

Chapter 74: Doing Better

The balcony for Jason's suite was not as expansive as the one Rufus, Farrah and Gary shared, but it was still more than large enough to put out a reclining lounger. Being on the opposite side of the building, Jason's balcony looked over the street instead of the water. The sounds of the guild district's bustling daytime activity came in through the balcony doors as Jason opened them up.

He was ready for a lazy afternoon, with a colourful, short-sleeved shirt, and loose, knee-length shorts. He lay back comfortably, pulling a small red-gold crystal from his inventory.

Item: [Awakening Stone of Wrath] (unranked, uncommon)

An awakening stone that unlocks the power of wrath (consumable, awakening stone).

- Requirements: Unawakened essence ability.
- Effect: Awakens an essence ability.
- You have 8 unawakened essence abilities.
- You are able to absorb [Awakening Stone of Wrath]. Absorb Y/N?

"Time to see what you have for me."

Jason was about to absorb the awakening stone when there was a knock on the door. Jason groaned, putting the stone away and getting up from the lounger. He made his way back inside and opened the door.

"Humphrey," Jason said. "I haven't seen you in a while. Come on in."

Jason watched as Humphrey came inside. Humphrey's body language was uncertain and uncomfortable, and he was uncharacteristically quiet. Humphrey normally moved with confidence and was quick with the verbal niceties.

"Something the matter?" Jason asked as he directed Humphrey into a comfortable chair.

"Jason..."

Humphrey was hesitant but carried on.

"...can I ask you something?"

"Of course," Jason said.

"I... can you not answer the question with a question?"

"Is something bothering you, Humphrey?"

"I watched you fight and the other in the mirage arena."

Jason chuckled.

"I'm not sure anyone was expecting that," Jason said. "Even me. Your mother gave me way too many advantages. Do trap weavers really show up in numbers like that?"

"During the monster surge they do," Humphrey said. "The last surge was when I was a boy, but a whole army of them got into family grounds. Walls don't stop something that climbs the way they do."

"Wow. You couldn't have been more than six or seven."

"How are you alright with what you did to them? Rick and the others, I mean."

"Ah," Jason said, leaning back in his chair. "You're concerned about the way I fought them."

"We were watching you, from the viewing, room," Humphrey said. "Watching them, really; we didn't see that much of you. What we did see, what we heard... the way you took Hannah and Henry while they were distracted. That laughter as you mocked them from the darkness. It was chilling. What you did do Hannah's body; draping her body off a monster's webs like a decoration."

"What do you think about what I did to them?" Jason asked.

Humphrey sat up in his chair, shaking his head. "You always do this," he said. "I ask you about something that seems questionable, but when I question it, you just question me back. Instead of defending what you did you just talk and talk as if right and wrong are whatever you want them to be if you explain them enough."

Jason sighed.

"You know, I've been where you are," Jason said. "A lot more recently than I'd like. I accused a friend of mine of having an immoral perspective on adventuring, without ever having been an adventurer myself. You're making the same mistake I did, not seeing my perspective, any more than I did hers."

Jason gave Humphrey a friendly, but tired smile.

"I know this is coming from a good place," Jason said. "You have this certainty about right and wrong, and you don't want a friend going down a bad path. I'm not going to sit here and say that you're wrong to do that, but not everything is as simple as it seems from the outside."

"Some things are just right and wrong, Jason," Humphrey said.

"Sure," Jason said. "But the consequences of our actions aren't always what we want them to be. Humphrey, let me put a hypothetical situation to you."

"You're going to make things complicated again, aren't you?" Humphrey said.

“Humphrey,” Jason said unhappily, “you essentially came in here to ask me if I’m an immoral person, which is more than a little rude. This is the answer I have for you. If you don’t want to listen, the door works just as well for leaving as it did for coming in.”

Jason gestured at the door. Humphrey glanced at it but turned his gaze back to Jason.

“Alright, then,” Jason said. “Imagine you’re on a contract. You have to go to a town out in the desert, way out past the delta. It’ll take you a few days to get out there, and you’ve stopped overnight along the way. You’re in a little town, staying at the only inn. You’ve had a long, hot day on the road, and you don’t want to just eat a spirit coin and go to bed, so you head downstairs. The common room is busy, but you find a quiet corner to have something to eat and drink without anyone bothering you.”

“What does this have to do with anything?” Humphrey asked.

“I’m setting a scene,” Jason said. “So, there you are, minding your own business. But like I said, the common room is busy. Some people are eating, everyone’s drinking. There’s this one guy. You’ve been seeing him all night because he’s loud and his aura is the strongest one here. Not compared to you, but a couple of essences make him the toughest guy in this little town.”

Jason paused to take a glass of juice from his inventory.

“Want one?” he asked.

“No,” Humphrey said, then smacked his dry mouth. “Actually, yes. Please.”

Jason handed over a second glass, taking a sip of his own.

“Just make sure and use a coaster,” Jason said. “Wooden tables don’t grow on… oh, I guess they kind of do.”

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“Doesn’t matter,” Jason said. “So, this guy is the town tough. It becomes clear as the evening goes on that he and everyone else knows it. There’s this girl, young, pretty, who works at the inn. The guy has been giving her a hard time, and it’s only getting worse the more he drinks. Everyone can see what’s happening. He’s too rough, she’s too young, but all she can do is bear it. No one is stepping up to help her, because he’s the strongest guy in this town.”

Jason looked Humphrey straight in the eye.

“Except he isn’t,” Jason continued. “Not this time. That night, you’re there. So what do you do?”

“The right thing is obvious,” Humphrey said, “but you’re clearly setting me up to be wrong.”

“Of course I’m setting you up to be wrong,” Jason said, “but that doesn’t change the situation. The girl is clearly uncomfortable. As this guy goes deeper into his cups, he’s even hurting her a little. But no one is saying anything. They might give him some covert looks, but they won’t challenge him. What do you do, Humphrey?”

“I stop him,” Humphrey said.

“How?”

“I go over there and suppress his aura.”

"He's not iron rank," Jason said. "He's too weak to sense your aura and too drunk to realise what you're doing to him. This is his town, and he's the toughest guy in it. You've just challenged that, and he's way past making smart choices. He wants a fight. He shoves you."

“I kick him out on the street.”

“That works,” Jason said. “You’re stronger than him at his best, which he is far from in that particular moment. He wants to keep fighting, but he’s got a couple of friends sober enough to realise you’re an adventurer and not to be messed with. They take him home before he can cause any more trouble.”

“Then what?” Humphrey asked.

“Then nothing. Without that guy and his friends around, the mood is lightened and everyone has a pleasant evening. The girl thanks, you, nervously, and you go to bed. The next day you move on because you still have a long road ahead.”

“I don’t see the problem,” Humphrey said.

“Well,” Jason said, “what happens the next night? You’re not there, but the town tough isn’t going anywhere. His reputation just got destroyed. He was manhandled and humiliated in front of everyone. It was mostly by his own actions, his own arrogance and pride, but he doesn’t care. Who does he take it out on? How does he re-establish his dominance? How does he put the fear back in these people? How does he teach them what happens if they confront him the way you did? What happens to that girl?”

“You think I should have left things the way they were?” Humphrey asked.

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “Standing up for those who can’t stand up for themselves is a virtue. But if acting on that virtue puts more hurt into the world than it takes away? Is that still moral?”

Humphrey slumped in his chair.

“I don’t have an answer to that,” he said.

“There isn’t always a good option,” Jason said. “Doing nothing to change a bad situation may not feel right, but if anything you do will make it worse, then it’s the only choice to make.”

“What does that have to do with what you did in the mirage arena?” Humphrey challenged.

“Do you know why your mother lets us spend time together, Humphrey?”

“She doesn’t decide who my friends are.”

“Of course she does,” Jason said. “Answer the question.”

“Why?” Humphrey asked. “You didn’t answer mine. You always answer questions with more questions.”

“Fine,” Jason said. “You want a simple answer, then here it is: Things are complicated. That’s it. Your mother wants you to recognise that the world is a lot more complicated than right and wrong, good and evil. I don’t think the way you do, and she wants that to challenge you.”

“You think she wants you to think like you?” Humphrey asked.

“No, Humphrey,” Jason said, shaking his head. “It’s like forging a sword. A sharp edge takes heat and hammering. She wants your principles to go through the fire so they don’t collapse once you’re out in the world where she can’t watch over you. I’ve been playing along, but I want a friend, not a frigging ethics pupil.”

Jason sat up straight in his chair and continued, voice rising as pent-up frustration leaked out.

“I may not always make the best choices. Sometimes I do things that are selfish and hurt other people. I try and do good, and when I fall short, I try to do better. That’s all I can do, all anyone can do.”

“How was hanging Hannah’s corpse up like a party decoration trying to do better?” Humphrey asked.

“That wasn’t real, Humphrey. But it could be. The consequences of what we do, as adventurers. The risks we take. Yes, what I did was traumatising. But now they have a better idea of what could be out there waiting for them, and they’re a little more ready for it than they were before. You think I don’t know what my powers are?”

“And if they freeze up because they’re afraid of what you did really happening?”

“Then they shouldn’t be out there at all,” Jason said. “Isn’t that the whole point of all this training? To make sure we go out as ready as we can be?”

“Does that justify what you did to them?”

“My powers are what they are, Humphrey. There’s no point trying to stab someone with a hammer. If I run around pretending I have your powers, then I will die, and die quickly. Maybe I should have waited for different essences, but you have no inkling of how lost I was when I first came here. I would have done anything for just a little bit of control over my circumstances, and now all I can do is live with the consequences.”

“You think that makes it alright to terrorise people?” Humphrey asked.

“I know what my powers are, Humphrey. Misery and death. Blood turned black with taint, your body dying around you while you're still alive. You think I want to use that on a person? Maybe someone wants to come after me, but they hear about that day. Maybe even see the recording. They decide against coming after to me because the price if failure is too high. Not some clean, quick kill, but a slow, lingering death. Every enemy that fears me too much to come after me is a person I don't have to do use those powers on.”

Humphrey shook his head.

“You’re good with words, Jason. Anything I say, you’ll have an answer for.”

He stood up.

“That’s why I’m done listening,” he said. “I watched what you did in that arena. I listened to you taunt them. I’ve never heard a sound so cruel, so inhuman as you laughing at the suffering of others.”

“Humphrey, that was just theatrics.”

“Was it?” Humphrey asked. He walked over to the door and opened it.

“I think you need to take a look inside yourself, Jason. To find out where that was coming from.”