

Chapter 658

Significantly More Powerful

Clive winced at the grisly sound of chewing that filled the tunnel. The worms were being merrily devoured by toothy leeches that grew in number as they ate. The sound of fleshy consumption was accompanied by a muffled screaming that came from the largest pile of leeches, under which the messenger was buried. The pile undulated with the messenger's helpless thrashing.

The auras mixed up in the tunnel were unsettling. The strongest was Jason's, which loomed like a prison tower. Although it was not directed at Clive, it filled him with unease, like an authoritarian monument. Next was the aura of the sanguine horror.

Clive knew that the familiar was an apocalypse beast. He remembered hearing about it in the beginning and being disturbed, but somehow it had become normal to him. Jason had a way of hiding the disturbing things, such as giving the creature an innocuous name. But as Clive felt the fully unleashed hunger of it, the need to consume without end, he recalled the dread that had struck him on first learning about Colin.

In that way, summoner and familiar were alike; easy to forget what lay underneath the smiles and the jokes. Jason watched his familiar feed, the hood of his cloak pushed back to reveal his stony expression. The impassive manner in which he watched the heaping mounds of bloody monsters chew up flesh was almost as confronting to Clive as the scene itself. He searched in Jason's expression for the laughing man he had met back in Greenstone, but he had trouble finding it.

Clive thought of the mirage chamber recording from Greenstone where Jason fought Rick Geller's team. Jason was embarrassed by it and the way he played up his monstrous behaviour. The act had been enough to intimidate inexperienced teenagers, at least for a little while. But what Clive had just seen in the tunnel wasn't an act. There was something in Jason now that he'd had to fake back then. Something all too easy to take out, and Clive hoped that it would be as simple to put away again.

"I'm fine, Clive," Jason assured him in an unconvincingly stony voice. It wasn't the cold malevolence with which he had broken down the will of the messenger, but echoes of that cruelty remained. Jason's gaze did not turn from the bloody pile of creatures beneath which the messenger was dying.

"It's rude to read my emotions, Jason."

"How could I not when your aura is all but shouting them? It's time for more team exercises in aura control, I think."

The other auras in the tunnel, aside from Clive's own, were of the worms and the messenger. The worms were also an apocalypse beast swarm, yet it seemed like little more than feed before the sanguine horror. The worms exuded animalistic terror as they attempted in vain to escape the all-devouring familiar.

As for the messenger, Clive tried to shut out her aura from his senses. He had seen a lot of combat and death, even for a silver ranker, but he had never felt a death. Her aura felt broken, shattered by helplessness and despair that dwarfed even the pain of being consumed alive.

"Jason, please just end this."

"They're connected," Jason said in reply.

"What?"

"The messengers. I don't know how it works exactly, but it's to do with an astral king."

"Like you."

"Significantly more powerful than me, I expect."

"You think one of them is here? In this world?"

"No. It's a servant of some kind. It's connected to the astral king, the way Colin and Gordon are connected to me. Because their king is stronger, so is the power it can give its servants. And one of those powers is influence over those who subject themselves to that astral king. Including this messenger."

"So, this servant knows what's happening here?"

"I don't think so, not entirely. Just what is happening to this one."

"So, that's what you're doing? Sending a message to the messengers?"

"Yes."

"I think they've probably gotten it, Jason. So put an end to this."

"Clive they've killed who knows how many people, turning them into nothing but places to stash these worms."

"Yes, Jason. They're callous and evil. Are you fighting them because we're better than they are, or to prove that you can be worse?"

Jason finally turned from the leech mound the messenger was buried under to look at Clive.

"I don't know," he said in little more than a whisper. He turned back to the pile.

"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."

Blue, silver and gold light came beaming down from the ceiling and into the leech mound. The leeches were unaffected aside from the mound deflating as the transcendent damage eradicated the messenger.

Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

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

- Current rank: Silver 4 (87%)

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

- Effect (bronze): Damage scaling is increased by instances of [Penance] on the target.

- Effect (silver): Inflicts or refreshes [Sanction] on the target.

- [Sanction] (affliction, holy): Healing, recovery and regeneration effects have diminished potency. Base strength of this effect is very minor but scales exponentially with the enemy's level of injury. Scaling is affected by [Legacy of Sin] in the same way execute damage is. Cannot be cleansed while any instances of [Penance] are present.

After the light of the spell ended, smoke started seeping out of the leeches. This was not the rainbow smoke of a monster, however, but akin to the transcendent light of Jason's spell. The smoke itself was blue, with gold and silver light sparkling inside it. Clive postulated that the magic from which a messenger's body was made was more refined than that of a monster. He had heard of similar phenomena around the deaths of very high-rank essence users.

There was also a red haze mixed into the smoke, wet and heavy like the air before a storm. The haze was slowly fading, turning into more sparkling light. Clive could sense the remnant aura of the messenger within it. Jason held out his hand and chanted another spell.

"As your life was mine to reap, so your death is mine to harvest."

The red haze started moving towards Jason's hand but struggled like a dog pulling against its leash. Clive felt Jason's aura push out, unleashing a soul attack against the aura. The leash was cut and the life force was dragged out of the aura and into Jason. Clive watched as Jason's nebula eyes glowed bright and his starlight cloak flared out, becoming a shadowy cloud. It took on a shape like a bird silhouette, the stars inside it glowing brightly before the bird shrank down to a cloak once more.

- You have drained life force using [Blood Harvest].
 - Health, mana and stamina have been replenished.
 - You have gained multiple instances of [Blood Frenzy].

 - You have absorbed physical matter with inherent spiritual properties.
 - Your readiness to enter a star phoenix state has increased.

 - Current star phoenix state readiness: 0.3%
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Jason looked down at his glowing hands, his body electrified as if he'd mainlined a bolt of lightning. Clive looked on in concern as a predatory grin crossed Jason's face. The star phoenix state was what Jason turned into rather than dying when his body was killed. It should have been unavailable to him again until he reached gold rank, but now he had a new path forward. That it went through the middle of the messengers did not bother him in the least. If they were going to run around wiping out whole towns to use the people as weapons, he had no qualms about devouring them.

Shade, who had been watching silently, finally spoke up.

"Mr Asano, while I recognise that you are simply accelerating her transition from a physical-spiritual gestalt to a purely spiritual state, the process is extremely traumatic to the soul."

"I know," Jason said softly. "I can feel it."

"Mr Asano, I've warned you in the past about there being some things you don't come all the way back from."

"I'm not coming back. On Earth, people came after me time and time again because they didn't respect me as a threat. You think Jack Gerling would have been so cavalier about killing Kaito, Greg and Asya if he thought I'd peel his soul like a grape in return?"

"Escalation is not a good way to handle a situation, Mr Asano."

"I know. I'm going to need you to stop me from going too far, like when you stopped me from ripping that guy's soul out."

"What?" Clive asked, but Jason ignored the question.

"But I have to be willing to go far enough," Jason continued.

"Is that the person you want to be?" Shade asked.

Jason gave Shade a sad smile.

"You know how much time I've spent brooding about what I was going to turn into," he said. "That time is over. Now the question is about living with what I've become."

This time, the smile he gave Clive and Shade was genuine.

"Sometimes I'm going to have to do things that aren't very nice, and I'm done struggling against the parts of myself that let me do them. I've always been afraid of how

easy is to take those parts out when I need them. But accepting them is the only way I'll be able put them away again when I'm done."

Jason looked around at the leeches which were growing in number as the worms lessened. Some of the worms had fled further into the tunnel and down the stairs leading deeper. A pile of Colin glooped after it, also spilling down the stairs into the areas neither Jason nor Clive had yet seen. Other worms had dug into the hard-packed dirt, digging neat, thin holes. The leeches had followed by digging rough, ugly burrows. Even with many of the leeches departing, there was no shortage left.

➤ **Familiar [Colin] has reached maximum potential biomass for its current rank.**

Unlike the world-consuming terror that a sanguine horror could become, Colin was limited by the power of the vessel Jason created for him. He was also infused with Jason's power as an astral king, however, and Jason decided to test what he could accomplish with that. He opened the gate to his soul space and had the excess Colin crawl inside.

Jason followed, arriving in the extradimensional realm where he possessed god-like power. They were in one of the many cloud buildings, this one round and empty, with a transparent roof. Colin conglomerated from a leech pile into a blood clone of Jason, looking at his summoner.

"You trust me to try something?" Jason asked and Colin nodded immediately.

"Just to be clear, I don't know exactly what I'm doing," Jason warned him. "I may be winging it a bit."

Colin opened his mouth to emit a nails-on-chalkboard shriek.

"Hey," Jason complained. "I do so know what I'm doing most of the time. Some of the time, definitely. I make plans."

Another screech.

"My plans are just fine, thank you."

Shriek.

"I'll have you know that I haven't died in more than a year."

Snarling screech.

"Okay, yes, that one was quite close. But I lived. I will admit that the recovery time was longer than I would have liked."

Jason frowned at the blood clone.

"Don't give me that look. I'm just going to start, alright?"

Jason didn't reach out with his senses as, in his soul realm, his senses were already everywhere. Instead, he concentrated on the portion of Colin that was in the realm with him. He explored the nature of the familiar, from the core astral entity to the vessel containing it to the two links that bound it to Jason.

One was the familiar link, which was strong but contractual and impermanent. The other was more tenuous and crudely-forged, but permanent. Jason explored that link further as he tapped into the astral throne and astral gate. These two elements of his soul were the core of what had turned his soul into a physical domain.

The original link was something that Colin had initiated himself while Jason was unconscious, struggling to survive after pushing his limits. What Jason had done to put himself in that position had broken down two extremely powerful items inside his soul. One of these items had been given by a great astral being and the other taken from one by Jason. Each item was intended to be used in specific ways, with specific limitations, but when Jason managed to damage his very soul, the items were damaged with it.

This resulted in the power driving the items being loosed as the items themselves broke down. Jason's soul absorbed large amounts from both, with the rest triggering Jason's loot power, which saved the leftover power from killing him. Jason traded that leftover power away, but what he absorbed had changed him on a fundamental level. It was responsible for the astral throne and astral gate that now resided in his soul, reforging it into a physical realm. And he was the astral king of that realm.

Jason was still in the earliest stage of learning what that meant. Before he had even awoken, however, two of his familiars had made use of it. As Jason was just learning, astral kings could bestow powers through a bond. His existing familiar bonds served as an invitation, allowing Colin and Gordon to accept that bond while Jason remained unconscious.

Jason had never actively attempted to manipulate that bond, but now did so for the first time. Working by instinct and moving with caution, Jason tapped into the astral throne and astral gate. He was still inexpert in wielding their power, while Dawn had cautioned him to leave alone, especially the astral gate. Naturally, that was what Jason had used the most.

The astral throne governed matter and physical forces, and Jason used it to refine Colin's physical vessel. The astral gate affected the spiritual, and dimensional forces, which he used to modify the nature of the connections between Colin, Jason and the physical vessel Colin inhabited.

- You have attempted to disconnect the portion of familiar vessel [Colin] in your astral kingdom from the main host.
 - If disconnected, the portion of the vessel can be claimed by the main host by entering the astral kingdom, up to the biomass limit for its rank.
 - Disconnection vessel portions will not count against the biomass limit of the main host
 - Destruction of the main host vessel will result in the main host returning to the astral kingdom and claiming the disconnected vessel portion, up to the biomass limit for its rank.
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The blood clone splashed down as it turned into blood, Colin's consciousness no longer contained in that portion of it. Jason used his ability to control physics to avoid any landing on him. He then started manipulating the large, round building around him. The walls turned from cloud stuff to black brick with a dark red sheen. The translucent ceiling turned into dark greenhouse glass and the floor into thick, rich soil. A pit formed in the middle of the room and the blood immediately flowed into it, barely covering the floor at the bottom. The air grew hazy and humid as plants grew from the soil, dark green, lush and leafy.

The end result was like a dark jungle greenhouse, built around an almost empty pit of blood. Jason was confident that Colin would like it. Jason's experiment worked out quite well, as his intention was to create a storehouse of biomass for Colin. The leech familiar frequently had much of it destroyed in combat and replenishing it took time.

Having a storehouse of it meant that Colin could be ready to return to the fight much faster. That was predicated on taking the time to fill the pit, however. Colin would be working on that right now, feeding on the worms outside of Jason's soul realm.

Or was it Astral kingdom? Jason had changed what he called the dimensional space inside himself several times. This was partly as it developed over time and partly as the names for all Jason's interdimensional assets blurred into a confusing mess. Was 'astral kingdom' what the realms of astral kings were properly known as? Was it what the messengers called it? Jason's interface had shown the ability many times to properly label things when even Jason didn't know the name.

Gordon manifested, floating over the blood pool. The eye-orbs around him rapidly flickered in complex patterns.

"Yes, I'll see what I can do for you too," Jason told him. "Not right now, though. We have to go fight more evil."

More flickering.

"Yes, I know I took the time with Colin, but he has all these worms to eat and he'd already gained his maximal biomass. It was the perfect time to try."

Flickering, with long, bright pauses.

“No, I'm not going to do Shade first. For one, he isn't linked to me the way you are. And I can promise you, he does not want the ability to turn into Herbie the Love Bug. He even threatened to do that once.”

Flickering.

“Yes, it would probably be in shades of black and dark grey.”