

Chapter 236

A Series of Familiar Powers

Shade was not visibly changed in his new, bronze rank vessel; he remained a shadowy figure in a cloak of darkness. The only visible difference was an increase in his number of bodies, from three to seven. He had also gained the ability to exert a small amount of physical force, while remaining an incorporeal entity. It wasn't enough to inflict damage but it would allow him to perform tasks in places too dangerous for people who weren't intangible and didn't have six extra bodies.

It also meant that it was unlikely that Shade's vessel would be completely eliminated in battle. Barring an unusual fight, such as the one against the elemental tyrant that claimed his original iron-rank vessel, he would remain intact. Any bodies that were destroyed could be remade, so long as at least one remained. The only cost would be time and almost all of Jason's mana, making it something not to be done in the midst of combat.

The other new ability Shade had acquired was his own dimensional storage space. It wasn't as capacious as that of Jason, Humphrey or Clive, but was accessible from any of Shade's bodies.

Jason's own storage space, his inventory power, had likewise improved as he reached bronze rank. One of its nuances was the ability to expand the number of slots available through the use of dimensional bags. There were five slots in the corner of the inventory screen interface for placing dimensional bags, but only one had been available and could only be filed with an iron-rank bag.

Jason had filled that slot early in his adventuring career, but he brought two bronze rank bags with him for use once he ranked up. He had to carry them empty, as dimensional bags could only be placed into other dimensional spaces when they themselves contained nothing.

Another boost to his inventory was an increase to the maximum volume per item. He could feel the change instinctively, but would need to experiment to find the exact new limit.

Humphrey and Clive had likewise experienced improvements from their storage abilities reaching bronze. Unlike Jason's power, theirs were essence abilities that gained not just incremental improvements but whole new effects on ranking up. Humphrey's storage space power, magic armoury, now significantly reduced the mana cost of conjuring his weapons and armour. It meant that he no longer had to burn a notable chunk

of mana at the start of every fight, of whenever he switched between his two conjured swords.

Clive's rune gate power had gone through the most impressive change. The original function opened a rune circle portal to his storage space, but was now a full-fledged portal power. Combining dimensional storage and a travel portal in one ability wasn't useful in a fight, but it was easily the most concentrated utility power on the team.

The increase in utility was another indication of the somewhat unusual makeup of the team. Humphrey and Neil were the only members that would slot easily into conventional team roles, with Jason, Clive, Belinda and Sophie all outside the norm to various degrees.

On the relatively normal end of the spectrum were Jason and Sophie. Affliction specialists and dodge tanks were less common variations of the common damage-dealer and guardian roles. Clive was a spell-based damage dealer who only had one attack spell. Belinda was the most extreme, simultaneously filling no set roles and most of them.

A traditional adventuring team used reliable strengths and fixed roles to approach every situation in a similar way, in order to maximise their strengths and minimise their weaknesses. The weakness of Jason's team was the inability to do that. They needed to strategise and adapt to any given circumstance.

The team, in a way, had become something of a reflection of Jason. There were better power sets for everyday monster hunting, but they thrived in meeting challenges that more conventional teams would struggle against. By not being pinned down to one approach, they would be ready when unusual circumstances were thrown their way.

Part of the team's adaptive nature was the inclusion of a lot of utility. Most teams would include at least one storage space power and would count any more as a happy bonus. As for portal or teleportation powers, there was no team that wouldn't jump at the chance. Many teams would take on an otherwise unremarkable, or even downright incompetent member for the simple reason that their repertoire included a portal ability. Jason's team commanded four storage powers and three long-distance travel powers, making them rather enviable.

Stash had also evolved to bronze rank alongside Humphrey, the bonded familiar not requiring a new body to be summoned in the way Jason's familiars did. While as mischievous as ever, he was more confident about revealing his true form, which only Humphrey had seen before. His true shape was small, with a long, serpentine body covered in rainbow scales that ran along him in waves of colour that shimmered and changed. Belinda became completely enchanted with his draconic true form and Stash became enchanted with the praise she heaped upon him.

Gordon went through a slight change when his new body was summoned, with a second pair of glowing, blue and orange eyeball orbs joining the first in floating around his body. This gave him four simultaneous attack beams; two of resonating force that was effective against tough opponents and two of disruptive force, effective against magic and incorporeal beings like Gordon himself. Additionally, he could send two orbs of the same type hurtling off, even flying them around corners before coming together and detonating. The resultant explosion was powerful, but the orbs would take a minute to reform, during which they could not be used to make further attacks..

Making good on his threat, Humphrey pushed the team to stay on the move, hunting down more of the flesh abominations and whatever ordinary monsters they encountered along the way. Eager to push the limits of their new capabilities, both Humphrey and Jason took on flesh abominations alone for the first time.

In Jason's case, his bronze-rank powers were enough to overwhelm the monster's recovery powers much faster. He had already been able to bypass the rank-based damage resistance but now his powers were doing bronze-rank damage. That was only part of the change, as his new afflictions also played a role.

Rigor mortis, inflicted by his shadow arm Reaper power, gave a stacking penalty to the speed and recovery attributes of whatever poor soul he inflicted it upon. His inexorable doom power caused the effect to stack up and up, the penalty to speed making the creature more and more sluggish, even when it took swift forms to try and pin down the elusive Jason. Meanwhile, the penalty to recovery left its ability to hold off the afflictions increasingly diminished, even as the afflictions themselves became worse and worse.

Another key affliction came from Jason's special attack, leech bite. Along with inflicting the bleeding effect, it now also inflicted the same leech toxin poison that Colin did. An instance of the stacking toxin would refresh the bleeding effect whenever it was healed through, leaving the adaptive powers of the flesh abominations unable to stave off Jason's malign powers as effectively as they had in the past.

Humphrey was likewise able to overcome the ability of the abominations to adapt to him, in his case with raw power. He showed off the advantage of being a human special attack specialist with an array of offensive techniques that could take on any kind of enemy. If it took a solid form, the resonating force of his shield breaker attack would crack it like an egg. A more amorphous form would absorb heavy physical blows but be vulnerable to the disruptive force of his spirit reaper attack. His unstoppable force power had a longer cooldown, but would devastate the abominations in whatever form they took.

Humphrey had not taken on any of them himself before Jason and Neil ranked up, as getting them over the line to bronze rank had always been the priority. Now they had, he was happier to let himself loose. Like Jason, he had already been ignoring the rank disparity, but increasing the power of his attacks from iron to bronze-rank had turned him from a threat to a nemesis. He relentlessly pounded away at an abomination that simply couldn't find a form to withstand the oppressive might.

The team were put through their paces as they made a beeline for the centre of the city and the territory of the blood weaver. Of a night they continued to rest in the cloud house, which was now a more secure than ever. The magic of the house was more sophisticated at bronze rank, with stronger defences and a superior ability to hide itself from the senses of wandering monsters.

As they stopped to rest each night, Clive had been taking more precise measurements of the ambient magic, which had been rising at a precipitous rate. He updated the team as they rested for the evening.

"Isn't that a barely measurable increase?" Jason asked as Clive gave them the results of his latest analysis.

"The fact that the increase is measurable at all is alarming," Clive told him. "That it's occurred over just a matter of weeks is insane. We need to figure out what these cultists have done."

"And if we can't question them, because they're mindless blood thralls?" Sophie asked.

"I doubt they'll be mindless," Clive said. "A blood weaver could turn them into witless blood puppets, but more likely it has employed a traditional form of vampirism, where they are subject to the will of the one that turned them, while retaining their own minds."

"We take them alive if we can," Humphrey said. "Not at the risk of endangering the team, though. If we have to put them down, we do it."

"If they aren't any help, that's not the end of the road," Clive said. "Whatever is causing this change isn't something you can just knock out a magic ritual for and off you go. What's happening is more involved than that."

"Any closer to an idea of what that is?" Humphrey asked.

"I've been going through the books Knowledge gave Jason, looking for something that would produce these results. Without more information, though, I'm not even sure what to look for. At this point, more than talking to these cultists, I need to see what tools they brought with them."

Shade now had enough bodies that he could transform into a mount for each member of the team, and bronze rank had apparently enhanced the nature of the mounts he could transform into. For one thing, he could collect multiple bodies together to replicate the self-propelled magical carriages favoured by the Greenstone elite. That was of little use on streets overgrown with jungle, but not the only new trick he had picked up.

Rather than a full vehicle, Shade could also merge fewer bodies to create different individual mounts. By merging his bodies in pairs, he became three creatures that were somewhere between a narrow-bodied beetle and a preying mantis. Each had a glossy black carapace, glowing eyes and huge blade arms with glowing white edges, from which mist softly drifted. They were an intimidating sight.

“Very nice,” Jason said approvingly. “Shade, you’re an absolute champion.”

“These creatures do not appear in this world,” Shade said with his remaining body. “They exist in another world I spent time in while serving as a familiar.”

“Hold on,” Humphrey said. “Jason, you have no problem with these terrifying blade-armed monstrosities, but heidels disturbing?”

“They have two heads, Humphrey. Two heads. Can you imagine having two heads? Imagine if you had a great idea for a recipe, then had to explain it to your other head. That’s not right.”

“Wait, *that’s* your problem?” Humphrey asked.

“What if you’re eating something delicious? Either one head gets left out or each one only gets half as much, because they have to share a stomach. Half as much! What if it’s a delicious cake!”

“That was a nice cake you brought out for the rank-up feast,” Neil said. “Did you make that yourself?”

“I did. The secret is to sweeten the cream before whipping it and really make it the highlight.”

“Was there leftover cake?” Sophie asked, with a suspiciously bushy moustache.

“There was not,” Jason said.

“Boo,” she jeered, before turning into an iridescent blue jungle lizard.

“At least he’s figured out how to shape shift clothes, now,” actual Sophie said.

“They’re still part of his body, so technically he was naked,” Jason said.

Humphrey said nothing, pinching the bridge of his nose and shaking his head.

Not all of the team rode the mantis beetles. Sophie maintaining her scouting glide-flight over their heads, while Humphrey rode Stash in lizard form. Clive joined Sophie, drifting slowly through the air on Onslow, the flying tortoise. His familiar wasn't very fast at any altitude beyond just above ground height, but as he didn't need to navigate the terrain there was no problem keeping up.

That left the three mantis beetles, the most Shade could produce. It was enough for Jason, Neil and Belinda, giving the whole team effective transport. The blade arms of the mounts were ideal for cutting a path through the jungle, while the remaining six beetle legs offered a solid platform that could navigate the uneven ground with ease.

"Shade, how do you think this form would hold up in combat?" Jason asked. Although the mantis beetle looked to have a hard, chitinous exterior, it was actually composed of the same soft, comfortable shadow-stuff Shade's horse form had been. The blade arms were effectively cutting through the undergrowth, however.

"That would be unreliable, at best," Shade said. "I strongly suspect that any amount of damage would make me unable to sustain this form. You do not have to tell anyone that, however. I could be used to make an effective bluff."

"I like the way you think."

"Oh, great," Neil said. "As if Asano wasn't dodgy enough already. Now he's got a partner."

The team reached the interior of the city where the buildings were completely shattered and the jungle in complete ascendance. As with their first visit, they were unharassed by monsters as they pushed in. Rather than ride mounts, they made a slogging path on foot through the thick undergrowth.

"Do you think the blood weaver took control of all the monsters in this area?" Neil asked.

"There might have been some too strong to take over," Humphrey said. "Other silver rank monsters. They were more likely driven out of the weaver's territory, rather than subjugated. You can expect to encounter vampire versions of everything bronze and below that was here, though."

"It kind of worries me that we still aren't seeing any," Neil said.

"It almost certainly knows we're here by now," Clive said. "It's smart enough to try and bait us in, the way it did last time, but not smart enough to realise we'd see through it."

"Yeah, but we're walking into the trap anyway," Neil said.

"Once the fighting starts, it probably won't stop until we reach the blood weaver," Humphrey said. "We're going to be fighting all the monsters from a large area, all in one

wave. Let Jason and Sophie do the heavy lifting as much as possible, since they're our endurance players. Obviously do what you have to, but conserve your mana and stamina as much as you can. We have a lot of mana recovery, but expect a lot of fight."

Humphrey stopped, looking around at the team.

"Make no mistake," he said. "This will be a battle, not a fight. We are about to experience the single most gruelling combat scenario that any of us have ever encountered. More than the expedition into the desert astral space, more than Jason playing distraction to the silver-rank elemental. We're going to war against an army of vampire monsters and we'll be wading through the bodies of the dead before we're done."

"So, what I'm hearing is that it will be easy and we shouldn't worry," Neil said.

Humphrey glared at him and Jason put a reassuring hand on Humphrey's arm.

"Mate, it's alright," Jason said. "We know the stakes, we know what we're up against and we know what we'll have to face before we're done. Don't go wasting your energy now on being tense; you'll have intensity enough, once the fighting starts. For now, just trust in your team."

Jason glanced at the jungle around them, as if waiting for something.

"Damn," he said.

"What?" Humphrey asked.

"That would have been an epic moment for the monsters to appear," Jason. "You'd think vampires would have a more appropriate sense of drama."