

Chapter 560

A Power That You've Overlooked

Jason and Melody faced one another in the magically sealed section of tunnel, both standing lightly on the water.

"You know, then," she said.

"There's a guy who's pretty keen to catch you up."

"You're helping someone catch your friend's mother?"

"Nah, we told him to stick it up his quoit. We'll try and bring you in for our own reasons. Alive, even though we were told to gank you."

"That's your general way of doing things, from what I understand."

"Pretty much. I don't suppose you can let me know what the Builder told you about me?"

"The Builder's attitude to you has been extremely erratic, from what I've seen. Sometimes it came across as a burning obsession to see you dead, while at others a ruse."

"A ruse?"

"We had semi-regular contact with the Builder's cult. I know for certain that the Builder was at least partially using his seeming obsession as a mask when his real intentions were for the diamond-ranker you're connected to. He wanted her to waste her single chance to intervene, which is why the Sea of Storms had three of the Builder's fortress cities. But I've also seen indications that his obsession was very real, as if the Builder himself was of two minds on you."

"Yeah, he's always been a bit all over the shop," Jason said. "I'm not sure I ever got a straight answer on why, exactly. A friend – and she'd know – told me that great astral beings have their behaviour affected by the vessels they're using. It's not just a straight-up puppet show. I don't think going from mortal to the omnipotent sky wizard of building model kits left him as the most stable of blokes, either, but I can't help but think there's something I'm missing."

"Do you have any concept of how arrogant you sound?" Melody asked. "Why would a great astral being be comprehensible to... wait, did you say he used to be mortal?"

"Yep. The guy who had his job first got caught playing silly buggers with a couple of worlds – guess which ones – and they gave him the boot."

"That seems like an absurd story."

"Lady, you've had me checked out. I am an absurd story."

“Indeed you are. Your capability with the Way of the Reaper is impressive for someone who only learned it a few years ago. Skill books?”

“Yeah.”

“Even so, you’ve certainly made it your own.”

“I’ve had the odd scrap here and there,” Jason said. “Plenty of chances to practise. No match for an old hand like you, but your daughter might give you a run for your money. You’ve got the experience but she’s crazy talented. Rufus Remore quietly told me she’s one of the best he’s ever seen. And that means something, if you know the name.”

“I do. And I would like to thank you for what you’ve done for my daughter.”

“Your welcome, I suppose. I’m not sure that means much coming from a deadbeat mother, though.”

Melody’s superior expression turned angry.

“You have no idea what I’ve sacrificed for that girl!”

“I know what I’ve sacrificed,” Jason said, unfazed by Melody’s outburst.

“She’d have died a child if not for me.”

“Oh, you stopped your child from dying. Congratulations on the absolute minimum of parental responsibility.”

Melody flashed across the water, sword darting at Jason. There was another dancing clash of blades before they again separated, this time Jason coming out the better. He knew that she was either genuinely angry or very good at selling a story. Her aura told him the emotions were real, but he understood better than most how aura manipulation could fake emotions.

“I got my soul personally tortured by the Builder, which kicked off more than a little bit of a feud,” he taunted. “The very fact that you know this is because he hired a god to take me out, which is where you came in. You’re not going to tell me you topped that, which makes me a better mother than you ever were.”

“I’m going to fulfil the Builder’s request in this tunnel,” she snarled.

“Is that so?”

“I know your powers, Asano.”

“They’re pretty awesome, right?”

“And you’ve compared our skills.”

“Your technique is also awesome, although getting angry makes you sloppy. Unless you’re faking it. I’ve had this problem with women before.”

“I also know you like to put your enemies off with babble. That won’t work on me. Nothing you have will work on me.”

“It’s called banter, lady. If you’re going to do it, at least learn the nomenclature. And I also use it to mask my nervousness in tense situations. This definitely counts, given how many times you’ve tried to stab me already. So I’m going to keep the banter coming if it’s all the same to you.”

“I know everything you can do, Asano. You can’t escape and you can’t beat me. There’s nowhere to hide and I can cleanse your afflictions as fast as you can put them on if you can’t hit me with that blade. Needing attacks to initialise your affliction suite is just one of the weaknesses I can exploit. I know them all.”

“There are a lot of them,” Jason acknowledged. “If I ever see one of those anime-haired celestines wearing a sailor uniform, fighting a tentacle monster, I’m going to do something I regret.”

As Melody’s brow creased with the slightest indication of confusion, Jason initiated the attack for the first time. As Melody had predicted, his blade failed to find purchase on her before they once more broke away and went back to slowly eyeing one another off, swords held in front of them.

“I was trained in the Way of the Reaper before you were born,” she told him.

“And you’re still silver rank? Rough couple of decades?”

“Yes,” she admitted, and when his eyebrows lifted in surprise, she struck. Jason had been using a combination of body language and aura to feint an opening and finally managed to score a glancing hit.

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- Special Attack [Leech Bite] has inflicted [Bleeding], [Leech Toxin] and [Tainted Meridians] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - Weapon [Hegemon’s Will] has inflicted [Hegemon’s Tribute], [Vulnerable], [Corrosion], [Ruin of the Blood], [Ruin of the Flesh] and [Ruin of the Spirit] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - Due to item set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon], Weapon [Hegemon’s Will] has inflicted [Hegemon’s Tribute] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - Weapon [Hegemon’s Will] has bestowed an instance of [Benevolent Hegemon] on you.
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 - Item [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed eight instances of [Guardian’s Blessing] on you.
 - Due to item set [Regalia of the Dark Hegemon], item [Amulet of the Dark Guardian] has bestowed eight instances of [Hegemon’s Authority] on you.
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Jason ignored the system message but a glimpse of something in it distracted him, which was all Melody needed to score a clean hit, raking her blade across his chest. The

blade skittered across a barrier before it broke and dug into flesh, shielding him from a portion of the damage.

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- All instances of [Guardian's Blessing] have been consumed to absorb damage.
 - Each instance of [Guardian's Blessing] has bestowed [Blessing's Bounty].

 - You have been inflicted with [Creeping Death].
 - You have resisted [Creeping Death].
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant] from ability [Sin Eater].
 - You have gained an instance of [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].

 - You have been inflicted with [Purifying Flame].
 - You have resisted [Purifying Flame].
 - You have gained an instance of [Resistant] from ability [Sin Eater].
 - You have gained an instance of [Integrity] from ability [Sin Eater].

 - Resisting [Purifying Flame] has inflicted you with [Inexorable Purgation].
 - [Inexorable Purgation] cannot be resisted.

 - [Inexorable Purgation] has been moved to [Hegemon's Dominion]. If you return [Hegemon's Will] to the scabbard, the next attack made with it will inflict [Inexorable Purgation].

 - [Purifying Flame] (affliction, wounding, fire, holy, dispel): Inflict ongoing fire damage and periodically negate a boon of the magic, elemental or unholy types.

 - [Inexorable Purgation] (affliction, holy, stacking): [Purifying Flame] is more difficult to resist. This affliction cannot be resisted. This affliction is negated when the victim is afflicted with [Purifying Flame]. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
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Melody didn't let up the advantage, following up with a rapid sequence of jabbing thrusts. On the third strike, he pushed his body into her lunge, sliding himself onto her blade to arrest its movement. Silver flame erupted inside his body but he showed no reaction as he gripped her sword arm and pulled her face to face.

She found herself staring into alien eyes, within the void-like darkness of his hood, as he chanted a spell in a voice of arctic stone.

"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."

The strength of Jason's Punition spell was based on the number of afflictions the enemy had, and only a handful were on Melody. Jason had learned his lesson about waiting for the perfect moment with Purity worshippers, though, taking the damage where he could get it. The necrotic damage wasn't a lot, but every attack she had landed or even that he'd blocked had affected her with the Sin affliction, amplifying necrosis.

She kicked him off her blade, her high-end silver strength noticeably superior to his, and they both staggered back. Her skin was flecked with black pockmarks of necrosis while his chest wounds were burning with ethereal silver flames. In both cases, normal recovery was impeded, hers by the hard-to-heal necrotic damage and his by the fire burning the wounds. They both had answers, however, and they choose not to immediately re-engage as they paused to recover.

Jason simply waited for his regeneration effects to heal him, the flame sputtering out as the affliction was absorbed by his scabbard. The rate at which it absorbed afflictions was accelerated by suppressing the aura of the afflictions originator, and Jason's aura pushed hard on Melody's. He didn't entirely suppress it because reading her emotions was one of the edges helping him against her superior speed, strength and skill.

As for Melody, she slapped her upper arm and a rune stitched into her sleeve glowed briefly before vanishing. The church of Purity excelled in the creation of dispelling and cleansing items, and the consumable rune immediately purged Jason's afflictions. Jason's affliction powers were not to be ignored, however, and the cleansing came at a price. His Punition spell, in addition to afflicting damage, had left behind an unwelcome gift in the form of the Penitence affliction.

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- [Rune of Greater Purgation (silver)] had triggered a strong cleansing on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - All afflictions on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)] have been cleansed.
 - Cleansing your afflictions has triggered [Penitence].
 - [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)] has been afflicted with an instance of [Penance] for each cleansed affliction.

 - [Penitence] (affliction, holy): Inflicts an instance of [Penance] for each curse, disease, poison or unholy effect that is cleansed from an enemy with this affliction.

 - [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
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The damage from Penance was limited by the number of afflictions, making it far from debilitating to a silver-ranker, but the transcendent damage was unavoidable, chiselling away at her health. She took a healing potion from her belt, drained the vial and tossed it aside. Jason didn't push the attack.

"You're not weak, I'll give you that," she told him. "You aren't going to win, though, and you know it. The environment matters a lot to your combat style and this place advantages me. I'm faster, stronger and better. You wouldn't believe how many healing

and cleaning items I have, so I can let you hurt me here and there. You can only beat me if your afflictions reach a threshold where they escalate past the point of recovery being possible.”

“You really are like your daughter,” Jason said. “Not just the looks, either. You probably don’t know what the genetic lottery is, but you ladies are big winners. It’s your personalities that make you alike, though.”

“How so?” Melody asked, surprising Jason with curiosity and an undercurrent of longing in her aura.

“You seem to know *a lot* about me,” Jason told her. “Your daughter had a thing for me too.”

Melody glowered at him but this time she didn’t make an angry lunge at him. She looked at where she had wounded him, the flesh already knitted back together and the robes repaired over them.

“I was curious to talk with you,” she said. “You’re important to my daughter, and I was wondering what grabbed the Builder’s attention.”

“And?”

“Not impressed.”

“I need to start using food to make a first impression with women. This getting kicked in the face approach isn’t working out. Can I offer you a chocolate cake sandwich?”

“I’ve seen enough,” she said. “With your healing, I’m going to have to be more thorough in taking you down. No more chats.”

“But that’s the best part. Besides, you haven’t even seen how I’m going to beat you yet.”

“You don’t have anything that can beat me.”

“I didn’t when your three minions ambushed me as I was going about my business, but you’ll find it’s different now. I have something new to rely on.”

“You mean that sword? It’s pretty, but it’ll take more than that.”

Jason laughed.

“No, it’s a power that you’ve overlooked, even though it’s the same power that beat the Builder.”

She tilted her head in a gesture of curiosity.

“Do tell, Mr Asano.”

“It’s Jason, please. You’re my friend’s mum. Anyway, the reason you overlooked this power is that magic is too easy in this world. Magic is so rich here you can literally find it just laying around as essences and awakening stones. In my world, magic is a struggle.

You have to work and scrape for it, but in doing so, you find pathways to power that people from this world would never consider.”

“Such as?”

“Here, magic is so rich you can just pick it up off the ground. But in my world...”

He paused just as the wall between them exploded inward, dust billowing and chunks of stone splashing into the water that started draining out through the hole.

“...friendship is magic,” Jason finished as the sound died down.

Melody raised her sword warily as she and Jason stared at one another through the stone dust, but Jason didn't move. Instead, Sophie came through the hole in a blur, immediately lashing out at Melody. Taken aback by the sudden confrontation with her daughter, Melody backed off, showing far less aptitude than she had against Jason. Jason's aura came crashing down on her as the rest of the team came pouring through the hole. With Melody's aura suppressed, outnumbered and caught on the back foot, the suddenly one-sided fight quickly came to an end as Jason tapped her with his sword and Humphrey and Neil gripped her arms.

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- You have cleansed all holy afflictions from [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - Weapon [Hegemon's Will] has inflicted multiple instances of [Hegemon's Mercy] on [Order of the Reaper Infiltrator (sealed)].
 - [Hegemon's Mercy] (affliction, holy, stacking): The victim of this effect is subjected to a powerful suppressive force affecting all magical abilities. This affects essence abilities, innate abilities and item abilities. Abilities derived from external transcendent sources are affected more strongly. This affliction drops off rapidly when not within the area of the wielder of [Hegemon's Will]'s aura. Additional instances have increased effect.
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The handful of Penance instances left on Melody translated to only a mild suppressing effect. It was still enough that, when combined with a fully suppressed aura, Clive was able to snap a suppression collar around her neck. She thrashed in wild struggle, but both Neil and Humphrey were stronger, holding her in place as Clive locked the collar.

Melody slumped, but her face locked on her daughter's. Sophie looked at her mother impassively, then slipped a bag over her head. Neil started shoving their prisoner towards the hole in the wall that water was draining out of. Humphrey gathered up Sophie in a hug while Clive and Jason looked on awkwardly.

“Being able to sense you working on the other side of the wall was amazing,” Jason said to Clive. “I don't think I've ever found my aura senses so useful.”

“I don’t think it was strictly necessary,” Clive said. “One of Shade’s bodies led us to you.”

“No, I mean with timing the line you guys entered with. My banter game was on point.”

Jason's eyes went wide, then he groaned unhappily.

“What’s wrong?” Clive asked and Jason gave him a forlorn look.

“I just realised she doesn’t know what *My Little Pony* is,” he said. “She totally didn’t get the reference.”

Sophie looked at him from over Humphrey’s bicep.

“Why would you expect that?” she asked. “No one ever does.”