

Chapter 70:

Rewards

The village was located right on the water. The monster sensed a potential meal out in the open and burst from the water to scramble in the direction of Clive and Jason. It looked like a large, six-legged crocodile. Clive, still sitting on the tortoise, pointed at the ground in the path of the rushing monster. He quickly chanted a spell.

“Emplace the mark of power.”

A rune appeared on the ground, glowing red. The monster ran straight over it and Clive snapped his fingers. The rune exploded, sending ruptured gobbets of monster raining through the village. Jason’s cloak appeared to shield him from the monster remains.

“Mind if I loot?” Jason asked.

Clive looked at the liberal spattering of monster on his clothes, wiping it off his face.

“Sure,” he said, grimacing at the mess.

Jason poked at a chunk of flesh.

➤ Would you like to loot [Mangrove Snatcher]?

Jason held his nose as the flesh dissolved off his cloak and off of Clive, who was coughing and spluttering.

“I can’t believe you,” Jason asked, giving Clive a flat look.

“You mean the mess?” Clive asked. “It was coming right at us.”

“No, I don’t mean the mess,” Jason said and pointing at the small crater left by Clive’s spell. “If you can do that, why don’t you hunt monsters?”

“I’m really more of a scholar.”

“I hate to break it to you, Clive, but whatever you call someone with magic land mines, it isn’t a scholar.”

“Land mines?” Clive asked.

Jason groaned.

“Let’s just go to the next village.”

Quest: [Contract: Mangrove Snatcher]

- Objective complete: Eliminate the mangrove snatcher threat to the four villages 1/1.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
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"That was the last one," Jason said.

In the end, Jason was the one who ended up playing bait. When not triggered immediately, Clive's rune trap faded away until only special senses could locate it. This made the enthusiastically predatory monsters easy to handle. Jason just stood there as they charged at him, only to die at a snap of Clive's fingers.

"It only goes off when you trigger it?" Jason asked.

"I can set it to trigger when something steps on it, too," Clive said. "That seems like it could be dangerous, though."

"You're worried about stumbling onto it yourself?" Jason asked.

"My vision power lets me see magic," Clive said. "I can spot it even when it's hidden. The same doesn't go for anyone I'm working with, though."

"It's a good power," Jason said.

"It has its weaknesses," Clive said. "It takes a few moments to activate and glows bright red when I cast it. Anything other than dumb monsters know to get out of the way."

"Good news," Jason said. "Fighting dumb monsters is most of what adventurers do."

"I will admit to not having a terrible time," Clive said, "the smell of dissolving monsters, aside. I'm hardly going to start making regular trips to the jobs hall, but if you need a ride out here again, then come find me."

"I just might do that," Jason said. "Do you have a bag or something?"

"What for?" Clive asked.

"I was rewarded a hundred coins for the quest," Jason said. "You did all the work, so you should get the pay."

"That's your ability," Clive said. "You keep it."

"No dice, mate," Jason said. "You do the work, you get the pay."

"Half then," Clive said, taking a money pouch from his dimensional space. "Use the rest to restock your potion supply."

"Sounds fair," Jason said. He withdrew seventy coins from his inventory and dropped them into Clive's bag.

"I put in half of what I took from the monsters, too."

Their task complete, they used the airboat to notify the villages that the threat had passed. Clive then directed the boat back in the direction of Greenstone.

"Hey," Jason called out over the noise of the airboat. "Didn't you say something about knowing a good place for dumpling soup?"

"Yes," Clive called back. "Yes, I did."

The airboat emerged from the delta waterways in the late afternoon, approaching the Old City Water Gate. A distributary running out of the delta led into Old City's canal district, through a massive, portcullised arch. The canal docking area was a bustle of activity. Clive drove their airboat right into a building, which was set up like a submarine dock. It belonged to the Magic Society and was quiet compared to the brisk goings-on of the canal docks outside.

"I need to get back to the Magic Society campus," Clive said. "I'm going to have so much to do."

Their trip had involved navigating deep into the delta, checking on all the villages, going through them to kill the monsters, going around again to give the all-clear, then finally come back. By the time they arrived back in Greenstone, they had been gone for more than half a week. When he first decided to drag Clive along, Jason had expected him to balk at the rough delta accommodations. He hadn't expected Clive to have grown up in such conditions.

"I'll go make the report to the Adventure Society," Jason said. "You should be able to drop by the jobs hall anytime and collect your share of the reward."

Clive requisitioned a small, magic-driven carriage from the Magic Society to take them back to the Island, stopping at the Magic Society campus.

"Lunch tomorrow?" Jason asked as they parted ways.

"Dumpling soup," Clive said with a wave.

Since Jason had started taking jobs at the contract hall, Rufus, Gary and Farrah had been increasingly busy. They each had their own projects, and in-between they were taking bronze-rank contracts from the jobs hall. One of their key reasons for coming to Greenstone was the chance for some independence, after all. Between the Vane Estate contract going wrong and Jason's training, their own adventuring had moved down the list. Now Jason was a full-fledged adventurer, they were back to adventuring themselves.

While they were all busy, Jason was seeing a lot less of the trio. He was unsurprised, then, that evening found him alone in his room at the inn. He decided to go out and see if there was anything on at the concert hall, seeing as it was so close.

Although there wasn't anything on the scale of the grand magical symphony, there was a string section recital taking place. He thought it might be interesting to see it from the main floor, given that he usually watched performances from the Geller's private viewing box. He was looking for a ticket box when Cassandra Mercer had spotted him wandering about.

"Mr Asano," she called out as she approached.

"Miss Mercer," Jason said. "Fancy meeting you here."

"You seem a little lost," she said.

"Well, I've never actually purchased a ticket before. I've been meaning to sign on to the patronage program with the Musical Society, but I've been a bit busy."

"The life of a new adventurer," she said.

"Mostly," Jason said. "I did spend the afternoon working in a dumpling restaurant."

"You got a job in a dumpling restaurant?" she asked incredulously.

"I didn't get a job there," Jason said. "I just worked in the kitchen for the afternoon. I wanted to learn to make dumplings with local ingredients."

Cassandra inviting him to view the recital from the Mercer family's private box.

"Thadwick won't be there, will he?"

"Thadwick treats culture like catching a cold," Cassandra said. "You can't always avoid it, but you can take precautions."

Jason laughed. Cassandra explained the reason Jason hadn't found the ticket box was that it was on the other side of the building. He had been looking where he usually entered, which he discovered was for patrons, private box holder and their guests.

The patron lounge was a place for concertgoers to engage socially before the performance and during intervals. They took drinks from the long bar and sat down in a pair of comfortable seats. Jason had a tall glass filled with rainbow layers of liqueur, while Cassandra took a neat measure of amber spirits.

Jason wasn't used to drawing a lot of attention at such events. He was usually an adjunct to groups with Rufus and Danielle Geller, who were much more interesting to high-society mavens. Being the solitary companion to Cassandra Mercer proved very different.

"How is it that you were having an evening out unaccompanied?" Jason asked. "I have to imagine people falling over themselves to be in your company."

"There's a difference between company and engaging company," she told him. "The men in this town are a little simple for my taste."

"You like a sophisticated gentleman," Jason said.

"Sophisticated is good," Cassandra said. "Complicated is better. As for the gentleman part, I can take it or leave it. What about you, Mr Asano? What are you looking for in a woman?"

"Evil genius," Jason said casually.

"Evil genius?" she asked, eyebrows raised.

"Why not?" Jason asked. "Smart, confident, assertive, driven. What's not to like?"

"The evil?" Cassandra ventured.

"That could be a problem long-term," Jason acknowledged. "Maybe what I need is a naughty genius."

He thought it over for a moment as an impish grin took over his face.

"Yeah," he said, voice purring. "That sounds exactly right."

As they continued to chat, several people attempted to join their conversation, usually young men. Jason admired Cassandra's ability to send them off with diplomacy and tact.

"You're very good with people," he complimented.

"You are as well," she said.

"No," Jason said. "I'm good *at* people; there's a difference. Usually, in how angry they get once they realise what just happened."

She laughed.

"Is something odd going on this evening?" Jason asked, looking around the room.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"There's a lot of adventurers here."

"Patronage isn't cheap," Cassandra said. "People of means tend to be essence users."

"I don't mean the attendees," Jason said. "There are people in the shadows."

He nudged his head in various directions, pointing out the people discreetly placed around the room. Cassandra frowned at she let him lead her gaze.

"I didn't notice at all," she said, with self-recrimination. "Perhaps I rely too much on my aura sense. All these essences users are aura camouflage."

"I wonder what they're up to," Jason said.

"Oh," Cassandra said, realisation dawning on her face. "They must be here for the open contract."

"There's an open contract?" Jason asked. "I must have missed it while I was out in the delta."

"Yes, there's actually been some excitement. Two rather brazen robberies."

"Robberies?"

“Yes. The first was in the theatre district. Someone snatched a rather valuable piece of jewellery right off the neck of someone attending a play, then made a run for it. It was some cousin of the Duke of Greenstone, no less.”

“That’s certainly bold.”

“That’s only the beginning,” she said. “A man was attacked right here at the concert hall. He was out on a balcony during the interval when he was attacked and robbed of all his valuables. I know the man in question and he rather had it coming, but still.”

“The same thief?” Jason asked.

“So it would seem,” Cassandra said. “In both cases, it was a woman dressed all in black. The interesting part is that, given the people involved, they were able to get a sense of her aura. She only has a single essence, yet managed to escape both times.”

“That seems wildly reckless,” Jason said. “I can’t imagine the reward to be commensurate to that kind of risk.”

“It certainly does raise questions,” Cassandra said. “The Duke of Greenstone had the Adventure Society put out an open contract for her capture, but the Adventure Society director restricted it to iron rank.”

“Why?” Jason asked.

“It’s the long-standing policy of the Society to send appropriate measures to deal with appropriate problems, and it is one person with only a single essence. That’s a widespread policy, not just here in Greenstone. Of course, the local powers have never had much time for Adventure Society strictures, and have been vocal in their displeasure. They don’t like that the director worked her way up from poverty instead of coming from the established families. They’ve also learned that pushing her does not tend to go well.”

“I see,” Jason said.

“Have you met Elspeth Arella, yet?” Cassandra asked.

“I have,” Jason said. “In fact, it was just before I met you.”

Lucian Lamprey stormed through the grounds of Clarissa Ventress’ estate. The silver-ranked Director of the Magic Society practically blasted away her guards with the power of his aura, using it to announcing his arrival. Ventress came out to meet him in the garden, sending her people off with a gesture. She grimaced as she fell under the suppression of his aura.

“To what do I owe the pleasure, Director Lamprey?” she asked, voice strained.

“She’s meant to get caught,” Lamprey said, “not cause a huge ruckus and get away.”

“Director, I can assure you that this is the way that meets both our needs.”

“Do you realise how many eyes are on this now?” he asked.

“With respect, director, I think you may be missing the point,” she said. “You need to start attending more social events.”

“You want me to catch her myself?”

“No, Director. But given your widely-known patronage of the Fortress and its fighting arena, you would, of course, recognise her aura. Should she make an appearance at an event you attend, of course, a civic-minded gentleman like yourself would reveal her identity. After that, the hunt begins and you have a seamless pretext for taking an interest in subsequent legal proceedings.”

Lucian frowned as he thought it over. Ventress was visibly relieved as his aura retracted.

“Where is she hitting next?” Lamprey asked.

“Even I don’t know that,” Ventress said. “Keeping each element isolated allows us to control the information. As you said, there are many eyes on this.”

Lamprey looked dissatisfied but gave a reluctant nod.

“My patience is not infinite, Ventress.”

“But it will be rewarded, Director.”

Lamprey departed, leaving Ventress alone in the garden. Fury filled her face and she spat at a bush which withered and blackened, letting off an acrid smoke.

“Darnell!” she called out, and her leonid body came quickly.

“Belinda and Sophie,” Ventress said venomously. “Where are they?”

“After the last time you called them in, they holed up somewhere,” Darnell told her. “If you made it known their protection was withdrawn, they’d be flushed out quickly enough.”

“No,” Ventress said, regaining her usual composure. “Make inquiries, but keep it discreet. So long as they get caught, everything works out.”

“What if they tell the authorities that you were behind it all?”

“Lamprey will keep a lid on that,” Ventress said. “So long as he gets what he wants, he’ll want to make use of us again. His backing will make us untouchable in Old City.”