

## Chapter 327

### The Blood and Death Guy

Three black, oversized dirt bikes roared across the red landscape. One had an uncertain-looking woman, another a shadow figure and the third a man in a robe trailing a cloak of darkness and starlight behind him like a comet's tail.

"Your vehicle forms aren't normally this loud," Jason shouted.

"I will remind you that I transform through your power," Shade said. "If any of the traits I take on are yobbish in nature, while I might be the one bearing it, you are the one responsible."

"Are you calling me a yobbo?"

"I've seen the maternal side of your family, Mr Asano. Your mother may try and hide it, but you come from bikes and beer stock."

"Wait, I like that side of my family."

He pumped a fist in the air.

"TEAM YOBBO!"

"What is wrong with you?" Farrah yelled at him.

"I'm a man of the land!"

Farrah shook her head, turning her attention back to not falling off her bike. The supernatural suspension of Shade's dirt bike form made it a minimally taxing endeavour but she still didn't trust the artificial mount. Even with magical assistance, the rough ground made for occasional sharp bumps.

"Couldn't you have turned into a heidel?" Farrah yelled at her bike.

"Mr Asano's power allows me to take forms appropriate to the environment," Shade said. "A heidel is out of the question in this world, but I could manage a camel."

"What's a camel?"

"It's like a horse's gangly, awkward cousin," Jason shouted from alongside her.

"What's a horse?"

They were drawing closer to the few surviving monsters. There was a candy red fish-toad with tentacle fingers, four giant toads, and a half-dozen of the looming, hairy yowies.

Farrah's bike slowed to a stop while Jason and the other dark rider swerved wide in the direction of the hairy giants. Shade turned from a bike to a cloud of darkness that disappeared into Farrah's shadow as she conjured a set of full body armour around her. It was made of glossy obsidian shards swept into wing shapes with a red glow shining from between the segments.

In her hands she conjured a giant, obsidian weapon that only vaguely resembled a sword. The double-edged blade was segmented like her armour, with sections of serrated obsidian teeth over a magma-red glow.

As the two remaining motorcycles swooped around the toads, one of the humungous creatures leapt in their direction. Despite having the size and mass of a quaint rural cottage, it hurtled itself through the air with alarming speed. It was on target to crash into Jason, whose bike exploded into darkness. The dark cloud engulfed him just before the creature landed and smothered it.

On the second motorcycle, Jason emerged from the shadowy rider, occupying its place as the rider vanished into his shadow. Taking control of the bike, he swerved it hard to circle the huge toad. It didn't move, sedentary outside of its ability to make repositioning leaps. Rather than move into the attack, it struck out via the bulging pustules all over its body, which burst explosively to spray pus over Jason.

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- You have been afflicted with [Congealing Toad Venom].
  - You have resisted [Congealing Toad Venom].
  - You have gained an instance of [Resistant].
  - You have gained an instance of [Integrity].
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Resisting silver-rank poison was nothing new to Jason, with his ability to ignore rank disparity and his stacked resistance bonuses. That made the worst part of the attack the stench, which was akin to rotting whale blubber. It wasn't rainbow smoke bad, but it was enough that Jason had once cancelled a beach holiday over a similar aroma.

Not letting the bursting pustules bother him, Jason made a quick lap around the creature, his shadow arm stretching to score its skin with his dagger while he chanted spells. The dagger barely penetrated the coarse, damp skin, but Jason had never needed deep cuts. In the short time it took him to loop the toad and ride off in the direction of the yowies, he had locked in his full suite of afflictions.

"This mounted combat thing might really work out."

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Farrah was squaring off with her own leaping monster. The bright red fish-toad-humanoid abomination called a yara-ma-yha-who launched itself toward her. She didn't have the mobility of the bike or even the mobility of not being encased in stone armour, so she didn't dodge. Instead, two halves of an obsidian dome rose from the ground to close over her.

The three metre tall monster landed on the dome, the impact spreading spiderweb cracks across its surface. Perched on the dome, the monster immediately started hammering away with tentacle hands balled into fists. It clearly had the strength to smash through in short order, but the dome exploded outward, tossing the monster back and peppering it with obsidian shards that dug into its flesh, although not deeply.

From within the expanding cloud of obsidian fragments, Farrah pointed to a spot on the ground.

*“Flame of the earth, await the call.”*

The monster’s agility was incongruous with its awkward-looking physique, but it twisted in the air to land on its feet. Farrah, predicting its landing point, had used her spell to create a glowing sigil on the ground, right under its feet. She snapped her fingers, no mean feat in a stone gauntlet, and a magma geyser erupted from the ground. The force of the magma stream staggered the monster, the molten rock clinging to its body.

Farrah strode forward, three flaming orbs manifesting and floating over her head. They each shot fiery beams at the monster, which ceased scraping at the magma with its hands and rushed forward at her instead. Farrah stomped her foot as she moved and obsidian shards erupted from the ground in a curtain, adding to the fragments already embedded in the monster’s flesh.

The creature quickly moved aside, dodging much of the cloud of shards only to see another ability coming for it. Something underground was rapidly digging its way forward. The monster moved again but the burrowing thing changed tack to keep pursuing. Finally, the monster grabbed a huge rock like it weighed no more than dollhouse and hammered it down, trying to kill whatever was hidden in the ground.

After the rock slammed into the ground, it was broken apart as a two metre obsidian column smashed through it as it rose from the ground in front of the monster. The column then shattered, burying yet more shards in the monster as Farrah chanted a follow-up spell.

*“Children of the volcano, be reborn in fire.”*

All the shards of obsidian, almost a patina coating the front of the monster, suddenly turned into molten magma. The small globules of molten rock started merging together burning all the hotter with each addition.

The entire front side of the monster was turned to molten slag, catching fire and drizzling onto the ground syrup to reveal the creature’s hideous innards. Even so, the monster did not die. Monsters may have lacked an essence user’s arsenal of powers, but

their resilience put all but the most indestructible essence users to shame. At silver rank, any monster took a lot of killing.

Farah didn't let up, approaching now with her sword. Swinging it in a wide, horizontal sweep, the segments of blade whipped away, strung along a cord of glowing magma. It wrapped around the monster twice, the serrated edge digging into flesh. It was especially vulnerable in its ruined front. The sword retracted, cutting into the monster like a saw as it shrank back to the hilt.

Even that didn't kill the monster, but the creature was no longer a threat, laying almost helpless on the ground.

"Time to try another new trick," Farrah said to herself and the sword in her hands transformed. Instead of a sword, it became an unwieldy saw blade on a heavy handle, the glowing hot edge spinning rapidly. Too awkward for a fight, it was just the thing for dismembering a monster already all but done.

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Physically tougher and stronger than the other monsters, the yowies were still less powerful, lacking the speed or special abilities to leverage that might. At silver-rank, strong and tough wasn't enough anymore, which was perfectly highlighted by an enemy like Jason.

Literally riding rings around them on his bike, he quickly loaded them up with afflictions before leaving them to percolate, heading after the remaining toads. He started with the one he had already gone to work on. Loaded up with afflictions that built up while Jason handled the yowies, the toad's flesh was already covered in ugly splotches of dead flesh. Jason's Punition spell delivered an immediate burst of necrosis for each affliction, which was enough to finish the toad off.

Farah was coming away from having killed the most dangerous monster and was eyeing off the two toads closest together.

Leaving them to her, Jason took the last one. Once again, he rode around the monster on his bike, shadow arm flicking out to land a pair of knife wounds. He had the arm emerge from his cloak, using his own hands to keep control of the bike as he rode it wildly over the uneven ground. This was more familiar to him than his fight against the bikies, having learned to ride dirt bikes on Uncle Robbo's farm as a boy.

The toads had thick skin, but as Cotsworth had told them, their insides were much more vulnerable. Jason's afflictions ravaged the toad's insides and he didn't wait long before switching to the second phase. After hitting it with his Punition spell, he used his

Feast of Absolution to drain the noxious afflictions. For each instance of curse, unholy affliction, poison and disease removed, two holy afflictions were left in its place.

Penance inflicted inescapable transcendent damage that diminished over time. Legacy of Sin made the target count as more damaged than they were for execute attacks, which only added to the fact that by the time Jason laid it on, the target was already plenty damaged.

Against lower-rank monsters, Jason had needed to work to use his finisher. Most monsters were done by the time he was ready to pull it out. Finally faced with silver-rank enemies, the power of the finisher was truly something he could use to close out a fight.

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

A column of transcendent light crashed down on the toad, descending like the judgement of the heavens.

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#### Ability: [Verdict] (Doom)

- Spell (execute)
- Cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: 30 seconds.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 3 (99%)
  
- 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.

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As of bronze rank, the triple-stack scaling of damage and the two afflictions made Jason's finisher a force of absolute annihilation, wiping the toad from existence.

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- You have defeated [Gigantoad].
  
  - [Gigantoad] has been wholly annihilated. It has been looted automatically.
  
  - 8 gobbets of [Silver Toad Jelly] have been added to your inventory.
  - [Healing Unguent (Silver)] has been added to your inventory.
  - [Monster Core (Silver)] has been added to your inventory.
  - 10 [Silver Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 100 [Bronze Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
  - 1000 [Iron Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
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Since his Punition spell had a cooldown, it would take him a moment to go through each of the yowies he had left behind, so after felling the toad, he pointed a hand in their direction.

*“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”*

One of the yowies stumbled as clumps of hair started falling out of stricken flesh.

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Farrah didn't bother messing around with the last two toads, deciding to go all out. She started by drawing a fire diagram in the air and then activating a power. Amber light shone from her body, before turning silver as her aura went from bronze-rank to silver. Then she cast a spell.

*“Burning heart of the world, show your might.”*

The first toad had leapt at her while she was drawing the diagram, but she didn't dodge, raising an arm in its direction. A metre-wide stream of lava erupted at the toad, coring its weak insides like an apple after punching through its tough skin. Pus and jelly rained down on her as she pointed her hand at the second toad. Another burst of lava made short work of it.

Afterwards, she dismissed her armour. Lava Cannon was a mana-devouring spell at bronze-rank, but artificially raising it to silver with her Limit Break power made her mana drop off like a calving glacier. She stood bent over in a recovery position, hands on knees as Jason arrived on his bike. Seeing her covered in toad goo, he cast his cleansing spell.

*“Feed me your sins.”*

“How do even your healing powers sound evil?” she asked as Jason tossed her a recovery potion.

“I used it on the fourth toad,” Jason said. “That should tell you what you need to know.”

“I saw that big column of smiting power,” she said. “Was that transcendent damage?”

“That's my finisher,” Jason said.

“What happened to you being the blood and death guy?”

“I also offer absolution,” Jason said. “But absolution comes at a price.”

“I see you're still the melodrama guy,” she said, looking in the direction of the yowies.

“What about those ones?”

Jason glanced back and cast another Punition spell.

“I'll finish them once they get over here,” Jason said. “Let me just loot this lot, first.”

“You don't have any more crystal wash, do you?”

“I've got two left,” Jason said. “I figured I'd save them for rank-ups.”

“Good idea.”

Speaking of rank-ups, though, I’ve got that feeling…”

Amber light started shining out of his body.

“Didn’t even wait for me to meditate,” he said. “That ability was right on the cusp.”

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- Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Bronze 3 (100%).
  - Ability [Verdict] (Doom) has reached Bronze 4 (00%).
  
  - All [Doom Essence] abilities have reached [Bronze 4].
  - Linked attribute [Spirit] has increased from [Bronze 3] to [Bronze 4].
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Jason leaned forward on the bike, letting Shade support him through the disorientation

“Mid-fight rank up?” Farrah said. “It seems that you aren’t taking these monsters seriously or your soul wouldn’t be relaxed enough for that to happen.”

“The fight is basically over,” Jason said.

“Looks like your monsters feel the same way.”

Jason turned to take a closer look at the hairy monstrosities.

“Have they turned around?” he asked. “It’s hard to tell with all that hair and how slow they are.”

“I think they have,” Farrah said.

“Oh, come on,” Jason said. “Why would you run when you can’t actually run, you stupid monsters?”

He took off on his bike, leaving Farrah with Shade, who emerged from her shadow to take the form of a black horse with a white mane. It was sleek and beautiful, with hair so shiny Farrah could vaguely see her reflection in it.

“Now, this is more like it,” she said.