

## Chapter 216

### My Name is Jason Asano

Elizabeth Silva stirred when she felt something press down on her large, canopy bed. There was a young man in a dark suit sitting on the other side, cross-legged. She opened her mouth to call for her guards, before stopping herself. If they could have helped, they already would have. Her bronze rank aura senses couldn't detect the man's aura at all, which meant that he was dangerous.

"Hello, Miss Silva," the man said. "I'm sorry to call on you so late."

"What do you want?" she asked.

"I want you to understand that Old City is changing," the man said. "The days of criminal rule are coming to an end. Other members of your family have come to understand this, but you've only seen weakness instead of wisdom and pushed them all the harder. People are being hurt, innocent people, and I'm here to convince you to stop."

"So you're one of Dorgan's dogs," she said.

"No," the man said. "I'm an adventurer, and I have a contract. To make people like you understand that these are new times. No one is saying you can't be a crime boss. Wiping out crime altogether would be pointless and foolish to even attempt, and having people like you retain a measure of power keeps the chaos to a minimum. But that's what you get: a measure. The days of the Big Three are over and trying to bring them back will only cause more bloodshed, which I promise will include yours."

"So the high and mighty Island government is going to bring us to heel with death threats?"

The young man smiled.

"If I have to come back here, Miss Silva, you'll find my mercy does not extend to killing you. My name is Jason Asano."

A cold fear washed over her body as she recognised the name.

"Your cousin went to some effort to destroy me. I took longer than I should have to rectify the scenario and my friends interrupted before I had my taste of recompense. I would advise against being the means by which I assuage my disappointment."

A shadow rose up behind Asano, moved over his body and he was gone.

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Belinda had finally undertaken her field assessment and the team were gathered in the marshalling yard to await her return. With them was a rather nervous Jory. The marshalling yard was crowded, with many new essence users that had appeared in the

wake of the Reaper trials. The drop in market price for essences wasn't a true democratisation of power, but many of Greenstone's only reasonably well-off families were adding adventurers to their ranks. An adventurer who found success would be able to raise their family up with them.

Normally, the crowd gathered waiting would be the families of the wealthy and powerful. This had been the case when Jason took his field assessment. Before the expedition disaster shook their faith, they had been so proud, so sure of themselves. In the wake of that, some families had realised their errors and corrected. They instituted new training programs for their essence users, frequently turning to the more successful adventuring families like the Cavendish, Mercers and Geller clans for guidance. This helped cement such families at the top of the Greenstone pile.

Other families had been looking for anywhere but themselves to place the blame. Loudly decrying the failures of Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella, they had gone so far as to seek restitution from the Gellers and the Adventure Society itself.

The results of these different approaches were reflected in the changes brought about by the Adventure Society's inquiry team. The families that looked to fix their mistakes and used the people they lost as a chance to grow and improve, their positions within the Adventure Society improved in kind. After the sweeping demotions, these were the groups that most frequently had their previous rankings reinstated.

Those that made an enemy of the Adventure Society obviously fared less well. Arguably the single most powerful political entity on the planet, the Adventure Society had no time for the admonitions of some lower-tier aristocrats in one provincial city. Those families found their demotions upheld, even suffering additional waves of demotion. Many found their family members had their Adventure Society membership revoked entirely.

Oddly, the outcry of fools railing against them was helpful to both Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella. The more they were blamed, the more clearly the blame fell on systemic problems within the local adventurer culture that neither Danielle nor Arella were responsible for. Danielle spent most of her time away from the city, and whatever revelations had come out regarding her motivations, Arella had been taking concrete steps to rectify the corruption within her branch.

While the old adventuring families were undergoing changes in the wake of the expedition, the people gathered in the marshalling yard represented a new, post-expedition movement in Greenstone. Where the old guard had a new sense of caution and humility, these new adventurers were filled with optimism and hope.

The people around Jason's team were more aspirational than established, anxious for the return of the person they had placed all their hopes on. For many families, having an adventurer amongst them was a chance to lift all of them up.

Jason knew that the reality was more harsh. Even amongst Greenstone's elite, only a handful of families were producing quality adventurers. Jason had seen the results of shattered illusions in young adventurers, like those who fell under the sway of insidious nobility like Thadwick Mercer or criminals like Cole Silva. Such people rarely met good ends. Of those that had followed Thadwick, half had ended up dead at Jason's own hand. He at least took solace that some of the others had managed to find fresh beginnings.

Jason considered group that had fallen under Thadwick's thumb. In the course of investigating Thadwick's shady land-grab scheme, Jason had decided the fate of most of them one way or another. The ones who had come for him before had died at his hands.

Months later he was still troubled by how quickly and easily he had turned to killing. He wondered if letting them go would have been better, but they had come for him once before and brought larger numbers the second time. Perhaps the longer he left it, the more killing it would have meant in the end.

Two of Thadwick's former lackeys had managed to find some measure of redemption. Dean was the one Jason had managed to put back on the straight and narrow. Disillusioned when his dreams of being a grand adventurer fell flat, he had been pulled into Thadwick's orbit at his lowest point. Jason helped him find his way back, and while he was never going to be an exceptional adventurer, there was still a place for him in Greenstone's Adventure Society.

The other of the pair was Jerrick. Where Dean had surrendered immediately that day, Jerrick had fought it out, with Jason taking him alive. Rather than being tried, he had been stricken from the Adventure Society as part of the quiet covering-up of Thadwick's activities. After Thadwick, Jerrick had fallen in with Cole Silva. Then risked everything to betray Silva and lead Jason's companions to him in his hour of greatest need.

Whether or not it was a cynical choice to try and get his way back into the Adventure Society, Jason didn't much care. When asked for his input, he voiced no objection to Jerrick's reinstatement to the Adventure Society. Jason met with him once after his reinstatement, advising him to work his way up using his own strength, rather than attach himself to others. Whether Jerrick took his advice or not was up to him, no longer Jason's concern.

Caught up in his thoughts, Jason was stirred out of them by the attention his team was getting. His aura senses detected the attention of normal people with no way to

control their own auras. Humphrey and himself were both fairly well known and his entire team were expensively outfitted. Jason had finally taken Neil into Gilbert's Resilient Attire For the Discerning Gentleman and Neil had come out looking annoyingly good.

Occasionally, someone would try and make a social approach, only to think better of it. Jason was helping this along with the subtle aura he was projecting to heighten their unease. It was a trick he had picked up from Humphrey's mother, who had been showing him some nuances of aura control normally held off until bronze or even silver rank.

"Has my mother spoken to you yet about the training program she was talking about?" Humphrey asked Jason.

"She's mentioned it," Jason said. "I don't hate the idea of what they're doing."

Danielle and Arella had a strained relationship since the expedition, but both women recognised that as important figures in the adventuring community they would need to put aside their differences. Danielle had told Jason about a program they were looking to develop, offering the new wave of adventurers some basic training. The goal was to prevent too many from falling into the patterns that had put so many essence users under the sway of the Big Three.

"Mother quietly thinks they can change the entire tenor of Greenstone's adventuring culture," Humphrey said.

"Her and the director seem determined to have something good come out of their shared mistake," Jason said. "I have a lot of respect for that."

"What do you think?" Humphrey asked. "Are you going to join in?"

"I'm not sure I'm qualified to teach anyone anything," Jason said. "This time last year I didn't even believe in magic."

"It's just fundamental aura control," Humphrey said. "Are you seriously going to stand there, using your aura like that, and say you can't teach someone the basics?"

"What's she roped you into teaching?" Jason asked.

"Basic martial technique. She's roped in a bunch of people, hasn't she, Sophie?"

"If the Adventure Society is paying, I'll take it," Sophie said.

"I've agreed to join in, too," Neil said. "Not to teach anything, but make sure Sophie's instruction doesn't kill anyone."

"I'm not responsible for other people being weak," Sophie said.

"Actually," Jason said, "If you've agreed to teach people to fight, you're directly responsible for them being weak."

She tilted her head thoughtfully. "Huh. I guess you're right."

The first wagon full of would-be adventurers arrived in the marshalling yard. It was a large intake, so they had gone out in separate groups.

“She’s going to pass, right?” Jory asked nervously.

“Of course she will,” Sophie said. “Right?”

“Right,” Neil said. “She has her full set of powers and she’s been on a road contract. She’s more qualified than any of us were for our assessments.”

“So, what next?” Neil asked. “Back to adventuring?”

“We need to be looking for the right contracts, ones that will get us to bronze,” Humphrey said. “The hardest iron-rank contracts we can find, plus any bronze ones we can get. Now Jason is back to three stars, the application process to claim a bronze-rank contract is much simpler.”

“We can do that?” Neil asked.

“It isn’t done in Greenstone a lot,” Humphrey said. “Beth Cavendish and her team have been taking some bronze-rank contracts, since the Reaper trials. The approval process is a pain unless you have a three star, which she is.”

Groups of would-be adventurers started arriving, including Belinda’s and she dashed over to share hugs with Sophie and Jory.

“Any problems?” Jason asked.

“I’m quietly confident,” Belinda said. “I thought Vincent would go easy on me, though. Aren’t he and Rufus a thing?”

“The fact that he didn’t go easy on you is the reason he and Rufus are a thing,” Jason said. “They’re both big on integrity.”

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With the whole team officially on the Adventure Society rolls, they threw themselves into contracts, with an eye to raising their abilities. Belinda and Sophie had the most abilities in need of raising, so the team put them forward more than the others. Aside from Clive, each member of the team had their own new powers to master, though.

Clive was the closest to hitting bronze, having been an adventurer for the longest and possessing the accelerated advancement speed of a human. He was quietly letting the others take the forefront in the training, not wanting to reach bronze yet. If it was possible to access the Order of the Reaper’s astral space, it was most likely that the iron-rank restriction was still in place. Once inside they would all be free to hit bronze rank, as some of the Reaper trial participants had done the first time through. Leaving the space had not been an issue for them.

For Jason it was his familiars that required the most work but his real attention was on path of shadows, his shadow teleport ability. He had only told Clive that there was a chance of finding a way back into the Order of the Reaper's astral space and Clive had been quietly working on the issue using information both from Emir's people and from Shade.

The iron-rank contracts were a chance for Belinda to keep cutting her teeth on iron rank monsters, since her abilities were at the lowest level on the team. They continued the technique they had learned from Henrietta of mixing up combinations of team members and solo operations to push her into using different powers. The team was always on hand to step in if something went wrong.

The others were seeking out large groups of iron-rank monsters, or bronze-rank ones when they could get them. Humphrey and Jason would even take them on alone, both having powers that helped them to bridge the rank gap.

As the mild desert winter moved almost imperceptibly into spring, the team took an unconventional contract. East of Greenstone, inland beyond the desert, lay the veldt. The people there were hardy and tough, beyond the reach of the desert astral space and its oases. They rarely called on the Adventure Society, but had sent word to Greenstone that a group of essence user bandits had taken up in their area.

The inhabitants of the veldt kept mostly to themselves and even when it came to monsters they usually handled them on their own. The use of every essence found by the loose-knit band of communities was collectively decided on, with a small group of local monster hunters serving them all. They would only turn to the Adventure Society in Greenstone if something beyond their abilities turned up. The people had an isolationist pride, but also a practicality born of hardscrabble survivalist principles.

Led by a bronze-ranker and with too many essence users for the locals to deal with, the bandits had taken over a whole town, killing most of the residents and enslaving the rest. They had started raiding the other small towns of the veldt, trading loot and slaves to the nomadic tribes of the north.

When Elspeth Arella had offered them the contract, Jason and Humphrey had discussed at length whether to take it. With the number of bandits, the remoteness of their location and the chaos they had caused, there was no stipulation for capture in the contract. The order was to put them all down.

Jason was reluctant but Humphrey had been adamant.

"Jason, those people are going to die. The Adventure Society will send someone out there to kill them and not everyone has your scruples. I'd rather do it out of a sense of

responsibility than send someone looking for a chance to kill actual people instead of monsters.”

“Are there really adventurers that bloodthirsty?” Jason asked.

“Yes,” Humphrey said. “I’ve heard stories from my family. Been told how to recognise the signs of adventurers I should never team up with. The kind of people who will kill the bandits and then kill their victims because they can. Then they’ll blame it on the bandits and no one can say otherwise.”

“And the Adventure Society allows this?”

“Of course not,” Jason said. “But out in the wilderness, who’s to say what happened? Every now and again there’ll be a push to implement rules about using recording crystals when the contract is to take down real people but there is always resistance. There are some valid arguments against it, like the recording crystals being detectable, but mostly adventurers don’t like anything that reeks of shackles.”

“I can sympathise,” Jason said.

Eventually Jason came around. They had taken a boat upriver, then Clive requisitioned a Magic Society skimmer from the local depot and they made their way into the veldt. It was there that they met with Keith of the local monster hunters, who led them to the bandit town. Jason had gone in alone to scout before returning to the team.

He had discovered that the bandits were from Greenstone. Criminal essence users from the Silva and Ventress organisations, they had seen the changes coming and left the city altogether, knowing the Big Three would no longer provide them with the same level of reward for big fish in a small pond. Many feared they would be held to account for past misdeeds, using their power within the criminal underworld to live out their most depraved desires.

Under a charismatic leader, they had gone out into the veldt where they believed the Greenstone authorities would not follow. Without the controlling hand, however, they had gone wild. The escalating series of atrocities they were carrying out as they raided the local townships had quickly led the locals to call on the Adventure Society.

After scouting out their town, Jason told his team that he wanted to handle the bandits alone. They immediately refused, but just as Humphrey had talked him into taking the contract, he talked them into letting him do it alone. They were reluctant but this situation was nothing like when he was taken by Silva. He would be fighting on his own terms, with his team nearby to provide backup if things went wrong. The town, he argued, was perfectly set up for him to fight using tactics that would allow him to use his abilities to their fullest.

It took Jason some time to get them to come around. Ultimately, they were convinced by his determination and resolve. The unflinching hardness of his eyes was a perfect reflection of his aura. Once they agreed, their local guide was flabbergasted.

“He’s just one iron-ranker!”

Jason didn’t respond as his shadow rose up, passing over him and he vanished. Clive sent an expensive, long-range recording crystal flying high up over the town. A projection crystal hovered in front of them, showing what the first crystal recorded.

“You’ll be able to see what happens for yourself,” Clive said.



## Chapter 217

### While They Watch Me Kill You

The town was little more than a cluster of stone and clay buildings along a single main street. It was not the better for its new residents, with unrepaired signs of essence abilities being thrown about. Walls were cracked with impact rings and scorched with the flash-burn signature of fire powers.

All seemed quiet, with no sign of Jason. There were bandits around the town, along with some miserable-looking unfortunates that the bandits were using as slaves. The bandits sat around, playing cards or molesting one of their more attractive slaves. There were men and women amongst the bandits, who cared more about toughness and malevolence over gender. Essences absolved any natural disparity in physical power between the sexes.

There was a corpse pinned to a wall with large stone spikes, that the bandits paid no mind. Unseen in the shadows, Jason watched one of the enslave former residents look longing at the outskirts of the town, then fearfully at the dead body. Even with a head start, there was nowhere to hide in the sparse, flat terrain of the veldt. It was nothing but low grass marked by the occasional lonely tree.

The bandits languid day was disturbed when one came staggering out of a building. It was a poor village and there were no doors on any of the buildings which had the bandit loudly stumbling through a curtain of beads before collapsing on the ground, blood pooling under his head. His fellows rushed over and turned over the body, finding his throat cut.

“Someone killed Craig!”

Paying attention to the body, they didn't notice a pair of blood-red strips of ragged cloth snake out of the doorway the dead bandit had emerged from. Only once they wrapped themselves around the corpse's legs were they spotted, the bandits watching in startlement as the corpse was rapidly dragged back into the building.

“What was that?”

“Go get the boss while I check it out. Someone thinks they can mess with us and they're about to have a very bad day.”

One of the larger bandits flexed his muscles, dark, hard scales covering his body. Others picked up weapon or conjured them out of thin air, some wreathed in fire or sizzling with electric sparks. The one with the scales went inside and the others heard him crashing about.

“Dammit, there's another one dead in here,” he called out, then stormed back out of the room.

“Two of our guys are dead in there and none of you idiots saw or heard a thing. What is wrong with you idiots?”

“Neither did you!”

That earned the speaker a punch to the face.

“I said go get the boss, idiots.”

He pointed out one of the bandits.

“You, go get him. Everyone else search the town. Whoever did this is here somewhere, and roust everyone out while you’re at it.”

Seeing the images recorded from high above, Jason’s team watched as the bandits started turning over the town. They found no sign of their attacker beyond what had been left behind. Many of the buildings had dead bandits, usually from a slice across the throat or a stab wound to the back of the neck. Others looked like corpses left in the desert for weeks, their bodies dried out and rotted, when they had been seen walking around hours or even just minutes earlier.

They dragged the bodies out into the sandy dirt of the main street as they cleared the building one by one.

“Where’s Vargas?”

“I saw him go into that building over there.”

“Did you see him come out?”

The bandits began to realise that more of their number were going missing in the course of the search. They heard screams coming from one of the buildings and then one of their number came staggering out, looking more dead than alive. The big bandit with the scales rushed over and grabbed the man’s shoulders to keep him upright.

“Who was it?”

The man was barely able to cough out a response.

“Shadow... eye...”

They felt an ominous aura come from the building, along with an icy voice.

*“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”*

The bandit holding the man up felt flesh soften under his fingers and he dropped the man as they watched his already corpse-like appearance fully rot in front of their eyes. The big man burst into the building, finding it empty.

The bandit’s leader emerged from the largest building in the town, formerly the only tavern before the bandit leader claimed it for himself. He had no shirt and was still pulling up his pants, eyes going wide at the pile of the bodies in the street. The remaining bandits, the better part of two dozen, assembled in front of him.

The leader loudly demanded to know what was going on and a dozen bandits all tried to talk at once, unnerved at finding almost a quarter of their number dead at the hands of unseen enemies.

“SHUT UP!” the leader bellowed and was about to make more demands when he looked behind the bandits assembling in front of him. Following his gaze, they all turned around to see four cloaked figures standing behind them in a line. One was a man in a cloak made of darkness and stars. Another looked to be made of darkness entirely. A third was wrapped head to foot in bloody rags, its hood and cloak made from dangling strips. The final figure was just a cloak with no wearer. All that was inside it was an eye, a little larger than a head, made of what looked like blue and orange fire. Two orbs drifted around the floating cloak, slightly smaller versions of the main eye.

The leader pushed his way forward through his men to stand in front of them. He guessed the man in the cloak was an actual person, the others having the looks of summons or familiars. The only aura he could sense from any of them was a bronze-rank aura from the figure made of bloody rags. Unsurprisingly, the sense he got from the aura was a blood drenched hunger.

“You killed my people?” the leader asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“So you would all gather in one place.”

“What for?”

“To kill the rest.”

The leader frowned. “You’re Adventure Society?”

“Yes.”

“They just said to kill us, instead of bringing us in, right?”

“Yes.”

The leader was worried by his inability to sense the man’s aura. If the man was a strong bronze-ranker, his bandit clan might be enough to kill him with numbers. If it was a silver ranker, they were all dead. Needing to know either way, he pressed his aura down on the man.

The aura that emerged to block it left him almost laughing in surprise.

“An iron ranker?” he asked, disbelievingly. “You really thought you could take us all out and you’re an iron ranker?”

“I still think that,” came the cold reply.

“Who do you think you are?”

“Jason Asano.”

Many of the bandits, formerly operating under Cole Silva, turned pale. They had all heard different stories but it was a fact that going after Asano had brought down Cole Silva and scattered his organisation into pieces. It was the very thing that brought many of them out into the veldt.

“Is that suppose to scare me?” The leader asked.

“No,” Jason said. “It’s meant to scare them, while they watch me kill you.”

The bandit sneered. He pressed his aura down on Jason’s but was startled to find he was throwing an egg against a rock. The sneer vanished as his aura was pushed back by a force that felt as inexorable as the dawning sun.

“Kill this fool!” the leader barked, but Jason’s aura flooded out and over the bandits. It clamped down onto each one, grinding their own auras into nothing. They were flooded with feelings of exposure and vulnerability, then something sharp pricked not against their bodies but their very souls. As if encased in a spiritual iron maiden, the bandits felt like any movement would leave them pained and punctured.

The big bandit with the scales mustered his courage and lunged in Jason’s direction, He immediately collapsed to the ground, letting out an alien, whistling shriek until suddenly he stopped. Laying on the ground, he looked like he was still screaming but was issuing no sound. His eyes were wide and watering, drenched in soul-deep fear. His whole body was rigid and trembling, as if caught in a seizure.

The bandit leader looked down at the fallen bandit, then the others. They were frozen in place, skin slick with cold sweat and eyes filled with terror. He turned back to Jason.

“You expect me to surrender?”

Jason turned his head to look at the corpse pinned to the wall, then back at the bandit.

“The contract has no terms of surrender.”

The bandit leader’s expression went hard, fierce eyes locked on Jason.

Jason’s perception power now included magical senses, which allowed him to detect the magic surging under his feet. He dodged aside as a thick stone spike burst from the ground in the spot where he had been standing. The spike then exploded, showering him in stone fragments. An army of short tendrils shot out from Jason’s shadow cloak, intercepting any that were about to strike him, and leaving him completely unharmed.

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Ability: [Cloak of Night] (Dark)

- Conjunction (darkness, light, dimension).
- Base cost: Moderate mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Conjures a magical cloak that can alter the wearer. Offers limited physical protection. Can generate light, or blend into shadows. Cloak can reduce the weight of the wearer for a low mana-per-second cost, allowing reduced falling speed and water walking. Cannot be given or taken away, although effects can be extended to others in very close proximity.
  
- Effect (bronze): Cloak reflexively intercepts projectiles. Highly effective against rapid, weaker attacks, but less effective against powerful, singular attacks. Cloak allows gliding for low mana-per-second. Weight reduction no longer costs mana unless affecting additional people.

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Jason moved into the midst of the bandits, his movements light and quick, his cloak floating around him. The bandits didn't move, frozen by the sensation of knives against their soul and the memory of what happened to their fellow.

A rack of stag horns grew from the bandit leader's forehead and he barrelled through his own people to get at Jason. One was killed by the spearpoint horns of their leader, while another two were knocked away. They tried scrambling away but then screamed a moment before falling silent, like their fellow before them.

Jason and the leader fought amongst the other bandits like duellists in a statue garden. The leader was stronger and faster but Jason had learned to fight from Rufus Remore. Compared to that, the skills of a failed backwater adventurer were crude and buffoonish. He was all power and no finesse; if it weren't for his bronze-rank reflexes, the fight would have been laughable.

Colin and Gordon remained where they were, not moving to assist. Shade's three bodies, on the other hand, joined Jason and the bandit leader in dancing amongst the other bandits. Jason teleported between Shade's bodies to run rings around the bandit leader, dodging the powerful, but slow attacks. It bought him the space to cast a spell or let him reposition to make attacks of his own, dagger shooting forward in the grip of a shadow arm.

Not many of the bandits actually had aura powers. One of the ones who did had been biding her time and when she found herself behind Jason she pushed back against his aura and lunged at his back with her knife, imbued with electrical energy as she used an

essence power on it. The instant she moved, Jason aura crushed hers like a bug in a fist. She too collapsed to the ground, shrieking like the god of death had grabbed her.

Human essence users typically had a preponderance of special attacks and the bandit leader was no different. Many involved flinging fragments of earth over wide area, which the leader did to try and catch the fast moving Jason, He quickly realised this was pointless, the cloak absorbing the attacks with ease. The leader tried a variety of other approaches, from conjuring and throwing hammers to hurling stone spears. As Jason continued to dance around him, his legs transformed into stag's legs, increasing his agility. Chunks of stone erupted from the ground to encase his arms in battering rams and he sprung about on the stag legs, trying to catch and hammer down Jason.

Catching Jason still remained an elusive prospect. Every time he thought he had landed a blow, it turned out Jason had hidden his true position within his cloak, the blow coming close but hitting nothing.

Jason, in turn, had used a few spells at the beginning that seemed to do nothing, the bandit leader assuming they had failed due to rank disparity. Since then, all Jason could manage were superficial wounds from his dagger, which the leader derisively sneered at. It was hardly surprising that a stealth specialist couldn't truly harm a higher-ranker in open combat.

The bandit paid no mind to the tiny wounds as he struggled to pin Jason down. One good hit was all it would take. It took some time before he realised something was horribly wrong. He had an increasing sense of dread, then spotted the black veins under his skin.

"Poison," he spat, coming to a stop.

"Disease, actually," Jason said, doing likewise. "Not that it matters."

"You think this iron-rank crap is enough to take me down?"

"Yes."

As the bandit lunged, again, Jason once more disappeared into one of Shade's bodies, emerging at a distance from the shadow of one of the buildings. He was already chanting a spell.

*"Suffer the cost of your transgressions."*

The punishment spell withered the bandit leader's affliction-riddled body with necrosis, his muscle atrophying on the spot. He staggered in place even as Jason cast another spell.

*"Feed me your sins."*

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Ability: [Feast of Absolution] (Sin)

- Spell (recovery, cleanse, holy).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Cleanse all curses, diseases, poisons and unholy afflictions from a single target. Additionally cleanse all holy afflictions if the target is an ally. Recover stamina and mana for each affliction cleansed. This ability ignores any effect that prevents cleansing. Cannot target self.
  
- Effect (bronze): Enemies suffer an instance each of [Penance] and [Legacy of Sin] for each condition cleansed from them.
  
- [Penance] (affliction, holy, damage-over-time, stacking): Deals ongoing transcendent damage. Additional instances have a cumulative effect, dropping off as damage is dealt.
  
- [Legacy of Sin] (affliction, holy, stacking): You are considered more damaged for the purposes of execute ability damage scaling. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.

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The bandit leader's life force became visible, shining from within his body. It was tainted with afflictions, marked in swirls of bruise colours; ugly shades of yellow, purple and red. The taint streamed out of the bandit leader life force and into Jason's outstretched hand. What it left behind was shining light of gold, silver blue, sinking back into the bandit's body with his life force and lighting him up from within, shining through his skin. The transcendent light started rapidly eating away at his already stricken body as the bandit leader started to scream.

Jason cast one more spell, to finish the job.

*"Mine is the judgement, and the judgement is death."*

More transcendent light appeared, hammering down from above like a deity's wrath. The leader's crippled body was entirely eradicated and Jason turned his attention to the remaining bandits.

"You aren't going to just kill us, right?" one of them asked, voice strained with panic.

Jason looked round the little town, seeing the people the bandits had taken as slaves, watching from hiding. His eyes once again fell on the corpse pinned to the wall.

"How many innocent people have you killed?" Jason asked. "There are adventurers heading north, even as we speak, to bring back the people you sold into slavery. In the face of that, you ask for mercy? If I took you back to the city, they would just kill you there."

Horror filled their faces as they realised they were about to die. The bandits started scattering, in spite of the fear Jason's aura suppression was still inflicting. The results were the same as those who had gone before as they all immediately collapsed, screaming with a pain unlike anything they had ever known before going silent, like the others.

Jason looked over them writhing on the ground and took a shuddering breath. He had killed before, quite a lot now. This would be his first execution. He was troubled by how little that prospect troubled him.

"Colin," he said flatly. "Feed."

Still standing by, Colin suddenly exploded like a bomb had hit him, raining leeches down onto the bandits. Caught up in Jason's soul attack, none of them screamed until Colin's afflictions claimed their lives.

Jason stood in the middle of the dead bandits, held his arms out to his side and chanted a spell.

*"As your lives were mine to reap, your deaths are mine to harvest."*

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#### Ability: [Blood Harvest] (Blood)

- Spell (drain).
- Base cost: Low mana.
- Cooldown: None.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Drain the remnant life force of a recently deceased body, replenishing health, stamina and mana. Only affects targets with blood.
  
- Effect (bronze): Affects any number of bodies in a wide area.

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Using their remote viewing crystal, the team watched as blood red life force streamed out of the bodies and into Jason. From above, he looked like a spider at the centre of a bloody web.

"Now, I'm not looking to give no offence," their guide said, "but your man there seems worse than the folk he was sent after."

"An opinion you'll keep to yourself," Humphrey said sharply, although his eyes didn't waver from the projection. "If I hear you say that where he can hear it, you'll be answering to me."

"Oh, don't worry on that account," the man said. "He's going to find everyone real polite."



## Chapter 218

### Inherently Corrupting

The ordinary people left in the town weren't inclined to come out after Jason's display. From their perspective, the shadowy figure with the monstrous companions was demonstrably more dangerous than the bandits. Jason left, leaving the heroic-looking Humphrey and their local guide to come in and play rescuer.

There was a floating barge coming to take the townsfolk away. It moved slower than the skimmer they had arrived in and would be waiting in another town for word of the all clear. Jason volunteered to go and bring back the barge.

"You've done your part," Humphrey told him. "Clive can go back in the skimmer."

"I'd like to do it," Jason told him. "I could use a ride to clear my head."

"At least take someone with you. Sophie isn't the exactly the sensitive rescuing type."

"What I'm looking for is some solitude, Humphrey. Some time to settle myself after..."

Jason looked over at the remains of the bandits, not finishing the sentence.

In horse form, Shade at full gallop was no slower than the skimmer and just as tireless. The midnight horse with glowing white eyes, hooves and mane sped across the grassy flatland of the veldt, leaving behind a trail of white mist, rising off the hooves. Shade's horse form was made of shadow-stuff, rather than flesh and bone, and had a similar feel to the soft cloud-substance that made up Jason's cloud house. It made for a smooth, comfortable ride.

He reached the town that was being used as a base of operations for the Adventure Society. It had turned out that the criminals coming from Greenstone had set up a number of bandit operations and Jason had only wiped out one of several groups. More teams like Jason's had been dispatched to key areas while the Adventure Society set up an operations hub. Jason went inside and reported that his team had been successful to the silver-ranker in charge, someone he hadn't met before.

The Adventure Society wasn't just going to leave the people Jason had liberated in a town full of the dead, so the barge was sent off. Jason made his way onto the roof, sitting down to quietly meditate as the hovering vehicle smoothly made its way across the veldt.

Jason's meditation was uneasy. He had become accustomed to his life being one of violence and he felt largely untouched by it anymore. This was a source of concern, since while it was useful, he worried about losing his humanity. He was, after all, no longer human.

Each time he killed people, rather than monsters, he thought back to his first night in his new world and his conversation with Rufus. Every time, he felt more and more separate from the man who wondered if his innocence was a worthwhile price for power.

Meditation had long been one of Jason's key coping mechanisms. After his encounter with the star seed, he had a much stronger sense of his own soul, which made meditation a very different experience. It was more involved, more controlled; a journey through an inner world.

He began by guiding his thoughts and feelings away, placing his mind and soul into a state of perfect stillness. His sense of his surroundings was somehow both heightened yet pushed aside, not intruding as he cultivated an inner peace.

In the past, his deepest meditative state had felt like a vast, still emptiness. Now he was able to sense things within that inner space. There was the comforting presence of his familiars, residing in his soul. As he reached a state of stillness and calm, he felt them do likewise. Over time he had come to feel the symbiosis between them much more clearly.

Within his soul he opened his eyes and was standing in a garden, lit up by the sun, shining in a blue sky. The plant beds were his powers, flowering in shades of red, white and black. The flowers of his bronze-rank powers had grown to fill their space, unable to grow further until the garden was enlarged.

The borders of the garden were marked by a high fortress wall of dark stone. There was damage, as if they had been besieged, but the gaps were filled with black metal, as if the damage had uncovered something stronger and stranger. The metal was polished mirror smooth, dark and reflective with a eerie and fathomless feel to it. It was easy to sense that it was much harder than the stone of the original construction, which it made seem like a façade, daring an invader to strip it away.

Jason walked through the gardens, letting his finger touch the flower petals. When he first began his training, Rufus had told Jason of the three pillars of effective advancement: training, practise and consolidation. At the time he had simply trusted Rufus' word, training his body and skills, then using them in combat and using meditation to make the most of his gains, using them to build a foundation and grow his power upon it.

Now, Jason had a much better sense of that process. Above his head, unconsolidated power shimmered like a heat haze. He could feel it, shaped by his training and stimulated by combat. He drew that power down and fed it into the garden beds, fertiliser to be soaked up by the roots of his powers. He worked carefully, methodically, always respecting the power and never acting with haste. He cultivated the garden to grow well, rather than quickly, and grow it did.

- 
- Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has reached Iron 9 (100%).
  - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has reached Bronze 0 (00%).
  
  - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has gained a new effect.
  - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has changed from [Special Ability] to [Special Ability/Conjuration]. The type for any given use of the ability is based on the effect.
  - Ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has gained the [Darkness] subtype.
  - Base cost of ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has changed from [Low] to [Varies].
  - Cooldown of ability [Path of Shadows] (Dark) has changed from [None] to [Varies].

#### Ability: [Path of Shadows] (Dark)

- Special Ability/Conjuration (dimension, teleport, darkness).
- Base cost: Varies.
- Cooldown: Varies.
  
- Current rank: Bronze 0 (00%).
  
- Effect (iron): Teleport using shadows as a portal. You must be able to see the destination shadow. This effect is a special ability with a low mana cost and no cooldown.
  
- Effect (bronze): You can sense nearby shadows and teleport to them without requiring line of sight. By increasing the cost to moderate, small shadows can be enlarged to serve as viable portals at both the ingress and egress points. Alternatively, conjure a shadow gate between two locations on a regional scale. The distant gate must appear in a location you have previously visited. This effect is a conjuration with a very high mana cost and a 10 minute cooldown. The iron-rank effect can still be used while this ability is on cooldown.

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With his new awareness and more controlled advancement, an ability transitioning to bronze was a different experience to what he had gone through in the past. The advancement of his perception power had been unpleasant, painful and disorienting. This time he slowed and guided the process, making it painless, smooth and invigorating.

“Very impressive,” Arabelle said and Jason’s eyes snapped open. In spite of his aura senses being heightened by his meditation, he had not sensed her approach at all. Of course, if a gold ranker with even basic aura control wanted to avoid his senses, they could. He still couldn’t detect her presence with his aura senses, which was a little off-putting while looking right at her. It made her seem illusory and unreal.

She was standing casually at the edge of the barge roof, looking down at him, still sat in a meditative pose.

“You’re not here as part of the barge team,” Jason said. “You’ve been hiding. From me.”

“Yes,” she said. “I couldn’t help but tell you how impressed I am, though. Most people reach bronze or even or silver before they can self-guide their advancement like that.”

“You could see that?”

“I can see your soul, Jason.”

“Because that’s not ominous at all.”

She gave him a warm smile.

“I can see the scars on your soul,” she said. “More clearly than the ones on your body, even if you were standing naked before me.”

“Best not,” Jason said. “A bloke can’t go around doing funny business with his mate’s Mum.”

She let out an easy laugh.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what I’m doing here?” she asked.

“People wanted to make sure nothing happened to me again,” Jason said.

“And that you weren’t doing anything foolish,” she added. “I almost intervened when you convinced your team to let you face the bandits alone.”

“They have faith in me.”

“I heard you didn’t care much for faith.”

“Yeah, but you use what you’ve got,” Jason said.

“That’s an interesting choice of words,” Arabelle said. “You said ‘use.’ These are your friends and companions we’re talking about. You use them?”

“Manipulation is just a tool,” Jason said. “Like killing. Dangerous when used inappropriately, but sometimes it’s the right choice, even when people look down on you for it.”

“And you wanted to manipulate them into letting you do the killing. Why is that?”

“Slaughtering some thirty-odd people isn’t a small thing, even if you’ve killed before, which not all of the others have.”

“But it’s alright for you to do it alone?”

“I’ve been working my way up. I’m alright with it.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?” she asked.

“No.”

“Good, because we will be talking about this again. Just not on the rooftop of a barge, a hundred miles from a decent cup of tea.”

“I have some iced tea, if that interests you.”

“Really?”

Jason hopped lightly to his feet and took a pair of tall glasses filled with fruit-flavoured ice tea, the chunk of ice in each clinking against the glass.

“Thanks,” Arabelle said, taking the proffered glass and sipping at the paper straw.

“That’s a good straw,” she said.

“I know a guy with the paper essence,” Jason said as they sat on the edge of the roof, their legs hanging over the side. “Mostly he works in publishing but I’ve been talking him into some side projects. Ever had a drink with a tiny umbrella in it?”

“Why would a drink have a tiny umbrella?”

“It makes it better.”

“How?”

“It’s a kind of magic from my world.”

“I thought your world didn’t have magic.”

“That’s why we have to get creative. There’s a magician in my world who made a Ninety metre statue vanish and reappear, right in front of people. It’s probably the most famous statue on the whole planet. It’s called Liberty Enlightening the World, which ultimately proved a bit ironic.”

“How can someone be a magician in a world without magic?”

“With misdirection and deceit, which aren’t inherently bad. They can be used to entertain and delight. It’s just that people can also use them for untoward ends, because there’s money and power in it. Let me tell you, politics in this world is child’s play. In my world, everyone has a recording crystal device and no one has magic. Even the most ignorant, at least in my homeland, just have a better idea of how it all works. No inherent hierarchies of power. You have to build them yourself, or be born into them.”

“That’s why you are so dismissive of them,” Arabelle said.

“That, and they shaft people over.”

“It sounds fertile soil for corruption,” Arabelle said.

“There’s no such thing as an incorruptible system. All you can do is your best to make it less crappy.”

“What about if a god was running it? Who could influence a god to corrupt them?”

“I’ll refer that question to the church of Purity,” Jason said.

Arabelle scowled.

“I don’t like what’s happening there,” she said. “Why would Purity throw his followers in with these cultists. They’re defilers.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” Jason said. “I’ve got the scars on my soul to prove it.”

“Yes, your soul is almost unrecognisable from when we first met. Actual, aura-changing events are rare and you’ve had three in a series of months. It’s probably for the best that you have that personal crest, because between the changes and your anti-tracking ability, trying to identify you from your aura without it would be an unreliable prospect.”

“The changes aren’t completely bereft of benefits,” Jason said.

“Yes, your ability to suppress auras and attack souls is impressive in action,” she said. “At iron-rank, only those with highly trained aura control or an ability to counter aura suppression will be able to stand up to you. That said, don’t go thinking you could do to the likes of Humphrey or your friend Valdis what you did to a bunch of untrained dregs. You should keep in mind all the elite adventurers who assembled for Emir’s event. They are your contemporaries, not these locals.”

“I’m aware,” Jason said. “We sparred with some great teams and they handed back out butts in a box on the regular.”

“I recommend you practice your aura control with your team mates,” Arabelle said. “It’s hard to find people you can trust to do suppression and anti-suppression drills with.”

“I’m wary of that,” Jason said. “When I first gained the power to use soul attacks, I told myself I wouldn’t if I didn’t have to. Of course, that didn’t last long. It’s almost as if power were inherently corrupting.”

“We can discuss that at length, later,” Arabelle said.

“There may not be time for that,” Jason said. “The ability I’ve been waiting on was the one that just reached bronze. It’s time to start trying to get into the astral space in earnest.”

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When the sand barge arrived, the Adventure Society officials on board took over from Jason’s team in managing the rescued people. The team gathered around Jason, obviously worried.

“I’m fine,” he assured them, not mentioning Arabelle’s presence in the veldt. If she wanted to remain hidden, he wasn’t going to spoil it.

As his team prepared to return to Greenstone via the skimmer they had rode out on, Jason tested his newly bronze-rank power. Jason waved his hand and a line of substantive shadows appeared on the ground, dancing like dark flames. Then an archway rose up out of it, made from what looked like of a whole piece of polished obsidian. The dark fire then rose up to fill the arch.

“That looks an awful lot like the shadow gates in the Order of the Reaper’s astral space,” Humphrey said, then looked to Jason and Clive. “Something neither of you seem surprised about.”

“I had an inkling,” Jason said. “Shade has seen that power before.”

“What aren’t you telling us?” Humphrey asked.

“That’s a conversation for later,” Jason said.

“Where does the gate go?” Clive asked.

“Back to the town where the Adventure Society set up their management hub.”

Jason squared his shoulders before walking through, emerging in the middle of the town’s main street. The sensation was very familiar to him; a disembodied sensation of movement, as if the world was turning around him. It was more intense than his usual shadow jumps, but he had experienced it a number of times now, with Hester’s portals.

A number of people were looking at him, having seen the archway rise up out of the ground. Sophie came through the portal after him, then Clive. He lacked the astral affinity that made portal travel more of an exhilarating rush than stomach-churning lurch.

“Alright, test over,” Jason said. “Back we go.”

“Give me a moment,” Clive groaned.

\*\*\*

On the way back to the city they experimented with the power, finding three major limitations. One was distance. As best they could tell, the range was around forty kilometres. Clive’s told Jason that was normal for a portal ability and he could expect it to rapidly improve. It would increase by it’s current range at each minor threshold of advancement, meaning that by the time it reached the peak of bronze rank, it would have ten times the range.

The next second limitation was capacity. Ten iron-rankers or one bronze ranker could pass through the gate in either direction before the power was consumed. One iron ranker would be able to pass through and come back five times before the gate was depleted.

They were able to talk a bronze-ranker they encountered on the way back into testing it, but could not find enough regular people willing to walk through the sinister magic archway for testing purposes. Suggesting that the ones who were up for it go through and back multiple times resulted in the few they could find backing out. It was at that point that Belinda asked the obvious question.

“Why not just ask your interface power?”

Jason and Clive looked at each other, then shared a nod.

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Help: Ability limitations, [Path of Shadows] (Dark).

- Capacity (Bronze 0): 1 bronze-rank, living entity. Alternatively, 10 iron-rank instead of 1 bronze, and 10 normal-rank instead of 1 iron-rank.
- Capacity is reduced by taking large amounts of non-living material through, either directly or in dimensional bags. Items in dimensional storage generated by personal powers do not count against the capacity.
- Range (Bronze 0): 40 kilometres. Destination must have been previously visited, before or after obtaining this ability.

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“That was deliberate,” Jason said.

“We wanted to field-test the power with unbiased views before looking to the interface,” Clive added.

“You forgot the blindingly obvious thing, didn’t you?” Belinda asked.

“Yes,” Clive said immediately. “Yes we did.”

“Seriously, Clive?” Jason asked. “You folded like an origami swan you have to put somewhere without throwing it away for long enough that the person who made it for you won’t get offended when you finally throw it out and claim the humidity made it fall over or something.”

“That was very specific,” Sophie said.

“Completely hypothetical,” Jason asserted firmly.

“What’s origami?” Neil asked.

\*\*\*

After getting back to the city, Clive and Jason told the team about the idea of going back into the Order of the Reaper’s astral space.

“There are no guarantees,” Clive said. “Jason’s ability doesn’t say anything about breaching dimensional barriers. That means we have no idea if we can get it to work, or how long it will take to figure that out. I’ll be going to stay with Emir’s team at Sky Scar Lake to work on the issue and Jason will be portalling in every day so we can do a series of tests.”

“In the meantime,” Jason suggested, “those of us who planned to work at the training centre being set up should do just that. We can also use this time to decide, as a team, if going back to the astral space is something we want to do. We have no idea how many unknown dangers we would face, so even if we can go back, it doesn’t mean that we should.”



## Chapter 219

### Beholden to No One

One of the ways Jason had made positive use of his recovery time was to get himself back into a training pattern. Rufus, Gary and Farrah had worked to instil good habits during his initial training, but the eventful life of an adventurer inevitably led to him letting things slide.

Rufus, Gary and Jason's team had often felt helpless at their inability to help Jason after his ordeal. They were forced to leave things in the hands of first Carlos and then Arabelle, who had the experience and expertise to give Jason the help he needed. When Jason expressed a desire to reformulate his training habits, then, they leapt at the chance to be useful.

The regimented training schedule also helped them maximise their own efforts, whether that was learning and developing their powers like Belinda, or making the final push toward bronze, like Humphrey and Jason.

After Clive, Humphrey was the closest to reaching the bronze-rank threshold. Like the others, he had powers to raise from scratch after completing his power set, but being a human meant his powers increased slightly, but measurably faster than Jason's, Neil's or Sophie's. He followed Clive in drawing back from the training until they knew if they would need to stay at iron to return to the astral space.

Clive had decamped for Sky Scar Lake, living in Emir's cloud palace and working with his people. Many were more experienced than Clive, even in his specialty field of astral magic, yet Clive's insightful thinking and prodigious capacity for learning never failed to impress. It was all the more so since he had gained the ability to learn the mundane things through skill books, leaving his mind free to tackle the esoterica.

Jason practiced his portal ability, visiting the domes at the bottom of the lake every day. He couldn't advance it, but aiming the portal over vast distances was a skill he worked on developing. It required a level of visualisation that made it tricky to target places he did not know very well. The ability to distinguish places in his mind with landmarks was very helpful.

The distance between Greenstone and Sky Scar Lake meant that it took Jason an hour to get there by opening a portal at his maximum distance, going through, then waiting for the ten minute cooldown before going again. To accomplish this, he first had to cross the desert in between, finding landmarks he could remember well enough to use as

waypoints. For that journey, Shade had transformed not into a horse, but a giant sand lizard to stride across the desert sands.

Each day on his arrival, he would meet with Clive and Emir's people to go over the ritual configurations they had devised. The end goal was to use his power to reopen the portal, but they were not yet at the point where they expected that to work. The astral magic involved, like that used by the Builder cult, was incredibly advanced. The astral magic theory that Knowledge had given to Jason, who then shared it with Clive, was proving invaluable.

Jason did his best to follow along with Clive's explanations as they worked. He learned a lot but it was largely above his head, even with all the magical theory he'd been studying. This was the new cutting edge of astral magic theory.

Jason frequently felt that his presence was superfluous beyond being a wand to produce the right kind of portal. The true collaborator was Shade, who was an endless source of fascination for Clive and Emir's people. His insights drove their work forward, until they declared that it was no longer a matter of if they could access the astral space, but when.

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"What do you think of all this?" Jason asked Shade, after they'd been visiting the site for a week. "Does it annoy you to be dragged off every day to constantly answer questions?"

"Just the opposite," Shade assured him. "I first became a familiar to have more experiences than can be had in the bleak void of the Reaper's realm. Being affixed within the astral space for centuries left me rather desirous of company. A group of intelligent people eager to hear everything I have to say has been entirely satisfactory."

"I'm glad. I'm also glad that you decided to re-up after I went and got you killed fighting that elemental."

"My only regret is that it kept me from offering my support during your recent tribulation."

From within his soul, Jason could sense a surge of feelings from Gordon, reflecting Shade's sentiment.

"Well, I'm glad," Jason said. "As much as I would have appreciated the support, I don't know what would have happened to you if that thing had gotten into my soul."

"We would have been annihilated," Shade said. "Our true, spiritual selves, not just the vessel. Star seeds are quite destructive to familiars. I have heard of them breaking the connection of a bonded familiar, too, although summoned familiars suffer the worst of it."

\*\*\*

While Clive worked on getting access to the astral space, Jason kept pushing off any actual discussion of whether they should go in once he did. His team largely felt that it was a pointless question with an obvious answer, confused by Jason's evasiveness.

He dodged the discussion until finally calling the group together, including Clive who was portalled back to the city by Hester. They met on the deck of the houseboat, where Jason had put on an impressive lunch spread of spring salads and ingredients to build sandwich wraps. They were sat around a long table, talking as they ate.

"Why have you been putting this off?" Sophie asked. "I don't think there are going to be any surprises, here. We all want in on this astral space."

"It should be you and I, at the very least," Clive told Jason. "As we continue to unravel how the seal on the astral space works, we've confirmed that only iron-rankers will be able to get in and we don't know if there will be problems getting back out. Your portal ability may well be necessary, and I'm the only iron-ranker with the requisite knowledge of the seal."

Jason turned to Sophie.

"I was waiting for you," he told her.

"Me? I've been bugging you about this for two weeks. Why would you be waiting for me?"

Jason took a thick document envelope from his inventory and handed it over. She frowned as she opened it up and pulled out the contents.

"This is my indenture contract," she said, looking over the first page.

"Yes," Jason said. "The contract expired today."

"It finished?" Sophie asked, surprised. "Honestly, I haven't even thought about it since..."

She trailed off, looking at Jason apologetically.

"Since I was taken and you didn't know who would end up with it if I died," Jason finished.

"Sorry," she said.

"No," Jason said. "You don't owe me an apology for having a reasonable concern. But now, you're free. Completely. Beholden to no one but yourself. From today onward, you are a member of this team for no more reason than you want to be."

He flashed her a grin.

"Welcome to the team, adventurer," he said and rest of the team echoed Jason's congratulations. Humphrey then apologised after giving her a clap on the shoulder that

made her grunt with pain. His strength-enhancing power had reached bronze and he was still getting a handle on his increased might.

As Sophie looked around at the sincere, smiling faces she made a rare bashful expression.

“Thank you,” she said softly.

\*\*\*

Brash young adventurers moved into one of the Adventure Society’s instruction halls. It was remarkably similar to a lecture hall from Jason’s world, complete with a projector screen on the wall behind the lectern to display images from recording crystals. Traditionally there had been little formalised instruction in Greenstone, with Danielle Geller and Elspeth Arella’s joint initiative a very new development. The sudden increase in demand for venues was something that was still being sorted out.

Some of the adventurers were nervous, quietly taking their seats, while others were brash and overconfident, lounging back with their feet over the seat in front of them. They ranged from their mid teen through their early twenties, many older than normal iron rankers because they only just received the chance to be essence users.

“Is this Asano guy even qualified to teach us?” someone asked. “He’s been an adventurer for what? A week?”

“A lot of us have been adventurers for literally a week,” a young woman said. “I’ll take any good advice I can get.”

“No, he’s right,” another guy said. “This is just another example of favouritism. They give the good trainers to the big name families and leave some nothing guy for us.”

“The big families don’t need this training, idiot. This whole thing is for people like us.”

“Which is why some iron-ranker to teach us. How is that guy’s aura any better than ours?”

“That’s easy,” a powerful, confident voice came into the room, followed by it’s owner. He was tall and handsome, broad shouldered and walking in through a side door with easy confidence to stand next to the lectern. “Jason has had excellent training and some experiences I don’t wish on any of you. For those who don’t know me, my name is Humphrey Geller. You may have heard of my family, or perhaps just my mother, Danielle. I’m here to assist Jason, as well as make sure he doesn’t do anything too outrageous. If you want a more specific example of his qualifications, then I’m sure you all heard about the aura blast incident in Marina North. Some of you may have even experienced it for yourself.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” someone called out. “We aren’t exactly the pleasure yacht crowd.”

“That was Asano?” someone else asked.

“It was,” Humphrey said.

“Can’t you just teach us instead?” someone called out.

“I’ve only been asked to assist,” Humphrey said. “Also, to make sure he doesn’t get carried away.”

“Carried away?” someone asked. “How would he get carried away?”

“Well, you never can be sure, with Jason. There’s a chance he might try and recruit you into some kind of underground movement and overthrow the existing political structures. Or a sandwich business.”

“That’s sounds very far-fetched,” someone said.

“Yes, but I’ve found that assuming Jason won’t do something just because its crazy or impossible is not a sensible approach.”

“You aren’t concerned about undermining his authority, here?” the same person asked.

“Jason has his own way of doing things, and he can establish his own authority once he comes on stage.”

“What’s he like?” a girl asked hesitantly. “I’ve heard some stories that almost made me stay home.”

“He’s sneaky,” Humphrey said.

“Sneaky?” the girl asked.

“That seems harsh,” the previous person said. “I’ve heard he’s very handsome.”

“I didn’t hear that,” someone else said.

“Me either.”

“I’ve picked a lot of stories about him and that never came up.”

“I’ve seen his face in recordings and it’s kind of pointy. Especially the chin.”

“He’s started wearing a beard,” Humphrey said. “What I meant by sneaky is that he’s the kind of person that, after agreeing to teach a group of new adventurers, would mix in with them and start bad mouthing himself to see how people reacted.”

Most of the group looked confused, while the ones quicker on the uptake turned to the man who had started the conversation.

“Seriously?” the man they were all looking at said. “There’s nothing wrong with my chin.”

Jason stood up and walked down to the front of the stage. As he went, his loosely controlled aura grew tighter and stronger, transforming from a weak, glob of power into an unyielding steel sphere.

“Aura disguise,” he said, turning around to face the group, “is an advanced technique beyond the scope of this foundational course. To be honest, I’ve only just started to learn it myself. What we’ll be going over are the basics. Projection, retraction, suppression. Mastery of these three things will have a transformative effect on your adventuring career.”

“Even I know those are the basics,” someone called out. “If that’s all you’re going to teach us, what good is all this.”

Jason panned a predatory grin over the group like he was sweeping them with a laser.

“You should all be able to sense the auras in this room. Look at all of you, and then look at Humphrey and myself.”

He waited a moment, then pointed at the nervous girl from earlier.

“What’s your name?”

“Janice.”

“Alright, Janice. How do mine and Humphrey’s auras feel compared to everyone else’s?”

“They’re solid,” Janice said. “They don’t fluctuate.”

“And what do you think when you sense an aura like that? Don’t think about it now, just say the first thing that pops into your head. When you sense an aura like ours on someone, what is your first thought about that person?”

“That they know what they’re doing.”

Jason pointed at Janice again with an approving gesture.

“Exactly, thank you, Janice. You sense someone with their aura under tight control and they seem to know what they’re doing. That is your foot in the door. If you want to be respected in this business, then that is your first step. If you’re looking to find yourself with a big name, standing next to a Cavendish or...”

He gestured at Humphrey.

“...a Geller, then you need to realise that your aura is the first thing another adventurer will know about you. If your aura control is sloppy, it will also be the last thing. If you get a contract, one of the juicy one with the extra incentives, and you turn up to meet the client and he can see through you like a window, then you’ll find those contracts drying up.”

“Obviously,” Humphrey took over, “there is a lot more to being an adventurer than just putting up a good front. But if you can’t manage even that, then you may never get a chance to show what else you can do.”

“That isn’t all aura control is good for,” Jason said. “But it’s important, and they don’t always tell you what’s important when you’re starting at the bottom, do they?”

“Damn right, they don’t,” someone called out.

“Well, you have us, now,” Jason said. “We’re here to teach you how to use your aura, and maybe you’ll pick up a few tricks along the way that the big boys have been keeping to themselves.”

“We’ll be starting with projection,” Humphrey said. “It’s the most basic form of aura control and the easiest to learn.”

“It’s also, arguably, the most important,” Jason added. “Not only does it determine how the adventuring world will look at you, but good projection control will better equip you to resist suppression.”

“Is that such a big deal?” someone asked.

“It is,” Jason said. “Over the course of this program, you will all experience having your auras fully suppressed. Good aura projection makes suppressing your aura that much harder.”

“I’m sure you all heard about the recent bandit issues,” Humphrey said.

“We had the chance to see one of the bandit camps subdued almost entirely by someone using their aura,” Jason stepped in. “Those bandits all had auras like yours are now. If they had had the training that we’re going to impart, that wouldn’t have been possible, not on more than twenty at once.”

“Then why didn’t they send that person to teach us?” someone called out. Humphrey turned to look at Jason.

“They did,” Humphrey said.

## Chapter 220

### Evil Detector

Jason sat on the roof of his houseboat, cross-legged, with the rest of his team sitting around him. They all had their eyes closed, concentrating on forcefully projecting their auras. His team all pushed against Jason, while he pushed back in turn.

Humphrey, Neil and Clive had the most training and experience with aura control and their projections were stable and consistent. Their auras didn't fluctuate, revealing no weaknesses as they tackled Jason's unyielding aura head on.

Sophie and Belinda were less practised and less polished. They had taken on all of the guidance of their team mates, but their were so many things they had to learn and do as adventurers that they simply didn't have the time and experience spent on it that the others had. Jason's aura inundated theirs, seeking out any flaw or inconsistency and pressing against it until they rectified it and pushed back.

They continued the exercise for hours until all but Jason started to flag, falling back onto the soft, cloud-stuff rooftop in exhaustion. After Jason produced snacks and drinks on trays, the team sat back up to voraciously dug in.

"I used a lot of magical ingredients with these," he said. "They should replenish you just as effectively as spirit coins, but with a better taste."

"I like the taste of spirit coins," Neil said. "I like that tingly feeling on your tongue."

"Really?" Clive said. "I can't stand it".

"How are you not tired?" Belinda asked Jason. "I don't think I could stand up right now but you were holding all of us off and you look fine."

"Aura projection is about the soul," Jason said. "It's difficult to differentiate the mind and the soul, and if you put too much of your mind into it, your mind will become strained. The soul, by contrast, and so far as I can tell, is inexhaustible. I don't know if it's some wellspring of power hidden within us or if it's connected to the astral somehow and draws strength from there. Clive might no better than me."

"No idea," Clive said. "The soul is a mysterious thing and experimenting on it is the taboo of taboos. Not to say there aren't people running unethical projects on the quiet, but the Magic Society and the Adventure Society are always on the lookout for things like that. Not to mention the churches. If you want one issue that unites people across religions, see how quickly they team up to go after someone doing soul experiments."

"The trick," Jason said, "is to make the aura control come not from the mind, but the soul. The meditation techniques help, but I realise that distinguishing mind from soul is not



easy. I became much more consciously aware of my soul after being forced to retreat into it when the star seed took over my body. During our meditation training, I've been working with Humphrey and Neil to try and help them make the distinction without going through what I did. Having a solid foundation of aura control is a gateway to that, which is the point of today's exercise. When you're stronger, I'll try and help you the same way."

"It's good to have you here for this," Humphrey said to Clive. "We've been missing you while you've been off with Emir."

"There's a meeting today to update about the anti-Builder cult operations," Clive said. "They've been having them regularly since we found out about the cult and the star seeds, and I've been a part of that since I was the one who figured out it was the Builder. Today they want me to bring Jason. The focus right now is on the cultists we think are in the Order of the Reaper's astral space, and Shade's input will be invaluable. Not to mention that he's the one who'll be getting us in."

"I think saying that is a bit much," Jason said. "There have been people working on that for months, now, where I just show up once a day to knock out my power a few times and see what happens. If something happened to me, you could just go find someone with the same power and have them portalled in."

"That's true," Clive said. "You are at the perfect stage for what we need, though. Your power is at bronze rank, therefore usable to us, but you aren't, so you can go through the portal once it's opened. Your presence may be necessary to getting back out, we can't be sure. It could well be that once we're there, we can just leave without issues."

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Jason and Clive were making their way through the streets of the island, each riding on a shadow horse.

"I have a rather important request, Mr Asano, if you are willing to hear me out," Shade said. Jason had long ago stopped trying to get Shade to use his first name.

"Of course," Jason said. "Request away."

"This is not a small matter," Shade said. "It is in regards to the flesh abominations in the astral space. The former Reaper acolytes affected by the Vorger."

"There are probably a few there now who used to be adventurers," Clive added.

"Indeed there are," Shade said. "Fourteen, as of the time the trials ended. I have no knowledge beyond that, as my purpose had been served and I was released back into the astral."

"What about them?" Jason asked.

“If you are going to be revisiting the astral space,” Shade said, “I would request that you hunt them all down and kill them. These were people who venerated the Reaper, whose most core value is the finality of death. They are trapped in an inaccessible realm, inside prisons of unaging flesh. If we have the chance, I would like to release them.”

Jason frowned.

“I know what it’s like to be trapped inside a body taken over by outside forces,” he said. “Our priority has to be to deal with the Builder cult and we will have to assess the situation once we’re there. Once we make sure the astral space is out of the Builder’s hands, I’ll do everything I can to help them. I’m sure the rest of the team will feel the same.”

“Of course we will,” Clive said.

“Thank you,” Shade said.

“My concern would be finding them all,” Jason said. “It’s a big city.”

“A soul compass,” Clive said. “They operate on the same principals as the tracking stones the Adventure Society uses on its members. Instead of tracking a specific aura signature, we can make one that will point at anything. We just filter out ourselves and the motive spirit false souls that monsters have and anything it points at will be either a cultist or one of the abominations. Providing there aren’t any natural creatures in the astral space.”

“There are not,” Shade said. “The plant life is natural, if frequently magical. There are no animals or normal people, however.”

“Sounds like a plan, then,” Jason said.

They were far from the only ones out on the streets, and they were passing by a busy eatery when Jason suddenly pulled up the shadow horse. Jason turned his head to peer intensely at the building, then dismounted.

“Jason,” Clive said, pulling to a halt himself. “We don’t have time for you to go exploring some new kind of sack.”

“It isn’t that,” Jason said. Clive’s expression went serious as he heard Jason’s voice. It was the icy tone he used for enemies.

Jason strode past the outdoor dining tables and into the busy shop, clearing a space with an aura projection that sent people rushing to get out of his way. He stopped in front of an ordinary man Clive didn’t recognise. The man had an iron-rank aura and looked nervous, but Clive didn’t find that surprising. It would be more strange if someone had Jason’s aura hovering over them like an executioner’s axe and looked perfectly calm.

“What do you want?” the man asked uncertainly.

“You’re coming with me,” Jason said.

“What are you talking about? What is happening?”

Clive had the same question but knew better than to voice it aloud.

“You know who I am,” Jason said. “You can feel it can’t you? Just like I can feel who you are. What you are.”

Clive watched the man’s feigned confusion give way to angry contempt.

“We will kill you, Rejector,” the man spat at Jason and Clive sensed a huge power suddenly swell within the man’s body. Jason’s aura came crashing down, shredding the man’s aura and clamping down on the power, squashing it into nothing. The man’s eyes went wide, his face stricken.

“How.. you can’t... that isn’t possible!”

“Now I’m the confused one,” Clive said.

“You know the Magic Society has been looking for a way to find star seeds without an extensive ritual?” Jason asked. “It looks like I’m it. I’ve locked down his soul so he can’t detonate it and kill himself. I bet we can find some people at the Adventure Society who would like to have a long conversation with this guy.”

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The attempts to find a way to prevent Builder cultists from killing themselves when exposed had limited success. The Magic Society had developed a suppression collar variant that could, in theory, prevent the explosive function from triggering, but in the time it took to activate, the seed would complete its activation to explode as normal.

Jason’s aura senses were stronger than before his ordeal, but still not as strong as Sophie’s with her aura sensing power. He had an intimate understanding of the Builder’s star seeds, however, and sensed the subtle affect it had on that of the secret cultist. Aura suppression alone would not have been enough to prevent the seed being triggered. Jason’s unusual power to attack the soul directly was able to disrupt the trigger and prevent the seed from exploding into a crystal star. By holding the man’s soul in a vice with his aura, Jason was able to take him to the Adventure Society to be fitted with one of the special collars.

“This is exceptional work, Asano,” Elspeth Arella told him as he left the secured room. “Very few of the Builder’s cultists have been taken alive.”

“Hopefully he knows something we can use,” Emir said.

Both had been preparing for the meeting when they got word of Jason’s capturing a cultist.

“Who is going to do the interrogating?” Clive asked.

“The deputy director is notifying the Adventure Society’s Continental Council as we speak,” Arella said. “They will want to send someone. In the meantime, the timing of this is excellent. We can discuss the potential ramifications in the meeting.”

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The meeting was something of a war council for the anti-Builder cult efforts. It had been formed after the gruesome first removal of a star seed and Clive’s declaration that the Builder was their unseen enemy. From the beginning it had included Elspeth Arella, Emir, Danielle Geller, Thalia Mercer and Clive himself.

It had also included Nicolas Hendren, the archbishop of the church of Purity. Following the revelation of Purity’s apparent involvement, the archbishop had vanished, along with other key members on what his church referred to as previously-scheduled sabbaticals. In the place of Hendren was the new Chief Priest of the Healer.

Like the rest of the Healer’s local clergy, the Healer had brought him in after excising the previous corruption. The new Chief Priest was now in charge of handling matters regarding the purgation of star seeds, although no new instances had come up since the original five. The closest was Jason, who was himself a unique case for whom a specialised member of the church had been brought in.

The Duke of Greenstone was now also included, as were Arabelle and Gabriel Remore. Of the visiting gold-rankers, only their team mate Callum was absent.

Lucian Lamprey had been a conspicuous absentee from previous meetings. Excluding the director of the Magic Society had been a bold move, but his penchant for corruption was well known. Given that he had been hauled away in chains, it proved to be a prescient move.

Lamprey’s successor was Pochard Finn, who was an equally distasteful individual but one with a better understanding of where the line was when it came to breaking the rules. Even with security tightened in the wake of Archbishop Hendren’s disappearance, Finn had been included as acting director of the Magic Society. Arella was confident that Finn knew he would need to be completely above reproach to have his position made permanent, especially considering his friendship with Lamprey.

The meeting began by bringing everyone up to speed on the new prisoner and the revelation that Jason could sense star seeds.

“It was as much of a surprise to me as anyone,” Jason said. “The applications are obvious, but I don’t know if it’s possible to hide from my senses. The man we captured may simply not have been trying because he didn’t know he needed to.”

“Even if they can hide it from you,” Danielle Geller said, “they are most likely as uncertain about it as we are, which we can use.”

“What do you mean?” Thalia Mercer asked.

“She means that we start using me as an evil detector to check all the most important people in Greenstone,” Jason said. “We do it on the quiet, because there’s no stopping word getting out and keeping secrets will make them fearful and paranoid. Some will make mistakes, others will run.”

“So, we kick the cupboard and see what bugs come scurrying out,” Gabriel said.

“That would be the idea,” Danielle said. “We won’t be able to catch as many as we’d like to put in a jar, but at least we would clear out some of the infestation and get some idea of just how bad it is.”

They made some preliminary decisions but largely left the details to be arranged later. They then moved on to the original main topic, the upcoming incursion into the astral space. The only real decision to be made was who to send through. Jason’s team was a given, leaving the question of who would go alone.

“I think the more the better,” the Duke opined. “We need to make absolutely certain that these people are stopped.”

“There is a question of capability,” Emir said. “Frankly, the local adventurers are lacking, which is why I brought in more people for the first time we sent people in. Aside from Jason and Clive’s team, Bethany Cavendish’s team and some of the Geller trainees are the only ones I would consider reliable enough to send.”

“We don’t have a lot of iron-rankers left on the estate,” Danielle said. “With the monster surge imminent and all this business with the Builder, the decision was made to send them all home.”

“You brought in more people before, Bahadir,” Thalia said. “We could do so again. Portal them in directly, instead of all that pomp of bringing them in by ship.”

“There are some specifics related to how we are getting in that need to be considered,” Clive ventured. “We can’t be sure that the people we send through will arrive in the same place. The city within the astral space is surrounded by entry point towers, and while we may all emerge from the same one, we might not, as happened the last time we went in. Additionally, Jason’s power currently only allows for ten iron rankers to pass through per use. We have the expectation that that limit will hold true when using it to access the astral space.”

“What’s the most likely outcome?” Arella asked.

“We can’t be sure,” Clive said. “The astral magic involved is operating on principles we’re only just beginning to understand.”

“What do you think is the best approach?” Arabelle asked Clive.

“There is a chance,” Clive said, “that once we force the door open, we won’t be able to do it again. Not from this side, at least. If we don’t send Jason through, in the hope that he can keep opening the door to send more people through, there’s a chance that we leave whoever we did send stranded. From what we understand, leaving the astral space should be much easier than getting in but there is no way to be sure of that before we make the transition. There is far more uncertainty than I would be comfortable risking if we don’t have to”

“You’re giving us a lot of qualifiers, Standish,” Pochard Finn said. “Are you not confident in your understanding of what you’re working on?”

“Of course I’m not,” Clive said. “You’re an administrator, Finn. You have no idea of what we’re dealing with. It isn’t just about complexity. This astral magic we’re dealing with is rewriting the foundations of our understanding. Once this is all over, people will build careers in the Magic Society on the back of what we’re learning. If someone has been telling you they’re confident that they have a handle on all this, then get rid of them, as fast as you can. That person isn’t just ignorant. They’re a dangerous idiot.”

Jason hid a quiet chuckle behind his hand.

“My advice is to send one team,” Clive said. “Ours has six people. Potentially it could be supplemented by four.”

“Is that enough?” Arella asked. “We know exactly who went into that astral space and who came back out. Granted, we don’t know how many of those died because the tracking stones can’t record a death across a dimensional boundary.”

“I do,” Shade said, emerging from Jason’s shadow. “At the time the trials ended, forty-eight people had died and fourteen had been turned into flesh abominations.”

“Seventy-five failed to come back,” Arella said. “That’s potentially thirteen Builder cultists.”

“I would bet on my son’s team against any fifteen cultists,” Danielle said.

“Don’t let yourself be blinded by family,” Thalia said bitterly. “I made that mistake and it cost me my son.”

“She’s right,” Gabriel said. “Arella, can you use that list to figure out which people those thirteen are?”

“If Jason’s familiar can tell me which one’s were transformed or killed, then yes.”

“Then we figure out what whoever goes through will potentially be up against and decide from there,” Gabriel said.

After more discussion, Clive’s suggestion was provisionally taken up, pending further investigation.

“The last question, then, is when this will actually happen,” Arella said. “When can we expect to have a ritual that will get the door open?”

“Jason has been coming out daily to the site,” Clive said. “In about a week we should have the rest of the team come with him because at that point, we may get the portal open at any time. And as I said, we may only get one chance to send people through.”

“Actually, there is one more thing to discuss,” Jason said. “Once the Builder cult is dealt with we intend to release all the people trapped in flesh prisons by the astral creatures infesting the astral space. I’m sure you’ve all heard of the vorger.”

“Asano,” Arella said, “as long as you stop the cultists from making off with the astral space, I don’t care if you move in there and set up a fried octopus stall. Just make sure you remember the priority.”