

Chapter 602

El Demonio Que Hace Trofeos de los Hombres

The adventuring teams led by Rangel and Tellez were in dense jungle. With eleven members in the combined group, it was necessary to cut a path, but magic was more than up to the task. One of Rangel's team members, Barrera, had been doing so with a conjured blade-whip that made short work of anything from thick scrub to entire trees.

Sunlight speckled in through the canopy above, vesting the two teams in false twilight as they stopped to argue over their current endeavour. Both teams had turned on a member of Tellez's team, Escamilla, when Barrera was suddenly hauled into the canopy, screaming. He was held in place by a swarm of shadowy arms, but they were more numerous than strong. Barrera was wrenching himself free, despite more arms emerging to snatch at him.

Barrera's panicked screaming turned into more of an intermittent yell until he finally yanked himself free and dropped to the ground. The others saw that he had wounds from a weapon scored into his back, sliced into the weaker fabric around the stiffer panels of his armour. The cuts were shallow, to the point that the natural recovery of a silver ranker should have closed them, but they were freely bleeding too-dark blood.

"Poison," Rangel said bitterly. "Carilo, cleanse him."

When no answer came, he looked around.

"Carilo?"

The silence magic that had been on the throwing dart that struck Carilo was not especially sophisticated. It would not prevent spell chants from working, which were about establishing a mindset in the caster, not making sounds that triggered magic. Any properly trained adventurer could cast their spells while underwater or otherwise muffled, even if that training hadn't been with a big family or fancy guild.

Casting a spell while being dragged by the face was another matter, however. Right after the very localised silence, tough straps had wrapped around his head, wet with what his sharp sense of smell identified immediately as blood. Carilo didn't panic, trying to push out with his aura senses, only to find something pushing back.

He hadn't even noticed the other aura until it started suppressing him, which was a terrifying level of control. The strength of it was no less concerning, given that he could tell it was silver rank, yet had strength more like gold. It swiftly and mercilessly crushed Carilo's aura, completely suppressing him.

Carilo felt himself being swiftly dragged into thick scrub, plants whipping at him as he was yanked across the rough jungle floor. Panic was now starting to kick in, but Carilo steeled his resolve and reached up to pry at the straps binding his head. He couldn't get them off his head entirely, but at least managed to peel them away from his eyes, restoring his sight. He grabbed at a tree, halting his unwilling passage across the ground. He was in the midst of heavy jungle growth, the canopy thick enough to turn daylight into near-dark.

Acting quickly, Carilo activated his shield ability. It was the common force barrier that would stop projectiles, magical or otherwise, along with powers that directly affected the target. Such direct powers were common among affliction specialists, and if it was Asano that attacked, it would likely be a strong counter to his abilities.

What it didn't stop were slow-moving physical objects, along with anything already in place, such as the straps around Carilo's head. He wrapped his legs around the tree he had grabbed, bracing himself against the straps still tugging at him. He then made a concerted effort to yank off the straps and they gave way, but they didn't pull away. The force yanking at them halted and they started thrashing like tentacles.

The straps looked like leather that had been saturated in blood, which started raining off the flailing tentacles in thick gobbets. The blood splashed on the rich soil, the lush jungle scrub and over Carilo himself. Each of the gobbets rapidly transformed into leeches with horrific lamprey teeth. They crawled over Carilo as he scrambled to his feet, hopping back away from the straps. It wasn't so easy, though, caught in the thick scrub, and many leeches were already burrowing into his arms, legs and torso. His healer's perception power catalogued the poisons each bite pumped into him, many of which he resisted, but fewer than he should. He suspected the aura keeping his own locked down also had some means of suppressing resistance.

Carilo was no stranger to casting spells under harsh circumstances, and though being devoured by flesh-eating leeches was harsher than most, he didn't let it distract him as he started to cast a spell that would send searing light bursting out of his body.

"Bright heart of embers, burst for—"

Because it was about the mindset, a sword passing through the back of his neck and out through his throat shouldn't, strictly speaking, disrupt the spell incantation. It was a fairly good way to distract the mind, however, and the spell failed. The magic gathered inside Carilo, ready to burst out, instead went wild in his chest. He wasn't some weak iron ranker, however, so the damage was relatively minor.

It took more than a severed spine and a miscast spell to slow down a silver ranker and Carilo didn't allow himself to be distracted for more than an admittedly critical moment.

He ignored the sword in his neck to move forward and launch a backwards kick, just a moment after the sword slid into him. He felt the kick connect, eliciting a surprised grunt from behind him, but whirling to confront his attacker, they were already gone. Disturbingly, the kick he landed had delivered some kind of retaliatory curse that was making the leech poison worse.

He knew his attacker had hidden rather than fled as Carilo's aura was still unnervingly suppressed. Having a moment to look around, he had time to consider the aura itself. It was overwhelmingly powerful and domineering; being suppressed by it felt like being in a dark room where he could only make out ominous shapes moving in the shadows. He reached up to push the sword out of his neck but it slid out on its own and Carilo spun to watch where it went, even as he cast a healing spell on himself. Even for a silver ranker, powering through a severed spine on raw willpower would only work for so long.

Trying to follow the sword to its owner was revealed as a trap as once more Carilo was attacked from behind, this time by two quick dagger slashes that penetrated his light armour's weaker areas. The cuts were light and in non-critical areas, but Carilo knew that poison didn't need them to be. His resistance to various afflictions was quite high, but his perception power showed him that these afflictions didn't care as a terrifying slate of them dug in with each attack.

Whirling around, all Carilo saw was a dark shape withdrawing into the shadows. He didn't try casting a cleanse, knowing that with the length of the chant, it would get it interrupted without his team to cover him. The same was meant to be true of an affliction specialist, but that didn't seem to matter to Asano. That was who Carilo assumed he was facing, after being swiftly layered with afflictions. Until that moment, he considered it might have been some other enemy, as he had still not gotten a clear look at them.

Carilo knew there was a clock on what was happening as his team would already be looking and the silence effect would not last long. Instead of casting a spell, he went for a potion from his belt, the vials having endured the drag across the jungle floor just fine. Belts that magically protected potions from incidental damage were amongst the most fundamental of adventuring gear.

As Carilo moved the vial towards his mouth, a shadow hand emerged from the shadows surrounding him and grabbed his arm. Many more arms shot out of the dark to wrap him up like a spider web, and while he was able to pull himself free, the vial was knocked from his hand.

As Carilo was pulling himself free, an alien figure appeared above him, hovering under the jungle canopy. It was a blue and orange eye-shaped nebula inside an otherwise

empty floating cloak. Around it floated orbs containing smaller versions of the same nebula, all of which fired blue beams that were blocked by Carilo's shield.

Six beams savaged the shield, which vacuumed Carilo's mana to maintain itself and he realised the beams were disruptive-force damage, the bane of magical barriers. Then he felt more of his mana sucked out, drained away into the shadows around him, which were indistinguishable from one another in the dark.

Carilo allowed his shield to drop, knowing that if he let his mana drain completely, he was done. To his surprise, the alien entity floating above him ceased attacking the moment the shield dropped. It turned into a cloud of blue and orange light that dashed away, vanishing into the jungle.

In the wake of its departure, Carilo finally got a good look at his enemy. Emerging from the shadows, the figure he assumed was Asano looked only vaguely like a person. It was wrapped in a starry portal, with eyes that looked like nebulas in a distant void, identical to those of the departed entity. Asano seemed unaffected by the thick scrub, as if space itself was warping around him to permit easy passage.

Carilo suspected the figure he presumed to be Asano cast a spell, unheard in the silence, as he felt more afflictions take hold. He turned to run, knowing his team was his only chance, but he found his enemy right in front of him. Then he felt the sword that had flown off come back, stabbing right back into the same wound it had left. Right after, the silence ended.

"Feed me your sins."

Carilo's perception power sensed all the affliction leave his body, only for others to take his place. Sensing their nature and knowing afflictions better than most, as a healer, these new ones were terrifying. Holy afflictions were notorious for many cleansing powers not removing them, and those that did were often slower or less effective. Carilo knew this well, the healer having such an ability himself.

Carilo couldn't bring himself to call out, too shaken as the panic that had been threatening to take hold of him finally dug its claws in. He also had a sword in his throat. Then, to his staggering surprise, the holy afflictions were drained into the sword. His perception ability briefly sensed some kind of power-suppression affliction before that ability was cut off, along with all his others.

Spent, he looked at the strange man in front of him as Asano's hand grabbed him by the face.

Escamilla was forgotten for the moment as Rangel and Tellez barked orders at their teams. While the healer from Tellez's team cleansed and healed Barrera, the others shifted from alert to battle-ready, prepping items, drawing weapons and initiating various defensive powers and buffs. They didn't hare off into the jungle looking for their missing team member, knowing full-well it could easily be a trap. They were cautious and methodical in their approach.

They were all Storm Kingdom adventurers and very familiar with the terrain around the Sea of Storms. That familiarity wasn't necessary to find the throwing dart that belonged to none of them, but it did help find a trail. Traces of blood and a disturbed patch of scrub showed the way, although it was a little worrying that none of them had heard Carilo get dragged away.

Unfortunately, hacking a passage through the jungle as they had before would make it harder to follow the trail. They were forced to push through the scrub at a more cautious speed instead of having Barrera carve a path. Even so, the jungle could only slow down the physical power of silver rankers by so much, and in a short time they found the signs of violence. It looked to have been fairly contained but there was no shortage of blood and there were signs of physical and magical combat amidst the thick scrub.

"How did we not hear this?" Rangel asked. "Tellez, do you think it was silencing magic?"

When no answer came, he looked around.

"Tellez?"