

Chapter 241

It's Very Complicated and You All Need to Go Away

The five storey mass of webbing was stretched between two buildings, completely blocking the street.

"I think I've spotted the blood weaver's nest," Neil said.

"Good eyes," Sophie said. "Maybe you should be the one scouting."

"It's a gift," Neil said.

"Has anyone else noticed Neil starting to take on some of Jason's more immodest traits?" Humphrey asked, leaving everyone laughing but for an affronted Jason and an aghast Neil.

"You really think our friendly neighbourhood spider monster's done a runner?" Jason asked Clive.

"This place is desolate, now," Clive said. "It could be baiting us in again, but into what? If it had something that could take us down, it wouldn't have wasted its army. The creature itself is silver rank, but the main source of its power is the minions it creates. It's fairly fast and fairly strong. It can use webs, obviously, and heals rapidly, especially if it has minions to feed on. Actually fighting it, though? Worlds apart from the elemental tyrant we saw in the waterfall village."

"The danger of blood weavers is their minions and the fact that failing to take one down means joining them," Humphrey said. "We've dealt with the main threat already."

"Exactly," Clive said. "Once the minions are dealt with, a decent bronze rank team should have little problem. The things you have to watch for are the healing and the webs. For the webs, you just have to be careful. For the healing, you need to stop it from feeding and be able to pile on enough damage."

"If that thing is in there," Humphrey said, "we'll be ready. Neil, you're our first line of defence against the webs; hold your shields for anyone with a web coming their way. As for putting on damage and taking off healing, Jason will be doing both. The rest of us are there to give them an easier job, and cut loose anyone who does get webbed up."

"Are we actually going in there?" Belinda asked.

"We are," Humphrey said.

"Won't it be all sticky?" Sophie asked.

"No," Clive said. "Spider monsters who make webs like this can produce two kinds of silk. One is a tool and a weapon. It's sticky and dangerous, but only lasts a short time. Remember the remnants we first found in the jungle. It had degraded relatively quickly,

which is no way to make a home. The other stuff is stronger and most resistant to the elements. It's also hard to build structures from a sticky substance. A nest like this is literally woven from silk. It's why many monsters who make nests like this are called weavers."

The nest turned out to be a network of tunnels that were quite wide, to accommodate the blood weaver itself, which was quite large. It meant the team didn't feel constricted as they worked their way up through the spiral tunnels that ascended throughout. The tunnels led them to chambers, some of which were unclear as to purpose, while others were unpleasantly obvious. The blood weaver's grisly larder was the most unpleasant sight Jason had encountered since the cannibal kitchen that was his introduction to the horrors his new world could hold.

The team searched the entire place, finding neither monster nor treasure. When they had thorough explored the nest they moved from its highest reaches to the roof of one of the buildings to which it was anchored.

"I suppose this means we always need to keep an eye out," Belinda said. "Not that we weren't already."

"Yes," Clive agreed. "It's silver rank, and a stealth-type monster, so it can hide its aura from us. Makes it hard to see it coming. That said, Monsters don't tend to be vengeful, the way people are. They don't have pride to injure. Most likely, the blood weaver will find some far corner of the city and set itself up all over again. It's smart enough to prepare for if we find it again, and also smart enough to not seek us out."

"So what do we do about it?" Neil asked. "Do we hunt it, before it establishes itself again?"

"We didn't come here to kill a blood weaver," Humphrey said. "It was the obstacle, not the objective."

"The blood weaver can prepare all it likes," Jason said. "Time is not on its side. Monsters don't grow stronger, so the most it can do is collect another set of minions, while we're all shooting up like rockets in this place."

"What are rockets?" Sophie asked.

"They're things that go up," Jason said. "Really, really up. You can send people to the moon with them."

"I heard about diamond rankers who teleported to the moons," Clive said. "No idea if its true. How could people get to the moon in your world if they don't have magic?"

"With rockets," Jason said.

"How do they work?" Clive asked.

“Well, you now how when there’s an explosion, stuff flies way?”

“Of course,” Clive said.

“It’s basically that, but you need to be very careful.”

“It’s sounds like you don’t really understand how it works,” Neil said.

“I don’t know much,” Jason admitted. “Also, I’m pretty sure most of what I do know is wrong. Also, this may fall under stuff Knowledge doesn’t want me talking about. When I take a bribe, I stay bribed. That’s how integrity works.”

“That’s not how integrity works!” Humphrey said, the team laughing at his exasperation. The team had felt the confrontation with the silver rank monster and her army of vampire monsters looming over them as they frenetically trained. Now the fighting was done, at least for now, the tension was draining away like a sluice gate had been opened.

“What now?” Sophie asked.

“The cultist camp,” Clive said firmly.

“Our best bet now is that they were set up here, in the middle of the city, when the blood weaver either spawned or wandered in. Whatever tools they used for whatever they did should be there.”

“The most intact buildings were directly around the central square,” Humphrey said. “Unless the destruction of the tower significantly damaged them, that would be my guess for where they chose to try and wait out whatever the Builder’s plans for this place are.”

“I just hope the purpose for the magic going up isn’t to wake up those giant golems,” Neil said.

“I think we can all get on board with that,” Humphrey said. “The first thing we’ll do is head to the old tower and survey the destruction. We can reassess from there.”

“What about these magic fragments we’ve been seeing?” Neil asked.

“Everything I’ve been able to determine supports Shade’s postulation,” Clive said. “I think they’re just fragments of destroyed treasure. I wouldn’t go eating them, but they shouldn’t pose us any threat.”

“I’m not sure I want to rely on ‘shouldn’t,’” Neil said.

Moving to the very middle of the city, it became clear that the Order of the Reaper’s testing tower had self-destructed in extremely violent fashion. Huge chunks of rubble were laying in the street under the impact marks of the walls they had crashed into. When they reached the square itself, the wide tower had been replaced with a crater.

The buildings around the square looked like they had been shelled. The intact facades the team remembered were riddled with holes, many having collapsed in their entirety, exposing the interiors.

“Probably not in there,” Neil said.

On top of the destruction, the treasure fragments radiating magic were so thick as to be overlapping. It still presented no discernable threat, but was wearying to magic senses, like strobing rainbow lights.

Leaving the buildings closest to the centre behind, the team went looking for those that had retained their integrity and weren't painted in distracting magical shards. They had to be thorough and didn't want to risk splitting up, so it took a day and a half of rigorous searching before they found where the cultists had been holed up. It was two streets back from the central square, conveniently marked by residual webs from what was presumably the battle where the cultists had fallen prey to the blood weaver.

The cultists had made a relatively comfortable home for themselves, with chairs, beds, even rugs. There was a large and well-stocked bookshelf, although Clive snorted derisively on browsing through it.

“I think these guys shared your taste in literature, Soph,” Belinda said, also perusing the tomes. “It looks like there's a lot of 'glistening thighs' books here.”

“Glistening thighs?” Neil asked.

“You know,” Belinda said. “Lots of heaving bosoms and men who don't care what anyone thinks about them yet still have their chests immaculately waxed.”

“That's quite enough,” Sophie said, looking embarrassed.

“She's even been thinking about writing her own.”

“I have not!”

“It's about a woman born into poor circumstances pursued by dastardly men for her beauty, until she's rescued by a dashing man who leads her on a life of adventure.”

“She is completely make this up,” Sophie insisted.

“Jason, do you wax your chest?”

“Shut up, Lindy!”

“I don't wax it,” Jason said. “If I did, I'd use a Jory depilatory cream, not wax. I only ranked-up the other day, though, so I'm mostly hairless right now, anyway.”

“We really need to stop talking about this,” Sophie said.

“You shouldn't be ashamed of what you like to read,” Jason said. “So long as you enjoy it, that's what matters.”

Sophie put her face in her hands and let out a sobbing groan.

Clive found what he was looking for in the basement of the building. The team had initially gone straight to the upper floor where the blood weaver seemed to have burst in, before searching the rest of the building more methodically.

“They must have brought in this with that specialty dimensional bag we found upstairs,” Clive said.

Iron rank dimensional bags had a per-item volume limit slightly smaller than that of an iron-rank personal space power. To store the huge metal plate they had found set into the floor would have required a specialty bag designed to hold that item and that item alone. It was a massive, heavy plate of solid brass. Set into it was an excruciatingly complex magical diagram in silver, along with runes and sigils made of gemstones in a variety of vibrant colours.

The walls of the basement also had magical circles set into them, these ones carved directly from the brick and filled with some kind of blue-tinted plaster. These were much cruder efforts than the delicate, elegant workmanship of the plate.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked.

“I don’t know,” Clive said, lightly, reverently brushing his fingers over it.

“Should you be touching it?” Jason asked. To his magical senses, the plate was even more sophisticated than its appearance suggested.

“It won’t affect us,” Clive said. “This is some kind of astral magic. Whatever it’s doing is working directly with the astral, not affecting the physical realm at all. You could do a dance on top of it and it wouldn’t care.”

“These magic diagrams on the walls are from simple masking rituals,” Belinda said.

“You’re right,” Jason said. “This looks exactly like I would have done when all I had was some skill book knowledge. I’m willing to bet that one of the cultists was loaded up with enough skill book knowledge to set up that big plate to do its thing and throw up some rituals to hide the plate’s magic.”

“To keep passing monsters from coming to investigate,” Belinda said.

“Exactly,” Jason said. “Does that sound right, Clive?”

“Hmn?”

Clive looked up, distracted. “What?”

“Does that sound right?” Jason repeated.

“No idea,” Clive said. “This is going to take me a while to figure out. Jason, take out those books on astral magic that Knowledge gave you, then you should all just go upstairs and settle in. It’s very complicated and you all need to go away. I’ll probably call you and

Belinda down, Jason, to help me go through the books when I have a better idea of what we're dealing with. You've both got at least some training, so I should be able to get some use out of you."

"You make us sound like a Christmas present from an inattentive aunt," Jason said.

"What's Christmas?" Clive asked.

"Never mind," Jason said. He took a bookcase from his inventory, which he had purchased to store everything Knowledge had given him.

"Just make sure you don't forget to eat again," Jason told Clive.

"Did Clive come up to sleep?" Humphrey asked in the morning. The cloud house was set up on the roof of the building, where it had taken the form of an extra storey. It blended right in, even to the point of incorporating the stairwell that led up to the roof as the point of ingress.

"No," Belinda. "Didn't you go check on him in the night, Jason?"

"He shooed me away," Jason said. "I'm going to check on him again, now."

"We should all go down," Humphrey said.

"Definitely not," Jason said. He made his way downstairs, where Clive had set up a table covered in open books and three chalkboards on standing frames.

"Clive..."

"Go away!"

A dishevelled Clive came up into the cloud house and stared around at the team, wild-eyed.

"You and you," he said pointing at Jason and Belinda. "Read this."

He shoved a piece of paper into Belinda's hand it was smeared with chalk dust, but the pencilled writing was as neat as Clive was messy. Jason stood next to Belinda and she held it out so they could read it together. Of the team, they were the only other ones who had studied magical theory. Neil had studied some practical healing rituals but that was the extent of it.

"Well?" Clive asked Belinda and Jason.

"Well, what?" Jason asked.

"Did you understand it?" Clive demanded.

"I did," Belinda said.

"Yeah," Jason agreed.

"Explain it to me," Clive said.

“Mate, if you can’t understand it, I think we might have been very wrong about us understanding it.”

“No!” Clive said and let out a frustrated growl. “Of course I understand it. I wrote it! I need to make sure you understand it.”

“It’s about astral resonance,” Belinda said.

“The idea is to set up a means of remote matching,” Jason added.

“Yes!” Clive said triumphantly. “You two, come with me. I need you to help me go through the books.”

“What you need,” Jason said, “is to get some sleep. You’re looking a bit manic, there, mate.”

“What? No. Shut up! Just come with me.”

“Clive,” Jason said. “Do you remember what you told me about ritual magic? To do it right, not do it fast?”

“Clearly, I wasn’t thinking straight. You can just do it right and fast, now come on.”

“Clive,” Humphrey said firmly. “You are going to get some sleep if I have to knock you out.”

“That’s not really sleep,” Clive said. “Being unconscious is a different-”

“Then you’d best quietly take yourself to bed, then,” Humphrey said. “Because asleep or unconscious, you’re about to get laid out.”

Clive snarled like an animal.

“Fine,” he conceded, then turned back to Belinda and Jason. “You two, get working on those books. Anything that pertains to what’s on that paper I gave you, make a note of book and page, then keep going.”

Clive looked around.

“Where are the bedrooms?”

Neil pointed, not wanting to say anything to aggressive, sleep-addled Clive.

“Not that I’m going to get any sleep,” Clive muttered angrily as he walked off. “My mind racing in a thousand directions. I’ll just be laying there, accomplishing nothing but a magnificent waste of time.”

Moments after settling into the soft embrace of a cloud bed, he was asleep.