

Chapter 202

Swat

Jason extended his shadow arm to the roof of Hiram's house as his shadow cloak appeared around him. He reduced his weight and retracted the arm, pulling himself lightly onto the roof. He looked around the village and saw people scrambling to get their families and go. They knew what a monster manifestation meant and none of them had seen anything as large as the rainbow vortex now shining over the surface of the lake.

The rest of his team was out of voice communication range. They would be back some time in the next few hours, depending on how long it took them to chase down the monsters they were hunting.

Jason turned his grim gaze back to the vortex. It was definitely going to be silver rank, which gave the villagers more time, but it wouldn't be enough. There was no way to evacuate the whole village in half an hour, not with children and the elderly. Someone was going to have to buy them time and the only person on hand was him.

He had no illusions of defeating a silver-rank monster. He was confident against a bronze-ranked one, even a bronze-rank essence user, if they were of the mediocre variety that inhabited Greenstone's lower rungs. A silver-ranked monster, though, was not something he could beat. Even with his powers to reduce the resistances of an enemy, his afflictions would spatter off anything silver-rank like rain off an umbrella.

Essence users advanced in a well-rounded manner, with all their attributes going up with rank. Even if they had no powers to boost them, every essence user would be faster and stronger than they were at the rank before. Monsters did not conform to that balance. Some were fast, some were strong; others were physically weak yet possessed potent magical powers. Jason needed the silver rank monster to be big and slow, just as he normally preferred.

If it was big and slow, there was a good chance he could kite the monster away from the villagers. If it was fast, or had some strange powers, it might well kill Jason in moments before rampaging through the fleeing villagers. Jason watched and waited, knowing that life or death for himself and hundreds of others was just a matter of fortune.

This was the third magic manifestation Jason had witnessed, after the awakening stone and the other silver rank monster. Silver-rank monsters were rare in the low magic region, yet he had been close to two of them manifesting in a month. It was possible the monster surge was imminent after all.

He had been told that no two manifestations happened exactly the same way, although he was having trouble getting excited for it, with his mind dwelling on his likely imminent death. Eventually, the rainbow vortex started to shrink, coalescing into a sphere that grew brighter and brighter, until Jason had to shield his eyes against it. He could see the village washed in blue light, as if a cerulean sun had appeared over the lake. Then the light dimmed and he was able to look again. He watched the sphere of blue light drop into the water and vanish.

There was an odd stillness from Jason's perspective, although in the distance he could still see villagers scrambling to flee. The light show had done nothing to allay their fears. Around Jason, though, all was quiet.

The moment passed as a humungous plume of water erupted from the lake, geysering into the air like a bomb went off in the depths. Waves rippled outward, rocking the boats tied up at jetties along the shore. Lake water fell like rain and Jason feared a repeat of what happened in the city with the small army of elementals.

Jason strained his aura senses at every pool and puddle that was forming, looking for manifesting elementals. He found the water seemed blessedly inert, aside from the single silver-rank aura bulging out from the centre of the lake. His eyes tracked to the very centre of the lake, where not all the water had fallen back down. Some had taken the form of an elemental, standing on the surface of the lake.

The elemental was unlike the formless blobs he had seen in the past. It resembled a statue, carved from water and filled with chunks of rock floating through its liquid body. It looked like a person, an armoured woman with greaves, breastplate and helmet, even a shield in one hand. In the other was a long whip, trailing from her grip down to the lake. The whip was filled with what looked like razor sharp stones along its length.

Quest: [Evacuation]

The villagers of North east Quarry Village Number Four need time to get their people away from the monster that appeared in their midst. You are all that stands between them and a quick death.

- Objective: Delay [Oasis Tyrant] until the villagers escape or help arrives.
 - Reward: [Amulet of the Dark Guardian].
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Jason let out a breath, realising that all the news was good. Normally an elemental was a bad matchup for him, but anything at silver-rank was as immune to his afflictions as

an elemental anyway. Elementals of the water and earth variety were not known for speed, which was the province of wind and fire types. Most importantly, it was alone. It would be powerful, but all he had to do was distract the one monster for as long as the villagers took to get away.

If he could keep it from going after the villagers until they were gone, then that would be a win. If he could do it long enough for the others to get back, it would be a triumph. Henrietta was the only one who would have the power to fight the monster and even that would be no easy fight.

Jason called out Shade and Gordon. Colin would be most useful remaining in his bloodstream, healing the injuries Jason would inevitably be taking.

“Shade, I’ll be relying on you for movement. One of you stays with me, keep your other bodies where I can jump to them at need. The villagers are escaping to the north, so we’ll start by heading south. We’ll use the building ringing the lake for cover and slowly work our way around. By the time we reach where the villagers are now, they should be gone. Gordon, stick with me. When I shadow jump, catch up as quick as you can.”

Jason drew his sword and looked at the elemental. Despite not having eyes, it was turning its head as if panning its gaze around the village.

“Gordon, grab its attention.”

Twin beams blasting out from the eyes orbiting the avatar of doom signalled the beginning of the fight. The elemental, standing on the surface of the lake, turned its gaze from the village to hone in on Gordon.

The elemental was a towering figure, three times the height of the house Jason was standing on. Just as he had hoped, it’s steps were slow and ponderous, even though it walked over the surface of the water as if it weighed nothing. Once it drew closer, however, Jason discovered he hadn’t gotten off as lightly as he believed. The elemental flicked its tree trunk-thick whip of water and razor rocks in Jason’s direction.

The elemental might have been slow but the whip was not. Jason barely had time to leap off the roof before the whip smashed through the front wall of Hiram’s house. As it yanked the whip back again, the roof was torn in half, what was left collapsing into the interior.

Gordon had followed Jason from Hiram’s rooftop to that of the next cottage by turning into a nebula cloud of blue and orange energy. In could form he made a rapid dash through the air before returning to his normal state. Jason was able to make such a huge leap to the next rooftop because of the jumping magic on his boots. At that moment, he

was sending a silent blessing in the direction of the Bert brothers, Gilbert and Filbert, who had found them for him.

The fight between Jason and the elemental was not a fight at all. It was a cat and mouse game, a housekeeper swatting at a skittering bug. Gordon would emerge from between a pair of buildings and fire beams at the elemental. Jason would use that distraction to extend his shadow arm and land a blow with his sword, striking at the whip.

While the elemental used it as if it were a separate weapon, it was part of the elemental itself. It didn't really matter, since the sword was all but harmless. The goal was to hold the elemental's attention. After attacking, Jason would vanish into Shade before Shade himself flickered away like the shadow of a cloud.

The game was not an easy one. Because the whip was an animate part of the elemental, it was not bound by the motion of an actual whip. It lashed and flailed, snaked and sought in pursuit of its elusive prey. As Jason and Gordon hid amongst the trees and garden, homes and shops, the passage of the whip devastated them all. Cottages were smashed to rubble, trees slapped right out of the ground in the attempt to swat down Jason and his familiars.

Jason ducked amongst the trees and buildings, sprinting, leaping, teleporting. It was close call after close call as the whip snaked around or smashed right through the obstructions he was using as cover. He was continually forced to find new ground to hide in as the monster smashed its way around the village in a circle. He realised that he was burning through village faster than the villagers could evacuate it. The contest was not just whether Jason could survive, but whether the villagers could evacuate while there was village to evacuate from.

From his first day of training, Gary had been hammering movement skills into Jason, and Sophie had taught him even more. She seemed to have a preternatural sense for motion, helping him incorporate each new power in efficient, innovative ways. All that training and practise was showing its value as he was pushed to the limit of his abilities and beyond.

In the crucible of action he was pulling off wild stunts he had barely learned for the simple reason that he had to. He wasn't even sure he had adrenaline anymore, but it felt his whole body was flush with it. He would leapt up high, floating with his cloak as he tugged himself through the air by gripping a tree or building with his shadow arm. It allowed him to air dodge the crashing whip as it tried to slap him into the ground.

He dashed wildly through the increasingly ruined village, retaliating only enough to make sure the elemental kept coming after him. The pinpricks of his sword weren't truly hurting it but seemed to annoy and frustrate as it became more wild in thrashing the whip.

Gordon was a loyal companion, following Jason's wild rush through the ruins of the once-beautiful village. Gordon's normal form was not swift, so he spent more time in his rapid, nebulous cloud form than not. Meanwhile, Shade was constantly repositioning his bodies to give Jason places to teleport to.

One of Shade's bodies was the first casualty, left behind as Jason barely teleported through it in time. The whip did not have any inherent power to affect incorporeal objects, but the silver-rank monster was so infused with magic that it ripped apart the iron-rank familiar.

Gordon was the second casualty. His cloud dash was fast but his reflexes were otherwise sluggish. He took one glancing hit, then a second, before a square blow slapped him into nothingness, his vessel dissipating entirely.

Jason was increasingly feeling the pressure. Losing one of the Shades hampered his mobility and he no longer had Gordon as a secondary distraction. When he had the chance he glanced to the evacuating villagers, confirming his fears that he wasn't buying enough time. The village was being wrecked faster than they could vacate it, the destruction moving closer and closer to their evacuation point. Just as despair began to well up, he received blessed relief.

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- Contact [Clive Standish] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Henrietta Geller] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Sophie Wexler] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Belinda Callahan] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Neil Davone] has entered communication range.
 - Contact [Humphrey Geller] has entered communication range.
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"HELP!" he screamed through the voice chat. "SILVER-RANK MONSTER!"

Henrietta's voice came back through the voice chat in a stream of expletives.

"She means we're on our way," Humphrey said. "How long do you think you can hold out?"

"Frankly, I'm surprised I lasted this..." Jason said before cutting himself off to duck under a sweeping whip strike that shattered the wall behind him and showered him in debris.

"If you could hear extraneous sounds," Jason said as he sprinted off, "you would have just heard a house collapse. Can't really talk."

“Stay sharp and stay alive, Asano,” Henrietta said. “We’re on our way.”

Renewed hope filled Jason with fresh determination. The villagers needed him to keep the monster away from them and he was running out of village, so he was forced to stay longer in the already-wrecked sections where the cover wasn’t as plentiful and the elemental could more easily track his movements. He took greater risks and more desperate chances. Finally, one of the increasingly close calls was too close and the whip found its mark.

It was little more than a glancing blow but Jason felt like he’d been hit by a truck, his body skipping like a stone across the ground before crashing into a wall. Barely able to move, he reached down and took a vial from his potion belt. The enchantment on the belt protecting them from incidental damage was one of his oldest items and he silently thanked Gary for insisting he buy it. Thumbing the stopper from the vial, he tipped it down his throat.

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, preventing additional healing and recovery items from being effective for a longer period.

Jason experienced a sensation unlike anything he had ever felt. Power, strength and vitality were a raging river, crashing through his body. It was performing at a packed-out arena; winning a grand final. It was being born while having an orgasm. He vaulted to his feet, ignoring the rents in his combat robes. The whip was coming in to finish the job, but he suddenly felt like he could beat the elemental single-handed.

Fortunately, that delusion passed quickly and he got out of the way. His shadow hand snaked out, much like the whip that was chasing him, to snatch up his dropped sword and continue the fight.

Over the course of the chase, Jason had landed many hits with his sword and built up considerable charges of extra force damage. He estimated it was more than any previous encounter, yet the iron-rank weapon took no more than thumbnail-sized divots out of the silver-rank elemental.

Jason continued his mad dash, buying as much time as he could as his situation deteriorated. Shade’s second body was destroyed, then his third. In Shade’s absence he was conjuring and re-conjuring his cloak as he teleported through it to any shadow he

could see. The reinvigorating effect of the potion was spent as he burned through stamina and mana both, riding more and more on the edge. Hiding had become a constant state of evasion, his body riddled with cuts from debris smashed into flying shards. He no longer had time to check on the villagers, or try and slow down the destruction of their village.

The end came when he sensed a bundle of new auras approaching. He recognised his team and let out a weary laugh. That moment's distraction proved costly as the whip slammed into him. A stone shard within the whip tore across his torso as it sent him careening through the air. He was already unconscious when he hit a wall like a bug on a windshield.