

Chapter 204

Elven Storage Solutions

The cloud house had taken the form of a large two-storey building of desert stone. Jason found Clive and Belinda out front, working on the scattered collection of parts that used to be the skimmer. After getting Jason's cry for help over voice chat, Clive had used a quick and dirty ritual to overcharge the skimmer. It had brought them to village in the nick of time, but also taken a toll on the vehicle. While Jason recovered, he and Belinda had been trying to repair it using the random collection of materials he happened to have in his storage space.

"How's it going?" Jason asked.

"We've figured out something that should last us the rest of the trip," Clive said. "It'll put all the burden on the parts that are still good, though."

"Which means the skimmer will be well and truly done by the time we get to the river," Belinda added. "It might not even make it, depending on how much chasing around after monster notices we do."

"We'll have it ready to go in the morning," Clive said.

"Jason, have you seen Sophie, yet?" Belinda asked.

"Not since I woke up," Jason said. "Was she looking for me for something?"

"No," Belinda said. "Just do me a favour and don't be too... you when you see her."

"Too me?"

"Yes," Belinda said. "You know what I'm talking about."

"I don't think he can help it," Clive said.

"Don't believe it," Belinda said. "He might seem all over the place, but it's a lot more deliberate than you think. I know a flim-flam man when I see one."

Jason flashed her a grin and went inside the house.

The team looked at the dark hole leading into the earthen bank. It was hard to think of it as a burrow when they could have driven the skimmer into it with room to spare.

Henrietta frowned at the dark opening, one of many they had spotted nearby.

"This one is dangerous," she said. "Dark hunters. Bronze rank, they appear in large numbers and like to dig themselves a warren of dark tunnels."

"I'll go," Jason said.

"I don't think going in there alone is a good idea," Henrietta said.

“Going with someone else would be more dangerous,” Jason said. “This is my kind of fight.”

A fight in the dark against powerful monsters was exactly what he needed to push his perception power over the edge. Humphrey and Clive, with their human advantage, had already reached bronze rank with their perception powers, gaining enhanced aura senses. Neil, who had been an essence user longer than Jason, had likewise reached bronze with his perception power. It gave him the ability to sense vulnerabilities in magical defences and detect injuries, both in allies and enemies.

“I’m not sure going into the dark all alone is a good strategy.”

“Going alone into the dark is my best strategy,” Jason said. “I’ve been practising fighting in various ways, this trip. Now it’s time to fight my way.”

Henrietta looked at Jason, seeing the usual whimsy absent from his expression. All that was there was confidence and determination.

“Very well,” she conceded. “I don’t want you to hesitate to call on us if it goes wrong, though. We’ve come close enough to losing you already.”

Jason walked forward, his cloak manifesting around him. As he went into the tunnels, stars on his cloak started floating into the air, turning pure darkness into dancing shadows. The rest of the team waited, with no indications of anything coming from the cave.

“Asano, are you alright?” Henrietta asked after a while.

“Yes,” Jason’s voice came back. “It’s about to begin.”

She concentrated on the hole in front of her, extending her aura senses.

“What is it?” Humphrey asked, seeing her focused gaze.

“Your aura senses are stronger now,” Henrietta told him. “Push them forward, into the caves.”

“You said dark hunters were good at concealing their auras,” Humphrey said.

“They are,” Henrietta said.

Humphrey did as he was told, concentrating his senses of the burrow entrance in front. Sophie and Clive did the same, using their own enhanced aura senses. It was hard to sense anything from within the warren, but they picked out an aura radiating fear and panic. It was coming closer, toward the burrow entrance directly in front of them.

A creature came stumbling out of the hole. It looked like a preying mantis the size of a Saint Bernard but with the stinger-tail and hard black exterior of a scorpion. It had lost a leg somewhere and was leaking dark fluids from beneath chitinous plates. From the darkness behind it came a cold voice.

“Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death.”

Light shone down on the monster from nowhere, a glorious mix of silver, blue and gold. The beauty of it was belied by the effects of the transcendent energy that rapidly evaporated the monster into rainbow smoke. Jason didn't emerge from the hole, only the team members with bronze-rank aura senses catching a glimpse of his aura in the moment the spell was cast.

They spotted more monsters emerging from the other holes around them, evacuating their underground warren. The creatures ignored the adventurers as they skittered away as fast as their legs would carry them. Each was radiating an aura steeped in the same fear and panic as the first.

"That's odd," Henrietta said, frowning at the fleeing monsters.

"What is?" Humphrey asked.

"They're called dark hunters for a reason," Henrietta said. "I've never heard of them escaping into sunlight before."

Some of the monsters were faster than others, who were clearly impaired. The most damaged started dropping dead shortly after making the surface, while the others grew more and more sluggish over time until they too collapsed to the ground. Jason's exit from the warren was presaged by floating lights that returned to their place on his cloak as he emerged into the light.

He started making his way around the dead monsters, using his blood harvest power on all the bodies before looting them. He didn't need to refresh his mana any more after the first couple of monsters, but kept doing it to level his ability. Finally completing his rounds, he returned to the group as if he'd been out for a stroll, nodding at the skimmer.

"Shall we?"

It finally happened as Jason meditated on the roof of the cloud house. It began with a burning sensation behind the eyes, which became a sharp, twisting pain until it suddenly stopped.

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- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) has gained a new effect.

Ability: [Midnight Eyes] (Dark)

- Special ability (perception).
- Base cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
 - Effect (iron): See through darkness.
 - Effect (bronze): Sense magic.
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- Ability [Midnight Eyes] (Dark) cannot advance further until all attributes have reached bronze rank.
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Jason's vision swam and he was struck with potent vertigo. He rolled forward from his meditative pose, onto to all fours for stability as the world felt like it was tipping and turning around him.

Jason senses were filled with strange new stimuli. He could smell something strange on the air, carrying a faint ozone tang like the aftertaste of a spirit coin. He could feel his necklace and amulet, like electricity against his skin but not at all painful. He took it out of his shirt and it visibly shimmered with power. The much weaker magic woven into his everyday clothes was much milder, but still visible.

He pushed himself back into a sitting position as the dizziness became manageable. Around him, even the ambient magic in their air had become perceptible. It wasn't just his sight, either. He could feel it like a breeze on his skin, smell and taste it in the air. Actual magic objects like his amulet and boots had what looked like a shimmering heat mirage on them. He conjured his cloak and dagger and was able to see the mana emerge from his body like a blue mist before coalescing into the conjured objects. They were similar to his magical items under his new senses but still noticeably different.

The cloud house underneath him was a vast well of magic, although his perception couldn't penetrate beyond the exterior. He carefully pushed himself up on his feet, still a little unsteady. His vision was swimming, like he was looking at the world through a fish bowl. He stood in place and focused on regaining his equilibrium.

Eventually his sense of balance settled. His eyesight got under control and he took stock of just how differently he was perceiving the world. He could sense subtle shifts in the ambient magic around him but it was all too new to make any sense out of it. He would need time to become acclimatised to all the new sensory input.

Once he was sure of his balance, he made his way to the edge of the roof. The cloud house was once again in the form of a two storey building of desert stone, the rooftop giving him a broad view of the desert vista. He dropped lightly off the side, his cloak allowing him to drift gently down.

He could feel the conjured object like it was part of him as he fed it the extra mana to reduce his weight. His new senses, however, suggested it was not his weight that was being changed as he sensed it affect not him, but a field around him. It explained how he was able to share the cloak's power with others and he wondered if the actual functionality was to somehow affect gravity.

He alighted on the ground next to Sophie, who was just coming out of the building.

"Are you alright?" she asked. "I could sense your aura up on the roof and it was all over the place. You aren't normally that sloppy."

"I finally had that bronze breakthrough," he said. "Probably not a big deal for the person who got their first power to bronze years ago. So, are you talking to me again now? Counting the time I was unconscious, this is the first thing you've said to me in a week."

She shifted her gaze, not meeting his eyes. It was a stark contrast from her normal mode of glaring at the world like it owed her money.

"It's kind of obvious that you're giving someone the silent treatment when you're riding around the desert together in a half broken-down skimmer," he said.

"I'm not avoiding you," she denied.

"That might have sounded more plausible if you weren't avoiding eye contact right in front of me when you said it."

She lifted her head to stare defiantly at him but he spotted the vulnerability behind her eyes. He gave her his best reassuring smile.

"How about you tell me what the issue is and we'll see what we can do."

She frowned hesitantly and he watched her body language draw back.

"They told you that you were almost fed a potion that would have killed you, right?" she asked, voice muted and reluctant.

"It rings a bell," Jason said. "I'd just came out of a four day healing coma, so my retention rate wasn't ideal."

"They didn't tell you it was me, though, did they?" she asked. "I was the one who rushed ahead. If your voice chat wasn't still up, if Neil hadn't realised what I was doing and called out for me to stop..."

Jason blinked a couple of times, then let out a chuckle.

"I almost killed you and you think it's funny?"

"It is now," Jason said. "If you'd actually killed me I imagine I'd view it differently. You rushed to my side, you say?"

"Rushed might be a strong word," she back-pedalled. "I suppose you could call it a brisk pace."

He grinned and laughed again.

“I think some humanity is started to show under that stony façade, Wexler. Celestinity? Is that a word? Look, I’ll take a reckless desire to help over cold indifference any day. Well, not any day. I can think of some scenarios where... it doesn’t matter. The point is, I’m glad you rushed to save me. Yes, it didn’t go as planned, but you learned for next time. Instead of taking a potion, pick up Neil and carry him.”

“What was that?” Neil’s voice came from inside. He wandered out of the building to join the pair.

“Nothing Neil,” Jason called back. “We’re just discussing strategies to render healing assistance when someone has already taken a potion.”

“Oh, alright,” Neil said, then clearly realised what must have prompted the situation as an awkward expression crossed his face. “Uh...”

“You can go, Neil,” Jason said.

“Thank you,” Neil said quickly and ducked back inside.

“Oh, Neil,” Jason called after him.

“Yeah?” Neil’s voice drifted back out.

“Is there any chance you could stitch handles into your clothes?”

“Handles?”

Sophie stifled a snort of laughter.

“Yeah,” Jason said. “One somewhere on the upper torso, maybe under one arm, and the other on the thigh. That should be a good balance.”

“Asano,” Neil said, “I have no idea what you’re up to, but the answer is no.”

“Probably for the best,” Jason confided quietly in Sophie. “I think some kind of ruck-sack situation would be better. You’ll be able to run faster with him slung over your back. One of those child-carrier backpacks, but sized for a super-ripped elf. No, you don’t want to carry that lot around. Do you have occy straps here? Never mind, Belinda can probably knock some out with that power she has for creating regular items. Do you know where she is?”

“Alright, seriously,” Neil said, coming back outside. “What are you two talking about?”

“We’re trying to find Belinda,” Jason said innocently. “You haven’t seen her, have you?”