

Chapter 121: Getting Stoned

Sophie and Belinda emerged from the side room, Sophie wearing a fresh outfit.

"That was deeply unpleasant," Sophie said, still looking peaky.

"I imagine Jason had it worse," Clive said. "He's an outworlder who came here before ever getting an essence."

"Why does that matter?" Belinda asked.

"He made his body from the most diluted and impure magic. He was basically a human-shaped lesser monster."

"That's a little blunt," Jason said.

"Because his body was so full of impurities, his purgation when he ranked up would have been very extreme."

"It certainly wasn't fun," Jason said.

"What do you mean by 'he made his body'?" Belinda asked.

Jason and Clive shared a glance.

"That's probably best left for another day," Clive said.

"Not an explanation that benefits from brevity," Jason agreed. "Suffice to say, my ascension to iron rank was a messy and profoundly awful experience."

"Sophie made quite a mess herself," Belinda said. "Good thing this whole place cleans itself because I wouldn't wish that on anyone. All the muck just sank into the floor."

"Mine was still worse," Jason said. "I completely passed out."

"Are you sure you weren't just weak?" Sophie asked him.

"Yes," Jason said. "I was, but it wasn't just that."

"How about we get started?" Clive asked. He had already used his abilities to purge the lingering magic from the previous ritual and draw a new circle on the floor. "Unlike the essences, we'll have to go through the awakening stones one at a time. It's a quick and simple ritual, though."

It was as simple as promised, starting with the awakening stone of eyes.

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- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Sight Beyond Sight]. You have awakened 2 of 5 mystic essence abilities.

Ability: [Sight Beyond Sight] (Mystic)

- Special ability (perception).
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Perceive auras.
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“A perception power,” Clive said. “It’s what we expected, but welcome, all the same.”

Sophie was disoriented at the influx of new stimuli. Her iron-rank ability to sense auras was only minutes old and had now erupted with sensitivity. She could not only see the auras of Belinda, Jason and Clive but feel them with all her senses. She could taste the auras around her, feel them on her skin.

Belinda’s aura was weak, with strange flavours Sophie couldn’t make sense of. It felt like spying on her friend’s thoughts and she instinctively withdrew her senses. Instead, she turned them on Jason and Clive. Their auras were much more controlled, nothing escaping the way it did with Belinda.

The aura of each man had a strange and powerful feel to them. Clive’s aura felt like a wellspring of magical power. Jason’s felt more dangerous; oppressive and controlling.

“Something wrong?” Jason asked as she stared at him.

“I was looking at your auras,” she told him and nodded at Clive. “I like his more.”

The remaining stones were the two awakening stones of the hand and the two of the foot.

“I recommend we start with the stones of the hand,” Clive said. “As you use more awakening stones, the abilities awakened will increasingly fill in the gaps of your power set. If the stones of the hand give you unarmed combat abilities, the stones of the foot are less likely to do so. There’s more chance they’ll give movement abilities instead.”

“That sounds fine,” Sophie said.

“I can’t make any promises, though,” Clive said.

“Understood,” she said.

Clive purged the ambient magic and set up a new circle.

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- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Immortal Fist]. You have awakened 3 of 5 mystic essence abilities.

Ability: [Immortal Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
 - Cost: None.
 - Cooldown: None.

 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

 - Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional resonating-force damage, which is highly effective against physical defences. Suffer no damage from making unarmed strikes against objects and negate all damage from actively intercepted attacks. Not all damage from very powerful or higher-ranked attacks will be negated.
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“Another mystic essence ability,” Clive said. “It’s quite unusual to awaken the confluence essence abilities first.”

“Is that bad?” Belinda asked.

“No, just interesting,” Clive said. “There’s a theory that our personalities have a large impact on the kinds of abilities we awaken.”

“That’s a little worrying,” Jason said, considering his own abilities.

“Some advocates of this theory suggest that people with a very strong sense of self awaken the confluence essence abilities first, although I find the evidence to support that idea rather questionable.”

“Asano,” Sophie said. “Hit me with a weapon.”

“Wait, what?” Belinda asked.

“Read her ability,” Jason said. “It negates the damage from incoming attacks.”

“Reading is all well and good,” Belinda said. “Trying to catch a sword is another thing altogether.”

“I have to test the ability sooner or later,” Sophie said.

“Then I vote later!”

“Now is best,” Jason said, pulling out his magical sword. “I have healing potions on hand.”

“That’s a handsome sword,” Sophie said.

Jason held it out for her to take. She drew it halfway out of the scabbard as she examined it. With Jason’s party interface in effect, she was able to read the description.

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).*

“A friend made it for me,” Jason said. “It’s my most treasured possession.”

“I’m still not convinced about this idea,” Belinda said.

“I told you,” Jason said. “If anything goes wrong, I’ve got healing potions.”

Sophie handed the sword back and, after confirming she was ready, Jason drew it and slashed out at her. She unhesitatingly blocked the attack with a palm strike, the sword bouncing back like it had struck a wall.

Everyone looked at Sophie’s hand, which was completely unharmed.

“Nice,” Jason said.

“Didn’t even hurt,” Sophie said. “Keep going.”

Jason unleashed a series of sword attacks, which Sophie intercepted with forearms, shins, shoulders and even a head-butt. She took several superficial cuts as she got a handle on the ability, but urged Jason to continue.

“I’ll need to adjust my fighting style for this,” she said.

“That’s normal,” Clive said. “An adventurer who doesn’t adjust the way they fight to their powers is a bad adventurer.”

“How do you fight?” Sophie asked him.

“From far away,” Clive said. “An adaptation in approach I was more than happy to make.”

“Looks like your ability doesn’t just protect your body,” Jason said. “Your clothes were only cut when you failed to intercept the hit.”

Sophie looked down at her clothes where blood was leaking from several slices in the fabric.

“You’re right,” she said.

“You said something about healing potions?” Belinda said.

“I’d like to try something first,” Jason said and looked at Sophie. “You up for it?”

“I can take anything you’ve got.”

“Alright. I’m going to throw out a special attack.”

He lashed out with his sword again and she intercepted it with a fist.

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- [Celestine] has negated all damage from special attack [Punish].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Celestine].
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"Interesting," Jason said.

Sophie frowned at the message in front of her.

- Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on you.
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"You inflicted me with sin," Sophie said. "That better not be a sex thing."

"You completely negated the damage on my physical attack," Jason told her. "Even the magical damage. The non-damage effect still went through, though."

"What is that non-damage effect?" Belinda asked.

"A curse."

"A curse," Sophie said, glaring daggers.

"A minor curse," Jason said. "It won't do anything unless I use more special attacks on her. Also, I can just take it away."

"So take it away!" Belinda demanded.

"No worries," Jason said and pointed an arm at Sophie.

"Feed me your sins."

Sophie's life force radiated out from her body as a vibrant red glow. A dark stain swam within it but was drawn out, floating through the air and vanishing into Jason's outstretched hand. The glowing life force withdrew back into her body and he tossed her a healing potion from his inventory. She drank it, making a sour face.

"Those cheap potions of Jory's get the job done," she said. "I cannot get used to that taste, though."

Clive set up another ritual and Sophie absorbed the next awakening stone of the hand.

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- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Radiant Fist]. You have awakened 4 of 5 mystic essence abilities.

Ability: [Radiant Fist] (Mystic)

- Special ability.
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Unarmed attacks deal additional disruptive-force damage, which is highly effective against magical defences and intangible or incorporeal enemies. Unarmed attacks do not trigger retaliation effects. Negate any non-damage effects from actively intercepted attacks.

“Mystic essence again,” Jason said. “It’s a magic version of the last ability.”

“That’s useful,” Clive said. “The damage types of those two abilities, resonating-force and disruptive-force. Between them, you’ll get through almost any defence. They’re special abilities rather than special attacks, so I imagine the damage is limited, but they will be effective against any enemy you can put a hand to.”

“Try that special attack again,” Sophie said and Jason pulled his sword back out.

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- [Celestine] has negated all damage from special attack [Punish].
 - Special attack [Punish] has inflicted [Sin] on [Celestine].
 - [Celestine] has prevented secondary effects of special attack [Punish].
 - [Sin] does not take effect.

 - Affliction negation has triggered an effect on weapon [Dread Salvation].
 - [Celestine] has negated the triggered effect.

“Wow,” Jason said. “That even stopped my sword from buffing itself.”

“It seems clear the direction her abilities are taking her,” Clive said. “Of her first seven abilities, three are defensive and one is self-recovery. They aren’t blanket defence powers, though; they take skill to use effectively. She’s developing an evasion-type defensive specialist power set.”

“A dodge tank,” Jason said.

“There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of defence specialist,” Clive said. “They directly conflate with the two kinds of essence users we were discussing yesterday. The most common type uses raw toughness, heavy on simple, passive abilities that mitigate damage. Their strengths are standing their ground and withstanding punishment.

“And I’m the other type,” Sophie said.

“It looks that way,” Clive said. “You can expect more active defensive powers and more mobility. You won’t be as good at holding a fixed position but you’ll have the tools to be exactly where you need to be, exactly when you need to be there. You won’t be as good at passively taking hits, but you’ll be better at intercepting them. The other kind of specialist will outlast you under a barrage of attacks. More powerful, singular attacks can punch through their defences, though, while you’ll have to tools to avoid or negate them.”

“Sounds like you’ll be good at staying alive when things are at their worst,” Jason said.

“I always have been,” Sophie said.

Clive set up the next ritual, moving on to an awakening stone of the foot.

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- You have awakened the balance essence ability [Cloud Step]. You have awakened 2 of 5 balance essence abilities.

Ability: [Cloud Step] (Balance)

- Special ability (movement).
- Cost: Low stamina and mana.
- Cooldown: 20 seconds.

- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)

- Effect (iron): Take a single step on air as if it were solid ground, becoming intangible for a brief moment. This ability can be used while all steps are on cooldown at an extreme mana cost per step. If used within mist, fog or cloud, this ability has no cooldown.

“Finally not a mystic one,” Jason said. “Kind of a shame at this point. You’ve almost fully awakened that essence.”

“What’s a cooldown?” Belinda asked, reading the ability description.

“That’s how long you have to wait after using an ability before you can use it again,” Jason said.

“It’s terminology from Jason’s world,” Clive said. “His ability serves as a guide for him to our world, so it describes them in ways he will best understand.”

“Why would she have to wait?” Belinda asked.

“Our bodies serve as a medium for the magic of our essence abilities,” Clive said. “Using the same magic in the same way repeatedly can over-stress the body. Less imposing abilities require little or no time before they can be used again, while more excessive powers require more time for recovery. This ability of yours, Miss Wexler is rather interesting in that you can circumvent this limitation using large amounts of mana.”

"Is that unusual?" Jason asked.

"Yes, but far from unheard of," Clive said. "It functions by spreading the strain across your body, which allows use in rapid succession but requires much more mana to push through. Very inefficient, but inefficient is better than unavailable in a critical moment."

"Try it out," Belinda said.

Sophie trod on an invisible step, then fell back to the floor.

"It seems underwhelming," Belinda said.

"I want to try the intangible thing," Jason said pulling a small pouch from his inventory. "Try your ability again."

Sophie used her ability to step on the air as Jason threw a glazed nut. It bounced off her forehead, earning Jason a glare.

"The ability does say briefly intangible," Jason said. "I think we need to get the timing right. Can you feel being intangible?"

"I think so," Sophie said. "There's a very brief sensation of lightness."

After several more attempts, they finally got a glazed nut to pass through Sophie's intangible body, right at the moment she took a step on the air.

"I wonder what happens if she uses it while standing on the ground," Jason said. "Would she fall through?"

"Not through the cloud palace," Clive said. "One of its many properties is to block the passage of intangible entities. She might go through the stone floor of this room, though."

The ritual room had a stone floor made from a single sheet of smoothly polished rock, to facilitate drawing ritual circles. After some experiments, they discovered that Sophie would sink into it if she had a foot on the ground while using the ability. After the fleeting moment of intangibility, her foot was pushed back out of the stone.

"You'd have to be moving fast but you could use that to get through a wall," Belinda said. "You have maybe a second of being intangible. You'd have to be moving fast enough to get most of the way through so you'd be pushed to the other side."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that test," Sophie said. "What if I get stuck halfway through?"

"Your foot got pushed out of the floor," Belinda said. "There's no reason to think a wall would be any different."

"What happened to the woman who didn't want me catching swords?" Sophie asked.

"There are healing potions," Belinda said.

"I don't think a healing potion will fix my head occupying the same space as a chunk of wall."

“We can take a look at the possibilities later,” Clive said. “We have more rituals to perform.”

“In a little bit,” Sophie said. “I want to see what this ability can do. Asano, spar with me for a bit.”

Jason and Sophie engaged in some light sparring, neither pushing too hard. In the fighting pits, acrobatically using her speed and the walls to outmanoeuvre her opponents was her signature. She started using her new ability as a wall to kick-off whenever she needed. It wasn't wildly effective right away, but she saw the potential. Eventually, she begged-off with a splitting headache and Jason handed her a mana potion.

“Is that your first low-mana headache?” Jason asked.

She sighed with relief as the potion took effect, then nodded.

“Not pleasant, are they?”

“No, they are not,” she agreed, rubbing her temples.

“Do you want to take a break?” Clive asked.

“I'm fine,” she said.

“Take the break,” Belinda scolded. “You don't have to tough everything out on principle.”

“It's past time for lunch anyway,” Jason said. “I have sandwiches.”

On the bench where the last awakening stone was still waiting to be used he set out a lunch spread. A tray of sandwiches, plus glasses and a pitcher of iced tea, complete with chunks of ice floating in it.

“Do you always carry around sandwiches?” Belinda asked as Jason poured out drinks.

“He does,” Clive said, taking a sandwich from the tray. “Also, a rope ladder.”

Sophie wandered over last and Belinda shoved a sandwich in her hand.

“Where did you get this chutney?” Belinda asked Jason after biting into her own sandwich.

“My landlady makes it. Now that Emir has set us up in the cloud palace, I don't see her, which is a shame. I learned a lot about local ingredients in her kitchen. I went and packed-up the rooms my friends and I were renting and she stocked me up on chutney and jam. I've been meaning to figure out how you cook things in a kitchen made of clouds and knock out some sweet scones.”

Belinda chatted with Jason and Clive while Sophie ate in silence. Belinda occasionally glanced her way, noting that Sophie put an end to a good portion of the sandwiches. As Jason packed away the remains of their lunch, Clive set up the ritual for

the last awakening stone.

- You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Mirage Step]. You have awakened 5 of 5 mystic essence abilities.
- You have awakened all mystic essence abilities. Linked attribute [Spirit] will advance in conjunction with lowest-rank mystic essence ability.
- You have 1 of 4 completed essences.

Ability: [Mirage Step] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension, movement, illusion).
 - Cost: Low stamina and mana.
 - Cooldown: 40 seconds.
 - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
 - Effect (iron): Move instantaneously to a nearby location, leaving an afterimage behind.
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“Instantaneous movement,” Clive said. “It’s functionally similar to a teleport, but requires a path of traversal.”

“Teleporting can be tricky,” Jason said. “It took me a long time before I was able to successfully...”

Sophie suddenly appeared next to him

“...activate the ability,” he finished. “Never mind, I guess.”

A shimmering afterimage lingered briefly in Sophie’s original position before vanishing. As for Sophie herself, she was reeling, unbalanced.

“That was amazing,” Sophie said as she dizzily held her arms out. “That felt absolutely incredible. I’m going to need some practice, though. That was the last of the awakening stones, so I should do that.”

“Actually,” Jason said, “Clive and I managed to rustle up some extras yesterday.”

He walked over to the bench. It was now empty of awakening stones, but he took out two more and placed them down.

“One of these I got from the Adventure Society for catching you. The other I got from... somewhere else, but also for catching you.”

“Somewhere else?” Belinda asked.

Jason didn’t respond to the question. Clive took out a third stone, placing it with the other two.

“This is the one I got for catching you,” he said. “Jason doesn’t have his full set of essences but he’s close. Since he’s waiting for what Emir is setting up, he decided to give these to you.”

“What about you?” Belinda asked.

“I’ve had my full set for a long time,” Clive said. “I was just never much of an adventurer.”

Jason slapped him on the back.

“You killed a bronze rank monster in a hidden fortress under a swamp,” Jason said. “You’re a plenty good adventurer, now.”

“Last night, after our meeting, we were belatedly contacted by the Adventure Society about the reward for catching you,” Clive said. “I was going to give my stone to Jason but since he was giving his to you, I decided to the same.”

“What kinds of awakening stones are they?” Sophie asked. She walked up to the bench, looking at the stones. Jason gestured at them invitingly.

“Touch them and see.”