

Chapter 180: You Have Friends to Help You

In the ritual room, the group continued to watch as Sophie went through her awakening rituals. She had three unawakened abilities left, one from the wind essence and two from the balance, along with three legendary awakening stones to use on them. She decided to save the Reaper stone for last, leaving the awakening stone of the celestials that Constance had suggested and the stone of karma that Clive picked out. She started with the stone of the celestials.

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- You have awakened the wind essence ability [Child of the Celestial Wind]. You have awakened 5 of 5 wind essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all wind essence abilities. Linked attribute [Power] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank wind essence ability.

Ability: [Child of the Celestial Wind] (Wind)

- Special Ability (dimension, holy).
- Cost: None
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Your celestine racial powers have increased effect. You gain damage reduction to disruptive-force damage.

“What are the celestine racial powers?” Neil asked. “I know you have a utility power aptitude and can use ongoing abilities for less mana. That one’s your ability that evolved, right?”

“Yes,” Sophie said. “We also recover mana more quickly, we’re faster and have astral and holy affinities.”

“What does holy do, other than improve holy abilities?” Neil asked.

“It increases the effect of healing magic and holy boons used on me.”

“Oh, that’s nice,” Neil said. “Those are abilities you want to have increased.”

They moved into the awakening stone of karma.

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- You have awakened the balance essence ability [Karmic Warrior]. You have awakened 4 of 5 balance essence abilities.

Ability: [Karmic Warrior] (Balance)

- Special Ability (holy).
- Cost: None
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- Effect (iron): Gain an instance of [Agent of Karma] when subjected to damage or any harmful effect, even if the damage and/or effect was wholly negated.

- [Agent of Karma] (boon, holy, stacking): The [Power] and [Spirit] attributes are temporarily increased by a small amount. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

“So basically,” Jason said, “Whenever you take damage, even when you negate that damage with your cheesy powers, you get stronger, tougher and your magical abilities get stronger get more powerful.”

“The spirit attribute actually has several functions,” Clive said. “Obviously, affecting the potency of essence abilities is the important one, but don't overlook its impact on our perception. As our spirit attributes move past bronze rank, our senses will go beyond what they are now. Colours, sounds and smells to which we were oblivious will suddenly be made plain to us.”

“So, you can move so fast it amounts to stopping time, become immune to damage, then heap all the damage you should have taken onto the other guy,” Jason said. “Now you have another overpowered ability. Humphrey got bloody immortality, and I got stretchy arms? Not even arms. One stretchy arm.”

“You can switch-up which arm it is, though,” Belinda said. “There's that.”

The group laughed at the flat look Jason gave her.

“We might be little more sympathetic,” Neil said, “if your powers hadn't killed a carnivorous plant the size of a small city.”

“It wasn't just me,” Jason said. “There were twenty-five other people involved in that.”

“Asano, we would have all been left sitting around with nothing to do if we didn't have you there,” Sophie said. “Stop whining.”

“I guess that's fair,” Jason conceded.

“Sophie, that new ability makes you rather like a defensive version of Jason,” Humphrey pointed out. “You don't have any explosive attack powers but now the longer a

fight goes on, the more dangerous you become. Increasing your power attribute will obviously increase your physical strength and the increase in spirit will affect the additional damage your powers add to your even your normal attacks. That will eventually add up to every one of your strikes having the kind of strength the rest of us only with a special attack. And we all know how quickly you can attack.”

“We still have one more ability to awaken,” Clive reminded them as he finished setting up for the final ritual.

“Did you hear what people were getting from Reaper stones, while you were in the market?” Jason asked.

“Clive veered off quite early to go ask around while the rest of us were selling loot,” Neil said. “Did you actually get people to tell you, Clive?”

“Kind of,” Clive said. “I found the Magic Society contingent and organised cheap awakening rituals for anyone who let us record their abilities.”

“I saw that,” Neil said. “You organised that?”

“I’m still a Magic Society official,” Clive said, “even if Lucian Lamprey did effectively strip me of all responsibility.”

“I’d like to kick that guy’s insides out once day,” Sophie said.

“Was this because of me?” Jason asked unhappily.

“He doesn’t like that I work with you,” Clive said. “It worked out, though, since It left me more free for adventuring and research. All his punishment actually did was free me from a bunch of administering duties.”

Jason frowned, knowing that it had not been the windfall Clive was making out.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“I told you, it’s fine,” Clive said. “Getting back on topic, I did manage to find out about a lot of powers coming from the Reaper stones. The most common, from what I could gather, are aggressive utility powers,” Clive said as he continued to work. “There’s quite a lot of conjuration powers, mostly weapons but also stranger things, like Jason’s arm conjuration. They all seem to incorporate offensive aspects, though, like the affliction Jason’s shadow arm delivers.”

“I’d like something impactful that I can open up a fight with,” Sophie said. “Something to put the enemy onto the back foot.”

“I’m not sure that’s on the table,” Clive said. “From the people I talked to, the Reaper stones tend to give out powers more in Jason’s wheelhouse. Slow, inevitable death.”

Speculation turned to anticipation as Clive finished the ritual and carried it out.

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- You have awakened the balance essence ability [Deny the Reaper]. You have awakened 5 of 5 balance essence abilities.
 - You have awakened all balance essence abilities. Linked attribute [Recovery] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank balance essence ability.

Ability: [Deny the Reaper] (Balance)

- Special Attack (counter-execute, healing).
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
- Effect (iron): Target enemy suffers a small amount of transcendent damage and you are healed for a small amount. As a counter-execute effect, the damage and healing scale exponentially with your own level of injury.

“Counter-execute?” Jason said. “That’s a new one to me.”

“You generally see it in defensive power sets,” Clive said. “They are generally more powerful than other abilities, but only if you use them when things are going badly. Usually, they have some combination of damage reduction, healing, retribution damage or health drain.”

“My immortality power is something of a false counter-execute,” Humphrey said. “It’s unlikely to scale as well Sophie’s new power but it can also scale off low stamina and mana, and will be more useful without having to be beaten down first.”

“Thought that ability scaled, like this one,” Neil said.

“Yes, but it doesn’t have to be with damage,” Humphrey said. “If I’m just low on mana, for example, it will top my mana up well without doing much for my health and stamina.”

“So it’s more versatile,” Jason said. “Stupid OP power. I bet your Mum’s happy, though.”

“Actually, she was ecstatic,” Humphrey said. “I’ve never seen her like that.”

“Of course she was,” Jason said. “A mother just found out her child was immortal.”

“I’m not actually immortal.”

“It is still a powerful survival skill,” Clive said. “This one of Sophie’s is not to be underestimated, however. The chance to bring a fight going badly back to even ground fits into the classic balance essence mode. Balance is quite popular because it has abilities like this that can pull you through rough situations.”

“I wanted an attack for a start of the fight, not the end,” Sophie said.

“Look at it this way,” Humphrey said. “Would you prefer a big, splashy entrance that may or may not do you any good, or something you can rely on when things go wrong.”

Sophie considered Humphrey’s words, nodding to herself.

“I guess you’re right,” she said. “Big attacks are kind of your area, anyway.”

“Plus, transcendent damage,” Clive said. “That’s as reliable as it gets, plus incredibly rare at iron rank. You only see it on conditional powers, like executes, or when the damage is negligible. Both of which are demonstrated by Jason’s abilities.”

“That leaves you,” Sophie said, turning to Belinda. “Ready to become an essence user.”

“Are you kidding?” Belinda asked. “I can’t wait for Jason to complain about how great my powers are.”

“What?” Jason asked.

“You can be a bit of a whiner,” Neil told him.

“I’m not a whiner,” Jason said. “I’m just open with my feelings. I’m a delicate flower.”

“The kind of flower that’s hard to eradicate, even when you try to get rid of it,” Neil said. “Is there a word for that?”

“You’re calling me a weed?” Jason asked. “That’s very rude.”

“You said I was fat!”

“You are objectively hefty for an elf.”

“I’m well built.”

“Like a fancy cake,” Jason said. “But I imagine you know all about cake, given how many you must have eaten to get like that.”

“I’m not the only elf that looks like this, you know.”

“You mean Lucian Lamprey? He’s not a great role model. Even putting aside the whole evil sleazebag thing, the guy looks like someone sucked the air out of a bag of nuts.”

As Jason and Neil continued to bicker, Clive went to work setting up Belinda’s first essence ritual. It was more elaborate and involved than a ritual of awakening, but otherwise quite similar. Soon, Belinda was standing in the middle of a magic diagram, a magic essence held nervously in her hands.

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Sophie said. “You saw me go through this.”

“Trust me,” Clive said. “I’ve done this dozens of times. Probably hundreds.”

“What if I get a crap power?” Belinda asked.

“My mother says there is no such thing as a bad power,” Humphrey said. “Just a bad essence user who doesn’t know what to do with it.”

“Everyone here knows how smart and resourceful you are,” Jason told her. “If you get a basic attack ability, that's a reliable power you can count on when things are too hectic to set up a clever plan. If you get something more esoteric, you can be innovative with it and really show what you're capable of. Either way, I know you'll be able to make the most of it.”

Belinda nodded.

“Thanks,” she told them.

“If all your powers are crap, though,” Jason added casually, “we're not letting you on the team.”

He yelped as Sophie thumped him on the arm.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“What was that for?” Sophie echoed incredulously. “If I had a suppression collar I'd put it on you and throw you off the highest tower in this whole damn palace!”

“I'm kind of in the middle of something here,” Belinda interjected.

“Sorry,” Jason said.

Clive conducted the ritual, the essence in Belinda's hands dissolving into a nebula-like cloud that floated around her before drifting gently into her body.

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- You have absorbed [Magic Essence]. You have absorbed 1 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 25% (1/4 essences).
 - [Magic Essence] has bonded to your [Spirit] attribute, changing your [Spirit] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all magic essence abilities to increase your [Spirit] attribute.
 - You have awakened the magic essence ability [Bag of Tricks]. You have awakened 1 of 5 magic essence abilities.

Ability: [Bag of Tricks] (Magic)

- Special Ability (dimension).
 - Cost: None
 - Cooldown: None.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): You have a personal, dimensional storage space. You may equip any item in your storage space directly onto your person or unequip anything on your person directly to your storage space.
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“A dimensional space as your first ability,” Neil said. “Not even from some high-end stone; you got it straight from the essence. It looks like a convenient one, too. None of this conjuring up a cupboard or whatever.”

“We have a lot of storage spaces in this team,” Clive said. “We’re lucky, in that regard.”

Blue-grey light started shining from within Belinda.

“Here we go,” Clive said.

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- Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [Adventurer’s Tools].

Ability: [Adventurer’s Tools]

- Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].
- Active ability (conjuration). Conjure basic, non-magical objects.

Sophie and Belinda had already decided just to do Belinda’s essences before taking their shopping trip to sell off their loot in a market not flooded with essences and awakening stones. They already had some stones picked out but were also waiting to see what her first powers produced. Normally, they would have only awakened around half of her powers right away, as had been the case with the rest of the team. Belinda was already behind the curve compared to the rest of the team, so they instead decided to do them all, after coming back from their shopping trip.

In the meantime, they moved on to the next essence.

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- You have absorbed [Trap Essence]. You have absorbed 2 of 4 essences.
 - Progress to iron rank: 50% (2/4 essences).
 - [Trap Essence] has bonded to your [Power] attribute, changing your [Power] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all trap essence abilities to increase your [Power] attribute.
 - You have awakened the trap essence ability [Bait and Switch]. You have awakened 1 of 5 trap essence abilities.

Ability: [Bait and Switch] (Trap)

- Special Ability (dimension, illusion).
- Cost: High mana.
- Cooldown: 1 minute.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%).

- **Effect (iron):** Teleport self or nearby ally to a nearby location. The subject is rendered invisible for a brief period, leaving behind a lifelike illusion. The illusion has no substance or aura.
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“An escape power,” Clive said. “The mana cost and use-interval for a power like that are quite large because you can use it on other people. That’s a valuable power.”
Belinda’s next racial gift evolution soon triggered.

- **Human racial ability [Essence Gift] has evolved to [The Price of Power].**

Ability: [The Price of Power]

- **Transfigured from [Human] ability [Essence Gift].**
 - **Active ability (spell, curse). The subject of this ability suffers disruptive-force damage when expending mana, proportional to the amount of mana consumed.**
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“That’s interesting,” Clive said. “Active racial gifts are rare, especially one you can use on other people.”

“How is that a trap power?” Sophie asked.

“It turns a person’s own mana into a trap,” Neil said. “It’s a nasty ability.”

“I’m glad,” Belinda said. “The first one wasn’t great. Useful, don’t get me wrong, but a bit underwhelming.”

“Underwhelming?” Jason said. “That ability to conjure tools is the most pure-blood adventuring power I’ve ever seen. I could empty half my storage space if I had that power.”

“He really could,” Humphrey said.

“A will admit, I’ve been carrying around some useful goods as well,” Clive said.
“Because I had ropes with me, Neil and I have multiple growth items, now.”

“Still two essences to go,” Clive said. “I’ll set up the next ritual.”

“Actually, could we take a break?” Belinda asked. “This is kind of intense and I could use a rest.”

“Good idea,” Jason said. “We can all go up to my suite and I’ll put on some lunch.”

As everyone shuffled out of the ritual room, Clive asked Sophie and Belinda to stay behind a moment to discuss an issue with their new abilities.

“Is there a problem with our abilities?” Sophie asked after the others were gone.

“This isn’t really about your abilities,” Clive said. “This is about Jason.”

“What about him?” Sophie asked.

“I don’t like the way you were attacking him,” Clive said.

“Seriously?” Sophie asked. “It hit him ten times harder when we spar.”

“But you weren’t sparring.”

“You think he couldn’t have stopped me?”

“Jason’s judgement is compromised when it comes to you,” Clive said. “He’s wary of his power over you and the men who had power over you in the past. Because of that, he lets you get away with things he wouldn’t tolerate from anyone else. Don’t forget, he just went through something incredibly affecting.”

“He seemed normal to me,” Belinda said.

“Exactly,” Sophie agreed. “You saw him. He’s fine.”

Clive gave them a sad smile. “You never met Farrah, but when Jason and I started adventuring together, she asked me to look out for him. To make sure he actually was fine and didn’t just seem that way. He’s good at hiding when he’s overwhelmed.”

“That’s crap,” Sophie said. “He’s just one of those guys who takes it all in stride. Nothing really affects people like that.”

“People like that don’t exist,” Clive said. “Jason may not have been through all the things you have but he’s had his own challenges. He’s more vulnerable than he seems.”

Sophie scowled while Belinda looked at her, thoughtfully.

“Maybe we can tone it back a little,” she said.

“You mean I can,” Sophie said.

“Yeah, Soph,” Belinda said. “I mean you.”

They reconvened in the ritual room after lunch. Sophie was subdued, her scowl replaced with unhappy, thoughtful frowns as she shot glances in Jason’s direction. Jason moved over to Clive as he drew the circle for the next ritual.

“What did you do?” Jason asked quietly.

“I didn’t like the way she was treating you.”

“She needed that,” Jason said. “To know that she really is free and wouldn’t be pushed back down for acting against the man with the power over her.”

“You think that was a healthy expression of freedom?” Clive asked.

“Of course not,” Jason said. “But it was a start.”

“And what about what you need?” Clive asked. “You might be putting a good face on it but I know what happens to people who get that close to that many gods. I’ve read papers on it. You can’t tell me you’re fine when I know you were shaken to the very soul. Literally.”

“It’s fine,” Jason said.

“The way she was treating you isn’t fine,” Clive said. “Neil and Humphrey might think she’s crabby about some other girl but they’re teenagers and don’t know any better.”

“Wexler’s damaged,” Jason said. “We need to give her some leeway.”

“Trauma is not an excuse to hurt other people,” Clive said. “Isn’t the whole point for her to take responsibility for her own behaviour? This is not how you work through your problems.”

“You can’t fix everything at once, Clive. You take the wins you can get.”

“You aren’t a reliable judge when it comes to her,” Clive said. “You’re so scared of abusing the power in that indenture contract that you won’t act when you should,” Clive said. “But that’s alright. You have friends to help you. And so does she. Let us keep both of you walking in straight lines.”

Jason glanced over at Sophie, then nodded.

“Alright, Clive,” Jason said. “Thanks, mate.”