

Chapter 183: Domineering, Territorial and Robust

For those who could afford them, personal transport in Jayapura consisted of small discs that floated in the air, underfoot, the rider directing them by shifting their weight. Hester brought a number of them out onto an open area of lawn for the visitors to get a handle on.

“Hoverboards!” Jason called out cheerfully.

“Their actually called personal float discs,” Clive corrected him.

“Hoverboards!”

“That’s not..”

“Hoverboards!” Jason asserted again. Stash turned into a bird and flew onto Jason’s head, echoing his cry.

“Hoverboards!”

“Good boy,” Jason said, giving bird Stash a biscuit.

Smaller float discs, like those Hester had brought out, were for standing on. She explained that there were larger ones, each of which had a seat on them. Use of those by anyone other than the physically infirm were looked down on, however.

Humphrey and Clive had used them before, while Sophie and Jason found their balance quickly. Neil and Belinda had more trouble, struggling to get their disc to move, only for it to shoot out from under them as it did. While they continued to practice, Jason skimmed around the edges of the yard, giggling like a madman.

“Hoverboards,” he said happily, pulling up next to Clive. “Why do we not have these in Greenstone?”

“The magical density is too low,” Clive said. “It’s why all the magical vehicles need someone like me to drive them.”

“Doesn’t that make your ability kind of useless here?” Jason asked at which Clive grinned.

“You need someone like me to drive that,” Clive said, pointing up. Jason looked into the air, where what looked like a zeppelin was floating gracefully through the sky. Instead of an inflated envelope of air, it had what looked like the frame of one, visibly glowing with magic.

“Awesome,” Jason said.

Eventually Hester judged Neil and Belinda ready for strictly supervised use of the float discs and they started down the hill and into the city, carefully for the benefit of Belinda and Neil.

“Did we have to start off downhill?” Neil asked as he nervously controlled his disc.

“Not to say I don’t agree with the sentiment,” Belinda said, likewise moving with caution. “It might be a bit much to ask Hester to move her house somewhere flatter for our benefit.”

Hester led them into the city, passing through older and older sections as they moved closer to the centre. Their destination was the Mystic Quarter, where the city’s main temples were located, along with the Magic and Adventure Society campuses.

“The Adventure Society trade hall should be the place to find most of what you’re after,” Hester told them. “You may need the Magic Society for some of the ritual components. In any case, the trade hall brokers will take all the loot you’d care to trade off your hands.”

Adventure Society campus dwarfed that of Greenstone’s, although it lacked the open simplicity. Instead, it was a warren of tight alleys and narrow streets, with building hugging together like goods bundled in a crate. It was more like a town, with the trade hall alone being the size of a village.

“You should enjoy this, Humphrey,” Jason said as they moved through the crowds of the main trade hall. “Unlike in Greenstone, there’s no one to recognise you. You can just be some guy, here.”

After visiting the brokers, they spent some time shopping around, Jason’s group chat allowing them to stay in contact when they split up. They moved through the crowded trade hall, the maelstrom of voices all around them, hawking and haggling.

“Does anyone have any crystal wash?” they heard a voice calling out. “Everywhere seems to be sold out, all of a sudden.”

The team regroup outside the trade hall to compare purchases. They had only bought a few things, their main purpose being to hand over their awakening stones and essences to the brokers for auction. There was market enough that auctions took place daily, so they would be able to collect their earnings in the morning.

“I got a line on a magical tattooist with the skills I need,” Jason said. “Someone who can apply the immortal crest.”

The immortal crest was an item Jason obtained during the trials that was unusual in nature. Using it required the services of a specialist magic craftsperson, none of whom resided in Greenstone. Humphrey had used one himself, while travelling with his mother.

Item: [Immortal Crest] (iron rank, rare)

An object that allows the soul to mark the body (consumable, tattoo).

- **Effect:** When applied by a mystical tattooist, this item will draw out a soul crest. This item can only be used on an iron rank essence user.

After acquiring the item, Jason had asked Clive about it. Clive, in turn, roped in Humphrey, who already had a soul crest. A soul crest, they explained, was a magical tattoo printed not on the body, but on the soul. That imprint would appear on the body in turn, in a form that resisted design. The form of the crest was a visible reflection of the bearer's true nature.

The value of the crest was as a form of identification. The unique imprint on the aura remained the same, even if the aura itself changed and the visible form of the crest with it. Impossible to track or falsify through even the strongest magic, so long as there was a record of the imprint, it was a guaranteed proof of identity.

Immortal crests were difficult and expensive to make, especially for an iron-rank item, but many wealthy adventurers commissioned one, nonetheless. Once the Adventure Society had a record of the imprint, it was an ironclad proof of identity that could be verified at any branch in the world.

The visible form of the crest could not be chosen, instead reflecting the soul that produced it. This had famously mixed results.

"If we're going to see a magical tattooist," Humphrey said, "then you should all get one. I already did, when I used my immortal crest."

Deciding to make that their next stop, Clive explained magical tattoos as they traversed the city on their hover-discs.

"It will only last as long as your current rank," Clive told them. "It gets purged from your body as you rank up, along with any other magical waste that doesn't hold up to your new rank. That leaves you free to get a new tattoo at your new rank."

"What do they do?" Belinda asked. "I've heard of magic tattoos, but never seen one."

"We can change that," Humphrey said. He pulled back his sleeve to show an intricate sigil on his upper arm, confident enough in his skill with the floating disc to do so without falling off. The tattoo's colour was a brilliant shade of blue that shimmered like sunlight on the ocean.

"Different tattoos do different things," Clive said. "That looks like a mana-accumulating one."

“That’s right,” Humphrey said. “It slowly accumulates mana, which I can absorb when I need it. It’s basically a mana potion that takes a few hours to refill itself.”

“The functions of iron-rank tattoos are quite basic,” Clive explained, “so most people go for some variant on health or mana recovery, be that a moderate increase to natural recovery, or an on-demand burst like Humphrey has there. There are other options, though. A short burst of damage reduction, or reducing the cooldown of an ability. Effects like that are single-use and take an amount of time to recover before being used again.”

“How many can you get?” Sophie asked.

“Just the one,” Clive said. “Usually, anyway. There are essence abilities that can increase that. My rune essence, for example, will frequently produce that type of ability. I didn’t get one of those, though.”

Following the directions Jason had obtained, Hester guided them away from the main areas of the Mystic Quarter, the streets growing narrower and the building older as they went.

“Are you sure this place we’re going is legitimate?” Neil asked Jason.

“Are you kidding?” Jason asked. “Mysterious shopkeepers in dilapidated parts of the city where most would never tread are always better.”

“According to whom?” Neil asked.

“Eighties movies.”

“Eighty what?”

“I’ll assess the place for myself,” Hester said.

They found the tattoo shop, and while the dingy exterior was not confidence-inducing, the interior was a stark contrast, with polished wood, shining tiles and glass as pristine as a cloudless winter sky. Hung on the walls were pictures of various tattoos, some artistic, others with descriptions of their effects.

“If the craftsmanship we can expect is a match for what’s on display here,” Clive said, examining the pictures, “then I don’t foresee any problems.”

“Agreed,” Hester said, likewise looking over the displays. She turned to Jason.

“Who told you about this place?” she asked.

“I was asking around at the trade hall,” Jason said. “I couldn’t much tell good advice from the bad, so I tried something else. They don’t differentiate the trade hall by rank like they do back in Greenstone; it’s all mixed together. So I started looking for places that seemed a bit less impressive than you’d expect at the trade hall. Eventually I found a place that didn’t look like much and everyone seemed to ignore, but every person I saw go in was clearly a top-flight adventurer. It was all silver and gold rankers, the kind who have

plain-looking gear that you can tell is actually the good stuff if you pay attention. So, I went in, had a little chat with the guy running it and he gave me a tip.”

“Just like that?” Sophie asked.

“Well... I did have to promise to send Neil in for a special visit.”

“What?” Neil asked.

“It’ll be fine,” Jason said. They really liked the sound of a chunky elf. We should start looking for a sailor suit soon, though, because finding one in your size might be tricky.”

“They?”

“I think he had some mates he wanted to bring along. The more, the merrier, right?”

“You know that someone is going to tie you to a boulder and drop you in the ocean one day,” Neil said.

“That’s fine,” Jason said. “It turns out that I don’t need to breathe.”

A wiry woman emerged from a back room. She looked older, but hale and weathered like a tree that survived storm after storm. Jason was unable to detect any aura from her at all.

“I was wondering who was making a commotion in my shop,” she said, looking them over. “Not a lot of boisterous youths darken my door. Accompanied by Hester Maharala, no less. The lady with the house on the hill. Are you still following that Bahadir boy around?”

“You know Emir?” Hester asked.

“Know might be a strong word,” the woman said. “We crossed paths when he was still a precocious boy. Good to hear he took up treasure hunting, because he was only a so-so adventurer. That couple he ran around with, now they knew their business. The sneaky one, too.”

“Gabriel and Arabella Remore,” Jason said. “We’ll be seeing them soon, if you’d like us to pass on a greeting.”

“Oh, they don’t want to hear from some old shopkeeper,” she said. “Who is it that sent you my way?”

“The man selling magic lamps in the trade hall,” Jason said.

“And you were the one who got it out of him?” she asked. “He probably saw you were an outworlder and got all excitable, the damn coot.”

“I’m Jason Asano. May I have your name?”

“Tilly is good enough. You didn’t come here just for tattoos, Jason Asano. You could get them plenty of places, cheaper and easier.”

Jason took out a plain metal plate and handed it over.

"Immortal crest," Tilly said, turning it over in her hands. "Who made this?"

"Me, kind of," Jason said. "A looting ability. Of sorts."

"Of weird sorts, to produce something like this. Alright, I can get you sorted out. Once we've settled the matter of price."

"And that is?" Jason asked

"Is the chunky elf with the sailor suit on the table?"

Jason blinked in surprise, then burst out laughing.

"Gods damn you, Asano," Neil said.

"The price is money, of course," Tilly said with a twinkle in her eye. "It's a tattoo shop. It'll be a wheelbarrow full of coins for an immortal crest and a day or two to get things ready."

"Once today's auctions have gone through, we'll have wheelbarrows of cash to spare," Jason said. "In the meantime, We'll get some enchanted tattoos."

Tilly took them back into a workroom with a big chair, plus needles and pots of oils, unguents and powders. Light came from the large skylight over their heads.

"You first," Tilly said to Humphrey. "Shirt off."

"I already have a tattoo," Humphrey said.

"I don't care," she said. "I want a look at that soul crest. The price of me doing one for your friend."

Humphrey tugged off his shirt, revealing his impressive physique.

"Damn, Humphrey," Jason said. "I didn't realise you waxed your chest."

"I don't wax my chest."

"You do seem oddly hairless," Belinda said. "Do you get that hair-removal cream from Jory?"

"No!"

"I think he has some kind of magic crystal he uses for shaving," Jason said.

"Would you please stop talking about my chest hair."

"You don't have any chest hair," Belinda said. "That's kind of the whole point."

"Stop gabbing and turn around," Tilly told Humphrey, who was clearly relieved to do so. It revealed a startling image on Humphrey's back; a rainbow-coloured dragon on a great, sand-coloured shield. The dragon's scales glimmered in the light, making it seem like a living thing."

"Whoever drew this out knew their business," Tilly assessed. "This is the Vitesse style. Was it Klimpsen?"

“You can tell that just from looking at it?” Humphrey asked. “I though the image was determined by the soul.”

“It is,” Tilly said. “It’s shaped by the artist that drew it out of your soul, though. Klimpfen was a good choice but he doesn’t work for just anyone. You must have some good family connections.”

“His mum is kind of a big deal,” Jason said.

“Lucky for some,” Tilly said. “You next, Asano. I need to know what I’m dealing with to make the right preparations. Shirt off.”

Jason looked at Humphrey as he self-consciously removed his shirt. Jason’s body was as fit as it had ever been but looked flabby and meagre next to Humphrey.

“How is that fair,” Jason said. “You look like some famous sculpture brought to life by a witch to steal my girlfriend.”

“You don’t have a girlfriend,” Humphrey said.

“Rub it in, why don’t you.”

Tilly shoved Jason around and started prodding at his back with her wizened fingers.

“You shouldn’t get anything too embarrassing as a crest. You wouldn’t believe the number of sheltered young idiots that get an immortal crest and aren’t happy with a crest that reveals who they truly are. Which yours will too, make no mistake. If you don’t think you can handle seeing what you really are, then I’d stop here.”

“It is what it is,” Jason said. “Worst case, shirts are a thing.”

“Interesting aura,” Tilly said, continuing to ply Jason’s back. “Domineering and territorial. Robust, especially for your rank. Something else, too. Are you some kind of priest?”

The whole team laughed at that.

“He’s definitely not,” Neil said. “If anything, he’s the exact opposite.”

“It’s a little odd to find a touch of the divine on you, then.”

“I’ve been touched by gods, alright,” Jason said. “They’re quite handsy, once you get to know them.”