

Chapter 96: You Don't Get a Third

Jason's path back to the city was a long one. The lumber region was on the far side of the delta and he had Dean alongside him, as well as the suppression-collared and manacled Jerrick shuffling behind. Jason considered commandeering a cart from Clementson but decided he'd rather walk than deal with the heidel he would need to pull it. As for Clementson himself, Jason left him behind. Another person would be unmanageable, and Clementson wasn't going anywhere. Without his lumber mill, he was nothing

Jerrick made some trouble early in the journey. On the first day, he tried to sneak-attack Jason from behind, but without his powers, he quickly came to regret it. The first night he tried to sneak out the inn, which he came to regret far more. Jason had not used his familiar when fighting Jerrick, and Jerrick was unaware Jason had left bunches of Team Colin suckered to the wall above every exit.

Jason also slowed their progress with his usual routine of healing people in the towns and villages they passed through. He also took some notices from the adventure boards if anything seemed like a threat.

Leaving Jerrick in the middle of a leech circle, Jason took Dean to show him what actual adventurers did. His fergax summon was a powerful, but singular threat. Jason quickly identified Dean's problem while on a notice for a small humanoid monster called a pixelax. Quick creatures with emaciated limbs and long, sharp fingers, they were around a metre tall and appeared in large groups. They swarmed over Dean's summon, which occupied many of them, but others made straight for Dean, who started to panic.

Jason swept in to handle them, sword flashing. His afflictions were of little point against the frail monsters, so he didn't bother. Their pointed fingers made little headway against his armour and they fell to a well-placed sword stroke. Between Jason and the fergax, the pixelaxes were made short work of.

"Who names these monsters?" Jason wondered aloud as he used crystal wash to clean himself off.

"I don't know," Dean said, still shaken.

"Someone overly-enamoured with the letter X, apparently. We had a phase like that where I come from."

Dean gave Jason a strange look and Jason realised it probably didn't translate well.

"The good news," Jason said, "is that the problem keeping you from being a decent adventurer is quite evident. I know someone at the Adventure Society who can get you assigned to the right contracts to work through it. If that's still what you want."

Dean nodded, hesitant, but forcing himself to be determined.

"I can't go back to what I was doing," he said.

"Good man."

As they drew closer to the city, Jason was surprised to find church of the Healer members in multiple towns and villages. It was a pleasant surprise, letting Jason hasten his journey without leaving sick people untreated behind him. Finally, they reached Greenstone and started making their way through Old City.

"I have to assume that Clementson got word ahead to Thadwick," Jason said. "We didn't exactly make great time through the delta. You have family here in Old City, right?"

"That's right," Dean said. "We build and maintain devices that use water quintessence. It's a decent living, which is how they managed to afford a full set of essences for me."

His head fell.

"I haven't seen them in a while. I let them down pretty badly."

"Take it from someone further away from family than you can imagine," Jason said. "Don't let pride keep you away. If I leave you and Jerrick there until I sort things out, will that be alright? Can you handle him?"

"I can do that," Dean said determinedly. "We may not be one of the big-time families, but our compound is secure enough. Thadwick's people wouldn't move on it unless Thadwick himself was with them, and the whole point of him using us was to keep his hands clean."

Dean guided them through Old City toward his family's compound. They went through one of the main market districts and into a vast arcade. It had high, vaulted ceilings, stores on either side and was an obstacle course of stalls and shoppers.

That changed as a group of twelve, heavily-armed thugs started marching down the arcade, pushing over people and even small stalls that were in their path. The arcade started clearing quickly as people scattered. Seeing them coming, Jason handed Dean a recording crystal.

"Use it," he said. "We'll probably need the evidence, later."

"Evidence of what?" Dean asked as he threw the crystal up to float over his head.

"Stay here and watch everything," Jason said instead of answering and walked forward to meet the group.

One of the men was clearly the leader, walking front and centre.

“So you’re Asano,” he said. “I’m not impressed.”

Jason panned his gaze over the group. A dozen men, all with iron-rank auras. Every aura was uncontrolled, either through lack of training or a lack of aura powers altogether.

“I see some familiar faces,” he said. He spotted Dink, far less brazen than their last encounter. He was hovering at the back with the others who had slunk away after witnessing Dink’s beating at Jason’s hands.

“I’ve become a big believer in seconds chances,” Jason said. “This is yours. Leave now.”

He pointed out the ones he recognised.

“Except for you, you, you and you,” he said as he pointed each one out. “You all had your second chances. You don’t get a third.”

The leader laughed.

“Do you not see where we are?” he asked. “These are our streets. See how they all scuttled away like little bugs? That’s because they know what’s coming. Do you really think you can take us all?”

“Yes,” Jason said, his voice dismissive. “I just don’t know if I’ll be able to leave any of you alive.”

The leader laughed again.

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes,” Jason said. “Either I’m overestimating myself, or I’m not. Decide which you think it is, then act accordingly.”

“You’re relying on that rigged fight to make people scared of you,” the leader said.

Jason looked around. The skylights in the ceiling left plenty of shadowy nooks in the arcade. Even the open space had plenty of stalls and carts to cast shadows. The people were already gone.

“I hope you let me keep doing so,” Jason said. “I’d prefer that to having it based on what I do to you.”

The leader grinned and stomped the ground with his foot. Stone erupted from the ground, flying at Jason in shards. His ability to aim the power was clearly not good, most of the shards being intercepted by one of the fruit carts in between them. Gobbets of pulped fruit flew as the stone tore into the cart. Jason was unconcerned by the attack, having already dropped into a shadow on the ground.

“Where did he go?” the leader yelled, looking around. Blood from a slashed artery sprayed over them as they looked behind and realised one of their number had already

fallen. His body dropped to the ground, falling at the hands of a shadowy figure in their midst.

Spattered with the blood of their companion, the thugs were startled into a brief, but critical moment of inaction. Jason's wicked-looking red and black dagger didn't stop as he moved like a ghost, finding the back of a neck, a throat and then burying itself in the side of a head before Jason vanished into the shadow of a dropping corpse. None of the spooked, bottom-feeder adventurers reacted effectively in the few startled moments it took Jason to appear, kill and vanish. In the aftermath, some of them realised the dead were Dink and the others Jason had pointed out.

"Last chance," Jason's voice came from the darkness.

"Leave now," his voice came again, from the opposite direction.

The group looked at each other nervously and the leader slapped one across the head.

"Don't let him get to you. It's just games because he's scared to fight us straight-up!"

His own voice didn't sound completely convinced, and the others looked at the dead bodies at their feet.

"No way," one of them said and started running. There was a rip of cloth as a huge rat tail emerged from the leader's back. To Jason, watching from the shadows, it looked like the prehensile tail of the rat gorgon he had fought. It wrapped around the fleeing man's ankle, tripping him over and dragging him back to the group where the leader savagely stomped on his head.

"NOBODY RUNS," the leader announced fiercely. "Everyone their keep eyes out. He can't pick us off if we see him coming."

They all started looking around them, peering into every shadow.

"Don't forget the shadows at your feet," the leader said. "Catch him quick and you can drop him while he's disoriented from appearing."

As they watched the shadows, they neglected to realise that not every patch of darkness in the tall arcade was at ground level. None of them saw Jason floating down until Jason let his weight return, using the weight of the fall to plunge his dagger through the startled man's eye. Their leader slid off Jason's blade and dropped to the ground, dead. The others stared at the shadowy figure standing in front of them like deer in headlights. Even though he was right in front of them, out in the open, none of them made a move.

Jason looked down at the man whose head had been stomped on by the now-dead leader. He was in a very bad way, but still alive. Jason walked closer to the group, who flinched at his approach. Jason took a potion from his belt and held it out.

“Heal this one and go,” he told them, gesturing to the hurt man on the ground. The thugs looked at the potion like it was a venomous snake, but finally one of them reached out to take it. As if that movement was a starter’s pistol, the others all ran. The one who took the potion knelt down to feed it to his fallen companion. It didn’t bring about a full recovery, but with his friend’s help, he got to his feet. The thug who had taken the potion from Jason gave him a look of wariness and confusion.

“Thank you,” he said. “For the potion.”

“You won’t thank me if we meet like this again.”

The pair hurried off, one supporting the other. Soon after, Dean cautiously approached with the recording crystal still over his head. Jerrick was walking behind him.

“Give me that,” Jason said and Dean nervously took down the recording crystal and handed it over. Four of the five dead men on the ground had been beside Dean himself when they first confronted Jason. If Thadwick hadn’t needed Dean for his summoning power, and if Jason hadn’t needed Dean to use against Thadwick, then Dean himself could have easily been one of those bodies.

Jason looked at Jerrick, who was also staring down at the bodies.

“You’ve had your two chances,” Jason told him. “If you and I run into each other again, after all this is done, I hope you’ll be smart enough to run.”

“Are these all adventurers?” Jason asked.

“What?” Dean asked, looking up from the corpses, distracted. “Oh, uh, yes. Those who couldn’t pass the assessment themselves, Thadwick had slipped through. That was a while ago, though. It’s harder since the new director came in.”

Jason started shuffling through the pockets of the fallen, eventually digging out their Adventure Society badges.

“I’m a little surprised they carried them,” Jason said. “It’s not like they do any adventuring.”

“We all carry them,” Dean said. “It gives you some weight to throw around.”

Standing up, Jason looked around the arcade.

“What’s the local civic authority here?” he asked.

“The what?” Dean asked.

“Who’s in charge here,” Jason said. “Who do we tell about the killings?”

“This is Dorgan’s territory,” Dean said.

“Dorgan? He’s one of those three crime lords, right?”

“The Big Three,” Dean said. “They run Old City because people from the Island don’t care so long as the money keeps coming.”

“What about some kind of local government authority?” Jason asked.

“There’s the Duke’s guard,” Dean said, “but they only come over if there’s some kind of threat to Island interests. The Big Three makes sure there isn’t.”

“Five dead adventurers is a long way from nothing, though,” Jason said. “The Adventure Society will be looking into it.”

“So what do we do now?” Dean asked.

“Stick to the plan,” Jason said. “Get you to your family and I get things settled. This is just one more thing to settle.”