

Chapter 166: Part of Being a Team

After defeating the flesh abomination, Jason's temporary team had grown to five. With two defenders in Keane and Sophie, two healers in Neil and Jory, Jason was their only dedicated damage source. They were heavy on sustain but light on immediate damage, with Jason's powers bringing certain, but eventually death to the monsters they encountered.

This setup made for slower going than they might have with someone like Humphrey on hand but it wasn't without benefits. With the oversized monster groups they were encountering, fights were long and everyone's abilities were getting a workout. The results of all that practise were showing each night as at least one member of the group experienced ability advancement.

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- Ability [Castigate] (Sin) has reached Iron 6 (100%).
 - Ability [Castigate] (Sin) has reached Iron 7 (00%).

 - All [Sin] abilities have reached [Iron 7].
 - Linked attribute [Recovery] has increased from [Iron 6] to [Iron 7].

 - Progress to bronze rank: 35% (2/4 essences complete).
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The top end of iron rank represented the peak of human potential in a given attribute. Jason's power and recovery attributes had both reached seven, vastly improving his cardiovascular health while making him stronger and tougher than his slight frame would suggest. As his skinny physique transitioned to lean muscle, he felt incredibly empowered.

"If it feels this good to advance through iron rank," he said to the others as they prepared to set off for the morning, "I can't wait for bronze rank."

"Where I come from, you can randomly throw a rock and you'll hit a silver rank," Keane said. "They say you aren't even a real adventurer until bronze."

They had got to know Keane over the last few days. He was a dark-skinned human, from an island city located in this world's Caribbean Sea. He had none of the arrogance they had seen from some of the imported adventurers, just looking to be the most effective member of the group that he could.

They fell into a daily pattern. From early morning to late evening, they would move toward the centre of the city, fighting monsters as they went. At the end of the day, they

would find a promising-looking building, search it for treasures and clear out any monsters lairing inside before setting up camp.

“What do you think this building was?” Jory asked as they regrouped from searching the latest building. “Some kind of huge inn?”

“Brothel,” Neil said absently, then noticed that everyone had turned to look at him.

“What?” he asked.

“That was a very confident response,” Jason said.

“You spend a lot of time in brothels?” Sophie asked.

“Yes,” Neil said with a sigh. “Hang around with Thadwick Mercer long enough and you’ll see the inside of a lot of brothels.”

“He’s seventeen,” Jason said. “How many brothels can he have been to?”

“I think I’ve seen the inside of every bordello in Greenstone,” Neil said. “High class, low class; high class pretending to be low class. He doesn’t care. He’s spent a lot of money at the church of the Healer in the last year or so.”

“At least he’s using paid volunteers,” Jason said. “He gives off a very strong date-rapey vibe.”

They occasionally met more adventurers, but none of those encounters led to further conflict or team-ups. There was some exchanging of supplies, with many adventurers having been separated from the team members carrying most of the team's gear. Jory proved popular in this regard, with his specialised dimensional bag overstuffed with potions.

They also met more vorger and flesh abominations. Building on their previous experience, by the third and fourth encounters they had a good idea of what worked and what didn't.

“We’re lucky they’re both fairly mindless,” Keane said as they discussed tactics one evening. “The most dangerous thing about higher-rank monsters isn’t their more exotic powers, but their intelligence.”

“You’ve seen a few higher-rank monsters?” Neil asked him.

“Yeah,” Keane said. “In areas of high-magic density, we iron rankers aren’t allowed to hunt by ourselves, like you Greenstone people. We get to go along and see some higher-rank monsters in action, though.”

One thing Jason finally got going was practice for his execute ability. Even without burst-damage members on the team, only the toughest iron-rank monsters could actually survive enough damage for it to be effective. It was only against the bronze-rank enemies,

be they the flesh abominations or regular monsters, that he could actually get some use out of it.

The team were strong enough to handle a bronze-rank monster, but while the flesh abominations roamed alone, the actual monsters did not. With the city so saturated in magic, even normally solitary monsters were appearing in packs. In the face of this, the team's usual strategy was to make a fighting retreat, using their two defenders and two healers to keep the group intact while Jason loaded up the enemies with afflictions.

This gave Jason the chance to use the two abilities he had the most trouble practising. They were both direct damage abilities, but neither were effective to just open up with. Both required setting up and were quite similar in their use, which, at least meant that when he could get some use out of one, he could get it from the other as well.

Fighting a trio of monsters, the team was being pressured. Their strong defensive strategy was highly effective against iron-rank monsters, even in large numbers, but bronze-rank beasts with powerful attacks threatened to overwhelm them.

The monsters looked like four-armed gorillas, covered in lizard skin instead of fur. They liked to climb and leap, making rapid attacks with their four arms before leaping away to set up for the next rush attack.

Sophie and Keane intercepted each attack while Neil and Jory supported them with buffs, shields and healing. It was enough to hold on but just barely, the team's mana being rapidly depleted as they used their abilities to the full. If it weren't for Jory delivering mana potions and Neil's replenishing spells, they would have already been exhausted and overrun. Jason was nowhere to be seen, although the patches of black flesh and the blood oozing from the monster's wounds marked his active presence.

"I see what you mean by smart being dangerous," Sophie said to Keane during a lull in the action. "They're starting to coordinate better."

The monsters were starting to attack all at once, or attack in rapid succession with little or no pause for the adventurers to regroup, attempting to break up their formation. They had a strong defensive line and good individual synergies but the raw power of the bronze-rank monsters was beginning to beat them down.

A pair of the monsters started hammering on Keane's shield, which began to buckle until one of the monsters abruptly stumbled away after Jason cast a spell on it from the darkness.

Ability: [Punition] (Doom)

- Spell
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 6 (91%).

- Effect (iron): Inflicts necrotic damage for each curse, disease, poison and unholy affliction the target is suffering.

While the bronze-rank monster had inherent damage reduction to Jason's iron-rank spell, that same damage reduction meant that the afflictions it was suffering from had time to multiplying without killing it. The result was that the spell, boosted for each one of those afflictions, ravaged the monster's body, even though the damage reduction. The monster staggered away as dead flesh replaced healthy, passing across the creature like a shadow. Jason finished it off with his execute ability.

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Conjunction (execute)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 5 (38%)

- Effect (iron): Deals a small amount of transcendent damage. As an execute effect, damage scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury.

Shimmering light of blue, silver and gold shone down on the monster. Transcendent damage ignored the difference in rank and the creature dissolved directly into rainbow smoke.

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- You have defeated [Grizzard].

 - [Grizzard] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
 - [Monster Core (Bronze)] 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.

The others ignored their share of the loot that fell over them, still caught up in the midst of combat. By the time the fight was over, they were battered, exhausted but grinning in triumph at having overcome such powerful enemies.

“That sparkle power,” Keane said as they sprawled inside a building to hide from more monsters. “You should have been using that from the start with those flesh abominations.”

“You’re right,” Jason said. “Those flesh abominations are hard to time it with, though. It’s an execute power, so they need to be badly hurt for it to have any impact. Normally, you can see the condition a monster is in, but whatever the flesh things do to try and adapt to my afflictions hides their condition. I’m just left guessing.”

“I like this interface power of yours,” Keane said. “I can feel it when my abilities cross a threshold, obviously, but having it show up for me to see gives a real feeling of progress.”

“We appreciate your powers too,” Jory said to Keane. “Standing in front of me and taking all the hits is something I really like in a team member.”

“Being able to take the hits is nice,” Keane said, “but some hits I really wish I could dodge. I envy your ability to get out of the way, Sophie. Or into the way, as you need. I’ve had plenty of times where I’m wasn’t fast enough to be where my team needed me to be. I hope they’re doing alright without me.”

“Huh,” Clive said as a system notice appeared in front of him.

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- [\[Jory Tillman\] has been added to your party.](#)
 - [\[Imran Keane\] has been added to your party.](#)
-

“What’s up?” Valdis asked.

“It looks like some of my friends have found each other,” Clive said. “And someone new. It’s good to know they’re alright.”

“That’s a useful ability, working from that far away.”

“A lot of its usefulness is lost at this distance. Better than nothing, though. At least it lets me know they’re still alive.”

Valdis nodded. “Far from a given, in this place.”

After their traversal of the towering building, the other three members of their group were more respectful of Clive. He had proven himself multiple times, including identifying the hoard of growth items they had found at the top. Each member of the team had picked out one pair of items for themselves, from the six pairs. The rest of the team agreed that the last set should go to Clive, as the strongest contributor to actually obtaining them. That last pair was the orb and circlet, which weren’t useful to Clive himself but he knew would be very useful to Neil.

After they climbed back down the building, they set off through the city again. Clive glanced back at the building behind them, then at Valdis.

"You remind me of a friend of mine," Clive told him.

"Oh?" Valdis asked.

"He's outgoing, like you. Good at pulling people into his own pace. You both have a dangerous habit, though."

"And what's that?"

"You take risks, ignoring that it may be the people around you that suffer the consequences. My friend, for example, has this indentured servant he had become an adventurer."

"The outworlder," Valdis said. "The one who made that big fuss at the meeting. The indentured servant was that gorgeous celestine?"

"That's them," Clive said.

"I heard about how he had his indentured servant made into an adventurer. That's an unusual choice."

"He was trying to help her because she was a friend of a friend," Clive said. "Then he overestimated his own political acumen and almost handed her off into what amounts to sexual slavery. If you ask him, he'll say he did it because he sympathises with her circumstances. Really, though, I think he feels guilty over what he almost dropped her into."

"I would never do something like that to someone," Valdis said.

"No?" Clive asked. "Climbing up those towers, you didn't face any real risk, but Hildebrand was literally dropped off the building."

"But we got out, safe and sound, with no small reward for our trouble."

"This time," Clive said. "But how many times can you take that kind of risk without it going wrong? And when it does, will you be the one paying the price? My friend has done a lot of good for me. His enthusiasm helped me find the part of myself I'd lost that made me want to be an adventurer. In turn, I need to try and help him avoid making the kind of mistakes that will haunt him. Covering each other's weaknesses and blind spots is part of being a team."

Clive nodded his head at the other three, having their own conversation, further ahead.

"I hope your actual team isn't like them," Clive said. "They have skills, certainly, but you need people who'll tell you when you're wrong."

“I think I do,” Valdis said, frowning. “There aren’t a lot of people in my life who’ll talk to me like this, though. I don’t suppose I can talk you into changing teams?”

“I’m good, thank you,” Clive said. “I’m pretty sure running around with an outworlder will give me plenty of chances to see some interesting things. Especially this outworlder.”

Chapter 167: Making a Spectacle of Himself

“We’re getting closer to the centre,” Jason said, looking at his map. “We could get there today if we went straight for it.”

“That explains why we ran into so many groups, yesterday,” Neil said. “Everyone is converging.”

“Do we go straight for the middle?” Jory asked. His abilities had been growing as fast as anyone else’s, but that had never been his goal. He had gotten more than he could ask for with the alchemy recipe his previous group had come to blows over and was ready to leave. The lesser miracle potion formula would guarantee his clinic’s funding in perpetuity.

“I like the training,” Keane said. “It’s like our own private monster surge, without innocent people getting caught up in it. I like the treasure’s we’ve been finding, too. That said, there are six days left. I vote we make for the middle and decide what to do after seeing what we find there.”

Agreement with Keane’s reasoning was unanimous and they set out directly for the heart of the city. The monsters, unsurprisingly, had no interest in accommodating their accelerated schedule and continued their regular attacks. They didn’t stumble on anything more dangerous than they had previously encountered, however, and kept to their anticipated pace through the morning. They stopped for lunch, all sitting on the edge of a high building eating sandwiches.

“This is a good sandwich,” Keane said. “I’m not sure why you brought food along, though. Spirit coins sustain us just fine and take up a lot less space.”

“Sure,” Jason said, “but of all the time you spend here, will you ever think back on that time you ate a spirit coin while trudging on? Of course not. You’ll remember the crazy fights and the amazing treasure. The dashing affliction specialist with great hair. And now, you can look back on a quiet moment where you stopped to eat with friends and take in this amazing place. If this isn’t what you became an adventurer for, then you’re doing it wrong.”

Keane looked at Jason, looking out at the city laid out before them with a contented smile. Keane turned to take it in himself. With Jason’s words he realised that he had been so caught up from the start that he’d never stopped to appreciate what he was experiencing.

When Keane arrived on the archway tower, he had been startled to be separated from his team. Then he had formed a temporary group, only to have them fragment over

treasure. After that came a new group, more cohesive than the first but also more unusual in their sensibilities. The team leader was prone to nonsensical ramblings, the celestine was somehow his indentured servant and an adventurer. The healer seemed normal enough, but Jory, who Keane had been with the longest, didn't actually seem to like adventuring. That was a distinctly unusual position for an adventurer.

Since then, they had faced fight after fight, coming closer to death than he'd like more than once. In all that time, through losing one team, then a second, only to fight his way through with the strangest of the three, he had never taken the time to really stop and consider where he was and what he was doing. Now he took the time to look out over the city, which was actually quite beautiful with nature having reclaimed the ruins. He glanced at the people sitting with him on the rooftop, eating sandwiches like it was an ordinary day.

"I wish my team were here," he said.

"They are, somewhere," Jory said. "We get to the middle and you'll find each other."

They finished eating and resumed their course through the city. A few hours and a couple of monster packs later, a welcome message popped up in front of Jason.

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- [Contact \[Niko Tomich\] has entered communication range.](#)
 - [Contact \[Bethany Cavendish\] has entered communication range.](#)
 - [Contact \[Hudson Kettering\] has entered communication range.](#)
-

Jason immediately opened a voice chat.

"Beth," Jason said. "Are you all alright?"

"We are," Beth's voice came back. "Niko and I were dropped on the same tower and we found Hudson along the way. No sign of Emily or Mose, yet. How about you?"

"Missing two as well; Clive and Humphrey. Want to meet up?"

"I do," Beth said. "We're kind of stuck here, anyway. There's a bunch of people all looking for a way to the centre of the city."

"Something's blocking the way?"

"Yeah. Come find us and you can see for yourself."

Jason added them to the party, allowing him to find her with his map ability. Not long thereafter, Jason and his group were arriving at what turned out to be a sizeable camp of adventurers. From the looks of it, some of them had been here for days. The wariness the adventurers had been treating each other with was absent here, with all looking to find a way forward.

The Greenstone adventurers were easy to pick out from the imports, just from their auras. The foreign adventurers had clean, controlled auras. Outside of Jason and Beth's groups, most Greenstone adventurers had shoddy aura control at best.

"What's going on?" Jason asked, after greetings and introductions between his team and Beth's.

"Some kind of plant monster infestation," Beth explained. "Anyone trying to get closer to the city centre than this is faced with tentacles and plant monsters crawling out of the ground. People have tried going around, but the infestation seems to be encircling most of, if not the entire the central region of the city."

"How do you know it's encircling the central area and not covering it entirely?" Jory asked.

"We don't," Beth said. "We're just hoping, because otherwise, how is anyone going to complete these trials. A few groups have tried fighting their way through but we have no idea if they made it or if they're mulch, now. We know from the people who've tried going around that there are a few camps like this one, with people gathered to see if anyone can figure out a way through. Assuming there's a way through at all."

Quest: [Reclaimed by Nature]

Plant life has not just reclaimed this part of the city but actively defends it. Find a way past the aggressive flora to reach the heart of the city.

- Objective: Circumvent aggressive plant life 0/1.
- Reward: Varies by effectiveness of method.
- Some party members are too far away to participate in this quest. They will not receive this quest until they re-enter proximity to party leader.

"What the heck is that?" Beth asked.

"That's Jason's ability," Sophie said. "He gets free stuff for doing what he was going to do anyway. It's basically a scam."

"I can drop you out of the party if you don't want to participate," Jason said.

"I can drop you off a building," Sophie told him.

"I can float down, remember?"

"Not if I knock you out first."

"Look, I love some sexually-charged banter as much the next girl," Beth said, "but we have a bunch of plant monsters to deal with."

While Jason and Sophie looked at Beth with matching expressions of silent affront, Beth turned her attention to Jory.

“You’re an alchemist, right? Plant monsters can often be handled with alchemical solutions, so is there anything you can do.”

“Maybe,” Jory said. “I’ll need to know what we’re dealing with before I can look at solutions.”

“There are a lot of impressive adventurers, here,” Neil said. “I have to imagine someone knows something.”

“There’s a little council, of sorts,” Beth said. “Each team sends one or two people to discuss a way past it. People are trying all sorts of things, so we’ve been meeting every few hours to talk about results.”

“How’s that going?” Jason asked.

“It’s a bunch of adventurers used to getting their own way, so about as well as you’d expect.”

“Jory,” Jason said. “You’re about as close to a plant expert as we’ll get. Beth, can you take us around to people with firsthand knowledge of this thing?”

“I can,” Beth said. “I told you that some groups have tried to make it through. Some didn’t come back, so we don’t know if they made it through. Others tried and came back when things got too rough.”

Jason nodded his thanks, and suggested the rest his group to ask around, see what they could find out. While the others roamed the camp, Beth took Jason and Jory to speak to some of the other teams, Jory taking notes on anything they could tell them. After speaking to enough teams that they were just getting the same information over again, they regrouped to take stock.

“What do you think?” Jason asked Jory.

“This is potentially very bad,” Jory said.

“How so?” Beth asked.

“I think what we’re dealing with might not be plant monsters,” Jory said. “I’ve heard of something like what’s been described to us before, and that wasn’t a monster at all. It was a magical plant.”

“You think these plants have taken over this section of city?” Keane asked.

“Not plants,” Jory said. “Plant, singular. One single, massive plant mass, buried underground and sending up parts of itself to find prey.”

“Prey?” Neil asked. “Since when are plants predatory?”

“I’ve heard of predatory plants,” Jason said. “The one on my world are small, though. They lure in bugs, that kind of thing.”

“The one I’m thinking of is bigger,” Jory said. “Much bigger. It takes centuries, but they have been known to grow to the size we’re looking at, here. It thrives underground, slowly expanding. It forms symbiotic relationships with the other plant life in the area, which become like sensory organs for it. Then it starts preying on anything that wanders into its area. Animals quickly learn to avoid it and it goes dormant. It lets the animals come back, waits until the area is teeming, then strikes. Tentacle vines and spawned, semi-independent plant creatures.”

“And you think this is what we’re dealing with?” Jason asked.

“I can’t know that for sure,” Jory said. “It’s what I can think of that fits.”

“You think this whole section of city has a giant plant monster under it? One monster?”

“Not a monster,” Jory said. “We know from the people who fought them that the spawned plant creatures are iron-rank, while the tentacles, which will be appendages of the main body, are bronze rank. No bronze-rank monster spawns that big, or occupying that much space underground.”

“What’s it called?” Jason asked.

“It’s called a blood root vine,” Jory said. “It’s named that because it straddles the line between plant and animal, with its predatory behaviour and blood sap. That was what really gave it away, when people started saying the tentacles bled when cut. The sap of a blood root vine is almost identical to blood and has a number of alchemical uses. Most of the big ones you hear about are from alchemist grow houses that were abandoned and the blood root vine slowly expanded until someone found it again. It’s a story that goes around in alchemy circles but you never actually expect to see it.”

“So, what do we do about it?” Beth asked.

“Assuming I’m right,” Jory said, “the key is the main body. That means an underground root network. From what I hear, when clearing out a blood root vine that’s gotten out of hand, there’s two ways of handling it. One is to dig the whole damn thing up and burn it. That’s logistically infeasible, especially in five days. I have heard, however, of another method. A method we have the good fortune to have on hand.”

Jory turned a pointed look on Jason.

“Me?” Jason asked.

“You,” Jory said. “I can’t guarantee the authenticity of this story, but I have heard of using afflictions to infect the main body and rot the whole thing. You have to get

underground, at the root system itself, though. If you just try it on the tentacles, it will let the tentacles fall off to protect itself.”

“We’ve already tried that,” Beth said. “There’s a few people in camp who can use afflictions, including me. We blasted a chunk out of the ground and poured every affliction we had into the roots. They withered up, but it didn’t spread.”

“Were any of you focused affliction specialists, like Jason, or were they all area abilities like yours?” Jory asked.

“Area, like me,” Beth said. “Not to put you down, Jason, but who afflicts one person when you can affect whole groups.”

“That’s your problem,” Jory said. “We’re talking about a plant spread over an area the size of Old City. The afflictions you fed it were like trying to turn the sea yellow by taking a sneaky wee in it. You need afflictions that grow worse and worse, faster and faster, instead of petering out.”

“Will my afflictions even work on it?” Jason asked. “We’ve seen a few plant monsters since we got here and my abilities have been very inconsistent on them.”

“They should,” Jory said. “As I said, the blood root vine is more akin to animals than other plants.”

“Blood is one thing,” Jason said, “but to get the kind of damage escalation we need, I’ll need my curses. That requires a soul, or at least the motive spirit most monsters have instead of one.”

“I can’t guarantee anything,” Jory said, “but once it reaches a certain size, it even has a dim, animalistic intelligence. Hopefully it’s close enough to an animal that there is something inside it for your curses to hold of.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“Then we get out and come up with something new,” Beth said. “Unless you have a better plan, we may as well try.”

“The trick will be getting access to the root system,” Jory said. “You said you had someone who can open up a hole in the ground?”

They all turned to Hudson, the large man who served as the front-liner for Beth’s team. He had been staying quiet through the conversation, leaving things like planning to Beth. His earth powers were the most prominent abilities in his power set.

“It’s not me,” he said. “I have the earth essence, but not a hole-digging power.”

“It was another earth user,” Beth said. “We can get her again.”

“Alright,” Jason said. “Beth, talk to this council you mentioned. See if you can’t find us some extra muscle to fight our way in with. Jory and I will try and get more specific about what we can expect when we try this.”

“What about the rest of us?” Keane asked.

“Get some rest,” Jory said. “This thing will be relentless in fighting back against us. You’ll need all the stamina you can muster.”

The group they gathered had twenty six members, including the five from Jason’s group and three from Beth’s. Keane had found a member of his own team in the camp and pulling him into the endeavour, along with that team member’s own temporary group. Aside from that was another earth essence user and a few more people Beth had wrangled into participating.

The region of the city occupied by the plant was more overgrown than other parts of the city. The buildings were mostly rubble, the paved streets long overturned by roots and other plant growth. As they moved into the area, tentacle vines crawled out to the ground to ensnare legs, thorns covered in soporific toxin biting through skin. The team fought back, cutting away vines as healers purged the poison, a task in which Jason participated using his own cleansing power. It was highly effective, although the way Jason consumed the cleansed afflictions did not go unnoticed.

“Did you just say ‘feed me your sins?’” another adventurer asked him.

“There’s a lot of people chanting spells,” Jason said. “You probably misheard.”

A variety of plant creatures came shambling into the attack. Plodding mounds of fibrous matter that whipped at them with tentacle arms, they weren’t very dangerous but they were tough, their numbers swelling as the group struggled to put them down as fast as new one appeared.

“This should be far enough!” Jory yelled after he determined that they should have definitely made their way over the root system.

“Alright!” Beth called out. “Everyone knows what to do. Gather on me!”

The group pulled in tight on Beth as Hudson, beside her, started casting a spell. Shortly after, a stone dome rose up out of the ground in two halves, closing over them. As it sealed them in, crystals embedded in the dome lit up the interior with luminescence.

The other earth user called for more room and the people inside the dome moved up against the walls. The creatures outside were shut out, but tentacles still came up through the ground. Beth designated a team to protect the earth user while she used her spell to

dig. Her spell did not take long and soon gobbets of wet earth were geysering out of the ground and over everyone inside the dome.

“Sorry,” she called out. “I don’t normally do this indoors.”

With the earth user’s spell completed, Jason glanced at Jory, who nodded back. Jason then walked up to the hole, even as more tentacles crawled from the ground to attack the people under the dome. Beth directed the people who had been shielding the earth user to switch their protection to Jason. Looking in the hole was a vertical tunnel from which the wet ground had been excavated. Left behind, scraped but intact by the digging spell, were thick roots, looking like thick green and yellow veins.

“Moment of truth,” he muttered to himself. Loaded up with every buff the whole group could muster, he chanted a spell.

“Bleed for me.”

A crack appeared on the thickest root, blood red sap trickling out. The sap was, as Jory surmised, close enough to blood that Jason’s ability took hold.

➤ Special attack [Haemorrhage] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Blood Root Vine].

“Now the real test.”

He chanted another spell.

“Carry the mark of your transgressions.”

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- Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Sin] on [Blood Root Vine].
 - Spell [Castigate] has inflicted [Mark of Sin] on [Blood Root Vine].
 - [Blood Root Vine] have resisted [Mark of Sin].
 - [Mark of Sin] does not take effect.
-

Transcendent damage burned a symbol into the root as the spell took hold. The bronze-rank vine resisted one of the effects, even with all the buffs Jason was under, but it was the one Jason didn’t need. He let out a relieved breath, then remembered he couldn’t afford to relax as a thorny vine wrapped around his leg.

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- Special attack [Vine Thorn] has inflicted [Subjugating Toxin] on you.
 - You have resisted [Subjugating Toxin].
 - [Subjugating Toxin] does not take effect.
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
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Before Jason could cut away the vine, one of his protectors had done it for him.

“Need a cleanse?” the man asked.

“All good, thanks,” Jason said, turning his attention back to the hole.

He cast another curse on the vine, which it resisted, then a second and third time before it took hold.

➤ [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Blood Root Vine].

Jason held a hand out, slicing it with his wrist razor. Leeches went spilling down into the hole.

“Sorry to drop you in a hole, Colin. See if you can’t suck some blood out of that vine.”

At another of the adventurer camps around the aggressive plant zone, Clive and Valdis watched a heavily injured group retreat from the danger zone.

“I think you were right to urge caution, Clive,” Valdis said. “It looks like something has set the vines right off.”

Previously, the tentacles would only emerge from the ground to attack intruders. Now, however, they were erupting from all over the ground, thrashing about wildly.

“I think something is happening to them,” Clive said. “Are you seeing those black patches?”

“I am.”

They watched as the black patches grew larger, some vines even rotting and falling dead to the ground.

In another part of the city, Humphrey and his temporary team were deep into the territory of the aggressive vines. Their intention had been to fight their way through, but the deeper they went, the more plant monsters and tentacles appeared to meet them. They were a powerful group but they were slowly being overwhelmed.

“Do we keep pushing forward, or go back?” Carly called out, panic tinging her voice.

“Forward,” Lowell called back. “There has to be an end to it. We could be almost clear.”

“There’s no guarantee of that,” Humphrey countered. “We go back.”

“We can’t make it back,” Lowell objected. “We have to risk it.”

“No, we don’t” Humphrey held firm, not pausing as he hacked away at the tentacles. “Our chances may be slight but at least we know there is one, going back.”

The tentacles started growing more and more numerous but flailed wildly, rather than grab at the adventurers as they had done previously.

“What’s happening?” Carly asked.

“Something’s rotting the tentacles,” Lowell said, and as he said, pointing to where the tentacles were turning black from the base. Some rotted away and dropped dead, even as more emerged from the ground. Then a silver, blue and gold light lit up all the tentacles, dissolving them to nothing. As it did, the plant monsters became inert collections of plant matter.

“Was that transcendent damage?” Carly asked.

“It was,” Humphrey said.

They looked around, seeing that whatever had destroyed the plants around them had affected everything within sight. Hurt and exhausted, they dropped to the ground to rest.

“What do you think did that?” Carly asked.

“Not what; who,” Humphrey said with a smile. “I know who did this.”

“You’re telling us some iron ranker did all this?” Lowell asked.

“I know these powers,” Humphrey said. “They belong to a man who can’t help making a spectacle of himself. Thankfully.”

Chapter 168: Team Change

Only seven groups had managed to breach the centremost region of the city before the blood root vine had been killed. One was made up of people with flight powers. Such abilities were mana intensive at iron-rank, requiring them to chug mana potions as quickly as they could without poisoning themselves and stopping to rest atop every building not reduced to rubble by the plants.

Another was made up of adventurers from a jungle kingdom who had managed to find their entire original team. They had come up as adventurers fighting plant monsters and decided to bet on their abilities and experience to get them through. It was even worse than they expected; a seemingly endless, unrelenting slog until they finally reached ground not bursting with tentacle vines. They were hurt and exhausted, their willpower and supplies both spent. It was a near thing, but their experience, teamwork and mutual trust had seen them through.

Of the five remaining groups to get past the plants, all had found methods to do so when searching buildings around the perimeter of the zone. For some, this was an active search. Having concluded that the plants were a part of the test, they reasoned that the means to pass it had to be somewhere somewhere. For others it was serendipity, stumbling onto a way past the plants while searching for treasure.

Only two of the groups had come through in the original teams they had before entering the astral space. Separated at the start of the trial, like everyone else, they had found each other in one of the camps. One of these teams included Padma, Farrah's former mentee. Filled with determination after finding one another, they had no illusions of fighting their way through and looked for another path. Their intensive searching finally turned up an abandoned alchemy workshop, containing bottles of a liquid that repelled the plants.

However they arrived, each group was elated to have made it past the aggressive plants. Their efforts were difficult and costly but they knew that same difficulty made each team who struggled through more likely to be the ones who snatched the prize. It was largely to their dismay, then, that other teams started reaching the middle en masse, mostly in waves from the three camps. It quickly became evident that one of the camps had found a way to kill off the plants entirely.

Compared to the rest of the city the adventurers had been making their way through, the true centre of the city was much more intact. The buildings were still empty, time and

the wet air corroding away anything not magically sealed. It was also a relatively small area, allowing separated team members to reconnect as the three camps worth of adventurers swarmed in.

All the adventurers ended up in what Jason's map marked as the very centre of the city. There was a vast open space, like a city square, with a circular tower in the middle. This was the one building anyone had seen in the city with no signs of damage whatsoever and was both wide and tall. Every adventurer who attempted to get close to the tower encountered a disorienting magical field which sent them staggering back. This was true approaching from above, one flier getting injured as the field tossed them away through the air. The invigilator, Shade, finally appeared to announce that the tower would open on the final day of the trials, several days hence.

Previous conflicts were largely put aside as the adventurers arrived in the square. People found their original teams, even as they celebrated new bonds, forged in the fires of shared adversity. Not every reunion was happy, as someone started organising the counting of the fallen. Those who had collected remains returned them to their teams, where possible. Some teams had fallen entirely, while others lacked the resources to carry the caskets of their dead.

Others weren't dead but gone, having used their escape medallions to preserve their lives at the cost of further participation in the trials. Shade appeared to inform teams which of their members had escaped to safety. While many of the adventurers were able to reconstitute their teams, others were once again looking for new companions in the face of their original teams being absent or dead. Some, left alone, used their escape medallions to leave the astral space behind.

Humphrey's team staggered into the city, ragged from their narrow escape. If it wasn't for Humphrey hacking through the plants like a maniacal, magically-empowered lumberjack, they wouldn't have survived to see their reprieve as the plant monster died. Heading into the city, afterward, they had collected up the bodies of two separate groups that had died trying the same crossing.

The group, aside from Humphrey, were four of a team of six, having the luck to mostly arrive in the city together. They thanked Humphrey, sober in the knowledge that without him they would have been amongst the fallen. Lowell had lost much of his arrogance on their trek through the city. Humphrey still didn't like him, but they shared the respect of dangers weathered together. The group set out to find their remaining team members in the growing crowd as Humphrey went to find Jason and the others.

Clive, Valdis and the rest of their temporary team arrived in a far better state than Humphrey. After the dangers of the tower, Clive had won the rest of the team over against Valdis' proposal to fight their way through. Clive had proposed seeking out alternate means forward but the plant zone had cleared before they had the chance. They had an easy time passing through the rubble of what had previously been the plant-infested region. They were wary of danger, but the surviving jungle was made up of regular plant life. It was even monster free, courtesy of the now-dead carnivorous plant.

Clearing the zone, Clive was glad to hear from his team over voice chat. He announced his intention to go find them, signalling the end of their temporary alliance. Each member of the group was from a different team and had their own people to find, but Abarca, Campos and Hildebrand were reluctant to part from Valdis. Their teaming with the prince was an opportunity they were loathe to relinquish, each seeking to secure promises of meeting up after the trials. Valdis, clearly no stranger to such encounters, saw them each away smoothly. He, in turn, secured a promise of future dealings from Clive.

Jason already had two of his team members, thus waited for Humphrey and Clive to find them. Keane, who now had one of his own team with them, made friendly farewells before they went to find the rest. Jory was about to head off and seek out his own team, who were all fellows from the various crafting associations. Shade promptly appeared to inform him that every other member of his team had used their escape medallions, so Jory remained with Jason.

There was only an hour or so of good light left. There were days left to seek out the city's treasures and everyone took what was left of the day to reorganise. Adventurers reconnected with their teams, collected their dead and sometimes made new teams again. Many teams had members who were dead or, for preference, safely extracted via escape medallion. As when they first arrived, then, temporary teams were built from the scraps of those that remained.

Jason had the fortune to have all his team survive to regroup. As he used his map and the voice chat power to collect his team, he did the same for Beth Cavendish's absent team member. It was the archer, Emily, who had likewise arrived safely in the heart of the city.

Many groups were staking out territory around the square, Jason and Beth's team doing the same while waiting for their disparate members to find them. Groups were rapidly claiming the largely intact buildings that were closest and they picked out a five storey building that turned out to be a square around an open space in the middle. The courtyard inside meant that every floor of the building was splashed with natural light.

As they were taking stock, another group tried to bully them into giving it up, Beth and Jason going outside to meet their challenge. One of the team went pale when Jason responded by manifesting his cloak, rapidly whispering to the others. Jason and Beth shared a querying glance as they watch the group mutter in a huddle. The one who had recognised Jason cloak was using some very aggressive body language.

“What are they saying?” Jason asked quietly. “You have that elf-ears power, right?”

“It’s not an elf ears power!” Beth hissed back at him.

“Yeah, but you have it, right?”

“I can hear them, yes.”

“So, what are they saying?”

“They’re talking about that ridiculous rumour about you killing a bunch of adventurers in a shopping centre.”

“Oh?”

“He’s claiming you killed six people.”

“It was only five,” Jason said. “I bet people think six because there were twelve of them and people just say I killed half.”

“Wait,” Beth asked, turning on Jason. “That actually happened?”

“You didn’t know? Thadwick sent some bottom-feeder thugs to kill me so I wouldn’t reveal his shady land-grab scheme.”

“So you killed them?”

“Some of them,” Jason said defensively. “If you’re fighting twelve guys and they think you aren’t willing to kill them, they aren’t going to back off.”

“You really beat twelve guys?”

“They were all rubbish,” Jason said. “I don’t think any of them even had a full set of powers.”

“You don’t have a full set of powers.”

“Yeah, but they didn’t know that.”

“What does that have to do with…”

Beth trailed off as the other group finished their conversation.

“My friend here thinks you’re some kind of hard man,” one of them challenged Jason.

“Doesn’t really matter what I am,” Jason said. “My friend Humphrey is standing behind you with a sword bigger than you are, so I suggest you jog on, cobber.”

The man turned to find Humphrey standing there, as promised, with his dragon-wing sword slung over one shoulder.

“Yeah well,” the man said as he shuffled off to leave, waving a finger at Jason with transparent bravado. “You should count yourself lucky.”

“Why?” Jason asked. “Are you holding a raffle?”

They watched the group leave, Humphrey dismissing his sword with relief.

“I hate putting it over my shoulder like that,” he said. “It feels like I’m going to tip over the whole time.”

“It was just right,” Jason said. “Casually intimidating, like you might kick the snot out of them as a hobby.”

“You do have very large arms,” Beth said.

“They are quite large, aren’t they?” Jason said. “Do you do any special exercises?”

“We train together,” Humphrey said, giving him a flat look. “You know exactly what exercises I do.”

“So, you’re saying you rub special oil on them when no one’s looking?”

“What?”

Jason dropped his cloak and headed back into the building, calling out loudly.

“Hey Jory! Have you been selling Humphrey special arm oil?”

Three more teams ended up joining Jason and Beth’s in the building they shared. Valdis was his bombastic self, inviting himself and his team in as Clive tried to explain Valdis to the others.

“Imagine Jason, if his father was a diamond rank king,” Clive said as Valdis was already picking out rooms for his people.

“Two of them?” Neil asked. “I’m going up on the roof.”

Neil made himself scarce and Valdis was happily introducing himself, picking each person out from Clive’s descriptions. A celestine woman on Valdis’ team, Sigrid, was quietly apologising for him.

“No worries,” Jason told her. “If Clive says he’s alright, it’s fine.”

“Don’t blame me for this,” Clive said. “I never said it was fine.”

Jason and Sigrid both looked at him.

“Okay, it’s fine,” Clive conceded. “He’s just, you know, a lot. One of you is bad enough.”

“Indentured servant,” Valdis was saying as he greeted Sophie with enthusiasm.

“That’s strange. It’s not rude to say that, right? I mean, it is strange. Look at me, though. It’s not like being a prince with an eight-hundred year-old father is normal.”

“Yeah,” Sophie said, “but one is strange in that people give you everything you could possibly want and the other is strange in that people keep trying to give me to sleazy men.”

“I can see how that’s different,” Valdis said. “Now that you say it, though, I have heard some stories about the prince of Calute and a rather unconventional cattle market...”

“Val,” Sigrid said pointedly, cutting him off.

“Right, yes. Not meant to talk about that. Lovely to meet you though.”

The next group to find them and more politely ask to share accommodation was Keane’s. Keane’s team leader was clearly in two minds, but Keane had been insistent. On discovering the presence of Prince Valdis, Keane’s team became significantly more enthused.

The last team to join was that of Padma. The team from Vitesse had already been in the city when most of the teams arrived and had heard a lot of stories while everyone else was reorganising themselves. Padma was keen to hear more about Farrah from Jason and had convinced her team to ask if they could share the building.

That made for thirty-one adventurers, turning the excessive five-story building into a comfortable fit. With so many people, Jason decided to have an impromptu celebration for reaching the centre of the city and recruited Valdis to get everyone involved. Shortly thereafter, all five groups were on top of the roof, music playing courtesy of a recording crystal from Valdis’ collection.

“I kind of just wanted to sleep,” Beth said.

“I think everyone just wanted to sleep,” Humphrey said.

“So why are we having a party?”

“We were outvoted by Jason and the prince.”

“How do two people outvote twenty nine?”

“I’m not sure,” Humphrey said, “ but I think we may need to keep those two apart.”

Chapter 169: Company Worth Keeping

Since they were the impetus for the rooftop party, Jason and Valdis provided the supplies. Jason set up a buffet, putting out a couple of tables, an array of large bowls full of food, tongs and a stack of plates. He also laid out a good supply of drinks, tapping casks of wine, beer and mead.

"I've only got a dozen mugs," he announced, "so I hope you all have something to drink out of."

Valdis raided the dimensional space of his offsider, Sigrid, from which he retrieved a small sea of cushions so no one was left sitting on the hard, stone roof. He also supplied glow stones as the day's light died and recording crystals full of music. Jason and Valdis stood side by side, looking over the setup with satisfaction.

The thirty adventurers were mingling, all sharing the exhaustion of having traversed the city. Beth's cousin, Mose, approached Jason and Valdis, standing next to them to likewise survey their efforts.

"Not bad for an ancient city in the middle of a sealed-off astral space, right Mose?" Jason asked happily.

"This is what you brought to explore an astral space that was home to an ancient order of assassins?" Mose.

Jason and Valdis shared a nodding glance.

"Yep," Jason said.

"Getting your priorities right is important in the adventuring game," Valdis added.

Of the five teams, Valdis' were the most standoffish, clearly unsure why Valdis was choosing to camp with local teams over more well-known groups. Sigrid took him aside to advocate making connections with the more prominent teams. She knew full well the futility of trying to direct him, but knew that if she started early, then he might actually start to listen sometime in the next few days.

"I'm a prince of the Mirror Kingdom," Valdis told her. "If I want to meet big-name adventurers, I can do that any time."

"Val, it isn't about meeting," Sigrid told him. "It's about making connections."

"Agreed," Valdis told her, laughing again. "Here's the thing, Sig. You make connections when someone's already a big deal and they become someone you know. Make the connection when they're a nobody and they become a friend."

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but you only really know one of these people, right? What makes you think they’re worth making friends with?”

“Call it an instinct,” Valdis said. “I’ve spent enough time with Clive to get a sense of the company he keeps and that it’s company worth keeping. Danielle Geller’s son is here; you can’t complain about that. And that Asano is worth keeping an eye on. Dangerous, that one.”

“Really?” Sigrid asked, casting a sceptical look in Jason’s direction.

“Tell me this, Sig,” Valdis said. “You have two men who carve through people like a butcher with slabs of meat, taking on opponents in job lots and leaving seas of blood behind them. Both have mastered murderous skills that kill quickly and horrifying powers that kill slowly. One of those men spends his days dressed all in black, barely speaking. The sobriety of a killer. The other cleans himself off, has a nice meal with his friends and gets a good night’s sleep. Which of those two men would you keep an eye on?”

“You seem fairly certain about someone you just met.”

“He’s like me, I can feel it,” Valdis said. “The way he watches people. The way he seems to be off-kilter but is actually being controlling. I’m not sure he even realises how much he’s doing it. There’s something dark inside that boy and he doesn’t want it to be who he is. I know that feeling. Ask around and I bet you’ll find he’s dropped bodies that weren’t monsters.”

“I already have,” Sigrid said. “And he has. Should I keep an eye on him?”

“No, just tell the boys to behave. He’s not intimidated by my background.”

“He should be.”

“Be nice, Sig. Outworlders make good friends and terrible enemies.”

Night fell and they activated the glow stones they set up earlier. Thirty-one tired adventurers, stuffed with food and plied with drinks lounged on the cushions in the warm night air. With full bellies and full cups, Valdis’ team had finally loosened up as well.

“Mr Asano,” Valdis, said with exaggerated, drunken pomp.

“Your royal princeness,” Jason greeted back.

“I have heard tell,” Valdis said, “that the rather inconvenient plant monster we encounter was a single, giant entity. I’ve also heard that you are the one that killed it.”

“It wasn’t, strictly speaking, a monster,” Jason said. He had bronze rank booze he could have used to get drunk but didn’t want to risk the hangover.

“As for being the one who killed it,” Jason continued, “I was far from the one behind it. There were twenty-five more people there. If it had just been down to me, we’d all still be in the outer city, scratching our bums.”

“But your abilities were what destroyed it.”

“It was just a lucky confluence of enemy and the specific nature of my abilities,” Jason said. “It could just as easily have been completely immune.”

“I’m more interested in the treasure you got from it,” Emily said. The archer from Beth’s team hadn’t been present to participate, hearing about the shared quest from her team mates. Niko, the smoulder from Beth’s team who had been present laughed.

“You should have seen everyone’s faces,” he said. “One moment we’re fighting for our lives against all these thorny tentacles, and the next, treasure starts falling out of the air. A bunch of items, even essences. I got hit in the head by a whole sack of plant quintessence gems. A sack! It was crazy.”

“People got a bit crabby that we were the only ones who got loot,” Neil said. “Jason ended up sharing out the spirit coins. The ones that everyone saw, anyway. Those of us with dimensional spaces split the extra between just our teams after.”

“Why don’t we do a little showing off?” Beth suggested. “I’ll start.”

She stood up, picking up the dimensional bag next to her and taking out a long robe, holding it in front of her. It was green and brown with a forest motif, hanging like a dress. The colours setting off the pretty elf woman’s tawny skin, chestnut hair and vibrant green eyes.

“Bronze-rank spellcaster robe,” she said with a bright smile. “It enhances plant abilities and poison.”

“Sorry, where did this come from?” asked Lance, the leader of Padma’s team. “A looting power?”

“Neil and I both have looting abilities,” Jason said, cutting off anyone from giving more of his abilities away.

The people who participated in the plant monster raid went around one at a time, revealing their haul from the quest to get past the plant. The results of not just bypassing the plant but eliminating it entirely had made for impressive compensation. There were sets of armour, weaponry and items that affected essence abilities, usually with some kind of plant aspect. Hudson, the earth-essence user from Beth’s team, had received a wrist band that looked like a looped vine and added effects to his earth conjuration powers. Jason had looted a similar-looking vine wrist band that could produce a variety of vine conjurations.

All the magical equipment was bronze rank, like the plant creature, so none of them could use theirs, yet. Instead, they had a jump on useful items for when they ranked-up. Then there were the essences, Jason taking out a pair of green cubes and setting them

down in front of where he sat, cross-legged, on his cushion. They were both green, one ephemeral and swirling, like the cube was full of liquid. The other was appeared more solid, like an opal with a rich green colour as its base underpinned by lush, overlapping shades of darker green.

“Plant and growth essences,” Jason said. “Both fairly common.”

“Wasn’t there a third one?” Beth asked.

“Indeed there was,” Jason said, taking a third cube from his inventory with a flourish and laying it next to the others. It was the blue of an open summer sky, complete with clouds that seemed to float through the cube.

“Vast essence,” Jason said. “This one’s as rare as they come.”

“How much do you want for it?” Valdis said immediately, eagerly leaning forward.

“What do you say, Clive?” Jason asked. “Should we cut him a deal?”

“Gods, no,” Clive said. “Bilk him for everything you can.”

The group broke up into laughter at the exaggerated look of affront Valdis turned on Clive. The loot reveal continued as everyone showed off their hauls from their journey through the city, accompanied by stories of the tribulations faced to get those treasures.

The storytelling culminated with Valdis and Clive retelling their tower ascent and the items they found at the top. Valdis regaled them in the form of an epic saga, Clive drawing laughs as he periodically interjected with more grounded descriptions. Finally their story reaches the incredible find of growth items at the base of the buildings statues, Valdis pointing out to Clive that it was exactly the kind of haul he had told them would be there.

They ended the story with a presentation to an incredulous Neil of the last pair of items. The first was a fist-sized orb and the other a circlet of gold with a blue gem set into the forehead. With Jason’s ability, Neil could immediately see their effects. He started by looking over the orb.

Item: [Sentinel’s Orb] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

On object with the power to refine barrier energy to its most perfect form (tool, orb).

- Effect: Increase the effect of shield-based essence abilities.
- Effect: Cooldown of shield-based essence abilities is reduced.
- Effect: If wielding both [Sentinel’s Orb] and [Sentinel’s Crown], your shield abilities bestow a heal-over-time effect.

“Well that’s just ridiculous,” he said, then looked at the circlet.

Item: [Sentinel's Crown] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

The headpiece of the king of guardians (accessory, circlet).

- Effect: Mana recovery is increased. Mana recovery rate is increased briefly after using a shield-based essence ability.
- Effect: Mana cost of shield-based essence abilities is reduced.
- Effect: If wielding both [Sentinel's Orb] and [Sentinel's Crown], your shield abilities bestow a mana-over-time effect.

“And so is that,” he said, looking up at Clive. “You can’t just give me these.”

“Of course I can,” Clive said, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. “You’re on our team.”

Neil looked around at his other team members. Humphrey nodded encouragingly. Jason had the usual, self-satisfied grin that gave Neil a near-constant urge to punch him in the face. Sophie simply shrugged.

“Thank you,” Neil said to Clive. “Really, thank you.”

“Pay us back by keeping us alive,” Clive said.

“And you’ll need to buy some new clothes,” Jason said. “A gold headband with a honking great gem in the middle is a bold look. You’re going to have to dress around it.”

The next day saw adventurers washing through the city centre like a flood. The more intact nature of the buildings would seem to indicate more remnant treasure but a day of teams turning up nothing more than a few essences and awakening stones between them proved otherwise. The teams in Jason’s building did not participate in the day’s searching, in no small part due to hangovers. Valdis had been eager to participate but his team was loyal rather than obedient and collectively told him to shove off before crawling back into their camp bedding.

Those who had weathered the night’s festivities better were still exhausted from days of every moment not spent fighting still being in full combat readiness. They were happy to join the hungover in staying inside their bedrolls until the sun was high in the sky. In the late morning there was group meditation session on the roof, Valdis leading a dozen adventurers through a sword-dance meditation, much like the one Rufus had taught Jason. Given the athletic attractiveness of adventurers in general, Jason felt like he’d somehow joined a group of models doing tai chi in the park.

The adventurers that had scoured the central city shared the fruitlessness of their search as they mingled in the tower square in the evening. Most teams would be searching further afield the following day, returning to the outer city where treasure hunting that had proven more rewarding.

Jason and Beth's teams elected to stay put, waving off Keane, Padma and Valdis' teams in their "quest for epic loot." Rather than risk something else happening, Jason and Beth's groups chose to spend their time recovering their best form before the final trials unlocked.

Beth, Humphrey, Jason, Clive and Neil were spending a languid afternoon in the shade of their building's top level. They were sat by a window on some cushions Valdis had left behind after the party. The side of the building was open as if there was a missing bay window, allowing them to look out at the central tower within which the final challenges of the trials were located. From the roof above, they could hear Sophie practising with the rest of Beth's team.

"Why do you think all the rest of the trials only become available on the last day?" Beth pondered.

"Clearly, the city itself is the core component of the trial," Humphrey said. "I assume the tower has more direct, specific tests. Shade did tell us at the start that the purpose of the trials was to test for five virtues. Choosing whether or not to take the items he offered was the first trial and reaching the tower was the second. Presumably there are three trials remaining, inside the tower."

"I'm curious about the next one," Neil said. "The trial for those who chose courage is meant to be easier, now. I didn't use the items Shade gave me. It makes me wish I hadn't taken them."

"I don't know about that," Jason said. "We all took bold steps to make it this far. Would we have, if we didn't have some live-saving protections? Even with them, people died. I'm not sure I would have been willing to take the risks I took without them."

"Did any of you choose the courage path?" Clive asked. "I know Valdis did."

The others all shook their head.

As the sun set, Shade appeared before them.

"Greeting, adventurers. I am appearing before you all to announce that the second trial is coming to an end in one day. Anyone present in the tower square at the centre of the city when the sun goes down tomorrow will pass. Those who have not reached it at that time may leave by escape medallion. Those who do not have the medallions will be provided with them. They must be used before the trials completely close, however, or you

will be trapped inside. As a final note, the reward for the second trial will be granted tomorrow as the second trial concludes.”

“One more day,” Humphrey said. “It was good to relax and recover, but should we join the treasure hunting tomorrow?”

“Bad idea,” Sophie said, coming down some nearby stairs. She was covered in sweat and poured herself a glass of juice from the refreshments Jason had set out.

“It’s not just the last day for treasure,” she continued after a hearty swig. “It’s also the last day to quietly remove the competition. Either way, there’s a good chance we’d have to kill some people before they killed us if we went out there. I think I’d rather stay here.”

“Perhaps we could socialise with the other adventurer groups who stayed behind, like us,” Humphrey said. “Most of my family’s teams occupied a couple of buildings not far from here and some of the other foreign adventurers were nearby.”

“Not the worst idea,” Beth said. “I’m curious about this trial reward, though. What do you think?”

“Specialty equipment, maybe?” Clive postulated. “This place was originally a training ground for assassin trainees, right? It would make sense that they would receive some kind of reward for joining the order, like a uniform or something.”

“Would secret assassins have uniforms?” Neil asked.

“Probably not, now you say it,” Clive conceded.

“Awakening stones,” Jason said. “I’m certain Emir knows more than he told us and he implied to me more than once that there would be a chance at some unusual awakening stones.”

“That makes sense,” Clive said, sitting up enthusiastically. “The great astral beings can’t make essences the way that gods can, but they can produce their own awakening stones.”

“I have no interest in divine essences and awakening stones,” Jason said. “The idea of some god repossessing my magic powers doesn’t appeal.”

“No, that’s the interesting thing,” Clive said. “The stones the astral beings produce aren’t divine stones that the astral beings can revoke. They’re just ordinary awakening stones whose aspect aligns with the great astral being in question. I’ve used some of them myself, although the Celestial Book is a lot more approachable than the Reaper. The question is, what kind of powers would a higher-dimensional death entity grant?”

“Powers like Jason’s I’d have to imagine,” Neil said.

“I guess we’ll just have to wait and see,” Jason said. “I don’t imagine we’ll be using them until the trials are over, though.”

“That would be the sensible approach,” Clive agreed. “People are going to get impatient to find out what they do, though.”

“Yeah,” Jason said. “I’m willing to bet there are a bunch of people who’ll be annoyed at how long it takes to reveal what the awakening stones we’ve found here do.”

Chapter 170: He Who Fights With Monsters

In the heart of the city, a crowd of adventurers were gathered in the tower square as the sun dipped below the horizon. Clumped into teams, they formed a ring around the grand tower in the centre of the square. While the plain brickwork of the tower was uninspiring, its sheer height and width left it looming over everything else in the central city.

Jason's party was now reformed, with the addition of Jory, whose own group had already escaped the trials. The teams of Keane, Valdis, Padma and Beth were all gathered around them, waiting with everyone else for the next stage of the trials.

Quest: [The Second Trial]

- Objective complete: Reach the centre of the City of Fallen Echoes 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
- [Ritualist's Umbrella] has been added to your inventory.

The other members of Jason's team also received items. Humphrey and Clive both had personal storage spaces for them to appear in, while Sophie, Neil and Jory's rewards dropped out of the air. They started comparing items.

"Mine is a belt that accumulates power as I move," Sophie said, already slipping it around her waist. "I can unleash the gathered power as one attack."

"I got a wand that conjures and throws metal needles," Jory said.

"Can you use wands?" Neil asked.

"Yes, I have the same power to use items that Clive has," Jory said. "But I'm not high up in the Magic Society, so I can't requisition magic vehicles whenever I like to go swanning about the delta."

Clive gave the back of his head an embarrassed scratch.

"If you all got such good stuff, why did I get an umbrella?" Jason asked.

"An umbrella?" Humphrey asked.

"Yeah," Jason said, pulling it out of his inventory. It did look high-quality, with a shaft and tines of a pale blue, lightweight metal. The cloth was thick and a much darker blue than the shaft. When Jason opened the umbrella, he discovered a magical diagram drawn onto it in silver.

Item: [Ritualist's Umbrella] (iron rank, epic)

An device made to improve the convenience of using the rituals in the field (tool, umbrella).

- Effect: When open will float in the air and follow the person who opened it.
- Effect: Repels liquid while opened, while extracting breathable air from surrounding liquids. Can be used for underwater travel, but provides no means of propulsion.
- Effect: Harmonises nearby ambient magic while opened, sufficiently to make iron and bronze-rank rituals easier to enact. The use of nearby magic can disrupt this effect.

"I take it back," Jason said. "This thing is awesome."

"We might want to deal with this later," Neil said. "We're drawing a little bit of attention."

As Neil said, the nearby adventurers were all looking in their direction.

"Good looking out, Neil," Jason said as he put the umbrella away.

Not long after, the attention of the adventurers was diverted from Jason's group to their actual purpose in being there as Shade appeared. Not just one of him, but one for each adventure team present

"Congratulations," the Shades said. They spoke quietly but their voices carried through the square, eerily layering the words. "You have survived the second trial and the time has come for rewards."

The Shades handed out black awakening stones, one for each adventurer. There was almost no sensation of pressure from it in their hands, as if it wasn't really there. The black of the stone wasn't as much a colour as an absence, the same light-devouring darkness Jason's cloak could achieve.

Item: [Awakening Stone of the Reaper] (unranked, legendary)

An awakening stone sharing affinity with the Reaper. (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 3 unawakened essence abilities.

"Highest rarity," Clive said with excitement. "That means the list of abilities it could awaken is much smaller than normal, usually restricted to just one or two types."

Jason and Clive were not the only adventurers with the power to identify items and a susurrus moved over the crowd as word spread that they had all received a legendary awakening stone.

“You seem excited for someone who can’t actually use his,” Neil said to Clive.

“Clive’s more interested in new knowledge than new power,” Jason.

“Exactly,” Clive said. “Do you know how rare this opportunity is? Information about the rarest essences and awakening stones is incredibly limited because only so many people ever get to use them, and those people might have no interest in helping the Magic Society fill out their records. But look at how many people we have here! We’ll get so much information on who got what power, across different races and essences. This is going to be great.”

“What will you do with your stone, then?” Humphrey asked.

“Until we have better records,” Clive said, “I can only assume that an awakening stone of the Reaper will best fit Jason.”

Clive lightly tossed his stone to Jason.

“Thanks, Clive,” Jason said brightly.

“Well, I know you’ve been holding off on new awakening stones for a while,” Clive said. “Also, an extra sample of what an outworlder gets from it would be very appreciated.”

“Now your motivations become clear,” Jason said. “I suppose next you’ll be asking for chunks of flesh, to compare outworlder flesh with regular peoples.”

“That’s not a bad idea, now you say it,” Clive said, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. “Something out of the torso would be best, maybe slice a bit off the internal organs.”

“Not a chance,” Jason said.

“We could heal you right back up,” Clive said. “Right, Neil?”

“As long as I get to watch you cut the bits off, I’m willing to participate.”

“I said no.”

“We could put you into a magical sleep,” Clive said.

“You so much as try it and I’ll do you to the Adventure Society for necromancy.”

“I’m in the same position of having awakened all my abilities,” Jory said, pulling the conversation back on track. “I think I’ll give my stone to Belinda, since she’s going to be getting her own essences, soon.”

“Thank you,” Sophie said.

“The next trial,” the Shades said arresting everyone’s attention, “will test wisdom or courage. For those who chose the path courage in the beginning, your boldness shall be rewarded now. The test of wisdom is now before you and you may take it without fear.

Should your judgement be insufficient to the task, there is no danger in failure. You shall simply be led from the trial grounds in full safety.”

The tower the adventurers were surrounding was blank brickwork, but with a loud grinding of stone, that began to change. Bricks pushed out from the walls or retreated back, forming a series of rectangular doorways. Every second doorway opened, retracting slowly up into the ceiling to reveal dark passages beyond. The others remained closed, the brickwork marking their positions.

“Those who selected courage,” the Shades said, “choose a door and step through. Each must face their trial individually and you must each choose a door for yourself, and yourself alone.”

“Is it just me, or does the weird voice thing make it all the more portentous?” Jason asked. “Don’t get me wrong, the ancient tower of trials in a ruined interdimensional city has portent enough to be going on with, but it really seems to cap it off.”

“Is he always like this?” Sigrid asked.

“Pretty much,” Humphrey told her.

Sigrid looked from Jason to Valdis, letting out a light shudder.

Shade’s words had brought up a buzz from the adventurers who, having just reunited their teams, were required to split up again. It was not long before the first person stepped forward to accept the challenge. Predictably enough, it was Valdis, with others quickly following. They only made up a fraction of the gathered adventurers, with only one in five or six having chosen the path of courage from the start.

The adventurers picked their doors and passed through, the stone sliding slowly back down behind them. In one case, however, the door slammed back down, not behind the adventurer but on top of him, easily crushing him to death.

“The test of wisdom is for those who have already chosen courage,” the Shades announced. “Those unwilling to take the test of courage will be allowed to leave in safety. Those who seek to move forward without proving their courage will see that choice also demonstrates a failure of wisdom.”

A number of other adventurers moving forward scurried back to the main group.

When the last of the adventurers to move had chosen a door or returned to the group, the remaining doors closed and the alternate doors opened.

“The trial of courage is not for the uncertain,” Shade warned. “You will each encounter an entity known as a nightmare hag. These are diamond-rank entities from the astral that have no physical existence in this place and cannot harm you directly. What

they can do is warp the reality around you, manifesting that which you fear most. If you are unable to face this fear, it will most certainly kill you.”

Short lines of dark energy appeared on the ground, all around the tower. Rising up from the lines were a series of archways, each made from a single piece of glossy obsidian. The dark lines from which they emerged rose up to fill the archways with consuming darkness, making each archway identical to the ones that first brought the adventurers into the city.

“These shadow gates will return you to the archway towers,” the Shades announced. “If you do not wish to face the next trial, these gates will return you to the archway towers. You may then use the tower gates to leave the city. If you so wish, you may take this final day to further explore the city, but know that if you remain here when the sun sets tomorrow, then here you will stay.”

“I’m out,” Neil said as soon as Shade stopped talking. “I’m not foolish enough to think I can beat out all these other adventurers and I’m not going to die trying. Also, getting killed by your own fears is literally the worst way to die I can imagine.”

“Me too,” Jory said. “Between the recipe I found and enough plant quintessence to fill a wheelbarrow, I’ve gotten everything I could want and more from this place.”

“I’m not going either,” Sophie said. “I’ve managed to avoid some unpleasant fates over the last year and I have no interest in some magic ghost lady throwing me into everything I fought so hard to escape.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said. “Just you and me, Humphrey?”

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “My family has sheltered me from a lot. I’ve never been confronted with the kinds of challenges you faced, Sophie. If I’m going to be a good adventurer, I need to face up to my fears, whatever form they take.”

Quest: [The Third Trial]

The trial of courage will put you face to face with your greatest fear. Resolve will see you through, while a lack of will shall see you dead.

- Objective: Successfully confront your greatest fear.
- Reward: Random magic item.

“I know what my greatest fear is already,” Jason said. “It isn’t a threat to me.”

“That suggests it isn’t actually your greatest fear,” Neil said.

“No,” Jason said, “it is. See you all on the other side.”

With that, he marched off for the open doors. Humphrey nodded a farewell and did the same. Along with many other adventurers, they each picked a doorway and walked through. The doors closed behind them with finality.

Humphrey regained consciousness sprawled in soft earth. His head rung and his body ached. The air was full of noise and thick with the taste of blood. Shrieks of fear and pain were punctuated by the screeches and roars of monsters.

He scrambled to his feet, casting his gaze around. He didn't know where he was at first, then realised he hadn't recognised his home because it was half-collapsed and on fire. He was outside the main building, surrounded by the corpses of people he recognised. Some were burned, others savaged by monsters, all laying dead where they fell.

He could see a half-dozen monsters just from where he stood, and heard many more beyond. He started moving, calling his sword into his hands. He began a slaughter, one monster after the other but there was no end to them. As he fought his way through the grounds he found only the monsters and the dead. His team, his friends, his family. Finally he found his mother, clinging to the last vestiges of life.

"You were supposed to be the best of us!" she accused with a ragged dying breathe. "You weren't strong enough! You failed us..."

As he watched her die, monsters were charging in on him. Instead of fighting, he let his sword drop from his hands, casting his gaze around at the monsters lunging at him.

"No," he said flatly, his face stony and eyes sharp. "I won't let this happen. I will be strong enough."

The world around him shimmered like a mirage and vanished, leaving him in the dark. He took out a glow stone, revealing his location as a circular room made from the same brickwork as the tower. Shade was standing nearby, as was a cage with silver bars etched with gold runes. Inside was a figure that looked a lot like Jason in his shadow cloak, although this creature's cloak of darkness seemed ragged and torn. There were two ways out of the room, both stairwells alcoved into the walls. One led up, the other down.

"Congratulations on passing the third trial," Shade told him.

Jason followed the stairs up into a dark, circular, empty room. There was another stairwell, alcoved like the one he stepped out of. Down the stairs and into the room came a person, Jason himself, but different. His features were more handsome, with a greater resemblance to his brother. His combat robes were more elaborate and in shades of dark

purple and gold, instead of grey. At his hip was a sword, matching the one on Jason's own. On his head was a simple crown of dark gold.

The two Jason's moved closer, sizing each other up.

"My humble beginnings," the other Jason said. "Fancy meeting me here. But you knew you would, just like you know that one day, you'll be me."

"You aren't inevitable."

"Aren't I? Maybe if you gave it all away and led a quiet life, but we both know you won't. You've got that hero complex. That need to feel important."

Other Jason laughed.

"You can't hide it from me," he continued. "You'll follow this life and you know you'll have to make the hard choices. You'll keep making them because deep down, you like them. You like how important it makes you that you're the one in the middle of everything. And sooner or later, that leads you to me. What's the saying? He who fights with monsters should look to it that he does not become a monster?"

"Don't pretend you've read Nietzsche," Jason told his double. "You got that from a video game."

"I'm you from the future," the double said. "I've done all kinds of things you haven't."

"But you haven't read Nietzsche," Jason said. "Turning evil didn't change me that much."

The double laughed. "Fair enough. But I'm not evil, you know. I've just lost my illusions."

"There's nothing wrong with illusions. Justice is an illusion. Civilisation, morality. They're illusions we all agree to share because they make us better."

"Do they really? You think people won't disappoint you? They always fall short. I have the power to fix that and you will too."

"Is that what the crown's about? You're some kind of tin-pot dictator?"

"Something like that," Other Jason said. "Democracy is a pack of gullible idiots being exploited by the selfish and immoral. When you have the power to take control, you can fix things."

"Can I?" Jason asked. "You were right about people always falling short and that includes us. I've fallen short plenty, but you've clearly fallen all the way down."

"So you think now. How many bad days are you from becoming me?"

"That's from Batman," Jason said. "Not even good Batman."

"You don't like The Killing Joke? I forgot what a social justice wanker I used to be."

"Alright, we're done," Jason said, "I'm definitely not turning into you."

“Are you sure?” Other Jason asked, moving closer with a sinister grin. He stopped as they each realised the duplicate was taller, then Other Jason gave off a smirk.

“Looks like I’m better than original recipe in every way. Do you want to measure...”

“Don’t even,” Jason said. “You know Kaito’s still taller than us.”

“Oh, I dealt with our dear, older brother. The man married the love of our life.”

“How are you not over that when I am? Also, if you break up when you’re nineteen, it wasn’t the love of your life. It was the love of your adolescence.”

“You keep telling yourself that because you’re too weak to do anything about it,” Other Jason said. “You’ll get stronger, never fear.”

“Really? Never fear, during a fear trial? Evil me has some weak jokes.”

“Hey, I’m just a physical manifestation of your fears,” Other Jason said. “Anything I do is on you.”

“Aren’t you meant to be menacing me?”

“Would it work?”

“No. It’s good that I seem to have gotten over that chuuni phase.”

“Yeah, it got pretty bad there,” Other Jason conceded.

“If you’re the future me, did I ever get home?”

“I’m not actually from the future,” Other Jason said.

“Right. You’re a manifestation of my potential future self.”

A third figure shimmered into place. It was a figure made of darkness in a ragged cloak.

“Kill him!” it hissed at the duplicate Jason.

“Ooh, Mum’s not happy,” Other Jason said.

“That’s the.. what was it called?” Jason asked.

“Nightmare hag. Yeah, that’s her. She doesn’t really have control of what she conjures up and she’s not very bright. Why would I kill you before you’ve had the chance to turn into me. That’s like your fears vanquishing themselves.”

“KILL HIM!” the hag hissed again, the sound filling the chamber. The duplicate’s hand twitched in the direction of the sword at his hip, his face twisted with sudden fury. His hand finished the movement to the sword, which he drew, turning a furious gaze on the hag.

“NO ONE TELLS ME WHAT TO DO!” he roared, lashing out with the sword. It slashed through the ephemeral hag and both she and the duplicate vanished. In their place were shade and an empty cage.

Quest: [The Third Trial]

- Objective complete: Successfully confront your greatest fear 1/1.
- Quest complete.
- 100 [Iron Spirit Coins] have
- [True Light] has been added to your inventory.

“Congratulations on passing the third trial,” Shade said as Jason took out his new item to examine. It was a fist-sized lump of golden crystal.

Item: [True Light] (diamond rank, rare)

True light of the sun, trapped in a single moment (consumable, crystallised light).

- Effect: Consume to release the true light of the Sun.

Jason raised an eyebrow at the rank of the items, although he wasn't sure how useful it would be. Maybe it produced some kind of powerful, burning light, but he couldn't use it to tell.

“Was the test meant to go like that?” Jason asked, putting the item away again.

“It is what it is and goes how it goes,” Shade said. “Assassins adapt to their situation.”

“I'm not an assassin.”

“Yet here you are, taking an assassin's trials.”

“That's true. I've been thinking something was off about this whole thing for a while.”