

Chapter 51: Song of the Nightingale

"Enter!" Lucian's voice bellowed, and Cassowary opened the door. Following him in was a nervous-looking, middle-aged man with a balding head and noticeable paunch.

"Cassowary," Lucian said, his forehead creasing into a frown. Elven features weren't well-suited to malevolence, but Lucian made it work.

"I take it," Lucian said, "that you're showing your face here because you have what I asked for."

"Yes, sir, Mr Lucian," Cassowary said quickly. "This man is a bookmaker here in the pits and has been for some years. He knows all about the girl."

The middle-aged man visibly gulped as Lucian looked him up and down.

"Name?" Lucian demanded.

"Hubert, sir. They call me Bert the Bookie."

"Not your name, imbecile. The fighter, Nightingale."

"Sorry, sir. Her name's Sophie, sir. Sophie Wexler."

"You just heard Cassowary tell me you knew everything about her which, for your sake, I very much hope is true. Tell me everything, Bert the Bookie."

"Everything, sir, yes, sir," Hubert said. "She wasn't born local but came over with her father, when she was real little, like. This was at the time of the monster surge before last. I remember that's when it was because her father was part of this merchant group. The head of their muscle. Seems they hadn't been doing so well and gambled big on a sailing run during the surge. There's a reason no-one sails during a surge, though, and they lost everything. Only a handful made it in on some dinghies, including the girl and her old man. She couldn't have been more than two or three years old."

"He took a little girl out to sea during a monster surge?" Cassowary asked. "What a prick."

"Shut up," Lucian said to Cassowary, then returned his gaze to Hubert. "You, keep talking."

"Well, the merchant group was done," Hubert continued. "No ships, not even the money for passage back after the surge was over. The girl's old man went to work for Silva. Not Cole Silva who's in charge now, obviously. His old dad. Good man, too. Tough, but fair, you know?"

"Get on with it."

"Sorry, sir. So, the girl's old man could fight, like, proper fight, and catches the old man's attention. Does well under Silva Senior for a lot of years, until there's a problem. Silva Junior takes an interest in the girl."

"Hardly a surprise," Lucian said. "He has eyes."

"She is a looker, sir. But she didn't want any part of Silva the younger, and none could blame her. He'd left more than a few professional women in no state to undertake their profession, if you catch my drift. Old man Silva, he knows what his son is, and likes the girl's father. So he tells his son that it's hands-off."

"I bet he took that well," Lucian said.

"About how you'd expect, sir, yes. He did as he was told, but didn't make things pleasant for the girl. Got to the point that her father decided to get her out. He just didn't go about it a good way."

"Oh?"

"The father takes out a loan from Silva the senior. A hefty one. Tries to start up his own trade expedition, but even without a monster surge, the man ain't got no luck with the sea."

"Monster attack?"

"Pirates. Was quite the excitement, from what I hear; father and daughter fighting pirates back to back. Managed to fight them off, too, but the father didn't last long after, and neither did the ship. For the second time in her life the girl arrives at the city in a dinghy, and this time she's got no father and a shipload of inherited debt. She would have been sixteen, seventeen back then. She had an essence her old man had bought, which had just made the debt all the bigger."

"That was when she started pit fighting," Cassowary contributed.

"Shut up, Cassowary," Lucian barked. "Carry on, Bert."

"Now, I knew the father and daughter going back to when her father was muscle here in the Fortress," Hubert said. "He was a hard man. No essences, but I'd seen him put down people who had one, even two. He never fought in the pits himself, but the fighters showed him nothing but respect. His girl, as it turns out, was even better. Run up walls, fly through the damn air like a bird."

"Nightingale," Lucian said.

"That's right," Hubert said. "She had a good run. Took some beatings early on, but she learned fast. Add that to the way she looks and she got some attention."

"She fights for Silva?" Lucian asked.

"She did back then, for Silva the elder," Hubert said. "He looked out for her, kept his son off her back, which Silva Junior did not care for. But the old man took a real shine to the girl. Eventually, she gave up the ring, found some other way to pay the old man back. High-end thieving was what I heard. She had a friend who made the plans and the tools, she did the second-storey work."

"Then why is she back in the pits?" Lucian asked. "And who does she fight for, now?"

"That goes back to when Old Man Silva died," Hubert said. "There was talk old man Silva wasn't going to pass the mantle down to his son," Hubert said. "Too impulsive, too beholden to his own appetites. Word is, the old man was going to step back and pass it to one of the old-guard before he passed. Someone who'd respect the old man's treatment of the girl."

"But he didn't pass it on to anyone else," Lucian said.

"No, he didn't," Hubert agreed. "Couple of months ago, the old man went in his sleep. There were rumours, of course, but nothing came of them. Since the old man hadn't said otherwise, the son stepped in. Damn near the first thing he did was go after the girl. As far as I know, she'd almost cleared the old debt, but now it's in the hands of Silva Junior. He made plenty clear the only payment he'll take. She and her friend have a skill-set, though, and made themselves scarce. Found their way to another of the Big Three, Clarissa Ventress. Cut a deal to protect them from Silva."

"So Ventress is making her fight again?" Lucian asked.

"Word is, she's only doing it to annoy Silva."

"What does she get out of that?"

"The transition from father to son hasn't been smooth for Silva's people," Hubert explained. "The old man was stable and reliable, while it's no secret his son is just the opposite. He ousted his father's old guard, put in his own people. That's left a lot of folks uncertain and nervous about Silva's position in the Big Three. There's been talk about the other two snatching away at of Silva's territory. Word is, the only reason they haven't moved is they don't want Island folk coming down here. Begging your pardon, sir."

"So Ventress is using the girl," Lucian said. "She wants to make Silva do something stupid."

"The Big Three know better than to rock the boat too hard," Hubert said. "They don't want folk like you, sir, coming in and dealing with them."

"But if Cole Silva does something loud and impulsive," Lucian said, "then Ventress steps in to settle it down. She claims new territory and makes good with the Island powers at the same time."

"You see it clear," Hubert said. "If I might say, sir, you're as smart as I've heard."

Lucian laughed.

"I usually detest sycophancy," Lucian said, "but I like you, Bert the Bookie."

He opened a drawer, taking out a pouch of coins and tossing it to Hubert.

"You're a good storyteller," Lucian said. "If you come across any others worth telling, you came and find Cassowary, here."

"Thanking you, sir, I'll be sure and do that."

Hubert departed the viewing box, coin pouch clutched possessively in both hands. That left Lucian and Cassowary alone, the younger man looking nervously at his employer. Lucian glanced at the younger man, his own face unreadable. Cassowary grew increasingly more unnerved as the silence extended.

"Adequate," Lucian said finally, sending relief spilling over Cassowary's face. "I want you to arrange a meeting with Clarissa Ventress. Can I rely on you for that?"

"Yes, Mr Lucian, sir."

Belinda arrived at the Broadstreet Clinic to find a notice on the door. It announced that Mr Tillman wasn't in for the day. Basic medical supplies could be purchased from the reception and Mr Asano would be in at the usual times, but strictly for emergency cases.

Inside, the waiting room was quite full.

"Sorry, Mr Asano," she heard Janice the receptionist say. "The notice said emergencies only, but of course, people ignore it."

"Or can't read," a man said, coming out from the back room. It was the same man who had given Sophie the free ointment. His sharp features and dark, clear eyes looked stern until a friendly smile lit up his face like a light.

"Who's next, Janice?" he asked.

Janice called up a young mother with her son, the man leading them into the back. Belinda then approached the reception desk.

"I'm looking to buy some more ointment and potions," Belinda told Janice. "And some crystal wash, if you have it."

The magic cleaning fluid was more expensive than a shower, but Sophie kept ending up drenched in blood. She knew Jory produced some to sell at the Adventure Society trade hall.

"All out of crystal wash, I'm afraid," Janice said. "Mr Asano keeps buying it all. He's very particular about cleanliness. He says there is tiny dirt that you can't see, but can make

you sick. Sounds like nonsense to me, but Mr Tillman says he's right, so there you have it."

"Who is this guy?" Belinda asked. "Another alchemist?"

"No, he's training to be an adventurer," Janice said. "He's always out back, lifting weights or meditating. He just pops in every once in a while to cure everyone lined up with his abilities. Does it for free, too."

"For free?"

"For free," Janice confirmed.

"Doesn't that hurt Jory's business?"

"Oh, he never makes much money off the clinic, anyway," Janice said. "Mostly he sells things at the trade hall or even takes the occasional adventuring contract. That's where he is today."

"So what does this Asano get out of it, if he's working for free?" Belinda asked.

"Doesn't that seem a bit suspect, to you?"

"No, Mr Asano isn't like that," Janice said. "He says it lets him practise his healing ability, and he is always practising so hard. But really, I think he just likes helping people."

"Still sounds suspicious to me."

"Oh, you wouldn't think so if you got to know him," Janice said. "It's also good that Mr Tillman has a friend. He used to spend all his time upstairs with his little experiments."

"Still, keep an eye on him," Belinda said. "You should never trust people who say they just want to help."

Chapter 52:

Pain

"I'm taking it up to five," Rufus' voice echoed through the mirage chamber. Jason stood waiting in his illusionary body. He was under the dome, but it was hidden by the false landscape. His senses told him he was standing on a desert hillside, ancient ruins all around him and dead enemies at his feet.

The mirage chamber was a strange experience. To Jason's senses, everything was real, including himself. He felt the impact of every blow and the pain of every wound, even as his body lay unharmed in the control room.

The wounds vanished from Jason's body and the fallen enemies around him vanished. In their place, five men appeared and immediately jumped to the attack.

Jason's new art was different in many ways from what he had expected, although in hindsight such differences were obvious. In his own world, martial arts were designed to fight other humans, operating within a fixed range of physical capability. Adventurers had to fight anything from people with superhuman attributes to shark-crabs to spiders the size of a delivery van. It was tricky to put a wrist lock on something that didn't have a wrist.

The Way of the Reaper consisted of five forms, which shifted the combat style's priorities to meet changing circumstances. They were not organised to confront specific challenges, but rather to meet challenges in specific ways. The form, Way of the Sage, for example, was the most mobile of the five stances. It was of equal use against multiple opponents in complicated terrain as it was against a giant creature with many legs.

The Way of the Hierophant form was direct and aggressive, while the Way of the Trickster was the exact opposite. Full of strange movements and unconventional attacks, it reminded Jason of drunken boxing. The Way of the Hunter offered debilitating attacks against the unaware victims, and methods to hone in on the weak point of a monster. Against human opponents, the Way of the Hermit put attackers off-balance to set up devastating counters. Against monsters, it was used to defend against unusual attacks from the most bizarre creatures.

All together, it made for a comprehensive style, incorporating strikes, grapples, even acrobatics. How to move quickly and quietly, or with swift, breakneck efficiency. All the things he had been learning came into play, from Rufus' footwork to Gary's movement training, even Farrah's situational awareness techniques.

Despite all of that, Rufus' proclamations about the nature of fighting came to pass. The result of his sudden martial skills reminded Jason of playing a video game for the first

time. His avatar may have an array of amazing abilities, but his fumbling efforts to use them left him beaten, battered and failing to live up to the potential. Boxed in by the five illusionary enemies,

He was pinned down and savagely beaten. Rufus took longer to end the simulation than Jason would have liked, but eventually he did and Jason woke up in his real body. He swung his legs off the platform he was laying on, letting out a groan as he rubbed his side.

“I swear I can still feel it,” he said.

“Phantom pain,” Rufus said. “You get used to it.”

“Five enemies was a little much,” Jason said. “I could barely handle four.”

“You want to go back down?” Rufus asked.

“No, the challenge is good.”

“That’s what I want to hear,” Rufus said.

“Still better five illusionary goons than one of Humphrey,” Jason said. “I’d call him a monster, but I’ve fought monsters. He’s worse.”

“Humphrey has been training since he was able to walk upright,” Rufus said. “He and I have that in common. A book won’t close that gap overnight.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said.

“What did your parents teach you when you were growing up?” Rufus asked.

“My dad’s parents came from another country,” Jason said. “My mum was very big on having us learn about it. The language, the culture. Dad himself couldn’t care less, and I was the same. It was really my brother’s thing.”

“Well,” Rufus said, “you can speak the language now.”

Jason tilted his head thoughtfully.

“Huh. I guess I can.”

Jason and Rufus left the mirage chamber and started back for the city. Rufus asking about his family had left him uncharacteristically quiet. Jason didn’t have a lot of contact with his family after they had fallen out. When he dropped out of university he didn’t move back from Melbourne. The only ones he saw regularly were his much older sister, along with her husband and daughter. Uncle Jason was the cheapest childcare in town, but for all his complaining, he loved that little girl. From literally a world away, conflicts that once seemed intractable now looked small and meaningless.

As they made their way from the grounds of the Geller Estate, Rufus looked over at Jason, locked in contemplation. He wasn’t used to be the one making conversation.

“How are your essence abilities coming along?” Rufus asked.

“What? Oh, good, yeah” Jason said. “I’m getting better with the shadow teleport. I’ve been testing its limitations.”

“Oh?”

“It needs a distinct shadow,” Jason explained. “I can’t just teleport around wherever I like in the dark.”

“So you need at least some light,” Rufus said.

“Yeah,” Jason said, “but I have a solution for that. Shadow jumping isn’t the only ability I’ve been working on.”

“Good,” Rufus said. “Mastering your essence abilities is crucial. What have you learned?”

Jason stopped and looked around. They were on a wide path through a grove of what looked like banyan trees. Like most of the Geller estate’s winding pathways, the vegetation shaded the path from the punishing sun.

“This’ll work,” Jason said. “You remember how my cloak can light up with stars?”

“I do.”

“Watch this.”

Jason’s shadowy cloak appeared around him like dark smoke. Stars started to appear upon it, lighting it up as Rufus had seen in the past. Then the stars started floating off the cloak, more and more of them drifting out, spreading their cool light under the shady trees. The lights weren’t overpowering, filling the area with shadowy nooks and crannies. Jason started moving around. but the star motes didn’t move with him, floating independently.

“So you can bring your own shadows,” Rufus said.

“That’s the idea,” Jason said. “I’ve been practising at night. Once I have it down, I should be a proper menace in the dark.”

“Well, keep at it,” Rufus said. “Ideally, you will have solid control of your abilities for the Adventure Society assessment. It’s only a couple of weeks away now.”

“I don’t know,” Jason said. “I’ve come so far since I was stumbling around that hedge maze with no pants, but it feels like there’s still so much further to go.”

“The only thing you can do with that feeling,” Rufus said, “is to get used to it. I’ve been going through one form of training or another for as long as I can remember, and I still feel like that.”

The interior of Lucian Lamprey’s viewing box was spacious and split into two levels. The smaller, higher level was at the back. Behind Lucian’s heavy wooden desk was the

luxurious chair in which he spent most of his day. The larger space was a relaxed lounging area, with plush chairs and a comfortable couch. They were arrayed in a semicircle around the viewing window, with a low refreshments table in the middle.

Lucian had descended from his usual perch as a gesture to his visitor, awaiting her in one of the soft chairs in the viewing lounge. Respect was not the same as deference, however, and he didn't stand as he waved her to another of the chairs. The director of the Magic Society did not stand up to meet a crime lord.

"Thank you for your kind invitation," Clarissa Ventress said. Her bodyguard, Darnell, remained outside the door. He rarely was away from her side, but Ventress was at a rare disadvantage. The Fortress was the symbol of power in Old City, and she was one of its rulers. In front of Lucian Lamprey, however, she was reminded that Old City's power was only hers so long as the Island had no interest in taking it from her. Lucian Lamprey represented both danger and opportunity.

"You have been the Fortress' most important patron for some time now," Ventress said. "I'm delighted you've given me the privilege of a meeting."

Lucian nakedly ran his eyes over Clarissa. He could sense her bronze-rank aura, see the body sculpted into lithe perfection by the magic of her essences. She wore an exquisite green dress that both commanded and provoked. Lucian had heard the delta contained several breeds of snake that were beautiful in their colouration, but deadly to encounter. He had the same impression of Clarissa Ventress.

"The pleasure is genuinely mine," he told her.

Lucian's assistant Cassowary brought drinks brought refreshments, sitting them on the table as Lucian and Clarissa exchanged some more niceties.

"As you may be aware," Lucian said, "I am an enthusiast of the fights here in the Fortress."

"I have heard as such," Clarissa said.

"Normally it is the evening battles that interest me. Fighters with a full set of essences. But lately, I have found one of the lower-card fighters to be highly compelling. One of your fighters."

Clarissa smiled. The key to controlling a person was finding what they wanted. Now she understood what Lucian wanted, her concerns melted away.

"The Nightingale," she said.

It was hardly a leap of deduction. A certain kind of man took perverse pleasure in breaking the will of a strong woman. It was the reason Sophie made such a useful stick

with which to prod Cole Silva. Clarissa enjoyed such men, as she found them weak and easy to handle.

"Her real name is Sophie Wexler," Clarissa said. "She came into my employ under the condition that I would protect her."

"Give her to me."

"Of course, I would like to do nothing else," Clarissa said. "But there are complications."

Lucian scowled.

"You must understand," Clarissa said, "that my deal to protect her is widely known. That knowledge is no small part of where the protection comes from. I have gotten where I am in no small part on the strength of my reputation. If I make a deal to protect a person, then hand them over to someone else, I am no longer able to vouchsafe any agreement on the strength of my world alone."

"And if I just decide to take her?" Lucian asked.

"Then no one in Old City could stop you," Clarissa said. "But if Old City was all you had to worry about, you already would have. The Director of the Magic Society can't just go around kidnapping women for his own pleasure, and that kind of thing has a way of getting around. What you need is to have her placed under your power in such a way that will not be given a second glance."

"Go on," Lucian said.

"I think, perhaps," Clarissa said, "there is a way in which we can have both of our needs met. It will take some effort on my part, but the conclusion should be mutually satisfying."

"Explain," Lucian demanded.

"You must understand that one's word is not something that can be repaired. Once broken, it stays broken. I made an agreement to protect the girl from external influences, in return for certain services. Should something befall her in the course of providing those services, I cannot be expected to protect her from herself. You may or may not be aware, but she is a professional thief. If she were caught through lack of ability in her chosen trade, then I could hardly be blamed. Once she was in the hands of the legal system, I have no doubt a man of such staggering influence as yourself could take charge of the matter from there."

"I do believe I could," Lucian said thoughtfully. "But can you get her there?"

"It will require me to take some pains," Clarissa said. "But what's a little pain in service to a man such as yourself?"

Chapter 53: Nightlife

With Jason's Adventure Society field assessment looming closer by the day, Rufus, Gary and Farrah pushed him harder than ever. As a release, they would spend their evenings exploring the night time entertainments offered by the city. Danielle Geller acted as their guide to local society, usually with her son, Humphrey, in tow.

The symphony was a revelation to Jason. The concert hall was situated in the guild district, conveniently close to their lodgings, and they enjoyed the view from the Geller's private viewing box.

The instruments weren't what he recognised, although many were similar, at least in appearance. It was the magic they contained that made the performance as magnificent visually as it was musically. As they played, dancing streamers of light rose up from the instruments, galloping out over the audience to frolic in consonance with the music. Harmony of light and sound came together to transfigure the performance into something unlike any Jason had experienced before.

"How often do they put this on?" Jason leaned over to ask Danielle.

"The full symphony? Once per month, although smaller performances happen all through the week."

"Is there a membership or something I can get?"

"There's a patronage program with the Musical Society," Danielle said. "I can introduce you to some people from the Musical Society if that is of interest to you."

"Please and thank you."

At an evening of ballroom dancing, they encountered the young acolyte of knowledge, Gabrielle Pellin.

"Fancy that," Danielle said innocently.

When Humphrey failed to muster up the courage for an approach, he was left watching in horror as Jason taught her a dance from his own world. After Jason slipped the string quartet a few coins, they claimed the floor to demonstrate it in full, to the applause of the gathering.

Afterwards, Jason escorted her in the direction of Humphrey, Danielle and Jason's friends.

"You're quite the spirited dancer," Gabrielle told Jason as they walked leisurely around the dance floor. "You never did tell me the name."

"It's called the tango," Jason said.

"Is it well known, in your world?" she asked.

"It's probably the most famous dance there is."

"It was my older sister, who taught me to dance," Jason said. "I wasn't very interested until my father gave me some sage advice. He told me that if I wanted to be successful in love, I needed to learn three things. How to dance, how to cook, and how to keep my damn mouth shut."

"How did that work out?" Gabrielle asked.

"Well, Jason said, "I can dance and I can cook. Gabrielle, you'll remember Humphrey Geller."

"Of course," she said. "I haven't assessed that many people for the Adventure Society, but of those I have, I think he may have been the most talented."

"You realise you assessed me right after?"

"I do," she said primly.

"Ouch," Jason said, turning his gaze to Humphrey. "It seems this rose still has her thorns. Humphrey, I think I'll leave this next dance to you."

They both looked to Humphrey, who was looking nervous. His sheepish embarrassment could not hide the broad shoulders and chiselled features, however. He was another in a long line of annoyingly attractive people Jason was getting to know.

"I think that would be delightful," Gabrielle said, taking mercy on him.

"What do you say, Humphrey?" Jason asked.

"That... you... I would like that very much."

Unlike most society hotspots, the theatre district was actually located in Old City, quite close to the Fortress. It allowed members of high society to seem like they were heading to a play instead of the less-savoury delights of the city's chief den of iniquity. Leaving a private viewing box, Jason and his companions discussed their opinions of the play.

"The stage combat was actually rather impressive," Rufus said. "I found the plot to be a little slight, however. I like a performance with something to say."

"It did have something to say," Gary said. "That sword fights are great. The good guys win, the bad guys lose, the end. I liked it."

Jason was shaking his head.

"You disagree?" Danielle asked him.

"I'm probably just misreading it because of the difference in culture," Jason said.

"It's not like you to be diplomatic," Rufus said. "Just say what you really think."

"I think it did have something to say," Jason said. "I think the main characters weren't the heroes; they were the villains. I think the whole play was a critique of hereditary power structures and by overcoming the antagonists, the central characters were restoring a state of oppression."

"You think the main characters were the villains?" Rufus asked.

"I do," Jason said.

"I don't see it," Rufus said.

"Don't you have a childhood friend who's a member of some royal family?" Jason asked.

"He does," Farrah said.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Rufus asked.

They exited the theatre through the doors reserved for private box holders, where members of society were reboarding their carriages. Jason noticed a woman with the same silver-rank aura and physical perfection of Danielle. She broke away from her own group of ladies, making a beeline for Danielle.

"Danielle," the woman greeted. "Always lovely to see you. Young Master Humphrey. And you must be Rufus Remore, with your erstwhile companions, of course."

"Lady Thalia Mercer," Danielle introduced the lady.

Thalia's eyes settled on Jason.

"We haven't had the pleasure," she said. "You must be the young man people are getting so curious about."

"I'm no one important," Jason said.

"Yet, you keep important company," Thalia said.

"I do?" he asked. "I don't really know these people. I'm only here because I won a raffle."

Farrah snorted a laugh, while Rufus ran an exasperated hand over his face.

"Wait, there was a raffle?" Gary asked, only to be shushed by Farrah.

"This is Jason Asano," Danielle introduced, a smile playing over her lips. "He will be taking his field assessment for the Adventure Society when Humphrey retakes his. I assume your son will be there as well?"

"He will," Thalia said unhappily. "I tried to convince my husband that Thadwick would benefit from additional training, but he was quite adamant."

Thalia turned to Rufus, the man who had failed her son during the previous assessment.

"You know, Mr Remore," she said, "you rather overturned the fruit cart with how you conducted the last assessment."

"I'm sorry if you feel your son was treated unfairly," Rufus said, "but since he had previously passed, perhaps it would have been better not to put him forward for reassessment."

Thalia laughed.

"I couldn't agree more," Thalia said, to Rufus' surprise. "However, my husband cannot seem to help poking his fingers into things best left alone."

"It's a shame you weren't here when Thalia's daughter was tested," Danielle said. "Thalia oversaw her training personally, and I have no doubt she would have passed. Where is Cassandra, this evening?"

"Out in the delta somewhere, on a contract," Thalia said. "I do look forward to introducing you, Mr Remore."

After some more niceties, Thalia excused herself and the group boarded the Geller family carriage. It was one of the ones drawn by magic rather than animals and was larger than the equivalents from Jason's own world.

"I do believe Thalia is trying to set you up with her daughter," Danielle told Rufus.

"He's used to it," Farrah said.

"If she's anything like her brother," Rufus said, "I'd rather she didn't. I've never seen anyone that incompetent undertake a field assessment before. I'm convinced the other members of his group passed because they honed their abilities covering for that idiot. It was to the point that it could be a whole new training methodology. The trick would be finding people so aggressively incapable."

"You'll find her daughter to be a very different prospect," Danielle said. "Cassandra is a remarkable woman, and right about your age. Actually, she rather reminds me of Jason."

"You're kidding," Rufus said.

"Oh, at a glance, they seem different," Danielle said. "She's more of a knife to Jason's hammer, but they both seem to enjoy provocation as a social tool."

"On second thoughts," Rufus said, looking warily at Jason, "I might prefer to deal with the brother."

Sophie and Belinda were summoned to Clarissa Ventress' home instead of the Fortress; a sprawling manor in Old City's canal district. The canal district had its own internal city wall. It was a legacy of time before the Island, when the district was home to

the city elite. It had been left to those who had wealth but lacked in prestige, preferring to stand tall in Old City than go underfoot on the Island.

The two women were led through the compound, past various thugs standing guard. Centuries ago, Clarissa's residence had been the seat of the Mercer family. The grounds were quite expansive, with more than one canal flowing through it.

Inside the house itself, they were guided by Clarissa's hulking leonid bodyguard, Darnell. Clarissa was waiting for them in a parlour, sitting at a table with morning tea set out. Hers was the only seat in the room.

"Ladies," greeted them. "I have good news for you."

"I don't suppose it's that Sophie's done with the fighting pits," Belinda said sullenly.

"Actually, it is," Clarissa said.

Sophie and Belinda both looked up sharply.

"Really?" Belinda asked.

"Yes," Clarissa said. "She's had her last pit fight."

"Then what is it you want me doing next?" Sophie asked, eyes narrowing as she looked at Clarissa.

"So cynical," Clarissa said.

"Just say it," Sophie said.

"You two were an excellent team," Clarissa said. "I suspect that even now, the two of you are the only ones who know exactly how many jobs you pulled for Old Man Silva. I just want you back to doing what you do best."

"The deal was that we help you provoke Silva," Sophie said. "Now you want us to steal from him?"

"Of course not," Clarissa said. "I would never put you in that position."

"Then what?" Sophie demanded.

"It is well known that for almost a decade now, the Silva family has enjoyed the services of a pair of excellent thieves. When those same thieves start robbing the social elite, right out in public, the pressure on Silva will be considerable"

"Are you crazy?" Belinda yelled, stepping angrily forward. Clarissa's bodyguard moved towards her, but Clarissa casually waved him back.

"This will be the last task I assign you," Clarissa said. "Naturally, stealing from Greenstone's wealthiest will get adventurers investigating. Once they realise that the Silva family's most capable thieves are the most likely culprits, the pressure on Silva will be immense."

“Are you really willing to risk bringing the powers from the Island down on your own head?” Sophie asked.

“It’s hardly a risk,” Clarissa said. “What they’ll find is that after conducting a series of expertly-carried out robberies, the thieves who have worked for the Silva family for years are no longer in the city. Because, having met your end of the deal, you will be far from here, as promised. With a goodly amount of money for your troubles.”

Belinda opened her mouth to snap back a response, but was silenced by a gesture from Sophie.

“Alright,” Sophie said. Belinda wrenched her head to look at Sophie as if she’d lost her mind. Sophie gave a slight shake of the head to keep her silent.

“Excellent,” Clarissa said. “Now, your first target-”

“No,” Sophie interrupted.

“Excuse me?” Clarissa asked.

“The goal is to draw attention down on Silva,” Sophie said, “not to undertake any specific robbery. So, it doesn’t matter what we take, or from who, so long as it’s high profile and it’s public. Belinda and I will choose the targets and the timing.”

“Choosing the targets,” Clarissa said, “means I can meet more than one objective at a time.”

“Our deal didn’t include any other objectives you may have,” Sophie said. “So you can sort them out yourself. You aren’t staking us out as bait for some other reason, are you?”

“Of course not,” Clarissa said.

“Then we choose the targets and we choose the timing,” Sophie said.

“Fine,” Clarissa conceded. “Just make sure I’m notified beforehand.”

“No, we’ll keep you out of it,” Sophie said. “We wouldn’t want people moving attention from Silva to you, after all. We plan and execute the robberies alone, and fence the goods through Silva’s people. We have connections enough for that.”

Clarissa’s mouth was smiling, but her eyes were spraying venom.

“Very well,” she said. “But I want jobs done quickly and repeatedly. If not, then you aren’t holding up your end, and there won’t be a place in this city you can hide from me. As for escaping it... if you could leave this city alive, then you wouldn’t have come to me in the first place.”

Sophie gave a curt nod, then strode away. Belinda followed in her wake, Clarissa’s bodyguard trailing them until they were out of the compound. They walked through the darkened streets of Old City at a rapid stride.

"What was that?" Belinda angrily demanded once she was sure they had cleared Clarissa's eyes and ears. "That whole thing makes no sense. Everything hinges on people figuring out that we're the thieves. And stirring up trouble with the Island people? They'll send adventurers after us. Is she trying to bring all that down on her own head?"

"You're right," Sophie said. "It doesn't make sense if this is still about provoking Silva. Something's changed, and somehow Island politics are involved. Ventress wouldn't risk provoking the Island unless she has some kind of backing to shield her."

"This whole plan is madness," Belinda said.

"Yes," Sophie agreed.

"Then why go along with it? She has to know how transparent she's being."

"You know how Ventress is about her reputation. She wants us to break the deal, even if everyone knows she pushed us into it."

"Why bother?" Belinda asked. "We aren't any use to her except as a stick to poke Silva with."

"I don't know," Sophie said. "Maybe she's looking for an excuse to hand us over to him. Whatever she's into now, we've somehow become leverage. But she can't be seen breaking the deal."

"Her vaunted reputation," Belinda said.

"If we break the deal, she can openly do whatever she wants with us," Sophie said.

"So you bought us as much time and freedom as you could," Belinda realised.

"We need to figure out our next move. Ventress is no longer our way out of the city."

"Dorgan?" Belinda suggested. The third member of the Big Three had been quiet since the death of Old Man Silva.

"We don't have anything to trade for protection," Sophie said.

"Then what?" Belinda asked. "Try and make our own way out?"

The reason they had gone to Clarissa in the first place was that escaping the city unnoticed by the Big Three was as good as impossible. They had an iron grip of the shipping trade, and there was very little overland travel.

"We may have to try the overland route," Sophie said.

Escaping the Greenstone region overland meant one of two routes. The first was to go river to the Mistrun Oasis, then keep going through the desert to the central veldt. From there, south, to the more fertile lands and a port where the Big Three had interests enough that they could easily be dragged back to Greenstone. The other way was to make for the Northern territories, which means crossing the dead sands, braving monsters and nomadic bandit tribes.

“We ruled that out for a reason,” Belinda said. “Our experience and expertise ends at the city wall. If we try the wilderness, it’s a pure gamble.”

“A gamble may be all we have,” Sophie said. “For now, we do enough to keep Ventress mollified while we figure it out.”

Belinda hung her head.

“Things just keep getting worse,” she said softly.

“I know.”

Chapter 54: Field Assessment

The layout of the Adventure Society campus reminded Jason of a university. One of the nice ones, with expanses of lawn, gardens and tiled pathways leading through impressive stone arches. The marshalling yard was like a small town square for larger expeditions to assemble. When Humphrey and Jason arrived together, a dozen people were already waiting. An entitled cliché walked out of the group to sneer at Humphrey.

“Here he is,” the young man said. “The pride of the Geller family. But that out-of-town prick failed you, just like the rest of us.”

Like everyone other than Jason himself, the person approaching them was somewhere in his mid to late teens. This made the assemblage of would-be adventurers young men and women, but Jason could only think of the sneering idiot as a boy.

“We all have areas in which we can improve,” Humphrey said. “There’s no shame in admitting that.”

“Shouldn’t your hair be more oily?” Jason asked.

“What?” the man asked, turning from Humphrey to Jason as if surprised to see him there.

“Your hair,” Jason said, pointing. “When the sneering idiot who will inevitably be humiliated comes out to do his sneering, his hair should be properly greased back. Clearly, you’ve overdone it with whatever goo you put in there, but I really feel like you could have slathered in some more.”

“Who are you?” the boy asked. He was looking at Jason with the same expression he’d give to furniture that unexpectedly started talking.

“I’m no one important,” Jason said.

“Clearly,” The boy said. “Do you have any idea who my father is?”

“Does anyone?” Jason asked. “Your mother’s a friendly woman.”

Humphrey winced, while the onlookers all looked shocked, none more so than the boy himself.

“Are you looking to die?” the boy asked.

“Is your father going to kill me?” Jason asked. “You don’t strike me as someone who fights his own battles.”

“Uh, Jason,” Humphrey interjected. “That’s Thadwick Mercer. His father actually might kill you.”

“You’re Thadwick Mercer?” Jason asked.

“That’s right. Feel like apologising, now?”

“I do, actually,” Jason said. “I shouldn’t have said that about your mother. I have neither the knowledge nor the right to criticise how she conducts her personal affairs and I apologise unreservedly. I only met her briefly, but she struck me as a woman of style and intelligence. Now I’ve met you, I can see why people wonder how you turned out this way.”

“What?” Thadwick asked.

“It was actually the first thing I heard about you,” Jason said. “What was it Rufus said, Humphrey? The most incompetent person he’d ever seen attempt to join the Adventure Society? And Rufus grew up in a school, so he’s seen the bottom-end of a lot of classes.”

“I’m going to destroy you, you no-name little prick,” Thadwick spat. “I’m going to scrape you off my shoe.”

“Is that a challenge?” Jason asked. “Like a duel, or something? How do you want to do it; dance-off, or yo-mama fight? I’d prefer a dance-off because I actually like your mother. Also, I’ve got the moves.”

“What?”

“You say that a lot,” Jason said, “and you always look kind of confused. You’re not the sharpest tool in the shed, are you?”

Thadwick raised a hand at Jason, flame crackling over it.

“THAT’S ENOUGH,” a voice bellowed. Everyone turned to see a man wearing an Adventure Society pin approaching the group. Jason had never seen Vincent Trenslow before, although Rufus had described his glorious moustache. As promised, it extended past either side of his head. Behind Vincent was another official that Jason did recognise, as did Humphrey. It was Guy, the official present at their Adventure Society intake.

“Mercer,” Vincent barked, “if I see you try to use an ability on a fellow candidate again, you will fail on the spot. And you, Asano, is it? I suggest you clamp that mouth shut before someone puts a fist through it. Which will be recorded in my report as a self-inflicted injury. Geller, do try and keep your friend in check.”

“Yes, sir,” Humphrey said. Thadwick flashed an insolent look but remained silent. Jason was barely listening, transfixed by the man’s moustache.

Rufus had spent a week working closely with Vincent Trenslow during the last field assessment. After hearing Vincent would be taking Jason’s assessment, Rufus told Jason what he could anticipate.

“There may be some level of corruption in this branch of the Adventure Society,” Rufus had told him, “but Vincent Trenslow is exactly what I expect from a Society official. I

know you have your own ways of showing respect, but try and use mine, for once. Humphrey Geller will be there, so follow his lead.”

Jason respected Rufus’ judgement and intended to do his best, while acknowledging his best wasn’t that great. He also recognised that Rufus had very much undersold the magnificence of the man’s moustache.

Vincent explained the procedure for the Adventure Society field assessment. The group would depart for one week, during which time the candidates would attempt to complete postings from the adventure boards in towns and villages of the delta.

“For the duration of this assessment,” Vincent said, “you may refer to me as Instructor Trenslow and my fellow official as Instructor Spalding. For the second month in a row, we have extended numbers. We are taking a different approach this month and splitting the group in two.”

The other official, Guy, stepped forward.

“Last month there were problems finding enough postings for everyone on the notice boards,” Guy said. “Therefore, the groups will be assessed separately, taking different routes through the delta.”

“There weren’t enough monsters last month?” Jason whispered at Humphrey.

“There were plenty,” Humphrey whispered back. “Watch how they split the groups.”

Jason spotted that while he hid it well enough, Vincent had a hint of disdain around the eyes as Guy divided the group.

“My group,” Guy said, “will consist of those who have passed the assessment before, but their records were lost. I’ll be administering a specially-tailored program of reassessment for all of you that takes into account past achievement.”

“And now you see it,” Humphrey said softly.

“Yes I do,” Jason agreed.

There were seventeen candidates, ten of which went off with Guy for their special assessment. The remaining seven followed Vincent.

“So that’s how the Society came down,” Jason said. “The people who weaselled their way off the books weasel their way back on, while the rest of us pass an actual test.”

“Mr Asano,” Vincent called out sharply. “If and when you have passed this test and become a member of the Adventure Society, you can comment on how the Society conducts itself as much as you like. For the next week, however, you are a worthless flesh-sack nestled vulnerably in the palm of my hand. It would serve you well to disincline me at every opportunity from wanting to make a fist.”

“Uh, yes, sir,” Jason said.

Travel through the delta was mostly along the raised embankment roads. The group travelled in the back of an animal-drawn wagon, which didn't sit well with everyone. They were from wealthy and privileged families, unused to such rough treatment. A few complained loudly until browbeaten by Vincent, after which they restricted themselves to unhappy muttering. Others followed Humphrey's lead and took the conditions in stride.

Walking along a narrow embankment road, Jason glanced at Vincent, then at Humphrey. Both had crystals floating over their heads. The one over Vincent was silver-grey, while Humphrey's was a glowing blue.

"What's with the crystals?" Jason asked. "Should I have gotten a crystal from somewhere?"

"My crystal isn't a magic item," Humphrey said. "It's an essence ability that restores my mana. The one Vincent has is a recording crystal. You haven't seen them before?"

"I haven't," Jason said. "What do they record?"

"An image of whatever is in front of them, plus whatever they can hear," Humphrey said. "He's recording everything for later assessment. After the last time, Mr Remore took me through all the things I did wrong, in excruciating detail. He kept playing them, over and over."

"Where would I get something like that?" Jason asked.

"The Magic Society makes them," Humphrey said. "They sell them at the markets on the Island, and at a few stores in the guild district. You can get them at the trade hall in the Adventure Society, too. Assuming you pass and are allowed in."

The group was walking through an expanse of leafy, knee-high plants when Vincent quietly called for a stop. The plants were some kind of crop Jason wasn't familiar with, divided into fields by bamboo fencing. Vincent pulled out another crystal and tossed it into the air in front of him, where it started floating. In front of it, an image shimmered into being and Jason realised this new crystal worked like a telescope. It showed a distant part of the sprawling fields, where a pack of rodent-like monsters were gorging themselves on the crop.

The monsters were half as tall as a human but looked like oversized mice. They stood on their hind legs, hunching forward. Instead of forelegs, they had long arms that ended in eerily human-like hands. They used them to pluck leaves and stuff them into their mouths.

“Ratlings,” Vincent said. “Thirteen of them. They’ll run rather than fight, and if they reach their burrows, that’ll be it. They won’t surface again until they go berserk, at which point it won’t be crops they’re after.”

Vincent turned to look at Humphrey.

“Mr Geller, the only reason you failed last time was that you lacked decisiveness. So long as you can show me you’ve learned something in the last month, you’re the easiest pass in this group. Can you get all thirteen?”

“Yes, sir,” Humphrey said without hesitation.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Prove it.”

Jason watched as scaly wings appeared out of thin air on Humphrey’s back. He brought them towards the ground, pushing him into the air. The dragon wings sent him surging away at a rapid pace. Humphrey’s familiar, which had been sitting on his shoulder in the form of a bird, flew after him.

“Wow,” Jason said.

Jason and Humphrey had trained together several times over the last month. They had focused on martial technique, so each was yet to see all the other’s essence abilities. Humphrey’s martial art was called the Surging Storm style, an explosive and unrelenting combat art that was completely at odds with Humphrey’s personality. Thus far, Jason’s skill-book derived technique hadn’t come close to matching it.

The group watched Humphrey climb higher into the air as he grew smaller with distance. Suddenly he plunged out of the sky and all eyes snapped to the magnified image in front of Vincent. They saw Humphrey crash into the monsters like a meteor, a huge sword in the shape of a dragon’s wing appearing in his hands. He came down like a meteor, his boots landing on one monster and his sword on another. They died in a single, gruesome instant.

The other ratlings let out panicked screeches while Humphrey swung the huge sword in a low, horizontal arc. It ploughed through the monsters as if they weren’t there, severing three clean in half with a single swing.

The ratlings scattered, but instead of chasing, Humphrey dropped his sword, which vanished into the air. He took a deep breath, then a stream of fire sprayed out of his mouth like a human flamethrower. He walked the burning line over the fleeing ratlings, torching crops and monsters alike. Three ratlings escaped the flames, having run at different angles to the main cluster. One was being harried by Humphrey’s familiar, which had

turned into some kind of predatory cat, around the same size as the ratling. The other two were sprinting away in different directions.

Humphrey's wings had vanished after he landed, but they reappeared briefly to fling him forward through the air. They only appeared for a moment, in which they hurled him faster than he had been flying earlier. Another sword appeared in his hand, this one smaller, with a blade made up of metal feathers. He brought it down on a fleeing ratling as he landed, cutting it down with one strike. He vanished from the spot he was standing, reappearing in the path of the final ratling. His sword was held out in front of him and the startled ratling ran straight onto it. Humphrey yanked the blade up, spraying blood as the monster fell dead.

"He got teleport," one of the candidates next to Jason said as they watched Humphrey through the magnified image. "I bet they paid a lot for that awakening stone."

Humphrey glanced over to his familiar, who was sitting proudly next to a ratling, dead at his feet. As soon as it saw Humphrey notice it, it transformed into a dog and bounded over for Humphrey to scratch behind its ear. Humphrey walked back to the group through the field, his body drenched in monster blood. The others gave him a wide berth, except for Jason.

"You alright?" Jason asked. He knew Humphrey had killed monsters as part of his training, but also knew Humphrey was a kind man. Violence didn't come naturally to him.

Humphrey nodded. His normally friendly smile was macabre on his bloody face.

"That's what I like about you, Jason," he said. "You don't pretend that what we do doesn't affect us."

"I don't think being numb to it all makes you strong," Jason said. "Strong is accepting the choices you make and owning up to the consequences."

Like Jason, Humphrey had a dimensional storage space, from which he took a bottle of clear liquid and tipped it over his head. The crystal wash flowed over him, eliminating every trace of blood and filth.

"I'd like to be strong like that," Humphrey said. "You know, Jason, sometimes it's like you're from another world."

Jason had long ago realised that Danielle had figured him out, not realising she hadn't shared it with Humphrey. He decided to tell his friend all about it when they had the time. For now, they were surrounded by other people. Vincent looked Humphrey over, now clean, the crystal wash rapidly evaporating.

"You got them all," Vincent said.

"Yes, sir," Humphrey said.

“Burned a good portion of a farmer’s crop, though.”

“I thought the farmer would rather lose some harvest now than family later,”
Humphrey said. “I made a choice.”

“Yes you did,” Vincent said, putting a hand on Humphrey’s shoulder. “Good job.”

Chapter 55: Rune Tortoise

The routine for the field assessment was to stop in a town or village each night. In the morning they would collect monster notices from the adventuring board and set out to deal with them. Vincent took an approach where the would-be adventurers who met his standards were no longer called on for the monster hunts. Starting with Humphrey, the first three days saw four of the seven candidates move from participants to onlookers.

On the third morning, they were delayed in one of the towns Jason had passed through on his original journey to Greenstone. Vincent wasn't willing to turn away the quickly growing crowd of earnest sick people, so the town constable once again turned his office into a makeshift clinic.

Stopping to help the locals delayed the group's monster-hunting activities until the end of the morning. As Jason healed the sick, the grateful locals pulled out tables and benches, laying out a cornucopia of food for his companions. Some of the aristocratic candidates turned up their noses at a rustic feast until they started to smell the food. Once Humphrey started filling his plate with enthusiasm, the others followed his lead.

Liana Stelline was one of the adventurer candidates who was acquainted with Humphrey. Their families moved in similar circles, and they had both failed the previous assessment together. Like Humphrey, her family wanted her to pass on merit, rather than privilege. Sitting next to him on a bench, she asked Humphrey about Jason.

"How did you end up friends with him?" she asked. "Don't you find him insufferably smug?"

"He can be... challenging," Humphrey said. "He's a long way from home and I think he likes to put people off-balance because it's how he feels all the time. He can be difficult, and oblivious, but I think there's a kindness and generosity under it all. Look at what he's doing right now."

"Tell Thadwick Mercer about kindness and generosity," Liana said.

"That's fair," Humphrey said. "He can be mean and self-impressed when he's trying to prove how clever he is, which maybe isn't quite as clever as he thinks. He certainly won't get along with everyone. But look around us."

He gestured around at the villagers and all feast laid out for them.

"How many adventurers get this kind of reception?" he asked.

“He gets along with common people because he’s common, she said. “That, and he’s giving out free healing,” she said. “My sister has healing powers; she could do the exact same thing.”

“But does she?” Humphrey asked.

In the constable’s cottage, the last person shuffled out.

“That’s everyone?” Vincent asked.

“I think so,” Jason said.

“The constable nodded.

“You know,” he said, “it would make my life easier if you’d warn me you’re coming through instead of just turning up.”

“That’s on the boss man,” Jason said, jabbing a thumb in Vincent’s direction. “He sets the destination. Did I hear something about lunch being put on?”

That night they were stopped in another little town where they had taken up all four of the inn’s twin rooms. Humphrey and Jason were sitting on their beds because there wasn’t space anywhere else in the cramped twin share. Jason was going over the clothing in his hands, examining the ragged claw marks in the light of a magic lamp.

“This cloth armour doesn’t hold up so well,” Jason said.

“Well, it is cloth,” Humphrey said. “If you want real protection out of it you need to spend more on the magic. Or you could try something heavier.”

“I didn’t like the leather I was finding,” Jason said. “It was either too stiff and restrictive, or too expensive for what it did. I have a good amount of money, but that doesn’t mean I’m alright with being ripped off.”

“All the best armour is bought and sold at the Adventure Society trade hall,” Humphrey said. “Once we pass the test you can buy something there. How well does that cloak power of yours protect you?”

“I did some testing with Gary,” Jason said. “It doesn’t hold up to bronze-level attacks at all, which was no surprise. It’s really good against cutting attacks, so that’s a lot of swords, knives and claws.”

He looked down at the claw marks in his magically-treated cloth.

“So long as they actually hit the cloak, anyway. Stabbing attacks punch through a bit better, like those spines that monster shot at me yesterday.”

“And blunt attacks?” Humphrey asked.

“The cloak doesn’t cushion them at all,” Jason said.

“That’s a shame,” Humphrey said. “A lot of monsters are just big, tough, and try to batter you to death.”

“That’s where the unrestricted movement comes in,” Jason said.

“Maybe you can show that off tomorrow,” Humphrey said. “I went with Instructor Trenslow to take the notices from the board, and we’re going after a bark lurker.”

“Bark lurker?”

“I think it’s some kind of troll,” Humphrey said.

“I’ll look it up.”

Jason pulled a tablet of white and blue marble from his inventory. At Farrah’s suggestion, Jason had purchased the active monster registry from the Magic Society. It contained all the information the Magic Society had about monsters and was updated along with the Magic Society’s own archives. There was an index on the tablet, seemingly engraved in gold script, but the engravings shifted as Jason touched his finger to the inscribed letters.

“You’re right,” Jason said as he read from the tablet. “It is a form of troll. Less intelligent than most troll varieties, but has the usual troll resilience and rapid healing. Vaguely human-shaped, but stands twice as tall. Usually dwells in swampland. Has a hard, bark-like shell, but due to its thickness, the shell-plates leave exposed areas around the joints. Usually slow and uncoordinated, but can demonstrate bursts of rapid movement. It can breathe water and likes to hide near the water’s edge, mimicking a submerged log.”

“What about numbers?”

“Almost always manifests alone,” Jason read, “except during a monster surge.”

“There you are,” Humphrey said. “Big and slow, only one to deal with. Sounds perfect for an affliction specialist.”

“If I see it coming,” Jason said. “I’ll need to bait it out, somehow.”

“Maybe after this, Trenslow will finally pass you,” Humphrey said. “I don’t understand why he hasn’t already.”

“He’s not satisfied with my performance,” Jason said. “That’s easy enough to figure out.”

“You’ve done just as well as any of the others who passed,” Humphrey said.

“Except for you,” Jason said. “You’re head and shoulders above the rest of us, yet Trenslow kept pushing before he passed you. He was holding you to a higher standard.”

“You think that’s what’s happening?” Humphrey asked.

“Rufus came out of last month’s assessment with a pretty high opinion of the instructor,” Jason said. “Now that Rufus will be around longer than he thought, he doesn’t feel the need to rush me along so much. It wouldn’t surprise me if it turned out Rufus had a little talk with Trenslo, to make sure he fails me if I’m not up to the standard Rufus wants.”

“You think he’s going to fail you?” Humphrey asked.

“Probably,” Jason said. “You’ve seen Rufus’ standards.”

“You shouldn’t give up yet,” Humphrey said. “Go all out, give it everything. You might impress him so much that he has to pass you.”

The group of adventurer candidates were assembled on a huge, grassy field while one of their members fought a monster. There was enough neatly-cut grass for a good-sized sports arena, and it was just as flat. There were a few buildings around the edges, some of which looked to be good-sized barns. With the scarcity of lumber-worthy wood, they were primarily constructed out of mud-brick.

“What is all this for?” Jason wondered.

“What do you mean?” Humphrey asked.

“Every part of the delta that isn’t underwater is being put to efficient use,” Jason said. “Except for the parts some rich people walled-off for themselves, anyway.”

Humphrey gave him a side-glance but said nothing.

“This is good grass,” Jason said, crouching down and rubbing some blades beneath his fingers. “Real good grass, like a St. Augustine. Someone’s been taking care of it, too. Is this a turf farm?”

“What’s a turf farm?” Liana asked.

“The Island is an artificial island made of stone,” Humphrey said. “When people want to landscape their grounds, they have much the actual work done here in the delta, then transported over as slabs of earth. All that grass in the park district was grown in places like this.”

“I take it everyone cleared out when the monster showed up,” Jason said.

“They did,” Vincent said. “It isn’t the first time they’ve had monsters wander along. You seem strangely knowledgeable about grass.”

“My Dad’s a landscape architect,” Jason said.

“Is that what it sounds like?” Humphrey asked.

“Pretty much,” Jason said. “He designs big fancy gardens.”

“So he’s a gardener,” Liana said.

“Pretty much,” Jason said. “A well-trained, highly-paid gardener, but yeah.”

Vincent made an unhappy noise at the fight going on in the distance. It wasn’t going well.

Most monsters at iron rank did not boast exotic abilities. Some might shoot quills or rapidly heal, but they were largely reliant on their physical attributes. One of the rare exceptions was the rune tortoise, a creature with blue skin and a turquoise shell that was only around a metre long. The danger came from its shell, where every segment had a glowing rune, each of which could produce a different magical effect. The key challenge in facing a rune tortoise was that each one had a unique set of runes. The wide variety of potential abilities made it an unpredictable enemy.

As he had done with each of the more difficult creatures, Vincent took the time to explain the creature and the best way to fight it. In the case of the rune tortoise, its weakness was that after using an ability, it took time for that ability to become available again. The key to defeating it was baiting out the abilities, after which it was no more dangerous than a regular tortoise.

Looking out at the fight in progress, Jason saw several of its runes had dimmed after use. The tortoise had not spent them cheaply, however, as could be seen from the would-be adventurer trying to hunt it. His hair was blackened where it wasn’t burned-off entirely, his skin smeared and cracked. His armour had been shattered, his clothing reduced to rags.

“That’s enough,” Mobley,” Vincent called out. “If you go back in, it will probably kill you.”

“I can take it!” the bedraggled candidate yelled back.

Jason observed that the tortoise was possibly withdrawing from the fight. At the pace it moved, it was quite hard to tell.

“You probably can,” Vincent called out to Mobley, “but being an adventurer is about reliably dealing with monsters, not probably dealing with them.”

Mobley turned around to face Vincent and the onlookers.

“You’ll fail me if I don’t kill it, won’t you?” Mobley yelled miserably.

“I’m failing you either way,” Vincent called back. “Even if you kill it, I’ll fail you for the poor judgement of risking your life to do so.”

“Risk is what adventurers do,” Mobley yelled, pleadingly.

“Which makes accurately assessing risk the most important skill we have,” Vincent said. “Get back here.”

Of the three candidates yet to pass, one was trudging a bedraggled path back to the group. The others were Jason and a young woman staring uneasily at Mobley's charred state.

"Either of you care to volunteer?" Vincent asked. "Or do I send Humphrey?"

"I'm happy to go, unless you want it," Jason said to the young woman. "It's already gone through most of its abilities.

"No, you go ahead," she told him.

"Think you can handle it, Asano?" Vincent asked.

Jason set off toward the tortoise at a casual stroll, which was still outpaced the tortoise at full flight.

"I'll muddle through," he said.

Chapter 56:

Gary's Gift

Jason and Mobley passed each other as Jason walked in the direction of the rune tortoise.

"Sorry mate," Jason commiserated. The burned and blackened would-be adventurer just shot him a contemptuous look and kept walking. Jason wasn't sure if it was the immediate circumstances that drew the man's ire, or just general dislike. Jason had become an outsider to the group, for a couple of reasons.

The first was Jason's unusual mannerisms and general disregard for status and etiquette. The same traits that helped him get along with the people in every town and village they passed through didn't endear him to wealthy scions that made up his fellow candidates. For them, status was everything, and only someone like Humphrey, born at the very top of the pile, could disregard it.

The other reason they disliked him was his friendship with Humphrey. The Geller family stood at the peak of Greenstone society, and their local power was just a fragment of their world-spanning influence. On top of that, Danielle Geller was the strongest adventurer to come out of Greenstone in generations. Building a friendship with her son was a ticket to the top not just for an adventurer, but their entire family.

For some of the candidates, making a connection with Humphrey was more important than passing the field assessment. Having their chances monopolised by Jason left them increasingly rankled. Jason didn't much like those who shunned him for this reason, finding moments to tell him that he should know his place. He much preferred someone like Liana Stelline, who disliked him for himself rather than having an agenda.

Jason moved forward until he was just outside what he estimated to be the maximum range for the rune tortoise's powers, based on its battle with Mobley. He had a new wristband, which had a small razor that could be easily pushed in and out of a sheath. The tiny blade was in no way an effective weapon, but the sharp edge was perfect for quickly and easily drawing a shallow line of blood on the back of his hand.

Holding the cut away from him, leeches started spraying out of the wound like he'd knocked the side off a fire hydrant.

"Now I know what an emptying balloon feels like," he muttered. "Alright, Colin; fetch."

What came next was a slow-motion pursuit as Jason's sedately ambulating pile of leeches undulated in the direction the tortoise's soporific escape.

“I know there isn’t a strict time constraint,” Vincent called out, “but we do have other monsters to get to.”

“Don’t worry,” Jason called back. “Colin is just my stalking horse.”

The rest of the group looked on with varying reactions.

“Are those leeches?”

“Did he say Colin?”

“What’s a horse?”

Jason trailed well behind his familiar. His concern was that the tortoise had failed to notice it, so he pulled out a throwing knife. The skill book had given him proficiency with an array of weaponry, but Rufus had concentrated training on only a few. As Jason’s primary weapon was his poison dagger, Rufus had focused on various knife techniques, even throwing.

“They won’t deal any real damage,” Rufus had explained as he introduced Jason to throwing knives, “but they can offer some utility, or distract an enemy in a critical moment. Putting some poison on them wouldn’t be a terrible idea, either.”

Jason tossed the knife, but it was a long throw as Jason maintained distance, landing an embarrassing few metres to the left of the tortoise. He turned around to face the group.

“New knives,” he yelled at them. “I’m still getting used to them.”

As second attempt also missed, but the third bounced off the tortoise’s shell with a barely audible thud, rather than the satisfying clank Jason had been expecting.

“I think movie sound effects have given me unrealistic expectations for how cool the world sounds.”

There was a sharp crack as an arc of electricity erupted out of the shell in reaction. It didn’t reach Jason, instead blasting into his familiar, sending scorched leeches scattering about. On the tortoise’s shell, one of the runes dimmed away.

“Actually, that sounded amazing,” Jason said, looking at the burned and blackened remains of leeches. The pile was about a third smaller.

“You alright, buddy?” Jason called out. “Wobble to the left if you’re alright.”

The pile moved slightly left as it continued the pursuit. The tortoise slowly turned to face its new opponents. Jason observed there were only three runes still glowing on the tortoise, after which it would be no more powerful than an ordinary tortoise of its size.

Another rune faded as a huge globule of water shot into the air, then burst into mist. From the mist, bullets of water started shooting down into the leech pile, but the water didn’t seem to have a huge effect of the leeches.

In the wake of the water bullets' failure, the penultimate rune faded and the humid, delta air was suddenly stirred into motion. Directly over the pile of leeches, a small, but powerful dust devil formed, sucking up the leeches and scattering them to the wind. One even slapped into Jason's face, which he peeled off with a frown. As the wind faded, Jason looked around at the leeches cast as far as dozens of metres away.

"You did good, little guy," Jason said, moving the leech to the back of his hand where it disappeared into the cut. "You just gather yourself back together while I deal with the mean tortoise."

Jason looked over at the tortoise, which only had one remaining rune lit up. Confident he could handle one ability, he started closing in on the sluggish monster. The tortoise, for its part, made a very optimistic dash for freedom as Jason strolled in its direction. When Jason reached it, it ducked its head and limbs into its shell. The last rune dimmed as the tortoise's body took on a metallic sheen.

Jason crouched down to peer into the openings where the tortoise had disappeared into its shell. Some kind of plate had moved into place at each of them.

"I've seen this ability," Vincent said, startling Jason. He was sure he'd seen Vincent back with the others just moments earlier, and hadn't felt the approach of his aura.

"This is probably the strongest ability a rune tortoise has," Vincent said.

"How so?" Jason asked.

"It massively increases its defence," Vincent said. "It'll take a bronze-rank attack to break in, and a strong one at that. Even worse for you, it makes it immune to afflictions."

"How long can it keep it up?" Jason asked.

"Not sure," Vincent said. "Certainly long enough for its powers to come back. "I'll deal with it now."

"Hold on," Jason said. "You're the one who asked for a volunteer, so let me sort it out."

"You think you can get around this ability?" Vincent asked.

"Easily," Jason said. "There's a bunch of ways. It still needs to breathe, right? I don't know if it's aquatic, or burrowing, but we could bury it, or drown it. We could throw it off a great big cliff; I bet that'd crack it."

"I don't think there's a lot of cliffs in the delta," Vincent said.

"I'm just saying there's options," Jason said. "The one I'm going to go for is testing out a gift a friend gave me."

Jason drew a sword from his inventory. It was simple but elegant in design, not overly long, with a straight, double-edged blade. The hilt was red gold, the grip a dark, soft fabric. A short, simple tassel, of the same black fabric, dangled from the red gold pommel.

Other than knives, straight swords were the weapons Rufus had drilled Jason on the most, knowing Gary was already working on such a weapon for Jason. Taking it out, Jason smiled as he thought of the day Gary had presented it.

“We all wanted to give you something,” Gary had told him when handing over the sword. “Farrah gave you that awakening stone, and Rufus the skill book. I made you this and it turned out pretty well, I thought. It’s not a big deal, or anything.”

Despite Gary’s words, Jason could feel the care and effort that had gone into it. Magic items had auras of their own, and the aura of the sword was stronger than any other iron-rank items Jason had encountered.

Item: [Dread Salvation] (iron rank [growth], legendary)

A sword crafted with gratitude, in hope it would be of the greatest use in the moment of greatest need. It was forged with passion and expertise to be a reliable companion, bestowing upon it an incredible potential (weapon, sword).

- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a physical immunity to it, an instance of [Stone Cutter] is applied to the blade.
-
- Effect: If a special attack that applies an affliction is made with this sword, but the subject of the attack has a magical immunity to it, an instance of [Spell Breaker] is applied to the blade.
- [Stone Cutter] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional resonating-force damage; highly effective against physical defences. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- [Spell Breaker] (magic, stacking): All attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage; highly effective against magical defences and incorporeal entities. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

Growth Conditions (bronze):

- 1 kilogram of blood gold
 - 4 kilograms of low grade (bronze rank) star-fall silver
 - 100 bronze-rank iron quintessence gems.
 - 100 bronze-rank magic quintessence gems.
 - 1000 bronze rank spirit coins.
 - Ritual of bronze ascension.
-

Jason didn't read past the description before grasping Gary's huge, hairy body in a hug.

"I'm not really a hugger," Gary had said as he awkwardly returned the embrace.

"Well you should be," Jason told him. "You're really good at it."

Jason looked down at the bunkered tortoise, then back at his sword. He turned it over in his hand, watching the sun strike the clean edge.

"He's been secretly working on it for weeks," Rufus had told Jason later. "We don't really talk about it, but none of us thought we were getting out of that sacrifice chamber alive. We owe you a favour we can't ever repay."

Jason slapped him on the arm.

"Friends don't count favours, Rufus. They just show up when they're needed."

Jason looked down at the tortoise, hunkered in its shell.

"Is something wrong, Mr. Asano?" Vincent asked.

"Not at all."

Rather than bring the sword down on the shell, he casually stabbed the monster's side.

-
- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Rune Tortoise].
 - [Rune Tortoise] is immune to afflictions.
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Affliction immunity has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - Weapon [Dread Salvation] has gained an instance of [Stone Cutter].
-

"You may need a little more gusto to penetrate the protection," Vincent said.

"Actually," Jason said, "the key is persistence."

Jason stabbed out again and again. With each strike the sword became more powerful, until the first gouge appeared in monster's side. A section of flesh chipped off like stone under the monster's protection ability.

"I'm an affliction specialist," Jason told Vincent as he continued to chip away. "We don't do speed. We do inevitability."

Chapter 57: Rainbow Smoke

Jason looked at the dead rune tortoise.

“Sorry, mate,” he told it. “Can’t have you going berserk and wandering into town shooting lightning bolts at people.”

“You’re apologising to a dead monster?” Vincent asked.

“It might just be a congealed blob of magic, but it was still alive, and died trapped in its own shell. It might have only had an animal’s intelligence, but it could feel helpless and afraid. It’s a rough way to go.”

“You’re an affliction specialist,” Vincent said. “It’s always a rough way to go with you.”

“You know Humphrey breathes fire, right?” Jason said. “Burning to death can’t be great, either.”

Jason tapped a finger on the dead creature’s shell.

➤ Would you like to loot [Rune Tortoise]?

Jason walked away before mentally accepting the loot.

-
- [Monster Core (Iron)] has been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Lightning Quintessence] has been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Wind Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Water Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - 5 [Fire Quintessence] have been added to your inventory.
 - [Intact Rune Tortoise Shell] has been added to your inventory.
 - [Shell-Skin Potion] has been added to your inventory.
 - 10 [Iron Rank Spirit Coins] have been added to your inventory.
-

Behind him the rune tortoise started dissolving into rainbow smoke, rising up into the air. The colourful display was as beautiful as the stench of it was horrifying, which was why Jason had learned not to loot monsters until he was some distance upwind.

Having a power to harvest monsters, Jason discovered, was a rare and useful one. For most people, they had to use a specialised branch of ritual magic. It was something many learned, however, due to the lucrative rewards. Getting lucky and looting an awakening stone or an essence, even valuable materials paid out better than the contract to kill the monster in the first place.

“One of the candidates from last month had a looting power,” Vincent said as he glanced back at the rising smoke.

“Oh?” Jason said. “Is he in the other group this month?”

“Actually, he passed,” Vincent said. “One of the Mercer boy’s lackeys, unfortunately. Damn waste of talent.”

They reached the rest of the group, where Mobley had only partially healed up through potions. This group of candidates included a few with self-healing, like Jason, but no one who could help others in the group.

“You ready for the next one?” Vincent asked, as he and Jason walked back to the group.

“I am,” Jason said.

“Good,” Vincent said. “We’ve got a few more to get through, today.”

The mangrove swamp was wet and hot, the air full of tiny bugs. The mangroves were large and dense, shrouding the areas within in darkness. Passage through the swamp was either by shallow boat, or along Bridge Road; an extended chain of low, flat bridges, spanning the distance between sporadic patches of solid ground. Most of the construction in the delta was either mudbrick or yellow desert stone, but Bridge Road was built from the region’s signature green stone. It reminded Jason of the impossible bridge that carried the Mistrun River over the massive gorge on its way down to the delta. He wondered if it had the same, mysterious constructor.

They were crossing Bridge Road in their wagon, which Vincent drew to a stop at a seemingly random point in the middle of the swamp. He turned back to address the adventurer candidates in the back.

“Undeveloped areas like this can be some of the most dangerous in the delta,” Vincent explained. “There’s a lot of territory for monsters to go unnoticed until they hit the berserk stage. You won’t need to deal with that today, though. We have two sets of monsters in this area; one single monster and one pack.”

Vincent dropped down off the wagon and the group clambered out the back. After half a week, even the more spoiled members of the group had stopped complaining about the basic transport. Vincent gathered the group together on the side of the bridge.

“When you get a monster notice,” Vincent said, “whether from a notice board or the Adventure Society directly, it has three pieces of information, so long as that information is known. The name of the monster, or a description. The number of monsters, and the approximate location.”

He panned a stern eye across the group.

“What I am about to tell is you is the most important thing you will learn during this assessment. It is the single greatest contributing factor to adventurer death, bar none. It’s a simple thing, but if you disregard it, there’s a very good chance you will die. If you routinely disregard it, your death is inevitable.”

Vincent held the notice in his hand.

“This information is not reliable. It usually comes from local residents, with limited understanding of monsters and who run the moment they see them. They may well recognise monsters common to their area, but monsters are misidentified on a regular basis. Descriptions are wrong. Numbers are vastly inflated or grossly underestimated. People even get the place they saw them wrong.”

He waved the notice in their faces.

“Do not trust these notices. Prepare as best you can, not the best you can be bothered, and always be ready for everything to go horribly wrong. Most importantly, do not hesitate to run for the hills if something seems wrong. If you have any ideas about the dignity of an adventurer, or a noble, or whatever, then throw those ideas away or they will kill you. Your first duty as an adventurer is to come back alive. You can always come back with more people to kill the monster later.”

Vincent took a cleansing breath.

“It is the responsibility of an adventurer to understand what they are walking into, as best they can. In this case, our monster is a bark lurker. I know Geller warned you it, Asano. Are you prepared?”

“I am,” Jason said.

“Then you’re ready to go?”

“I am.”

“According to the notice,” Vincent said, “there should only be one, somewhere in the vicinity of bridge marker sixteen.”

He pointed to a stone marker on the side the bridge, on which the number 16 was inscribed.

“As that is all the notice says, that is all the information you’re getting. As I have just explained, however, that information is not reliable. Out in unclaimed territory, where the report was made by someone who fled off at first glance, there is every chance it is wrong. That said, most notices are fairly accurate. Which is why you have avoid becoming complacent.”

Vincent held something out for Jason to take. It was a crystal, like the one floating over Vincent’s head.

“A recording crystal?”

Vincent shook his head.

“A far-sight crystal,” he said. “As long as it’s active, we can see through it from here. It has a maximum range, but the monster should be well within it.”

“How does it work?”

“Just toss it in the air.”

Jason did as instructed and the crystal moved over Jason’s head. In front of Vincent an image appeared, showing the perspective from Jason’s crystal. The image looked a lot like the interface screens that appeared for Jason’s ability. Vincent adjusted the image with a flick of his hand, panning back for a wider view.

“Off I go, then,” Jason said, walking to the edge of the bridge. His cloak of shadows and stars appeared around him as he stepped off, drifting gently down to the water. He started walking over the surface of the water, his footfalls landing with a ripple.

Standing on the water, he concentrated on the auras around him. The strongest were on the bridge, Vincent’s bronze rank aura, the iron rank auras of the others. He moved his focus to the weaker auras around him. The swamp was teeming with life, inundating Jason with normal-rank auras. Animals were sensitive to auras and avoided him, even the ones that would normally view a human as potential prey.

Jason moved further from the bridge, still concentrating on the auras. He was looking for an aura dead zone, knowing the ordinary animals would give the unnatural monster a wide berth. He was out of sight of the bridge when he found what he was looking for. The normal auras, were avoiding something, much as they avoided Jason himself. He wasn’t close enough to pinpoint the source, as his aura sense was still limited.

Jason walked over to the mangroves at the edge of the water. He picked a spot where the trees weren’t too tightly packed, but still provided enough cover to make solid shadows. From his inventory he took out a slab of meat, something looted from a monster several days ago. He wedged it in between the mangrove roots, just under the surface.

The night before, Jason and Humphrey had pored over the monster archive entry for bark lurkers, looking for the best approach. What they had come up with was baiting the creature out with meat. Its ability to sense auras was weak, a trait common to humanoid monsters. Its sense of smell, on the other hand, was excellent, especially in water. Using monster meat made it less likely to attract normal creatures.

Jason waited, well away from the bait. He stood stock still in the shadows of another set of mangroves, his aura retracted as best he could. He sensed the monster beneath the dark water before he spotted the ripples on the water as something large moved within it.

He could see the monster barely broach the surface of the water; if it wasn't moving he would have mistaken it for a log. It moved slowly at first, before splashing wildly as it lunged onto the submerged bait.

It rose up out of the water, lifting the meat up in triumph as it let out a wild roar. It looked like a giant wearing armour made of swamp logs, water pouring off the pocked and craggy shell. Jason vanished into the shadows, emerging from those right next to the creature. His snake-tooth dagger easily found the gap between the thick sections of shell, cutting deeply into the flesh beneath. The creature's roar of triumph became one of startlement and pain.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Bark Lurker].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Bark Lurker].
 - Aura [Hegemony] reduces the resistances of enemies for each instance of [Sin].
-

Jason danced away across the water, his boots moving lightly over the surface. The monster wheeled on him, wading sluggishly in pursuit. It was twice Jason's height, but it was waist deep in water, leaving them face to face. The slow creature was impeded all the more by having to wade through the swamp. Jason knew it would move faster if it swam underneath, but it was too enraged and too stupid to think tactically. He led it toward another patch of mangrove trees.

Jason's back came up against the trees and the monster thought it had him. It lurched forward with a sudden burst of speed as Jason stepped back into the shadows of the mangrove trees. The monster crashed into the space he had just vanished from, becoming entangled in the trees. Jason emerged from the shadows just to the monster's side, again finding a gap in its bulky shell.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Bark Lurker].
 - Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Bark Lurker].
-

The trees were little impedient to the monster's strength, whole root systems wrenched from the water as it thrashed about. It failed to find its attacker as Jason was already gone, emerging from the shadows of another patch of mangroves. The monster cast its gaze about, spotting Jason and resuming pursuit. As it did, Jason calmly watched its approach as he chanted a spell.

"Your fate is to suffer."

➤ Spell [Inexorable Doom] has inflicted [Inexorable Doom] on [Bark Lurker].

With the spell taking hold, Jason's victory became inevitable. The poison from the dagger would necrotise the creature's flesh, while the sin curse would make the necrosis even worse. The spell would cause both curse and poison to accumulate over time. The combination resulted in exponentially escalating damage that would inexorably overwhelm the monster. It did have a rapid healing ability, but the bleeding effect Jason inflicted would absorb at least some of that. He could have unleashed his familiar, but wanted to see what his abilities could do against a tough enemy.

Jason led the creature along the edge of the mangroves, back in the direction of the road bridge. The creature continued its furious pursuit, slow wading interspersed with rushing bursts. Jason strolled casually over the surface of the swamp, shadow-hopping through the shady mangroves as necessary to stay ahead. The road bridge was in sight when the monster was finally overwhelmed and fell dead. Jason went back to loot as it sank into the water.

The candidates gathered on the bridge watched Jason, cloak of stars swirling around him on a breeze no one else could feel. He walked lightly over the water as a patch of swamp roiled behind him, disgorging rainbow smoke into the air.

Chapter 58: A Man of Malevolent intellect

With the bark lurker dealt with, the group completed the crossing of Bridge Road and mangroves gave way to marshland. Once again they were riding atop the embankment roads that were the main thoroughfares of the delta. Sitting in the back of the wagon, Jason looked out at the sun getting low over the wetlands, golden light shimmering on the water. The hour was fairly late, the summer causing the sun to linger in the sky.

Jason took out a red marble tablet from his inventory, the image of a bird etched into it in gold.

“What’s that?” Humphrey asked.

“Something I have to decide whether to keep or throw away,” Jason said.

“Why?” Humphrey asked.

“Probably best I don’t say,” Jason told him. “You know, Humphrey, my experiences in your little stretch of reality have been pretty extreme. I’ve had some rough moments.”

He looked out again at the sun setting over the wetlands.

“Some good ones, too. Whatever complaints I may have had, things being bland isn’t one of them.”

“Shut up, Asano,” Mobley said. “No one wants to hear your winsome prattling. You’re not profound.”

Humphrey was about to say something, but Jason waved him down with a gesture. Jason looked at Mobley but didn't say anything either, shaking his head as he returned the tablet to his inventory.

Vincent pulled the wagon to a halt at a junction where two embankment roads crossed one another.

“There’s a good size town beyond the marsh,” he told them, turning to look at the group sitting together in the wagon. “There’s a dedicated accommodation for adventurers on the road, so you can expect the nicest night you’ll have during this trip. Before that, though, there’s one last notice for the day.”

He panned his eyes slowly over the group. Humphrey and the three others who had already passed, Jason and the young woman who could still go either way. His gaze stopped at Mobley, the one member who had ostensibly failed.

“I won’t lie,” Vincent said. “This is a rough one. I’m willing to let any or all of you participate; you can sort that out amongst you. Mobley, you make a good showing, here, and I’m willing to reconsider your position.”

Mobley had been sullenly slumped in the wagon since his encounter with the rune tortoise that morning. Potions and ointments had healed him up, but his hair was still largely burned away. Jason had offered Mobley some hair-growth ointment Jory had given him, but he wanted nothing to do with Jason. On hearing Vincent's offer, however, his head jerked up, hope lighting up his eyes.

"What's the monster?" Humphrey asked.

"Trap weavers," Vincent said.

Humphrey and some of the others took on serious expressions, recognising the monster by name. The others waited for the explanation, but Mobley was the first to speak.

"Are you trying to get me killed?" he asked wildly. "Did someone put you up to this? It was the Kilgane family, wasn't it? They paid you to make sure I didn't come back."

The other candidates went as still as the suddenly frozen expression on Vincent's face. There was a long period of icy silence before Vincent spoke.

"Mr Mobley," Vincent said. "I am willing to take that accusation in the manner I believe it was made, which is to say, thoughtlessly. So long as I have your apology, I am willing to consider it an outburst made in a moment of surprise, that we can put behind us and speak no more about."

Mobley visibly gulped. Jason could hear something dangerous lurking behind Vincent's words as if his audibly controlled enunciation was trying to keep it from getting loose. Suddenly the man with the outrageous moustache didn't seem silly at all.

"You have my apology, sir," Mobley said.

"Good," Vincent said. "Mr Geller, please inform the members of our group who are not aware as to the nature of trap weavers."

"Perhaps we should disembark from the wagon first," Humphrey suggested.

"Good idea, Mr Geller."

Leaving the tense air of the wagon seemed like an escape. The marshland was vast, reeds and copses of trees punctuating expanses of water. The air was heavy, wet and warm, even as the sun ducked out of sight. The sky was a mixture of dark blue and orange-gold, reflected on the still mirror of marsh water.

"Instructor Trenslow," Humphrey said. "When you were collecting notices, I didn't see one for trap weavers."

"It came from the Adventure Society directly," Vincent said. "They have provided the location of the nest."

"Sir," Humphrey said, "trap weavers are dangerous, and this half-light will favour them strongly. Perhaps it would be best to come back in the morning."

"I asked you to inform the group of what trap weavers are, Mr Geller," Vincent said. "I did not ask your opinion on how I conduct this field assessment."

"Sorry, sir," Humphrey said. "Trap weavers are a kind of giant spider. Their main body is around the size of a man's torso, but they stand as tall as a man with their long legs. They can produce webs that are very strong and hard to see in certain light conditions, which is why they are most active during the pre-dawn and twilight hours. The webs can be used to create traps that can ensnare a person, or to directly attack and entangle. They are highly stealthy, and can hide their aura better than most monsters."

Humphrey gave Vincent an uncertain glance as he kept talking.

"Trap weavers roam in search of prey but return to a nest, usually in environments with water and dense trees. They use their webs to create traps that make invading their nests extremely difficult. This is especially true at the cusp of daylight where their webs are the hardest to spot."

Humphrey's face went hard.

"Trap weavers usually spawn in groups, at least two or three and as many as twelve or thirteen. There have been some occurrences of higher numbers, although I'm not sure of the record."

"Nineteen," Vincent said. "Outside of a monster surge. No one's counted the size of the swarms during a surge, but dozens of them."

"Using environmental and numerical advantages," Humphrey said, "trap weavers are responsible for more iron-rank adventurer deaths than any other monster in the Greenstone region. There is a standing advisory that they should be dealt with in groups, during daylight."

"Very comprehensive, Mr Geller," Vincent said.

"I'm not done, sir," Humphrey said. "Instructor Trenslo has asked us to decide for ourselves which of us will deal with the trap weavers. I strongly recommend we choose no one. Fighting these creatures, especially now, is a danger I don't feel to be appropriate. There is a strong likelihood of some of us dying too quickly for instructor Trenslo to intervene."

"I didn't ask for that, Mr Geller," Vincent said.

"With respect, Instructor Trenslo," Humphrey shot back, "you instructed us to decide for ourselves who will participate. This is my contribution to that discussion."

Vincent looked at Humphrey, his expression unreadable.

"What about you, Mr Asano?" Vincent asked.

Jason gave Vincent a long, assessing look before amusement crossed his face.

“Probably best I don’t say anything either way,” he said.

Humphrey looked at Jason, about to speak, but stopped at a slight shake of the head from Jason. Confusion crossed Humphrey’s face, but he stayed silent.

The other candidates who had already passed the assessment joined Humphrey in declining, leaving Mobley and the young woman who, like Jason, was yet to pass or fail. They looked at each other and also declined. Humphrey turned to Vincent.

“There’s our group,” Humphrey told him. “We choose no one.”

“Very well,” Vincent said, his face betraying nothing. “then I guess you should all get back in the wagon.

As promised, the town at which the group rested for the night had a large building for adventurers, with a common room, dining hall, and bedrooms enough for a dozen people. It was situated on the edge of a pond, with a covered terrace. They didn’t arrive until after dark, and most of the group were gathered in the common room.

Jason explored the sizeable kitchen, but the cupboards and cooler box had no food, only crockery and cutlery. Jason made a salad with ingredients from the market towns they had passed through. He left a stack of bowls and forks next to the big salad bowl, filling two and taking a fork for each.

He made his way through the common room, where the other candidates were discussing the day’s events. In the end, Jason had killed both monsters, aside from the trap weavers they had left alone. He had no interest in the circle of unwelcome looks, instead making his way out to the terrace. The night lit up by a bright pair of moons, shining high over the surrounding wetlands.

There was patio furniture on the terrace, Vincent casually reclined as he looked out into the night. Jason put a bowl and fork down on the table next to him, before taking a seat himself. He pulled a couple of glasses from his inventory, along with a bottle. He poured a little bit of blue liquid into each glass.

“I think you’ll like this,” Jason said. “It has a fresh, crisp flavour that should go nicely with the salad.

“Thank you,” Vincent said.

“For being so handsome?” Jason asked. “It’s attached to my face, so I had to bring it with me.”

Vincent shook his head.

“Rufus told me you’d be trouble,” Vincent said.

"He told me you were worth showing respect," Jason said. "Sounds like disparate treatment, to me."

Vincent nodded at the door Jason had emerged from.

"What are they doing in there?"

"Talking about the trap weavers," Jason said. "Humphrey's idea, of course."

"He's a diligent young man," Vincent said. "Have they figured it out, yet?"

"That we were never meant to fight them? They might get there, they might not. The rest are more interested in clamping onto the Geller family's leg."

"You haven't given them much of a chance," Vincent said. "He seems to value your judgement, for reasons that escape me."

"My judgement is excellent, thank you very much," Jason said. "Also, I think his mother wants him to learn something from me."

"Why?"

"You mean 'what.'" Jason corrected.

"No, I meant 'why.'" Vincent said. "Has she actually met you?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, she has. You really do think my judgement is suspect, don't you?"

"You tried to start a fight with Thadwick Mercer the first time you met him."

"If I tried to start a fight," Jason said, "then there would have been a fight. What I was doing was getting you to prevent a fight."

"For what conceivable reason would you do that?"

"Social advancement," Jason said. "If I get into it with Thadwick Mercer, then people see me as someone who operates at that level."

"Doesn't wandering around with Geller do that for you?"

"No, that makes me look like a hanger-on."

"I'm not sure outwitting Thadwick Mercer puts you any higher," Vincent said. "He's not one of the great minds of the younger generation."

"The point was to engage with Thadwick Mercer. Just that much puts me above a certain threshold, socially speaking," Jason said. "As for how far above, what do people see when they look closer?"

"They see you standing next to Humphrey Geller," Vincent said, realisation dawning.

"Rufus has been very good to me," Jason said, "but he takes a somewhat top-down view of society. Due to his upbringing, from what I understand. He wants me to reach a level of basic capability as an adventurer before certain facts come to light, but he's rather oblivious as to building social standing."

"I'm not sure your approach is the best way either," Vincent said. "In fact, I'm confident it isn't."

"Is that so?" Jason asked. "Less than two months ago, I walked into Greenstone with no name and no background. Two weeks ago, I watched the symphony from the private viewing box of one of the city's most prominent families. Two days ago, aristocrats were giving me death stares for my friendship with the son of the city's most powerful adventurer. Two minutes ago, you and I started discussing my conflict with the nephew of the city's ruler."

"I'm not really sure what to say to that," Vincent said. "You realise there will be consequences for the way you're going about things."

"Of course," Jason said, "but nothing is more impressive than handling the consequences of one's actions with grace and aplomb."

"And you can do that, can you?" Rufus asked.

"I have absolutely no idea," Jason said with a laugh.

"Rufus warned me about you," Vincent said. "He said you were a man of malevolent intellect."

"That may be the nicest thing anyone has ever said about me."

"That's the nicest thing?"

"What we find complimentary is often subjective," Jason said.

"You are a very strange man."

"That's just cultural differences," Jason said. "Where I come from, I'm perfectly ordinary."

"And where is that, exactly?" Vincent asked.

"Maybe it is possible that I'm slightly unusual," Jason conceded, instead of answering the question.

"Well," Vincent said. "Thank you, in any case, for not interfering when I told you to go after the trap weavers," Rufus said. "Pointing out what I was doing would have been easy points for you, socially speaking."

"No worries," Jason said. "It's not the easy points that win the game."

"You know why I haven't passed you, yet, don't you?" Vincent asked.

"I don't care what you tell us," Jason said. "You won't pass or fail anyone until the assessment is over."

"True enough," Vincent said, "although I don't see Humphrey dropping down this time. He did well, taking leadership today. He had a similar chance last month and second-guessed himself into silence."

“Did Rufus ask you to fail me?” Jason asked. “Or did he just ask you to set the bar high?”

“If I was going to fail you arbitrarily, I wouldn’t have brought you along,” Vincent said.

“Professionalism,” Jason said. “I can’t ask for more than that. Wait, yes I can. What is it going to take to get a pass?”

“You’re an affliction specialist,” Vincent said. “Something like the bark lurker would be trouble for most adventurers, but you handled it easily.”

“So why put me up against it?” Jason asked.

“You tell me,” Vincent said.

Jason thought it over.

“To make sure I can actually use my own specialty?” he ventured.

“There you are,” Vincent said. “So what will it take before I pass you?”

Jason rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

“Affliction specialist is a niche role,” Jason pondered out loud. “Just the thing to deal with a certain flavour of monster, but against ordinary ones, I’m just a slower version of any middle-of-the-road adventurer.”

He glanced over at Vincent, whose expression gave away nothing.

“If I want to pass then,” Jason reasoned, “it isn’t about beating the unusual monsters, because that’s basic stuff for my ability set. It’s about showing I can dominate the ordinary ones as well as any other adventurer. Am I close?”

“You’ll find that out when the assessment is over,” Vincent said.

The door from the common room burst open.

“Jason,” Humphrey said, striding out onto the terrace. “We were never meant to fight the trap weavers, we were meant to refuse! The whole thing was a test of leadership and judgement.”

Shock and disappointment crossed Jason’s face.

“Is that true, Instructor?” he asked, turning on Vincent. “Is something that devious even ethical?”

Chapter 59: Falling Short

The adventurer accommodation had a dozen bedrooms, with three bathrooms shared between them. Jason found the bathrooms strange in their familiarity, tiled surfaces and magical plumbing. Jason was fresh out of the shower, with a towel around his waist. He was standing over a basin, looking into the wall mirror as he washed cream off his face.

“Stash!” Humphrey’s voice yelled from the hall outside. It was followed by the door handle turning, the bathroom door opened from the other side by some kind of chimp-like creature. It then turned into a bird that flew up and perched atop Jason’s head, chirping triumphantly at its reflection in the mirror.

“Sorry,” Humphrey said from the door.

“No worries,” Jason said. “Just so long as the bird he turns into is a small one.”

“What’s that on your face?” Humphrey asked, standing outside the half-closed bathroom door.

“Shaving cream, kind of,” Jason said. “You just leave it on for a few seconds, then any hair washes right off with the cream. An alchemist friend gave it to me. You want to try?”

“I have a magic crystal that you rub on your face,” Humphrey said. “Anyway, I shaved yesterday. I don’t need to do it every day.”

Jason frowned. In the midst of a monster-hunting expedition, it was easy to forget that his fellow candidates were all sixteen or seventeen years old. Jason was only a half-dozen years their senior, but the idea of killing and dying at that age made him grateful he wasn’t forced to grow up young.

“Seems like it would be easy to accidentally take off hair you wanted to keep,” Humphrey said, oblivious to Jason’s thoughts.

“I have some ointment that causes hair to grow,” Jason said. “That’s the one you want to be careful about applying. It works everywhere, whether hair is meant to grow there or not.”

“That makes sense,” Humphrey said. “I was wondering why you didn’t have eyebrows when we met, but a couple of days later you did.”

In the final days of the field assessment, some of the candidates began to realise the results weren’t as decided as Vincent may have implied. Recognising that coasting on what they thought was a done deal wasn’t the best strategy, there was increased

competition for each new monster they went after. Jason didn't push himself forward as the others vied for additional chances to prove themselves, as he was still considering his approach to fighting monsters.

Compared to even the most mediocre of his fellow candidates, Jason's abilities were slow and weak. A fire blast or magical sword strike could take down an ordinary monster in a fraction of the time it took Jason to apply his various afflictions. Worse was that in the time it took them to overcome the afflicted monster, it could well have ravaged any companions Jason had with him in the fight.

His first thought was of his eight unawakened essence abilities, but they would not help him in the remaining days of the field assessment unless he stumbled on a cache of awakening stones. Even if he did, his new abilities would likely be similar to those he already possessed.

Jason's revelation came while watching Humphrey dispatch a group of monsters. They were dog-headed humanoids, with physiques like bodybuilders heavily into steroid abuse. Their jaws could produce a powerful bite, but their most dangerous feature was the sickle-like claws at the end of their arms. Combined with the crude clothing they fashioned for themselves with the flayed skin of their victims, they were an intimidating sight.

The monsters were called margolls. Despite their appearance, they were not very dangerous individually, at least to a fully trained and equipped adventurer. The problem was that they always appeared in groups. As many as a dozen could appear at once, and they were highly aggressive, even for monsters. They were one of the monsters most dreaded by normal people. Every resident of the delta heard stories of a margoll pack descending on a farm or ranch, or even attacking villages.

Humphrey had not put himself forward often since the early days of the field assessment, but he didn't hesitate to step out for the margolls. Rather than rely on his abilities, he used his combat skills to deal with the group. His martial techniques were most useful against humanoid enemies, and beyond summoning his sword and armour, he fought the monsters without powers.

Jason was reminded of the way combat styles of his new world differed from those in his old one. Brazilian jiu-jitsu might be practical in an MMA fight, but have limited application against a crab the size of a delivery van. An acrobatic kick may get punished by a skilled human fighter, yet perfectly deliver a special attack to an inhuman monster.

In all the time Rufus and the others had been training Jason, they devoted very little time to Jason's essence abilities. Outside of aura training, they largely left him to practise them on his own. Instead, they worked on his physicality, mentality and skill; everything

but essence abilities. Rufus had been especially unrelenting in driving Jason to master the martial techniques that came from the skill book he used.

Jason had sparred many times with Humphrey over the last few weeks as part of Rufus' ruthless regimen, and as he watched Humphrey dismantle the monsters, he realised that he had been far too focused on his essence abilities during the assessment. What worked perfectly against a bark lurker was pushing a square peg into a round hole against a small, quick ratling.

The last day of the field assessment would close their looping path through the delta, arriving back at Greenstone in the evening. They had spent the night in a barricade town, whose high walls and expansive lodgings were designed to be a safe-haven during monster surges. Jason had stayed in a similar town in the desert with Rufus Gary and Farrah, except this one had a sprawling stockyard in which to keep herds.

Jason made his way out of the mudbrick cabin he had shared with Humphrey, looking and feeling weary. His plan to put aside his slow essence abilities in favour of martial abilities hadn't worked as well as he had hoped. He was still able to put down the monsters, but not in the domineering fashion he was aiming for.

"Just give it time," Humphrey advised. "I've been training my whole life for this. You've been training for two months."

The group was assembling around the wagon when another wagon came bolting into town, drawn by a four heidels that were panting from how hard they'd been driven.

"Is it just me," Vincent said, "or do those look like some people in need of an adventurer? Everyone form up!"

Vincent approached as the driver pulled up the wagon.

"You need some assistance?" he asked.

A bedraggled driver glanced back into the wagon before dropping down, looking over Vincent. Most people, whether in Greenstone or the delta, wore loose-fitting, breathable clothes because of the heat. Adventurers, at least while on the job, wore more fitted outfits, often with overt protective properties. They carried arrays of weapons and other useful gear. This was also true for the candidates, making their occupation obvious. To dispel any doubt, Vincent wore his brooch bearing the Adventure Society emblem.

The driver explained that his family had escaped their nearby farm after a pack of margolls arrived. The only reason they got away was the margolls were caught up slaughtering their herd, giving the farmer time to load his family in the wagon and flee. This would make the fourth group of margolls the group had encountered in three days.

“Margolls again,” Mobley muttered. “Do you think it’s a sign the monster surge is starting?”

“Possibly,” Humphrey said, “but not likely. There hasn’t been an increase in overall activity or a sharp rise in pack numbers. The first sign is usually when solitary monsters start appearing in groups.”

After getting details from the man, Vincent addressed the group.

“We’re looking at a large pack,” Vincent told them, “somewhere around ten to twelve margolls. Geller, are you comfortable handling that many?”

“I want it,” Jason said before Humphrey could answer.

Mobley looked derisively at Jason.

“We’ve seen you fight, Asano,” he said. “You can’t handle twelve. You can’t handle half of that.”

Vincent looked contemplatively at Jason.

“Why?” Vincent asked him.

“Because I know I’ve been falling short, even if I’ve been muddling along. If I’m going to break through, I need to be pushed harder. Put myself in more danger.”

Vincent considered it for a few moments.

“Geller,” he said finally. “You be ready to get him out when it goes wrong.”

“You mean ‘if’ it goes wrong,” Humphrey said.

“I know what I said, Geller.”

Rufus, Gary and Farrah had spent hour after hour, day after day pounding Jason’s fighting skill into a usable state. He had come further in just a few weeks than he would have imagined possible, but it wasn’t close to matching a dozen monsters. As for the essence abilities he had been relying on in the early days of the assessment, nothing had changed. They were still too slow for a fast-paced battle.

“You don’t have to do this,” Humphrey told him.

“Let him,” Mobley said. “I’d love to see that smug look frozen on his corpse.”

Humphrey glared at Mobley.

“What’s so great about him?” Mobley asked. “Sure, he handled the bark lurker and the rune tortoise, but against anything the rest of us could walk over, his powers are useless. So he gives up on the powers and starts just fighting them straight up? Sure, he’s got some skills, but how long is an adventurer going to last when he fights without using his abilities? He’s not even going to pass if he can’t use his abilities and his combat skills together.”

Jason's eyes shot open.

Was it that simple? Had he really been that stupid?

Jason's mistake came to him as a revelation. Somewhere in his head, he had been putting his martial arts in a box belonging to his old world, and his essence abilities in one belonging to the new. He had been crippling both by subconsciously separating the two.

"I'm an idiot," he said.

"I know," Mobley agreed.

Jason spent the rest of the ride with a grin on his face, eyes flashing as a floodgate opened in his mind. He could suddenly see with perfect clarity how badly he had been hamstringing himself. By the time the wagon turned off the embankment road and down a slope towards the farm, he was itching to begin. He was the first to vault out the back of the wagon.

Vincent had stopped the wagon on the outskirts of the farm. In the distance they could see a clutch of mudbrick farm buildings, past fields of a low, leafy crop. Vincent, still in the driving seat of the wagon, tossed Jason a far-sight crystal.

"We'll watch from here," Vincent said. Margolls had poor vision and aura sense, but their smell and hearing were highly sensitive. The group would see everything through the crystal without interfering with Jason's fight.

As Jason marched away without pause, Humphrey followed. He maintained enough distance that he wouldn't interfere either, but could still intervene if necessary.

Jason neared the farm's largest building, a big, square barn. As he did, a margoll came wandering out, chewing on the remains of what Jason looked like the family dog. Somehow, the idea of a dog-headed monster eating a dog made it even more disgusting. The monster sniffed the air, then turned to Jason, dropping its meal in the dirt.

Jason had never been this close to a margoll before. It had the face of a pit-bull and the body of a power-lifter, with sickle-claw hands. Its arms were drenched up to the elbows in blood, as was its wide mouth. It threw its head back, letting out a wild howl.

Chapter 60: Making Music

Jason and the margoll faced off outside the mud-brick barn. The margoll's howl called out more, who emerged from in and around the building to join it. As they assembled, Jason and the first one remained where they stood, gazes locked. Jason was the first to move, walking closer to the wall of the barn.

That first step was like a starter's pistol, the monsters lunging into a sprint. Jason kept walking casually as the creatures closed the distance, pounding over the dirt. When they were almost upon him, he dropped into the shadow of the building like falling through a manhole.

He rose up from the ground behind the monsters, silently emerging from one the margolls' own shadows. In the brief but crucial moment of confusion, Jason noticed the margoll in front of him had loose skin at the back of its neck, like a dog. He grabbed a fistful of skin and yanked back, pulling the monster off-balance.

The creatures were already wheeling on Jason, so when his dagger tore the throat out of the monster in his grip, blood sprayed over the others.

-
- You have defeated [Margoll].
 - Would you like to loot [Margoll]?
-

He shoved the dead monster forward as it dissolved into rainbow smoke. The stench was horrifying, but bearable for Jason, but he lacked the powerful sense of smell the margolls had. For them, the smoke was like tear gas, the closest ones staggering away with dog-like yelps of misery.

The group of margolls was large enough that those furthest from Jason weren't disabled, although they were scattered and distracted. Jason moved right into their midst, making full use of his martial skills in the chaos. Another margoll dropped dead, throat slashed open. A forceful kick to the side of the knee dropped sent one dropping to the ground. Jason's flashing dagger inflicted more injuries, non-lethal, but distracting enough to keep the monsters off-balance while they were still reeled from the smoke.

-
- Weapon [Night Fang] has inflicted [Umbral Snake Venom] on [Margoll].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Margoll].
 - Aura [Hegemony] reduces the resistances of enemies for each instance of [Sin].
-

The margolls started to recover from the stench. Jason moved out of the encirclement he had placed himself in but was only a step away from the reach of those razor claws. One such claw swiped at him and he lifted a forearm to take the strike. The claw raked through his cloth armour like it wasn't there, cutting deep gouges in his arm. Then, like a burst balloon, leeches erupted from the wound to spray out over the margolls.

The monsters panicked, yelping in horror as leeches dug into any available patch of exposed skin. Leeches buried themselves into the monsters' arms, bodies and even faces. The margolls scrambled to tear them off, but every leech tossed aside took with it a chunk of flesh in its lamprey-like teeth. One margoll pulled a leech from its eye, which burst into goo as the leech came away.

-
- [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Margoll].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Leech Toxin] on [Margoll].
 - [Sanguine Horror] has inflicted [Necrotoxin] on [Margoll].
-

The leeches that didn't land directly on the margolls started accumulating in a pile, lurching toward the margolls at the back who had been missed in the initial spray. Jason raised his arm at the margoll that had cut into him and chanted a spell.

"Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast."

The margoll's life force started glowing dark red from within its body, before siphoning off in a stream toward Jason's extended hand. As it sank into Jason's skin, the claw marks on his arm closed. It didn't heal completely, but open wounds become bright red welts. By the time the margoll's life force retracted into its body, it looked weak and pale. Jason kicked it into its fellows and once again launched himself into the stricken pack of margolls.

Jason danced through the chaos, dagger flashing, elbows and feet lashing out.

-
- Special attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding] on [Margoll].
 - [Bleeding] already in effect, [Bleeding] is refreshed.
 - Special attack [Leech Bite] has drained health and stamina.
-

He did not go for quick kills, instead working to keep the large group distracted and panicked. Yelps and wails came from the margolls as they thrashed about. The stench of the smoke was still in the air and leeches dug into their flesh. Afflictions turned their blood black with poison, even as it leaked from their bodies.

Through it all moved Jason, like a demon conducting an orchestra of the damned. The margolls followed his direction, their screams of misery his music, until the last monster was dead and the air fell silent. Every part of Jason not shrouded in his cloak of

shadows was painted red and black with the tainted blood. At his feet, the leech swarm surged, gorged to bursting. Jason reached down, slicing his hand on a claw for the leeches to clamber back into his bloodstream.

Humphrey watched as Jason walked back Behind him, the rainbow smoke of a dozen monsters drifted into the sky. It also rose up from his body as the blood of his enemies burned away.

The rest of the trip back to Greenstone was almost entirely silent. Although a bottle of crystal wash had cleaned away the residue of the fight, it was as if the other adventurer candidates could still see the blood painted over Jason. Through the far-sight crystal, they had watched him play the creatures to a screaming, suffering demise.

Even Humphrey was shaken. He could tear through a pack of monsters better than any of them, but the worst he could do was burn a creature to death with his fire breath ability. He had never seen anything like Jason's symphony of horrors, shrieks of despair made into unholy music.

As for Jason, he was eerily still in the back of the wagon, staring out at the delta landscape. The horrors he had wrought played out again and again in his mind, but they did not horrify him. For the first time since arriving in his strange new world, he didn't feel like a helpless pawn of fate. He was in control. He had the power. What troubled him wasn't that his moment of catharsis was marked by the screams of the dying. It was that he couldn't ignore the part of himself that wanted more.

The sky grew darker as the wagon passed through cut-down flatland around the Old City wall and through the city gate. After the sprawling delta, everything felt pushed together in Old City, from the narrow streets to the buildings crammed against one another. The wagon rolled through up Broadstreet Esplanade which, in spite of the name, would barely pass as a laneway on the Island. Stalls were packed away and storefronts were closing with the setting sun. Jason noted Jory's clinic as they passed it by.

The Broadstreet Bridge was the same one Jason had crossed on his first day in Greenstone, the wagon getting waved straight into the rich people lane. The pace picked up one the wide and the wagon soon pulled up at the Adventure Society's marshalling yard.

The sun was completely gone by the time they arrived, but Jason's mood had lightened. He hopped free of the wagon feeling a different man than the one who climbed on a week earlier. He had a sense of power about him, of control over his own fate.

“And here we are,” Vincent said as the candidates decamped from the wagon. “Results of the assessment can be collected from administration individually as of tomorrow afternoon. If you wish to challenge or query the results, you may do so with administration at the time you collect them.”

The marshalling yard was thoroughly illuminated by magic lamps, and a small crowd was awaiting their arrival. The other group had apparently just arrived as well, already being greeted by waiting family. Humphrey spied his mother, fending off several would-be social climbers, and headed in her direction. Jason spotted Rufus standing next to her, but also spied Thadwick Mercer. From the body language, he guessed Thadwick was being met by a household servant rather than a family member.

Jason walked over in that direction, calling out Thadwick’s name.

“What do you want, Asano?” Thadwick asked, warily.

“I wanted to apologise,” Jason said. “There are some flaws in my character that sometimes lead me to be smug, childish, and a little too impressed with myself. Last week, I subjected you to all three.”

Jason held out a hand.

“I’d like to apologise, and start fresh.”

“You think I’d even touch your hand?” Thadwick asked. “You went out of your way to make me look like a buffoon, and now you think I’ll take your hand? You aren’t worthy to breathe my air.”

Thadwick stormed off, leaving Jason standing there, holding out his unshaken hand.

“Ah, well,” he said and turned in the direction of Rufus, Humphrey and Humphrey’s mother. Vincent had already moved to join them, and they were all looking in the direction of Jason’s encounter with Thadwick.

“Danielle!” he called out with a wave as he approached. He flashed Humphrey a grin, and Humphrey’s shoulders lost some of the tenseness they had been carrying since Jason’s fight with the margolls.

“Nicely done with young master Mercer,” Danielle replied with a smile. “I do hope you’re paying attention, Humphrey, dear.”

“What?” Humphrey asked.

“Jason,” Rufus scolded, “stop making a spectacle of yourself.”

“Oh, do leave him alone, Mr Remore,” Danielle said. “He knows what he’s doing.”

“I think I might have missed something,” Humphrey said.

“Same here,” Rufus said unhappily.

Danielle sighed, giving Jason a sympathetic look.

"You're wasted in this city, you know that?" she asked him.

"I do," Jason said, shaking his head with mock sadness. "But you can't help where some lunatic cultist summons you to."

"What?" Vincent asked.

"Would you please not provoke Thadwick Mercer?" Rufus asked.

"Or weirdly flirt with my mother," Humphrey added.

"Humphrey, dear. Mr Remore." Danielle said. "You have to remember that Jason wasn't born on top of the pile like you two. He has to make his own place in society, which is why he's playing around with poor Thadwick."

"Then why humble yourself in front of him?" Humphrey asked Jason.

"Because then I'm the reasonable one," Jason said.

"But he stormed off," Humphrey said. "Doesn't that make you seem below him?"

"It isn't about what Thadwick thinks," Jason said. "It's about all these nice people here. The people who saw me seem perfectly reasonable in front of a member of the Mercer family, then wander over here to where I'm on a first name basis with Danielle Geller herself. Where does that put me, in their eyes?"

"Right at the top," Rufus realised. "But why bother? You're already appearing in high social circles."

"As an adjunct to you," Jason told him. "What all this is really for is the people who recognise what I'm doing and why."

"Wait, Humphrey said, "I thought it was about all the people here. You're manipulating Thadwick, and all these people, for the benefit of the ones who see through it all anyway."

"Now you're getting it, dear," Danielle said happily.

"I'm fairly certain I'm not," Humphrey said.

"Dear boy," she said to him. "The people who know what he's doing recognise and respect his ability to do it. That's how you earn a place in the backrooms, not just the ballrooms."

"I still don't follow," Humphrey said.

Danielle sighed.

"Sometimes I think you and your sister are a little too much your father's children. Come along, everyone; I have a carriage waiting and dinner prepared. You will join us, won't you, Mr Trenslow?"

"It would be my honour, Lady Geller."