to the dormitories and connected by covered walkways. Inside was a very different story, with the soft, luxurious cloud-stuff interiors to which they had all become accustomed.

“This is very indulgent,” Henrietta said after her first night in the cloud house. Three of the five buildings were bedrooms, while the last two had a kitchen and dining room in one and a lounge with bar in the other.

“You’re free to pitch a tent outside, if you think it’ll make you soft,” Jason told her.

“It’s my responsibility to remain with the team,” she said hastily.

“We can expect to have a lot of work,” Henrietta said after they set off the next morning. Their planned route was to move north, checking in on the villages along the coast before turning deep inland and working their way back south before taking the river back to the city.

“The further we go, the more we should find overloaded adventure board notices,” Henrietta warned. “In some instances I’ll be splitting the team into two groups to cover more than one notice at a time, but no more than two. We want to keep at least some safety in numbers.”

“There’s a village on our list today,” Jason said. “Last time I saw it, it was a complete ruin. It’ll be good to see it rebuilt.”

“What happened to it?” Belinda ask. “Storm, or monster attack?”

“A tidal troll,” Jason said, “although it looked like a hurricane had passed through. This was just after Clive and I caught you and Sophie. Humphrey and Neil were off on the expedition and I took the contract alone. It was my first solo bronze-rank monster, and the first one I fought on purpose.”

“You took down a tidal troll alone?” Henrietta asked. “They’re tough and strong, even for bronze rank monsters. Humphrey and his might essence will be close to silver rank before he can match it.”

“They’re slow, though,” Jason said. “Big, slow and no weird powers. That made it the perfect enemy for me. Lots of surface area for Colin to latch onto.”

“I can see that,” Henrietta said. “If you were going slow and steady with the afflictions, though, it must have been hard to keep it out of the water.”

“It wasn’t what you’d call a fast mover,” Jason said. “By the time it ran for the ocean it was too late. I used my execute to close it out before the troll crossed the beach.”

“You’re the first focused affliction specialist I’ve met,” Henrietta said. “All the others were wide-area types. Very good at weeding out the weaklings and softening up the main opposition. They’re very popular on teams, which they have to be. They’re great openers, but not great closers, better against large numbers of weaker enemies.”

“That’s the opposite of you,” Humphrey said to Jason.

“I can see the appeal.” Jason said. “Just blanketing an area in afflictions would be nice. I was really envious when Beth Cavendish showed off powers like that and I was hoping to pick some up myself. I have to work to get people afflicted, and a lot of the time its better just to stab them in the neck and move on.”

“You need to get out of that habit,” Henrietta said. “The higher rank you get to, the less stabbing someone with a weapon becomes viable. A silver-ranker will pull your knife out of her throat and stab you right back with it. If you don’t have strength like Humphrey or passively add damage to your attacks like Sophie, ordinary attacks will be worthless. People get far too tough at higher rank and monsters are even worse. If you stab someone and want it to accomplish anything, there has to be a special attack to go with it.”

“Loading enemies up with afflictions at this rank feels pointless a lot of the time,” Jason said. “It doesn’t seem worth the effort when one good knife strike will get the job done.”

“That’s the wrong attitude,” Humphrey said. “The habits we ingrain now are the habits that define us in the future. You need to fight now the way you will then.”

“That makes sense,” Jason said. “I need to use those abilities to rank them up anyway.”

“Maybe ranking your affliction powers will give you some area effects,” Humphrey said to Jason.

“Not that I could find, when Clive and I looked through the Magic Society records,” Jason said. “It turns out my shadow teleport opens up portals, starting at bronze-rank, though. My range will be much shorter than Hester’s, and it won’t be able to transport people higher than bronze rank, but it’s still awesome.”

“My teleport will be long-range and let me take people with me at bronze,” Humphrey said.

“My personal space power, rune gate, also creates a portal at bronze,” Clive added.

“Hold on,” Henrietta said. “I knew about Humphrey’s power, but your team will have three portal users?”

“Mine’s technically not a portal,” Humphrey said.

“That doesn’t matter,” Henrietta said. “I thought it was bad enough when four of you had personal storage powers, but three portals? And you, Clive, getting both in the same power? Most teams would kill to get a portal user on their team.”

“Don’t tell Emir,” Jason said. “He’s already trying to poach Clive as it is.”

“You’re in demand,” Belinda said to Clive. “You should negotiate for a bigger cut of the loot.”

“The question,” Clive said, “was whether Jason’s powers would gain some wide-area effects. There are a lot of gaps in the Society’s knowledge regarding Jason’s abilities. His familiars are unusual, of course, but that’s true of many adventurers. He’s not the only adventurer to have an apocalypse beast familiar.”

“He’s not?” Humphrey asked.

“No,” Clive said. “There’s an active adventurer with another swarm-type apocalypse beast. Desolation locusts, they’re called. It’s not Jason’s familiar powers I’m thinking about, though. Many focused affliction specialists find their abilities adding wide-area aspects somewhere around the silver-gold level. Out of Jason’s sin and doom essence powers, the Society only has records of what one of them does beyond bronze rank. I’m looking forward to filling those gaps as he ranks up.”

“The sin essence is extremely rare,” Jason said, “and apparently not popular, for a legendary essence.”

“It does take a particular kind of arrogance to absorb the essence of defying the gods into your soul,” Neil said.

“I don’t see it that way,” Jason said. “The sin essence isn’t about defying gods.”

“Then what is it about?” Neil asked. “Because it really seems like it is.”

“It’s about the nature of sin,” Jason said. “A sin is a transgression against a set of rules.”

“Exactly,” Neil said. “Rules set down by the gods.”

“But those rules are arbitrary,” Jason said. “Each god had their own set of sins. For Knowledge, lying is a sin, but for Deception, or even the Merchant, lying is a part of their core practices. Each god has their own set of rules.”

“So?” Neil asked.

“So, I don’t think the sin essence is about violating rules of the gods. Not for me, at least. Maybe it works that way for some others.”

“It definitely does,” Clive said. “I’ve seen some of the combinations in the Magic Society records.”

“Anyway,” Jason said, “it doesn’t work like that for me. My sin essence, I’m pretty sure, is about having my own rules that others transgress.”

“Oh, so you’re not violating the rules of the gods,” Neil said. “You’re positioning yourself alongside them. Let me retract what I said about your breathtaking arrogance.”

The trickiest part of the adventure board notices in coastal villages was the preponderance of ocean monsters. Clive’s air bubble ritual was fine for slow underwater travel, but wouldn’t hold up to combat. Knowing their route through the coastal villages would cause this issue, they had picked up a supply of water-breathing potions from Jory before they left.

They were saving the potions for when they needed the whole team. They resolved most of the notices by relying on Jason’s magic umbrella, while his necklace of the deep was handed over to Humphrey.

Item: [Necklace of the Deep] (iron rank, uncommon)

A necklace containing the power of the deep ocean giants (jewellery, necklace).

- Effect: Ignore the effects of high pressure and pressure variance.
- Effect: Breathe water.
- Effect: Your weight is increased. You cannot use iron-rank weight reduction abilities or items.

Jason’s bubble, and the magic umbrella that created it, were quite stable and handled underwater contact with no issues. As the umbrella floated over his head by itself, it left both of his hands free, while the bubble of air meant his movements weren’t slowed down by water resistance. The biggest impediment to his combat power was the inability to pull out Colin, who couldn’t handle the salty water. The intangible Shade and Gordon handled it just fine, however.

The necklace didn’t have the same effect of freeing up movement, but it offered the secure footing of extra weight and Humphrey’s superhuman strength did the rest.

The pair emerged from the ocean after taking out a crab monster that was impacting the village’s seabed trawling operations. The water quintessence that formed along the coast north and south of the delta was the bulk of a village’s earnings. Their teammates were waiting for him on the shore.

“You should try going without your umbrella,” Clive suggested. “Getting past the drowning reflex is a good way to break the breathing habit.”

“He’s only iron rank,” Henrietta said. “He’ll drown.”

“He’s an outworlder,” Clive said. “His body got a head start on the magic transition.”

“I take it you’ve all had the talk, then,” Henrietta said.

“The talk?” Jason asked.

“The ‘we’re all turning into wet, magic flesh sacks,’ talk.”

“Yeah, we had that one,” Jason said. “Next we’re going to tell Neil where babies come from.”

The biggest time sink during their journey was not going to be travel, with the heavy skimmer Clive secured careening them over the desert in speed and relative comfort. It was the time it took to hunt down the monsters on the adventure board notices that soaked up their time. If the monsters had been closer and more of a threat to the village then they would have sent for immediate adventurer response.

The first village was the one closest to the city and in least need of extra attention. It was the remote villages out in the desert where they anticipated the notices to be stacked up. The second of three villages they planned to visit that day was the one where Jason had fought the tidal ogre.

Having been completely rebuilt, he didn’t recognise it as they arrived to the warm welcome of the villagers. After they had been forced to escape their ravaged homes, the Adventure Society had avenged their fallen, reclaimed their village and even helped fund reconstruction. They insisted on showing their gratitude with a small luncheon feast before the adventurers even had a chance to look at the adventure notice board.

They finally turned to the task that brought them to the village. It was a bronze-rank monster, but not an aggressive one. After the tidal troll, simply avoiding the territory the beast had claimed was an easy task for the villagers. This was especially true since it’s territory was a desolate stretch of desert with little value to anyone. They had simply posted warnings on the coastal road warning traders to detour around, a common enough thing in a world where monsters were a fact of life.

“This will be the first bronze-rank monster that many of you have faced,” Henrietta told the team. “The villagers have identified it as a stone lurker, which is a common monster in this area, so it should be reliable. It’s tough, strong and camouflages itself well in rocky desert areas. If you catch it in the sand it will be easy to spot, but keep a sharp eye out if you start seeing rocks. It’s very good at hiding it’s aura.”

“Also, don’t assume there is only one,” Humphrey added. “Jason, you’ll be the primary damage dealer.”

“You should be wary, Jason,” Clive said. “A stone lurker isn’t as strong as a tidal troll but it isn’t as slow, either. It can also make charging dashes, which it will in an ambush.”

There turned out to be two of the stone lurkers but the fight went well as they could have hoped. Sophie, with her enhanced aura senses, detected them right before they attacked. She and Humphrey intercepted them, her holding off one as Jason went to work on it. They already had Humphrey and Neil’s summons out, which they directed to support Humphrey.

The stone lurkers were large, bipedal lizards that hammered out with huge, knuckled fists. Their strength was enough that meeting them fist to fist rattled Sophie’s arm in spite of her attack-negating power, but she mostly dodged the attacks, frustrating the giant lizard. It was surprisingly fast for it’s size, but that was nothing to Sophie.

Humphrey didn’t have Sophie’s defensive strength so the rest of the team supported him. Clive and Belinda opened up, chaining Clive’s powerful attack spell. Humphrey held the line as Neil’s shields protected him, one after another, then let the summons take the brunt until Neil’s abilities became available again.

Jason used the reach of his shadow arm to get his attacks in from safety. Many of his afflictions were resisted at first, although his resistance-diminishing aura was stronger than in the past and almost half of them got through. Gordon’s unrelenting beam and Jason’s conjured dagger both inflicted the vulnerable condition, lowering the lizard’s resistances for each instance that took hold, so it was not long before Jason had his full suite of afflictions on the lizard. He could have unleashed Colin, but kept the leeches in reserve, in case there was a third monster, waiting to pounce.

Once his afflictions were locked in, Jason used his punishment spell. It inflicted damage for each affliction of certain types on the target, which were rapidly stacking up, but the bronze-rank monster was able to sustain that much from Jason’s iron-rank spell. He couldn’t use it again for half a minute, so he moved on to the second monster while Sophie continued to keep the first one busy.

Jason added his efforts to the others. His afflictions were soon locked in and the fight became a matter of time. He used his punishment spell every time it became available, causing more and more of the monster’s flesh to die as the afflictions mounted. In the end, he finished the monsters, one after the other, with his transcendent damage execute power.

The team were tired, stamina exhausted and mana spent. Against bronze-rank monsters, even when the fight went their way at every stage, the battle was a slog. Clive and Belinda had learned that endurance was the key when their combined efforts, while hurting the monster, weren't enough to take it down before they were reduced to ineffectually firing wands from the back.

"You did adequately," Henrietta told them in the aftermath. "Don't think things will always go that well, though. There will be hard fights ahead and you will be challenged. When I step in to save you, chances are you will have been hurt already. Badly hurt. You all need to be ready for that."

The team returned to the village to notify them they could remove the detour signs from the coast road. The team then moved on quickly as the graciousness of the villagers was appreciated, but also time-consuming.

Riding away, Sophie looked back at the village, then locked a thoughtful gaze on Asano's back.

"What is it?" Belinda asked quietly.

"He didn't tell them," Sophie said.

"Didn't tell who what?"

"Asano," Sophie said. "They don't know he's the one who killed the monster that destroyed their village, and he didn't tell them."