

Chapter 156: The City of Fallen Echoes

There was some pushing and jostling from the adventurers eager to pass through the aperture until a few low growls from Gary pulled the stropy ones in line. Emir stood with Gary, watching from the side as they went through, one at a time. When his team drew close to Emir, Jason greeted him.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got any insider tips, Emir?” Jason asked as they went past. This drew the attention of the adventurers around them.

“Jason,” Emir said with a wry smile. “If I had anything else to tell you, I would have told everyone. The goal to have the scythe brought to me. If it was to have the scythe brought to me by you, then you would be the only one I sent.”

“Fair enough.”

Jason had encountered two astral apace apertures before, both to the rainforest astral space that supplied water to the delta, along with many of the desert’s oases. Those had been shimmering blue, floating unattached as if not really connected to the world. As he got a look at this astral gate aperture, it was very different. It was contained within an archway the size of large double doors. The archway was made of stone, a single piece with the black, smooth gloss of polished obsidian. Unlike the buildings around it, centuries of submersion had done nothing to mar its surface or dim its lustre. The aperture itself, within the archway, held a strange darkness that almost seemed to have substance, devouring the light around it.

“Is it just me,” Neil said, “or does anyone else think that looks like Jason’s cloak?”

Jason dimmed the stars on his cloak down to nothing. The result was a void draped around him that, as Neil suggested, looked very much like the dark aperture before them.

“It does,” Clive said. “My guess would be a dark essence ability was used as the foundation for this archway, likely even the-”

“We should keep it moving,” Humphrey said, stopping Clive before his fascination overcame his awareness of the situation. This got a look of gratitude from the member of Emir’s staff standing next to the aperture. His task was to keep things moving but he also didn’t want to annoy people his boss obviously thought highly of.

Humphrey stepped up to the aperture. “See you on the other side,” he told the others and stepped through. Like Humphrey, it was not a first time entering an astral space for Neil and he followed without hesitation. Jason prompted Clive through next, not wanting to leave him to his curiosity. Sophie paused in front of the aperture, reluctance and uncertainty saturating her body language.

“Are we sure that thing isn’t just devouring people?” she asked. “It kind of looks like it’s devouring people.”

She was hardly the first adventurer to hesitate when looking at the lightless void of the aperture. Jason gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder, stepping past her.

“No one is going to push you,” he said. “If you don’t want to do this, go back with Emir and we’ll see you in a few weeks.”

Jason paused in front of the aperture himself, an anticipatory grin crossing his face before he stepped through.

“Miss Wexler,” the staff member said. “I’ll need you to either go through or move out of the way.”

Sophie looked at him, nodded to herself and held her breath as she stepped through the portal.

Different modes of teleportation had different feels to them. The feel of travelling through the portals created by Hester felt different to Jason’s own ability. It, in turn, felt different again to Danielle Geller’s ordinary teleport power. She had the same one as her son, but her higher-rank version allowed her to take more people. She would sometimes teleport around with the Geller family teams, including Humphrey’s, to help them acclimatise themselves to such abilities.

These benefits were not available to everyone, as evidenced by the state of people Jason found when he emerged from a dark archway, identical to the one he had stepped into. They ranged from looking slightly peaky to being on hands and knees, throwing up. Jason had no such issues.

Ability: Astral Affinity

- Increased resistance to dimension effects and astral forces. Dimension abilities have increased effect and transcendent damage is increased.

His racial gift made him more tolerant to the effects of teleportation but, more than that, the sensation of going through the portal had been incredibly familiar. Travelling through the dark aperture had felt exactly like using his shadow teleport.

As Jason emerged, system messages immediately started popping up. He dismissed them to the periphery of his vision so he could take a look around. He started by getting out of the way before more people arrived, stepping around those loudly vomiting.

At a glance, he was on some kind of very large tower with a flat top. It was made of dark, grey brick, with lichen growing in the crevices. The archway stood right in the middle

and the tower was apparently quite tall as he could mostly see sky over the edges. A sun was high in a sky, blurred by summer haze. The air was humid and heavy, as much as the delta on its worst day. He could hear water splashing against rocks from below, the unmistakable sound of the sea. The breezeless air carried none of the ocean's salty freshness, however.

The adventurers who had already recovered from being magically transported were turning their faces to the sky or wandering over the edges to look around. Others were looking for their party members and Jason noticed that most were not finding them. Jason himself could find no trace of Humphrey, Neil or Clive. As he waited to see if Sophie would emerge after him, he took a bracelet of sandy yellow stones on a loop and slipped it over his wrist.

Item: [Oasis Bracelet] (iron rank, uncommon)

- *A bracelet that draws on the power of water quintessence to bestow the blessings of a personal oasis (accessory, bracelet).*
- **Effect:** Keeps the wearer cool and refreshed. Bracelet energy is consumed at a varying rate according to climate.
- **Effect:** Reduces incoming fire and heat damage. This rapidly consumes bracelet energy.
- **Effect:** Consume a water quintessence gem to completely refill bracelet energy.

Taking out a water quintessence gem, he touched it to the bracelet and it melted away. The yellow stones turned blue and Jason immediately felt the benefits of his magical item as the muggy and oppressive air felt suddenly cool and refreshing.

Sophie emerged from the archway just as Jason was taking a deep, satisfying breath. Looking startled, she started waving her hand in front of her like she was swiping at insects. Jason walked back over to the archway.

“Just imagine the screens moving out of the way, to the edge of your vision,” he told her. She frowned at the space in front of her.

“Why so many?” she asked as they moved out of the way for the next adventurer to appear.

“I haven't read them yet,” he told her.

She looked around.

“So this is an astral space,” she said. “Where are the others?”

“Not here,” he said. “This is only a fraction of the people who went through, so there may be other arrival locations.”

“Unless the magic void door is eating people,” she said.

“Let’s hope not,” Jason. “Take a look around?”

“It’ll get us away from all these people throwing up. What’s going on with that?”

“They can’t handle teleportation as well as us,” Jason said. “Notice all the celestines are fine. You have an ability to endure dimensional effects that I happen to share.”

“Is that we didn’t get eaten?”

“They weren’t eaten. Probably. As for whether it affected us arriving in the same place, I’m not sure.”

They walked over to the edge of the tower, which had no railing of any kind, simply ending in a precipitous edge. Their tower was huge, some twenty metres across and at least seventy high. It would have loomed over even the tallest building in Greenstone.

Looking out from the edge, the tower was located right on the coastline, with water from a seemingly boundless sea stretching out to their right. To their left was an ancient, abandoned city. It was staggeringly vast, sprawling off into the distance as far as they could see. Plant life had long ago reclaimed it, with vines crawling over the building and trees growing in the boulevards through the gaps left by broken and dislodged flagstones. Although larger than Greenstone by at least several times, it was more jungle than metropolis.

Stopping to look and listen, they heard the sounds of creatures; the warble of birds, the distant roaring of some predator, be it animal or monster. They were even able to pick out a few inhuman figures shambling and prowling through the overgrown streets.

The tower Jason and Sophie were on was not the only great tower that could be seen. Maybe twenty kilometres distant was another, also right on the waterline. They moved around the edge of the tower to get a better look at the city below.

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- [You have used a panoramic view to unveil parts of the City of Fallen Echoes map. Visit unveiled locations to add additional details.](#)
-

Other adventurers were likewise moving over to the edge. There did not appear to be any way of getting inside the tower from the roof, but some adventurers found the top of a stairwell that wound its way down the outside. Some started rushing down immediately to try and get some kind of lead on the competition. Most chose to stay and take stock. All of the teams present were missing members, it seemed, and none of them was clear on exactly what they should be doing. Sophie and Jason found their own spot, sitting on the edge with their legs dangling off.

“We should start with those messages we put aside,” Jason said, pulling the screens up out of the corner of his vision.

-
- You have entered a zone of high magical saturation. Magical manifestations will occur at an increased rate.
-

“What’s magical saturation?” Sophie asked. “Are magical manifestations good?”

“Ambient magic, the invisible magic all around us,” Jason explained, “is graded in two ways. One is magical density, which is kind of like the strength of the local magic. It determines how powerful a magic item can be and work normally and the power of rituals that can be performed. The most important effect, though, is it determines the strength of what monsters will appear. Emir said the magical density here should be the same as the world outside, so we can expect mostly iron-rank monsters, plus some bronze. Silver should be extremely rare, but a silver rank monster can linger for years before breaking down back into magic, so there may be one or two around, somewhere.”

“That’s good to know, but doesn’t actually answer my questions,” Sophie said.

“I’m providing context,” Jason said.

“You’re starting to sound like Clive.”

“Clive’s a smart guy,”

“But he also likes to waffle on. You should hear him and Belinda. It’s interminable.”

“Anyway,” Jason said, “while magical density is how strong the magic is, magic saturation of how much of it there is. If you get higher magical saturation, you get more magical manifestation. That means more essences, more awakening stones and more monsters, which is all good.”

“More monsters is good?”

“Our ability to grow stronger is reliant on throwing ourselves into challenge after challenge,” Jason said. “Here, we have all the challenge we could ask for. This is a holy land for adventurers looking to get stronger. It’s a shame, now, that we only have eighteen days.”

“Then our first step should be regrouping with the others,” Sophie said. The other messages screens stacked up were all variations on a theme.

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- Party member [Humphrey Geller] has gone out of range. Voice communication and loot sharing with out of range party members are unavailable.
-

Clive, Neil and Humphrey were all out of range, while Jason and Sophie had only been out of range for as long as Jason had been on one side of the aperture and Sophie the other.

-
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has re-entered range. Voice communication and loot sharing are restored. Voice communication and loot sharing with out of range party members are unavailable.
-

“So, how do we find them?” Sophie asked.

Jason took a furtive glance at the other adventurers. Some were huddled together, having discussions like Jason and Sophie. Others were looking to form makeshift groups after being separated from their own. Jason recognised a few faces but no one he knew well. A few people seemed to recognise him by his cloak, a couple of whom were heading in their direction.

“Jason Asano?” one of them asked.

“That’s right.”

“We’ve been separated from our group and it looks like you have been, too. You could join up with us if you like, until you find your own people.”

Jason glanced at Sophie, who gave a little head shake.

“Sorry,” Jason said. “We’ve lost people but our most mobile people are still together. We’re going to use that to cover more ground. Thank you for the offer though. It’s very kind.”

After a little more polite chatter they walked away.

“I don’t think they were being kind,” Sophie said quietly. “I think they were trying to glom onto someone they’d heard of.”

“They’re just trying to survive in a situation that’s gotten away from them,” Jason said. “You of all people should understand that.”

Sophie glanced at the other adventurers more sympathetically.

“I can see that,” she said. “You think maybe we should put a team together?”

“No,” Jason said. “I was also inclined to keep it to just us. I wasn’t lying about the speed thing, and trying to mesh a new group together in a dangerous environment could cause trouble a critical moment.”

“Just us, then,” she said. “So what are we doing?”

“Pull up the quest,” Jason said, doing the same himself.

Quest: [Legacy of the Reaper]

You have joined the mission to retrieve the Order of the Reaper's legacy.

- Objective: Pass the reaper trials 0/5
- Objective: Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes.
- Objective: Obtain [Golden Scythe of the Reaper] 0/1.
- Objective: Deliver [Golden Scythe of the Reaper] to Emir Bahadir 0/1.

- Reward: Racial gift transfiguration.

“This is the City of Fallen Echoes,” Jason said, quietly. “The objective is to get to the middle. Knowing that might be a good edge for us against other teams. It also means our team knows where to go. As long as we head for the middle, we’ll find them eventually.”

“And where is the middle exactly?” Sophie asked. “Do we just head away from the water?”

Jason pulled up his map. It was a separate ability from his party interface, which meant Sophie couldn't use it herself, but it did allow her to see it when Jason did. The corner of the map listed their location.

➤ Zone: City of Fallen Echoes (Gate Tower Three)

The map showed a perfectly circular city, surrounded by water. All but the area around one tower with a marker for Jason's position on it was veiled.

“I can't see places I haven't been on the map,” Jason said. “The centre is pretty obvious from the outline though.”

He got to his feet and Sophie did the same.

“Let's get down,” he said. “The stairs start over there.”

“Forget that,” Sophie said, walking backwards away from the edge.

“That looks suspiciously like a run-up,” Jason said.

“I won't go too hard,” she said. “You should be able to follow it you put some guts in it.”

She ran to the edge of the tower and vaulted off without hesitation. Jason watched her sail through the air plunging toward the ground until she activated her leaf on the wind ability, slowing into a gentle descent. She landed in the middle of a wide boulevard overgrown with trees that headed in the direction they would be going. Jason looked down at her and shrugged, taking his own run-up and leaping out after her.

Chapter 157:

Shade

Jason's cloak fluttered around him as he drifted to the ground.

"Clive said that some people think the powers we get are reflections of who we are," Sophie said.

"So?"

"So, floating out of the sky with an attention-grabbing cloak made out of sparkles seems very much like you."

"I can't help if I'm pretty," Jason said. "I like your new armour, by the way. It's a very 'killing things for money' kind of look. Professional."

Gilbert Bertinelli, who supplied Jason's armour dealt exclusively in men's apparel, but Jason had asked for his recommendation for someone who worked with trap weaver leather. He suggested someone who developed armour specifically for women. The result was a simple outfit with clean lines, compared to the flowing lines of Jason's combat robes.

In shades of dark grey and black, Sophie's outfit reminded Jason of combat fatigues more than anything else. It had a neat but loose fit for maximum mobility, with hardened panels over critical areas and plenty of loops and pockets for gear. Compared to the body-hugging clothes Sophie normally wore it was all business, masking her lithe body.

"I would have preferred something in white," Sophie said.

Jason acknowledged to himself that she looked exceptionally good in white, but didn't say anything. As much as the indenture contract was in practicality a fiction, he was very conscious of the men who had sought to exert power over her for their own gratification. He didn't want to be one more guy piling it on.

"So I guess we head off," Jason said.

"If those noises we're hearing are anything to go by, we'll be running into plenty of monsters. Especially if they're spawning faster because of the extra magic."

"I reckon you're right," Jason agreed. "If we come up against anything nasty, you grab its attention and I'll set up the damage. Otherwise, we take it as it comes."

"Sounds good," Sophie said. "With all these trees and broken buildings throwing shadows, this place should be a playground for you."

"If you don't mind," a voice said from behind them, "I would like to have a word before you set off."

They both turned around, startled at whoever had approached them undetected. Standing in the middle of the overgrown street was a dark figure, like a person made of the same shadow-stuff as Jason's cloak. He was a living silhouette, a person-shaped hole in the universe.

"Who are you?" Sophie asked. "What are you?"

"Why do you sound British?" Jason asked.

"I don't know what British is," the shadowy figure said.

"That's for the best," Jason said. "Don't tell them you don't have guns or they'll colonise the crap out of you."

"I lack the context to grasp the exact scenario you are positing," the figure said. "I assume you are introducing a confusing tangent to the conversation to gauge my response to an unanticipated reaction to my approach."

"Yeah, that's pretty much it. I like you, British shadow guy. You got a name?"

"I am Shade."

"That's rough," Jason said. "You're a person made of shadows and your name is Shade? That's like my name being Human."

"You are not human," Shade said.

"Yeah, but I was when I was named. I'm Jason and this is Sophie. Are you a local, Shade?"

"In a manner of speaking," Shade said. "I am the invigilator of the Legacy Trials. I will administer each of the five tests you must pass to receive the legacy of the Order of the Reaper."

"If you're running the show, why have you appeared before us?" Sophie asked.

"My nature is multifarious. I am currently appearing before every person who has entered the trial grounds. I am here to introduce you to the trials and instruct you on what you must do to pass them."

"Well that sucks," Jason said. "And here was me thinking we had a head start. Why did we not appear in the same place as our other team members, Shade?"

"There are seven gate towers. Each person that enters arrives at a random tower."

"Seven," Sophie said. "We could have been split up entirely, so it could be worse."

"I'm worried about Clive," Jason said. "Humphrey will be fine on his own and Neil is a healer, so he'll have no trouble finding some people to roam around with. Clive is a harder sell, especially with Clive as the salesman."

"There's not much we can do about it here," Sophie said. "All we can do is head for the middle and trust that he can do the same."

Jason gave a reluctant nod.

“If I may interject,” Shade said, “part of my task is to instruct you on the trials to come and what will be required of you.”

“Go ahead, Shade.”

“Thank you,” Shade said. “The legacy of the Order of the Reaper is here to be claimed. The one to do so will be the one who proves that they can embody the ideals of the Order. Courage, intellect, resolve, capability and wisdom. Over the course of five trials, you will need to demonstrate these five virtues.”

“And these trials are located in the middle of the city?” Jason asked.

“The final three are located in the heart of the city,” Shade said. “This City of Fallen Echoes is itself the second trial; the trial of capability. It constitutes the longest of the five trials and not everyone will successfully navigate the dangers therein.”

Quest: [The Second Trial]

The second of the Reaper's trials is to reach the heart of the city.

- **Objective:** Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes.
- **Reward:** Random magic item.

“The city is the second trial?” Sophie asked. “What about the first?”

“The first trial I will administer now. It is the simplest in that it cannot be failed. Instead, it is a choice that will be important once you reach the final trials.”

“It can't be failed?” Jason asked. “That seems like a gimme but I can't help thinking there's a catch.”

“The trial is simply this,” Shade said. “Do you wish to enter the second trial with wisdom or courage?”

“What's the difference?” Sophie asked.

“To enter with wisdom means you will receive two items. One will allow you to escape the trials entirely. You will not be allowed to enter again but it can extricate you from an inescapable situation. The other is a recovery item that can save you in a critical moment.”

“And courage means entering the second trial without them,” Jason said.

“Exactly so,” Shade acknowledged.

“It seems like wisdom is objectively the better choice,” Sophie said.

“That is why it is the path of wisdom,” Shade said.

“Then why would anyone choose courage?” Jason asked.

“Each of the final trials will test the virtues that have yet to be demonstrated,” Shade said. “But to reach the trials of intelligence and resolve, one must pass a trial that tests that which they did not demonstrate here, in the first trial. For those who have already proven their courage, the test of wisdom will assess their judgement. Failure means being removed from the trials, but there is no danger in it. For those who have proven their wisdom, they must face a test of courage. The test is simple but dangerous. To pass is to move on and to fail is to die.”

“So it’s a choice between safety now and danger later or safety later and danger now,” Jason said. “What can you tell us about the later trials?”

“Only that you will be informed of the nature of each trial you face, immediately before you face it. Once you have navigated the city, each future trial will be explained, after which you may choose to face the next trial or be safely removed from the trials altogether.”

“So you can tell us about the second trial now?” Sophie asked.

“I can, yes,” Shade told her. “There is no limit on time beyond the closure of the trials in eighteen days.”

“What happens if we’re still here after eighteen days?” Jason asked.

“Then you will be trapped here,” Shade said. “There are dangers in this place, of which the monsters are not the greatest. There are two larger threats to be aware of.”

“We appreciate the warning,” Jason said. “What can you tell us about them?”

“I can explain the practical dangers,” Shade said. “If you would prefer, I can explain the origins of the trials and the dangers you will face in undertaking them.”

“I’ll take some context, if you’re offering,” Jason said.

“This astral space was originally a training ground for the Order of the Reaper,” Shade explained. “You travelled here from the ruins of the Order’s final and most hidden redoubt. It was once a hidden place to instruct the Order’s initiates, turned into a final hiding place as the churches sought to purge the Order.”

“The churches purged the Order of the Reaper?” Jason said. “I found an underground fortress that had suffered some kind of attack, centuries ago. I think that belonged to the Order as well.”

“The Order did have an underground facility that was wiped out. At first, it was believed that the hidden training centre had escaped the churches’ attention after they attacked that location. The Order was betrayed, however, and the hiding place under the lake revealed. The churches came, shattered the magic domes that held back the waters and drowned all within.”

“That’s horrifying,” Jason said.

“Which churches?” Sophie asked. “It can’t have been all of them.”

“It was not,” Shade said. “The Order of the Reaper served a number of important purposes. In a world of kings and queens, leaders are chosen by blood instead of virtue. A fool or mad person can, by virtue of birthright, be given the power to consign countless lives to chaos, suffering and death. In such cases, a knife in the dark can be the deliverance of nations.”

“Royal assassins,” Jason said. “I’d say you should try democracy but the results where I come from are very mixed.”

“Though the Order remained hidden in the shadows,” Shade continued, “its function was known and accepted by the nations and organisations of the world. The Adventure Society, the Magic Society, even the churches.”

“But not all of them,” Sophie said.

“No,” Shade said. “There were two churches. One is the church of The Unliving. More than just assassins, the Order were also hunters of the undead. The peace of final rest is the Reaper’s most core principle and more necromancers fell to the Order than princes or kings.”

“The Adventure Society does that, now,” Jason said.

“In the Order’s absence, others must take up their tasks. The church of The Unliving did not act against the Order alone. There was another church that, like the Order, was inimical to the church of The Unliving. Nonetheless, they formed an unholy compact to remove what this church called the unclean methods of the Order.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Jason said. “The church of Purity?”

“It is as you say,” Shade confirmed.

“How is that church even vaguely pure?” Jason complained loudly. “They team up with the worst people they can find at the drop of a hat.”

“I do not know of what you speak,” Shade said.

“They’re at it again,” Jason said. “The church of Purity have teamed up with some interdimensional turd nugget to strip-mine astral spaces.”

“That can wait until we’re back outside,” Sophie said. “Right now, we need to focus on these trials. I assume you were working your story towards the danger you mentioned.”

“Yes,” Shade said. “When the churches discovered the training facilities beneath the lake, the last grandmaster of the Order sent all the initiates here, into the city. They then sealed the entrance, that the churches could not follow. The keys to the entrance were taken and scattered across the world. The goal was that someday, someone could prove

themselves worthy of the Order's ideals and reclaim that which was left behind. That day should now be coming soon, but if all you who have entered fail, there will be another chance."

"Oh?"

"After eighteen days, the trials will close. The keys can be used to open them again in a year, that others may try where you failed."

"What about all those initiates?" Sophie asked. "What happened to them?"

"The churches were unwilling to leave behind the threat posed by the initiates, but could not reach them in the astral space. In the early days of the Order, one of the grandmasters found this astral space. It was unstable, a proto-astral space that was as likely to dissolve into the astral as become a true realm."

"Obviously it did," Sophie said.

"The Order of the Reaper has long used such places," Shade said. "There was ancient knowledge of how to anchor such realms, provided by the Reaper itself."

"So, the Order really is connected to the great astral being," Jason said.

"It was," Shade said. "The grandmaster who built this place was akin to you, Jason Asano. Like you, he was an outworlder with the dark essence. Many of the functions of this place are based on his abilities. I was his summoned familiar, once."

"You were a familiar?" Jason asked.

"I was. Now, I am bound to this place until the trials are completed and the legacy claimed."

"He was from my world?" Jason asked.

"He was not," Shade said. "You were originally humans, which do not exist in the world he originated in."

"You didn't tell us what happened to the initiates," Sophie said.

"As I said, the churches were unwilling to leave the initiates be, but the means by which this astral space was anchored to the world left the those hunting them locked out. So the churches made a second bargain, this time with entities of the deep astral. Known as the vorger, they have the power to violate dimensional boundaries."

"Like those of an astral space," Jason said.

"Yes," Shade said. "They cannot enter a truly physical realm, but astral spaces are partly of the astral and partly of the physical. It is unknown how they lured such creatures as they are animalistic entities, acting only on primal urges. Lure them the churches did, however, and the vorger remain here to this day."

"What are these vorger, exactly?" Sophie asked.

“They are creatures intangible in nature, for they are not physical beings. They take many shapes but their nature is the same. Their touch warps flesh, twisting it into hideous new shapes.”

“That’s what happened to the initiates?” Jason asked. “They were killed by the vorger?”

“Worse,” Shade said. “The vorger do not kill. Their victims do not enjoy the sweet release of death. In what is perhaps the greatest insult to the Reaper, the initiates were warped into unaging abominations of flesh. They never die, their souls trapped inside twisted shells of rage and pain, cursed to eternal madness. They roam this place still, striking out against anything they encounter.”

“Those are the dangers you mentioned,” Jason said. “The vorger and these flesh abominations.”

“Yes.”

“What can you tell us about how to fight them?” Sophie asked.

“The vorger have no physical substance,” Shade said. “Magical weapons will have some limited effect on them but unless you find them in isolation, it will be insufficient to handle their numbers. They tend to appear in swarms and without specialised tools or abilities, they are difficult to deal with. They will warp your bodies until the city gains another flesh abomination. As you both possess an affinity for astral energy, you will be far more resistant than most, however.”

“Your abilities should work well,” Jason said to Sophie. “My sword should be effective enough as well. What about the flesh abominations, Shade?”

“If you can kill them and release their souls from torment, then that would be a mercy. My advice, however, is to avoid or escape them. Their power is at the bronze-rank level and they are no easy match. Their bodies will adapt to your attacks and defences, making them more effective and you less so, with every passing moment. If you must fight them, then I would recommend fighting one after another instead of working together. When they adapt to one form of attack they may create a weakness to another which you can exploit.”

“Thank you,” Jason said. “We’ll remember your words.”

“Then your next step is the first trial,” Shade said. “Your choices remain: courage or wisdom.”

“What do you think?” Sophie asked Jason.

“I’m thinking wisdom,” Jason said. “I feel like courage is probably the best choice for getting to the end, but as much as I would love a cloud palace, I’ll take alive and no cloud palace over dead and no cloud palace.”

“I would have thought you would have gone for courage,” Sophie said. “All the stories I’ve heard about you paint you as pretty reckless.”

“I used to be,” Jason said. “Probably still am, to be honest, but Farrah’s death brought some things home for me. Death is easy enough to find as an adventurer. I don’t need to go looking for it.”

“Alright,” Sophie said with a nod, then turned to Shade. “Two for wisdom.”

“Very well,” Shade said and raised his shadowy hands. Resting in each was a small vial and a medallion. They took them, feeling the cold of Shade’s shadowy hand as they picked up the objects.

Jason looked at the medallion first. It was made of the same glossy black stone as the archway through which they had entered the astral space and was embossed with a scythe symbol. It was small and on a cord that could be easily slipped over the neck.

Item: [Medallion of Escape] (silver rank, uncommon)

A path of escape for those with the wisdom to know when to let go (consumable, teleport).

- Effect: Project your aura into the medallion to be immediately evacuated from the astral space. Only functions within the City of Fallen Echoes.

“Project your aura into the medallion,” Jason read. “Doesn’t that mean anyone without aura control can’t use it?”

“Part of wisdom is knowing which challenges not to accept,” Shade said.

“Good thing you picked up an aura power,” Jason told Sophie. They both slipped their medallions over their necks and tucked them under their armour. They then looked at the second item, the vial.

Item: [Lesser Miracle Potion] (iron rank, legendary)

Salvation in a bottle (consumable, potion).

- Effect: Fully restore health, mana and stamina. This potion is only effective on normal and iron-rank individuals. The magic of this potion lingers in the body longer than normal potions, meaning additional recovery health and recovery items will not be effective for a longer period.

“Strewth,” Jason said. “Now, that’s a potion.”

“I didn’t realise potions like this were even possible,” Sophie said.

“Me either,” Jason said, carefully placing it into his potion belt. Like him, Sophie had an enchanted potion belt that would protect the vials from breakage unless a concerted and directed effort was made to do so.

“One last thing,” Jason said to Shade. “I don’t suppose you can tell us where our teammates are?”

“I can,” Shade said, “but I won’t.”

“That’s what I figured. We’ll see you in the middle of the city?”

“You will,” Shade said. “Good luck.”

With that, Shade vanished in a swirl of darkness.

Chapter 158: Seriously Hardcore

The monster was mostly identical to a leopard, except for the legs. They were still covered in spotted fur, like the rest of the creature, but there were eight of them, multi-jointed and emerging from the monster's side like the legs of a spider. The legs were not as good for running but it was an excellent and rapid climber. That didn't much matter when Sophie's wind blade cut half of those legs off and it tumbled to the ground where she finished it with a brutal stomp to the head.

➤ You have defeated [Spotted Tree Cat].

"Spotted tree cat," Jason said. "It lacks imagination but at least it's what it says on the tin. I was worried it would be called a spidard or something. Some of these monster names are just daft. Some of them have got people killed, I'm certain of it."

"How does a monster name get someone killed?" Sophie asked.

"Well, take sloth demons and demon sloths. Demon sloths are iron rank, strong and relatively tough, but slow. Not that hard to take down, as long as you're careful. A sloth demon is a gold-rank monster with a soporific power that cripples your speed, making you easy meat."

"I see your point," Sophie said. "You wouldn't want to get them confused."

"No, you would not. Did Humphrey get you reading the Magic Society monster records? He said he was going to."

"He did," Sophie said. "It's actually pretty interesting, learning about all the crazy stuff that's out there."

"It might seem odd to say this," Jason said, "but you don't want to be too efficient with your kills. You'll do better if you use as many of your abilities as you can."

"It's not like I won't get another chance," Sophie said. "I don't think it's even been an hour. Besides, these easy fights won't do me much good. I need something tougher, or that comes in numbers."

"That's true enough," Jason acknowledged.

He wandered over and touched the creature.

➤ Would you like to loot [Spotted Tree Cat]?

“Hold on for a second,” Sophie said, pulling off her boot and sitting it on a low, broken wall before backing off as Jason did the same. Jason mentally accepted and the creature went up in rainbow smoke, along with the muck on Sophie’s boot. There was some minor spattering on her pants and trouser legs that dissolved as well, causing Sophie to wince at the smell as Jason moved aside.

“Do you ever get used to that?” she asked.

“A little but not really,” Jason said. “On the bright side, after that you can handle pretty much anything. A fought a monster called a belch bug that has this stink that’s meant to make you vomit. Barely a stomach twitch.”

They were making their way down a wide boulevard that went in exactly the direction they wanted. There were eighteen days in which to make the most of the excellent training environment but they decided to start by making their way to the middle of the city. It gave them the best chance of finding their errant party members and they could just roam around fighting monsters from there.

The boulevard was uneven ground, the once neatly-fitted flagstones cracked, pushed up by root growth or displaced entirely by trees. It was still the most open path, though, and offered an easy passage toward the centre of the city. On either side, what had once been impressive buildings rose up, half-collapsed and covered in creepers and other growth.

“We should have a rummage through some of these buildings,” Jason said.

“What happened to going straight to the centre of the city?” Sophie asked.

“We at least have to have a bit of a look around,” Jason said. “Let’s just pick the next awesome-looking building and take a gander. Maybe we’ll find an essence or something.”

“You think?”

“Maybe,” Jason said. “In fairness, we could just as easily find one sitting in the middle of the boulevard. With the increased manifestations and this place having gone untouched for centuries, there could be a veritable hoard just waiting for us to find it.”

“Maybe we could check out one building,” she said. “What about that one?”

Most of the buildings they passed by were two or three storeys tall. The one Sophie pointed out was six, and more intact than most.

“It looks a bit fortressy,” Jason said. “Some kind of military barracks?”

The front entrance once must have been a pair of towering metal doors, but centuries of humid air had left little but rusted scraps behind. The looming doorway was large enough to wheel a siege engine through, as evidenced by the remains of just such a siege engine. It was in some kind of a marshalling courtyard beyond the huge doors, abandoned

to a state of disrepair. Now it was a pile of wooden beams, rusty metal bars and leather straps.

“That’s awesome,” Jason said, looking at it. “Also, suspicious.”

“Suspicious?”

“It may look like a dilapidated pile of junk,” he said, “but its not really dilapidated enough. That wood should have been long rotted away, and that metal might be rusty but compare it to what’s left of the doors. I’ve been on farms and seen what fifty years of abandonment does to a place. This has been here what? Ten times that, at least? In this wet climate, there shouldn’t be any of that thing left.”

“What are you thinking?” Sophie asked.

“I’m thinking you move closer, carefully. See if you can sense an aura off of it.”

Sophie did just that, approaching the large doorway. Before she could sense anything, the fallen pile of metal and wood started moving. What was little more than a pile of rotted wood, rusty metal and leather scraps started re-assembling itself into a vaguely humanoid form. It towered almost four meters high, enough that as it stood upright it became obscured as it was taller even than the huge doorway.

The construct creature was asymmetrical and looked very uncoordinated, with two arms on one side and one on the other. Of the two arms that shared the same side, one was stubby and ended in a crude, rusty claw. The other was longer but less agile, looking like a long box terminating in a rusty ball. The single arm on the other side was actually a platform for a ballista. As it stood up, they both sensed its bronze rank aura.

“Is this one of the Builder cult creations?” Sophie asked as the construct creature assembled itself.

“Unlikely,” Jason said. “It looks like it fits right in here. Probably a monster or something left behind from long ago.”

“Do we run?” Sophie asked.

“Fight,” Jason said, drawing his sword. “Something tells me that some practice fighting construct monsters will pay off, down the line.”

Knowing his core abilities would be useless against the construct creature, Jason silently thanked Gary for making his sword.

“I’ve never fought a bronze-rank monster before,” Sophie said.

“That’s why it will help us get stronger,” Jason said. “If you think you can’t handle it, just run. It doesn’t look like much of a chaser.”

The creature was ducking slowly under the doorway with jerky movements, the monster’s height too much even for the oversized gap. Jason took advantage of its

awkwardness to dash forward. It lashed out crudely with its ball arm but Jason easily dodged, raking his sword against one leg, then the other as he ducked under and passed the creature. His sword did nothing more than scratch the wood but that was all he needed.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Siege Golem].
 - [Siege Golem] is immune to curses.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.
-
- Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
-

The golem was caught halfway under the door, almost through only to start turning back after Jason. As it did, Sophie moved in to the attack, lashing out with rapid strikes.

-
- Special ability [Immortal Fist] has dealt resonating-force damage to [Siege Golem].
 - [Siege Golem] has an extremely rigid body and suffers additional damage from resonating force.
-

The fight started out strongly in Jason and Sophie's favour, catching the golem in a bad position. Neither Jason nor Sophie had any big attack powers to capitalise, however, and their iron-rank attacks had limited effect of the bronze-rank enemy. Sophie started off stronger with her resonating-force damage, while Jason's attacks did next to nothing as his sword accumulated power. With each attack it dealt increasing amounts of the same resonating-force energy but he would need some time to have a real impact.

The golem focused on Sophie as the greater threat, working its way toward the outside. Just as it was about to get free of the door, she nimbly dodged past it to join Jason on the inside, followed by Jason making his way back out. The mindless construct creature could do no more than react, the same lack of internal spirit that made it immune to Jason's curses making it too stupid to understand it was being played back and forth.

Finally it worked its way loose, courtesy of Jason's sword. It was accumulating enough power to affect even the hardy, bronze-rank construct body and when Jason carved a protrusion from its body it staggered free of the doorway and back into the courtyard.

Jason had reached the point where he could do some real damage, but free of the door, the golem had its own tricks to use. The stubby claw yanked back the ballista arm, and from within the arm a ballista bolt jerked out, ready to be fired. The golem launched it at Jason but the crude, massive weapon was easy to dodge. He moved aside, the

creature's aim obvious and the bolt missed him, the huge metal head digging into the stone floor.

Just as Jason was about to renew his attack, the shaft of the ballista bolt explodes, firing out finger-length shards of piercing wood, sharp as needles and hard as iron. Sophie, on the other side of the golem, was far enough away that she could duck out of the doorway before the shards reached her. Jason, on the other hand, took the full brunt. The attacks carried the inherent power of bronze-rank attacks, shredding his cloak and piercing his armour. He shielded his face with his arms as he turned his body to present a smaller profile and protect certain delicate areas. His arms, legs and sides were riddled with the wooden shards, which were left sticking out of him like echidna spines. He snatched a potion from his belt and chugged it, the healing power doing little more than pushing out all the spines.

The golem, in the meantime, had brought its ungainly box-arm with the rusty ball-hand up in the air. It brought it down in Jason's direction as he was still staggered and inattentive, the ball coming loose on the end of a cable, extending out as it swung down hard. Jason realised the danger too late, only for Sophie to appear in front of him using her mirage step power. Her feet braced, she threw a punch out at the descending ball.

Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 2 (14%).

- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional resonating-force damage, which is highly effective against physical defences. Suffer no damage from making unarmed strikes against objects and negate all damage from actively intercepted attacks. Not all damage from very powerful or higher-ranked attacks will be negated.

The huge metal sphere was deflected but the power of it was too much for Sophie's ability to negate. She was hammered into the stone, bouncing off herself as her arm was brutally mangled. Jason, protected and recovered, looked down at her. Under the hood of his cloak, his face contorting with malevolence as he saw what was left of her arm. He turned that gaze onto the golem, the sword in his hand practically humming with power, even as blood from Jason's punctured arm ran down it.

He ran at the golem, having fought it enough to know that its ungainly size and sluggish speed were the weaknesses he needed. His sword flashed as his body danced,

slicing into the creature again and again. With each strike the damage grew greater while the golem flailed at the cloaked figure flittering around its feet. Soon, even bronze-rank damage resistance was not enough. Jason had burned most of his mana on special attacks it was immune to, trigger the sword until every strike was blasting away chunks of wood and shearing apart strips of metal. He went for the joints, the legs first, then the arms as it toppled, finally going to work on every part of it still large enough to hit.

➤ You have defeated [Siege Golem].

Jason dropped his sword on the destroyed golem, rushing over to Sophie. She was struggling, one-armed, to get to her knees and he carefully helped and she grimaced silently through the pain. Her right arm dangled limply, the hand coming out of her sleeve. Jason pulled the lesser miracle potion from his belt but she waved him off.

“I’d be a pancake if it wasn’t for you,” he said, still pushing it on her.

“That’s for the middle of a fight,” she snarled through the pain and clenched teeth. “Don’t be an idiot and waste it now. I can use this to practice my recovery power.”

Jason looked at her as she fought through the pain to take a kneeling meditation pose as best she could.

Ability: [Equilibrium] (Balance)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 1 (76%)

 - Effect (iron): Meditate to slowly accrue instances of [Integrity], up to an instance threshold based on the [Recovery] attribute. Instances quickly drop off when meditation ends.

 - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
-

“At least take some kind of potion,” Jason said.

“This is kind of hard, so how about you shut your damn mouth for once.”

“Lady,” Jason said, putting back the lesser miracle potion and pulling out a regular healing potion for himself. “You are seriously hardcore.”

“What did I just say?”

Chapter 159: Mixed Medication

Sophie's arm was more serious than any of Jason's wounds. Her arm was severely damaged, requiring an extended period to heal back up with her self-recovery power. Jason had been needled quite badly but it only took a few potions to eliminate the minor, if numerous wounds. His blood harvest power normally allowed him to heal up after fights using the remnant life force of fallen enemies, but it only worked on enemies with blood. The siege golem was largely impervious to Jason's abilities, even after being destroyed.

The puncture points in his armour were slowly recovering as well, due to his armour's self-repair properties. Gary's advice to find armour with that particular quality had saved Jason a good amount of money on repairs. Now he was isolated from a place to get repairs, it was all the more valuable.

Sophie's healing power was meditation-based and concentrating was proving difficult with the state of her arm. She took regular breaks, panting and sweating in spite of doing no more than sitting in place. Jason tried to distract her from the pain each time she took a break.

"I'm going to loot the monster, now you're not in the middle of meditating," he told her during the first break. "I didn't want to interrupt you, before."

He wandered over to the fallen golem, which didn't look much worse than when it had been mimicking a broken siege weapon. He placed a hand on a chunk of shattered wood.

➤ Would you like to loot [Siege Golem]?

"Head's up," he warned Sophie as he walked away. The golem started dissolving into rainbow smoke.

-
- [Meteor Hammer] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Monster Core (Bronze Rank)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.

 - [Siege Grips] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 10 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
 - 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been awarded to party member [Sophie Wexler].
-

Sophie ducked out of the way as two bags of coins dropped from where they appeared over her head with a flash of rainbow light. There was also a pair of gloves, which she picked up to examine.

Item: [Siege Grips] (bronze rank, rare)

A pair of combat gloves containing the power of a siege weapon (clothing, gloves).

- Effect: Add explosive power to a physical attack, inflicting additional resonating-force damage and creating a powerful knock-back effect. 20 second cooldown.
 - Effect: Conjure a ram that flies through the air to make an extremely heavy resonating force attack. 5 minute cooldown.
 - You do not meet the requirements to use this item.
-

“I got bronze-rank gloves,” she said. “What about you?”

“A ball and chain,” Jason said, showing her the weapon in his hands. It was, as he said, a metal sphere at the end of a chain. Like a smaller version of the ball-hand of the siege golem, the metal orb was pitted with rust.

Item: [Meteor Hammer] (bronze rank, uncommon)

A magical chain weapon taken from an animate siege weapon (weapon, chain).

- Effect: Inflicts additional resonating-force damage based on how long the meteor hammer was swinging prior to the attack.
 - Effect: Chain length can be extended or retracted as it swings.
 - You do not meet the requirements to use this item.
-

“I don’t think this really suits me,” Jason said. “It’s bronze-rank anyway.”

“So are these but I could see myself using them later.”

Jason stashed the items and Sophie’s coins in his inventory. He glanced down at her arm, still hanging limp, her hand purple and distended. She was careful to jostle it as little as possible when she moved.

“How’s that coming along?” he asked.

“Not much progress on the arm,” she said unhappily. “I’m feeling better otherwise, though. That big ball thing really hit hard.”

“Thank you for that, by the way,” Jason said. “I don’t think I would have taken the hit nearly as well.”

“This is going to take longer to heal than I thought,” she said. “Maybe I should take a potion. Not one of the good ones, just a regular healing potion.”

“No, you were right in the first place,” Jason said. “Healing it up will be good training for your ability and we have time to burn. You hole up in the courtyard here while I check out the rest of the building. I’ll look for a good spot to set up camp. Use voice chat if anything happens and I’ll come running.”

“Alright,” Sophie said. She went back to meditating as Jason went further into the building.

Jory wasn’t happy. He had only agreed to participate as part of a joint activity between the craft associations, only to be immediately separated from his assigned team. As people formed makeshift groups from the people they found themselves with on the tower, Jory didn’t exactly have his pick of teams. His alchemy-related essence abilities made for a certain amount of healing but the people assembling groups were competing to attract the more conventional healers.

Jory was geared out in a heavy coat, covered in pockets. It was enchanted to protect both him and the contents of the pockets from harm. Fortunately for Jory, it was also enchanted to keep him cool, despite the jacket being as thick as the humidity. Along with the jacket, Jory had two belts around his waist and two bandoliers across his chest. They were full of vials containing potions and reagents Jory could use his essence abilities on to make potions on the fly. Like his coat, the belts and bandoliers were enchanted to protect their contents. Slung over his shoulder was a dimensional bag satchel.

The group Jory ended up with clearly viewed him as a better than nothing option, but they were the most seemingly capable group left. The best people had already formed teams and headed off. The group Jory joined at least had three members from the same team, a trio of leonids who had the luck of arriving on the same tower. They then added Jory and a solid guardian-type named Keane who could conjure heavy armour and a huge shield.

If they weren’t so clearly disgruntled at not getting a better healer, Jory would have been fairly happy. As it was, he was regretting the entire enterprise until they encountered the strange personage of Shade. Jory wanted to take him up on his offer to explain the place they found themselves, but the rest of his group were eager to press on. The three leonids all chose courage, while Jory and Keane chose wisdom.

The lesser miracle potion Shade gave him was an object of fascination for Jory, who had an essence ability that allowed him to determine its effects. His intention was to take it

back to his workshop and see what he could learn from it. He wouldn't be able to reproduce it from a sample, but he had no doubt that anything he could glean from it would be invaluable.

Of the leonids, the leader was named Laramie. He and his fellows were in no rush to reach the centre of the city, more interested in the search for treasures. Every building they spotted that looked mostly intact was a prime target.

Jory was initially annoyed but was forced to acknowledge their choice was a good one as they dug out more than a few worthwhile finds. The advantage of magical items was that they stood out, having withstood the passage of time better than ordinary objects.

The leonids gave themselves first pick, but otherwise distributed the loot evenly. They found a magical box of unknown purpose, a magical staff that Jory claimed, some leather armguards and no less than four awakening stones. They were mostly commons, but the plant, snake and earth awakening stones were all desirable enough to sell well. The one rare stone, an awakening stone of ruin, would sell the best though, inevitably ending up in Laramie's possession.

Jory's essence ability that identified items revealed the properties of each, aside from the magical box that eluded his ability's power. All it revealed was the name of the item which was, appropriately enough, mystery box. Jory could have used his ability to undersell the value of the rare awakening stone but his ethical nature never led him to even consider it. He was satisfied enough with the loot sharing that he was happy to continue on.

Trouble came when they searched what turned out to be a sprawling, multistorey alchemy workshop. Even with the expansive renovations on his own workshop and the dilapidated nature of the building, Jory couldn't help but be envious. He even managed to dig out a few magical alchemy tools that found their way into his dimensional bag. The others didn't begrudge him as they would be hard to sell and gave them an excuse to cut him out of the next round of loot. They told him that anything alchemy related was all his. This lasted until Jory's honest nature caused him to reveal a discovery.

Inside a magical cabinet sealed to protect the contents from the elements, Jory found a whole catalogue of alchemical formulas. Many were out of date compared to superior modern equivalents, or used ingredients too expensive or rare for what the potions did. There were a few gems amongst them, however, and one huge prize. The requirements and ingredients were outrageous in both rarity and price, but there was a complete formula

for the lesser miracle potion Shade had given him. When he revealed this fact, Laramie immediately demanded he hand it over.

“You said everything alchemy-related was mine,” Jory told them.

“That was before you found something so valuable,” Laramie said. “Hand it over.”

“You three have already been taking the most valuable goods for yourselves,” the heavily-armoured shield-bearer said. “We agreed he could have the alchemy stuff, so you should stick to the deal you made.”

He had been quietly stewing over what he saw as unfair loot distribution and used their move on Jory as a chance to push the issue. They were still in the alchemy building, in a large room once used for the preparation of alchemical components, with a series of long benches dividing the room.

“The deal has changed,” Laramie said.

Jory watched as the two men squared off.

“Let’s just keep talking,” Jory said. “There are monsters enough out there, without us fighting one another.”

“There’s no need to fight,” Keane said, the big man’s eyes not leaving Laramie. “They just have to give you what they promised.”

“I promise I’ll put a hole right through that helmet if you don’t back off,” Laramie said. The Leonids were all-powerful damage dealers.

The three squared off against one, with Jory in the background, his calls for de-escalation going unheeded. The tension ramped until one of the three finally twitched, lashing out with a conjured whip of fire. The other two were only a beat behind, their coordination proving too much of an onslaught for Keane.

His defensive powers were strong but it was three against one, with the trio's practised teamwork overwhelming the protector. He held out briefly under a terrifying barrage as Jory yelled at them to stop, but soon he fell to the ground. Most adventurers would have died but Keane was only debilitated, his wounded flesh already starting to heal itself. Laramie turned his attention back to Jory.

“I’ll hand it over,” Jory said. “Just take it and go while I look after him.”

“You had your chance,” Laramie said. “Now you’re going to be unfortunate victims of the many dangers, here.”

“You don’t need to-”

Jory’s fruitless words were cut off by a spear made of solid stone being launched at him. To his surprise, a bubble-shield snapped up around him, disappearing again as it absorbed the spear’s attack.

“There’s no reasoning with some people,” Neil Davone said, stepping into the room. A golem made of dull glass stepped in ahead of him, Neil’s chrysalis golem summon put itself between the trio and Neil, who grabbed Jory and yanked him behind a bench. “Time to go, Jory.”

“Davone? I’m not leaving that guy to them,” Jory said, pointing at Keane, whose sprawled feet they could just see past the edge of the bench.

“Don’t fight it, Jory,” Laramie called out. “Your friend isn’t going to save you.”

“The hell I’m not,” Neil told Jory with quiet insistence. “I can’t do anything about the guy on the ground, though, unless you have some awesome power that will let you fight all those guys by yourself.”

Jory grimaced.

“If that’s what it takes. The after-effects are bad, though, so you’ll have to take care of me.”

“Wait, you seriously have something like that?”

“Yes,” Jory said soberly. “I don’t like to use it, though.”

“I think now might be the time you’ve been saving it for,” Neil said.

Jory held his hands out and vials started floating out of their loops on his belt, floating in the air. The vials started opening, spilling their contents into the air. Instead of dropping to the ground, they flowed together into a sphere of liquid that grew darker as each new ingredient was added. As they did, Jory pulled off his coat and unbuckled his belts and bandoliers, even as more vials flew out of them to disgorge their contents into the air.

Attacks were now lancing into the glass golem, chunks shattering off it as they did. With every piece of damage, runes were engraved onto its surface. It didn’t fight back, remaining steadfastly planted between its attackers and Neil.

“I thought it was a really bad idea to mix potions like that,” Neil said, watching all the liquids and powers from the vials splash together in front of them.

“It is,” Jory said.

“So why are you doing it?”

“To show those idiots what happens when you push an alchemist into using a very bad idea.”

The liquid started streaming into Jory’s waiting mouth. Immediately, from the head down, Jory’s body started grossly distending. His whole body grew, his skin turning a patchy mishmash of sickly yellow, purple, blue and green. His hair fell out and his head bulged out like the rest of his body, now too large to hide behind the bench. He was unrecognisable as Jory, now just a monster of muscle.

A bolt of flame struck him, releasing a stench of acrid chemicals and burning flesh, which Jory didn't seem to notice. A stone spear pierced his torso, which he dismissively yanked out, throwing it back with the force of a ballista. Then he picked up the bench in front of him and threw that too, despite it being affixed to the floor. Accompanied by the sound of shattering tiles, he ripping it right off the floor and hurled it at the leonids.

Neil watched the process with horrified fascination. The three adventurers scrambled out the door on the other side of the room. Monster Jory moved after them in a lumbering pursuit but not at a pace likely to catch them.

Jason led Sophie through the building. Day had turned to night as Sophie worked to heal herself, Jason wondering how the sun worked in the astral space. Her arm wasn't fully recovered but she had control over it again and her hand looked like a hand instead of a potato someone had taken to with a hammer. She couldn't see in the dark like Jason, so she had a glow-stone floating over her head.

"Did you find anything, searching the building?" she asked.

"I did," Jason said. "I found an armoury with a couple of magic weapons, although they were fairly mediocre. More importantly, I found an awakening stone."

"You did?"

"It's an uncommon one," he said. "Awakening stone of preparation. I know the others said to just collect what you can so you can choose which ones to use after, but maybe you could use just one."

"You think I should?"

"Probably not, but I would. I can do the ritual in the morning if you like. Give it some thought, overnight."

They reached where Jason had set up the aura tent, which would mask their presence from most monsters. He had also set up some alarm rituals, just in case. It was on the top floor of the building, close to the steps leading up to the roof.

"I only set up the one tent," he said, "but I can put the other one up if you want."

"It's fine," Sophie said. "Just know that if you get handsy, you aren't getting those hands back."

Chapter 160: Giving People Choices

Sophie awoke to enticing breakfast smells. She was aching and tired, her damaged arm having given her a restless night. Only in the last few hours did she snatch away some precious, uninterrupted slumber. She crawled delicately out of the tent and followed the smells up a stone stairwell and onto a flat roof. Jason had set out a folding camp table and pair of chairs, one of which he was sitting in.

“Morning,” he greeted her. “Join me?”

He gestured at the other chair with a fork, on the end of which was skewered a piece of sausage. The rest of the sausage was on a plate in front of him, along with poached eggs and hot, buttered toast. As she sat down, he pulled a second plate of food from his inventory, as fresh and hot as the moment he put it there. A pitcher of juice was already out, Jason filling an empty glass to match his own.

“This is surreal,” Sophie said. “I can more or less accept the whole adventuring life. Magic powers, alternate dimensions, astral spaces. Monsters, cultists, even an ancient order of assassins. Yet somehow, seeing you sitting in the middle of it all, comfortably eating breakfast is just too much.”

“Believe it or not, you aren’t the first woman to tell me I was too much.”

“Oh, I believe it,” she said and took a sip of juice. “That’s really good.”

“It’s a blend of delta fruits. I bought a bunch of it from Arash.”

“The guy who sells juice from a cart and keeps calling you a heretic?”

“That’s the one.”

“So when you making preparations to enter this unexplored astral space full of unknown dangers, you went with picnic furniture, plates of hot breakfast and pitchers of fruit juice.”

“Life isn’t for surviving, Wexler. Life is for living.”

Jason had set up the table to overlook the street below. The building was quite high, as were many of the other nearby buildings. It turned the overgrown boulevard they had been walking down into something of a jungle canyon. Jason looked it over with a smile as he sipped at his juice.

“You really like this, don’t you?” Sophie asked him.

“I do,” he said. “I get what you mean about everything being crazy but my advice to you is to surrender to it. I know you’ve spent a lot of time wondering why I helped you so much when I could have gotten you out of the city and been done with it. It wasn’t long ago that I was the one sitting at a table with a more experienced adventurer, no idea what lay

ahead and wondering what to do. He helped me realise that I had a chance to start things fresh. To become the person I wanted to be.”

He smiled in reminiscence.

“Give yourself over to the experience, Wexler. This is your chance to take control. The river may be raging but you’ll be amazed how fast you go working with the flow, instead of against it.”

“That seems strange, coming from you,” she said. “I’ve never met a person who went more against the flow in my life.”

“It’s about picking your moments,” Jason said. “I came into this world with the naivety of someone who lived his life in safety. I’ve had a lot of illusions shattered, about the world and about myself. But sometimes when the world tries to bend you, you have to stand straight until one of you breaks.”

“You think the world will break before you do?”

“Probably not. But there’s no chance if I don’t try. I decided early on that with my second chance, the one regret I would never have is that I never tried. So I do the things that feel right. When I heard about your situation, I felt for you and Belinda. I know what it’s like to be in an untenable situation. I found friends to guide me out. I know Jory wanted to help you, so I gave the help I had. Now I’m giving you the advice I received. Take this chance to be who you want to be.”

“And if I don’t know who that is?”

“You do, on some level. Just do what feels right until you figure it out. It’s what I’ve been doing and I don’t regret any of it, mistakes and all.”

He gestured at the astral space around the with his fork.

“In my old life, I never had the chance to visit places like this. Yes, this world has brought its share of challenges, but facing those challenges has been more fulfilling than anything in my old life. At some point, I’ll be going back to my world but I’m not going to put this world behind me when I do. There’s a means to travel between worlds and I’m going to find it.”

“How?”

“I’ve been talking with Clive, him being the expert. These builder cultists seem to have more advanced astral magic than this world does. Clive thinks they have some means of crossing dimensional boundaries that doesn’t require a diamond ranker, or they wouldn’t have so many agents here to be active all over the world. If I can get a hold of their magic, it may well put me on the right path, if not deliver what I need on a platter.”

“A way home.”

“No,” Jason said. “A way here. I’ve been told that I will be going home, sooner or later. I can’t help but feel that I need to go back and deal with the things I left behind. Once I have, though, I’m coming back to this world, even if that trip is one way. My old world is my past, and while I’m compelled to settle that past, this world is my future.”

“And if you can’t find a way back?”

“The thing I realised when I truly came to accept that magic is real is that the impossible is just a limitation I put on my own thinking. If you have the time and the resolve, you can do just about anything. But you already know that.”

“I do?”

“Of course you do. You were in an awful position. Caught between two crime lords and a powerful aristocrat, with none of the connections and power I’ve been enjoying since coming to this world. All you had was a loyal friend. Most people would have capitulated. Found the least awful path and accepted their fate. Not you and not Belinda. You came up with a plan and you threw yourselves into it.”

“It probably wouldn’t have worked, even without your interference.”

“But it could have and you went for it. You saw that glimpse of light that most other people would have dismissed as unreachable and you reached for it. I really admire that.”

He held his glass up in a casual salute.

“Thank you,” she said uncertainly, shifting in her chair. “I don’t... not a lot of people look at me for who I am. My whole life, men have looked at me like an animal they need to break in.”

Jason nodded.

“I have this philosophy in life,” he said. “My brother always had this knack for fitting in. For becoming what he needed to be, but I can’t do that. Every time I tried I ended up losing it and doing something crazy and self-destructive. So, I decided early on that I was going to be who I am and people could take it or leave it. Like me or hate me, I’ll take passion over ambivalence. It lets me know who to avoid and who to be friends with. It makes for a better life.”

“But a lot of times you must have to deal with people who don’t like you.”

“Of course,” Jason said. “I’m from a whole other world, so people were always going to find me strange. I just play that up sometimes to disorient them a bit. If you need to tip someone over, it helps to unbalance them first.”

“I don’t know I entirely believe that,” she said.

“Oh?”

“I’ve been watching you and I’m willing to bet you’re strange, even where you come from. If it was all an act, you wouldn’t be the same around your friends as your enemies.”

“It’s not an act,” Jason said. “I told you that I’m just being who I am and people can take it or leave it. I just crank it up or dial it back a bit for any given situation.”

“And that works?”

“When you take a very specific approach to things, the way I do, you have to accept that some people will respond to it and others will reject it wholesale. It’s a numbers game and you have to accept that a certain number of people are going to tell you to sod off. Some people like what I’m selling, others can’t stand it. I work with the ones that do and don’t bother with the ones that don’t.”

“It sounds like you're just making excuses for doing whatever you like,” Sophie said.

“Oh, I’m absolutely doing that,” Jason said. “I told you it’s a life philosophy. I’ve just found out how to make it work.”

“By manipulating people.”

“You say that like we don't all do it every day. We all put up fronts, adjust who we are, how much we show of ourselves to the different people around us. I just do it more consciously than most. Take Neil, for example. When I went to recruit him, I could have taken a different approach. Presented something more universally appealing to get him on board. Instead, I showed him who I was, cranked up a bit to make the point. I figured he was more likely to turn us down than join but I didn’t want the best person we could find for our team; I wanted the best fit. So I presented a certain version of myself, not to get him on board but to help him decide if the place he wanted to be was with us.”

“You gave me that choice too, didn’t you? Join your merry band of misfits or vanish into some distant land to start over.”

“I like giving people choices.”

“That’s because you like control. If you're the one giving the choices, you get to decide what the choices are. Otherwise, people might go finding their own options that don't fit your narrative.”

Jason chuckled, not denying it.

“How’s the arm?” he asked.

“Not fighting strength but a couple more hours using my meditation power should do it.”

“So now you’ve experienced the power of a bronze-rank monster,” Jason said.

“According to Rufus, a good adventurer should be able to handle monsters one rank up, so long as the match-up is good. Meaning only pick fights with the big ones when your powers counter theirs.”

They started discussing the fight, their teamwork in confusing the unintelligent monster to keep it stuck in the doorway. They discussed what they did well, what could

have been improved. Jason was impressed with Sophie's ability to break down the fight, find the errors and look at how to correct them.

"My big mistake," Jason said, "was getting into a mindset of my powers not working on it. My execute power would have worked just fine but I'd fallen into the trap of dismissing the effectiveness of my abilities. When I was first training, one of the things Rufus said was to think about what every ability can do and how to use each one effectively in a situation."

"My mistake was trying to counter such an obviously powerful attack," Sophie said. "I should have hit you instead."

"What?" Jason asked.

"I could have knocked you out of the way," she said.

"Oh, right."

After breakfast, Jason started packing everything into his inventory.

"Did you decide if you wanted to use that awakening stone?" Jason asked.

"I don't think I will," Sophie said. "I don't think this is the best situation to break-in a completely new power."

"That's sensible."

Jason continued packing up. Sophie didn't have a dimensional bag of her own, yet. She wanted something that wouldn't impede her very mobile fighting style, much like Emir's dimensional storage jacket. Something like that was hard to find, locally. So, for the moment, she was relying on Jason the way Gary and Rufus had done with Farrah.

Sophie settled into a meditation pose as Jason went downstairs. Pausing at the top of the stairwell, he called out to Sophie.

"Hey, Wexler."

"What?"

"Thanks for stopping my head from getting smeared across the floor."

He went down the stairs before she could reply. He negated the alarm rituals he put in place and packed up the aura tent. Then he went up and joined Sophie, who had settled herself on the edge of the roof. They sat, meditating side by side. Eventually, a smile crept over Jason's mouth as he experienced a breakthrough.

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- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 8 (100%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 9 (00%).
-

As a perception power, midnight eyes was the ability Jason was always using and for this reason, it had advanced the most quickly. Like his other abilities, though, it had slowed

to a crawl as it drew closer to reaching bronze rank. Despite not being a big part of the fight, taking on a bronze-rank monster had helped it edge up the wall.

After almost two hours, Sophie declared her arm fully restored. To test it, she and Jason did some sparring on the open space of the roof. Sophie had been trained hard since becoming an adventurer but it was not a one-way street. Having someone with her skill who understood his style better than he did was immensely useful for Jason. She had pushed him to use it not just for escapes and sneak attacks but to become stronger in a straight-up fight.

Before he ever met Sophie, Jason had already been working on a deceptive style that baited out the enemy. What Sophie had pointed out was that Jason was massively wasting what could be one of his best combat abilities: his cloak. Because it only had physical substance when he wanted, it could obscure his movements without obstructing them. What's more, the ability to be real or insubstantial at will offered powerful utility.

Using his cloak to hide his stance, Jason feinted a forward motion, only to duck back as Sophie threw out a fist to counter and wrap her arm in his cloak. He yanked her forward, pulling her arm out of the way as he stepped in with a rising knee. She couldn't see it coming but anticipated the move, halting Jason's rising knee with a leg block before it gathered force. She yanked back on her arm and he let the cloak become insubstantial. Without the resistance she used too much force, briefly stumbling back. It was only a moment of lost balance but Jason moved in to capitalise.

Soon after, Jason was sprawled face down on the rooftop.

"You did well," Sophie said. "You're improving."

"Then why does it feel like I'm getting worse?" he groaned.

"You're getting better but I'm also learning how you fight," she said. "Given that I know your style and have been doing this a lot longer, it only makes sense that I'll improve against you faster than you do against me."

"Doesn't that mean you should take it easy on me?" he asked as he pushed himself to his feet.

"Probably," she acknowledged. "Something about hitting you repeatedly is really satisfying, though."

"Thanks," he said, disgruntled look. "I'm glad you can use me for your personal gratification."

He started stripping off his clothes, taking out some healing unguent to rub into the muscles Sophie had tenderised.

"You're very skinny she said, unashamedly looking him over as he stood there in his boxer shorts."

“Are you kidding?” Jason asked, looking himself over. “I’ve totally filled out. I used to be way skinnier than this.”

“You did? Do come from a race of twig people?”

“No!”

“You seem very defensive,” she said. “You’re a twig person, aren’t you?”

“I’m not a twig person! I’m a regular person!”

“Uh-huh.”

“Yeah, well, you aren’t so great, with your...”

He waved his arm up and down at her lithe body, her caramel skin set off by the matching silver of her eyes and hair.

“...how is that fair,” he finished limply. “I’m going to put my clothes back on now.”

“What are those things on your shorts?”

“Love hearts,” Jason said.

“That’s not what a heart looks like.”

“How do you know what a heart looks like?” Jason asked. “You don’t strike me as someone who took lessons on internal anatomy.”

“I did, after a fashion,” she said. “A few years back, during my first time in the fighting pits, there was a guy who would rip people’s hearts out and eat them. He had some power where it made him stronger.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“And they let him participate?”

“It got the crowd riled up.”

“They surely wouldn’t just let that go on, would they?”

“The idea was to build up tension,” she said. “They threw in scrubs to fight him, get some interest in the lower card fight before putting him up against real fighters. Kind of a ‘who can take down the monster’ situation.”

“So he was killed in the arena?”

“No, the Adventure Society came in and did it. Turns out they don’t like essence abilities that require you to eat people’s hearts.”