

## Chapter 120:

### Iron Rank

In the ritual room, Clive was rubbing his hands together.

“Now for the good part,” he said.

“The good part?” Belinda asked.

“Jason has an ability that he shamelessly squanders,” Clive said. “He could be a one-man revolution in how we categorise powers but he refuses to come and work for the Magic Society.”

“That would be the Magic Society run by the guy who wanted Miss Wexler for what I can only assume to be a creepy love dungeon?” Jason asked.

“Oh,” Clive said, looking between Sophie and Belinda. “I’m probably not going to sell you on the virtue of the Magic Society then.”

“Not likely, no,” Sophie said. She was still holding the two essences she had accepted from Jason.

“Hold on,” Clive said, turning to Belinda. “Why did you accept the job as my assistant, then?”

“To find out more about Lamprey, obviously. Also, it sounded pretty interesting and no one is looking to put me in a... love dungeon.”

“I guess Jory didn’t show you all the renovations,” Jason said, which got a laugh from Sophie. Jason’s head swivelled around to look at her in surprise.

“What?” Sophie asked.

“I’ve never heard you laugh before,” Jason said.

“You have a problem with the way I laugh?”

“Not at all,” he said. “It’s just that our normal interactions range from you saying you don’t trust me to you kicking me in the head.”

“She’s like that with everyone,” Belinda said.

“I guarantee you that Jason’s worse to deal with,” Clive said.

“How am I worse? I’m affable. And I didn’t just make up that kicking me in the head thing.”

“He’s definitely worse,” Clive said to Belinda. “You have no idea what he put me through when we first met.”

“Jory told me to do it,” Jason said.

“He told you to tell your landlady that I slept with the wife you don’t have?”

“He left the specifics to me, but yeah.”

“Why would he do that?” Clive asked.

“You were investigating me for forging spirit coins or whatever.”

“You made counterfeit coins too?” Belinda asked Jason.

“Wait,” Clive said, turning to Belinda. “You made counterfeit spirit coins?”

“Er... no.”

“I think it’s time to use that ability, Clive,” Jason said. He opened his contacts list, selected Sophie, Belinda and Clive and sent party invites.

---

➤ You have received a party invitation from [Jason Asano]. Accept Y/N?

---

Sophie and Belinda were startled by the sudden appearance of screens in front of them. Belinda started waving her hand in the air in front of her.

“Party invitation?” she asked. “Like where everyone dresses up?”

“More like where people form a group to go fight a monster,” Jason said. “This is an ability I have that I can share with other people. It lets you know things about the world.”

“What kind of things?” Sophie asked.

“Accept the invitation and find out.”

She barely hesitated before nodding, to Jason’s relief. Sophie was like an alley cat that had been kicked so many times it didn’t trust you when you tried to feed it. Shortly afterwards she was staring wide-eyed at one of the essences in her hands.

---

Item: [Wind Essence] (unranked, common)

*Manifested essence of the wind* (consumable, essence).

- Requirements: Less than 4 absorbed essences.
- Effect: Imbues 1 awakened wind essence ability and 4 unawakened wind essence abilities.
- You have absorbed 1/4 essences. Once absorbed, an essence cannot be relinquished or replaced.

---

“I don’t see anything,” Belinda said and Jason offered her his hand to shake. As they touched, a window appeared in front of her.

- 
- Jason Asano (outworlder).
  - Essence User (iron rank).
-

“One of the features is that you can identify things by touch. You don’t get much from people, but it’s useful for items.”

He looked over at Clive with a frown.

“As you can see.”

Clive was pulling a series of racks out of his storage space, laden with items. He started picking them up, one by one, scribbling in a notebook in between.

“Clive,” Jason said.

“Yeah?” Clive asked absently, not looking up from what he was doing.

“Did you save a up a bunch of items you wanted to catalogue until they next time we were in a party?”

“I figured if I asked, you’d say no.”

“Of course I’d say no.”

“That’s why I thought to myself: ‘what would Jason do?’ Obviously, he’d just do it without asking and then point out that no one said he couldn’t.”

“That’s what I’d do, is it?”

“Of course it is,” Clive said. “Also, I’d like to point out that no one said I couldn’t.”

Jason groaned.

“Look, we need to get on with this ritual,” he said. “Pack it up for now and you can do some more while she’s recovering before we move onto awakening stones.”

“You promise you’ll let me finish at the end?” Clive asked.

“Yeah, alright,” Jason conceded. “It’s not like I actually have to do anything. I just don’t want you treating me like I’m administration software.”

Jason looked at the racks of items Clive had pulled out.

“Do you even have time to be doing this? I was surprised you even agreed to help with the essence ritual. I thought you’d be neck-deep in what they brought back from the expedition by now.”

“I won’t be allowed to see it for at least a few days,” Clive said as the racks started vanishing back into his dimensional space. “Whoever figures out what they were after will look very good in the eyes of the wider Magic Society. Lucian Lamprey is motivated entirely by personal benefit and I’m the son of eel farmers. First look at what they brought back goes to the Magic Society members he wants favours from.”

The mention of Lamprey arrested Sophie and Belinda’s attention.

“I think you may have extended the definition of benefits in an unsavoury direction,” Belinda said.

“Do you think your colleagues will find the answer?” Jason asked.

“Highly unlikely,” Clive said. “Greenstone’s Magic Society is almost as rotten as its Adventure Society. It’s basically a social club for people who like magic toys, with only a handful of genuine researchers. There aren’t a lot of experts per field and I suspect it will require actual expertise in astral magic. Aside from me, the only other astral magic scholar in Greenstone was Landemere Vane. Who you killed.”

“That sounds a little accusatory,” Jason said.

“It would have been nice if you had killed someone stupid. He was a capable magical scholar.”

“He didn’t list his accreditations before trying to kill and eat me.”

“Did you just say eat?” Belinda asked.

“I certainly did,” Jason said. “You two don’t have a monopoly on being caught in bad situations.”

While Clive put away the racks of paraphernalia, Jason moved over to Sophie. She was still staring at the essences in her hands with fascination.

“Now you know,” he said.

“Know what?” she asked, looking up at him.

“How I see the world.”

“Is it like this for everyone, where you come from?”

“No. I lost my humanity when I came to this world. This is what I got in trade.”

She watched his expression as he looked at the essences in her hands. He was clearly caught up in some memory, his mask of perpetual amusement briefly absent.

“You’ve been through your own troubles, haven’t you?” she asked softly.

He looked up, flashing her a grin as his usual visage returned.

“Nothing that rakish charm and dashing good looks couldn’t handle.”

She frowned, searching his face for something authentic.

“I can never tell what’s real with you,” she said. “I’ve known manipulators before. The good ones use vulnerability as a weapon.”

“When I first met Cassandra, I told her that there was only one way to use vulnerability as a weapon.”

“That was a lie.”

“Yes.”

“Leave her with a question and plant the seed of seduction,” Sophie said. “I’ve seen it work before.”

“It was just some flirty banter,” Jason said. “It wasn’t some kind of organised campaign.”

“Of course it wasn’t. Men like you try to turn the world into a story, even with friends and lovers. It’s like breathing; you don’t even realise you’re doing it.”

“You seem to think you know me pretty well,” he said.

“I’ve known plenty like you. Some are subtle, others outrageous, like you. Keeping people off-balance so you can tip them over. You’re not special, Jason Asano.”

Clive had finished packing away his things. He stood with Belinda, observing Jason and Sophie across the room. They couldn’t hear the softly worded exchange but watched their body language. They stood right in each other’s faces, neither looking away. Their bodies had confrontational stances but were close together, the cubes in Sophie’s hands filled most of the space between them.

“That’s trouble,” Clive said to Belinda.

“Yep,” she agreed.

“I hope Jason doesn’t do something stupid.”

“If he doesn’t keep his hands to himself, she’ll break them.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Clive said. “Jason has very specific views on power relationships, and while his values might be strange, they’re important to him. He’s not Lucian Lamprey.”

“Then what kind of stupid are you talking about?”

“Look at the choices he made to get you here,” Clive said. “What iron-ranker would face down a silver in order to turn a pair of thieves into adventurers?”

“I still don’t know why he would go this far for strangers. He made his big speech but that felt more like he was telling a story than telling the truth.”

“Farrah,” Clive started, his throat catching. “I think she was the only one that really understood him.”

“That’s the woman that died?”

Clive nodded.

“When I first met Jason I wanted to understand him better. I mean, a man from another world. For an astral magic scholar like me it’s the opportunity of a lifetime. Farrah told me that under all the... Jason, he feels constantly exposed. Beset on all sides by powers that could easily destroy him.”

“I know that feeling,” Belinda said.

“And he recognises that. It’s why he wants to help.”

“It’s that simple?”

“He has bit of a hero complex.”

“That kind of thing gets people killed,” Belinda said.

“Probably,” Clive said. “But where would you be right now if he didn’t have it?”

Clive left Belinda at the edge of the room, moving up to the magic diagram. He directed Jason to get out of the way with Belinda and Sophie to step into the magic circle. He had her hold her hands out from her sides with an essence cube in each hand. He took out a magic wand and started waving it like he was conducting an orchestra. The air in the room started to stir, centred on the diagram and Sophie within it. It swirled around her, whipping her silver ponytail.

“Is this how your’s went?” Belinda asked Jason, quiet, so as to not interrupt.

“I didn’t have an essence ritual,” Jason said. “I just absorbed my essences with my vast magical powers.”

“Because you’re some weirdo from another world?”

“Pretty much,” Jason said, wondering once again how accurate his translation power was.

The wind was continuing to pick up as it stormed about in the enclosed ritual chamber. There was a sonorous hum and they could feel a prickling on their skin. The sharp taste of ozone filled their mouths. Light from the magic diagram on the floor started floating up in golden motes, drawn into the two essences cubes. As the light sank into them, the essences started shedding dust that floated into the air, also faintly glowing. Slowly at first, then with increasing pace, the essences dissolved, riding the wind to shroud Sophie in a magical squall. Rainbow light started appearing in the squall, sinking into Sophie’s obscured body.

The last of the essences turned to glowing dust, swirling around Sophie. Suddenly the wind stopped dead and the glowing dust stopped glowing, dropping to the ground. The magic circle faded as the now powerless dust scattered across the stone floor.

- 
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Wind Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 2 of 4 essences.
  - Progress to iron rank: 50% (2/4 essences).
  - [Wind Essence] has bonded to the [Power] attribute, changing [Power] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all wind essence abilities to increase the [Power] attribute.
  - You have awakened the wind essence ability [Wind Blade]. 1 of 5 wind essence abilities have been awakened.
- 

“I love this part,” Clive said.

- 
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Balance Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 3 of 4 essences.
  - Progress to iron rank: 75% (3/4 essences).
  - [Balance Essence] has bonded to the [Recovery] attribute, changing [Recovery] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all balance essence abilities to increase the [Recovery] attribute.
  - You have awakened the balance essence ability [Equilibrium]. 1 of 5 balance essence abilities have been awakened.
- 

“That didn’t feel bad at all,” Sophie said.

“Essence rituals are very gentle,” Clive said. “It’s only if you shove the essence inside yourself without one that the experience is a harsh one.”

“You’re just bitter that you didn’t get to see me do it,” Jason said.

“That’s true,” Clive said as he read the description of Sophie’s first new power.

---

#### Ability: [Wind Blade] (Wind)

- Special attack.
  - Cost: Low mana.
  - Cooldown: None.
  - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
  - Effect (iron): Create a cutting projectile of air.
- 

“Special attack,” Clive said. You probably won’t get many, so each one is valuable.”

---

#### Ability: [Equilibrium] (Balance)

- Special ability.
  - Cost: None.
  - Cooldown: None.
  - Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
  - Effect (iron): Meditate to slowly accrue instances of [Integrity], up to an instance threshold based on the [Recovery] attribute. Instances quickly drop off when meditation ends.
  - [Integrity] (heal-over-time, mana-over-time, stamina-over-time, holy): Periodically recover a small amount of health, stamina and mana. Additional instances have a cumulative effect.
- 

“See, this is great,” Clive said, jotting in his notebook. “Jason, you really should be helping out the Magic Society with this ability. People have an instinctive sense of their

abilities, but they aren't always great at verbalising them. The time and inaccuracy this saves is fantastic."

"Eyes on the prize, Clive," Jason said.

"Right," Clive said, refocusing on Sophie. Three intangible, translucent cubes floated out of her body, interposing on one another until they formed a single cube floating in front of her. Still insubstantial, it had a vibrant blue colour.

"The confluence essence," Clive said. "Take it."

Sophie reached out and the intangible object became solid at her touch. It began dissolving into blue smoke in her hands, which seeped into her body until it was gone.

- 
- Party member [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed [Mystic Essence]. [Sophie Wexler] has absorbed 4 of 4 essences.
  - Progress to iron rank: 100% (4/4 essences).
  - [Mystic Essence] has bonded to the [Spirit] attribute, changing [Spirit] from normal to [Iron 0]. Master all mystic essence abilities to increase the [Spirit] attribute.
  - You have awakened the mystic essence ability [Strong Soul]. 1 of 5 mystic essence abilities have been awakened.

---

"Strong soul sounds good," Belinda said, reading the description.

---

Ability: [Strong Soul] (Mystic)

- Special ability (dimension).
- Cost: None.
- Cooldown: None.
- Current rank: Iron 0 (00%)
- Effect (iron): Disruptive-force damage dealt to you reduced by a large amount; other damage dealt to you is reduced by a small amount. Resistance to dimensional and astral effects and energies is increased. You can physically interact with incorporeal entities.

---

"How does having a strong soul make you take less damage?" Belinda asked.

"My advice is to just be glad it does," Jason said. "My damage reduction power is stabbing them in the back. How do you feel, Wexler?"

Sophie was still reading the last system message.



- 
- You have absorbed 4/4 essences.
  - All your attributes have reached iron rank.
  
  - You have reached iron rank.
  - You have gained damage reduction against normal-rank damage sources.
  - You have gained increased resistance to normal-rank effects.
  - You have gained the ability to sense auras.
  - You have gained the ability to sustain yourself using sources of concentrated magic.
- 

She stood awestruck in the middle of the chamber, rubbing one hand over the back of the other, feeling her skin.

"This feels incredible," she said, her usual undertone of cynicism completely absent.

"You need to go into the side room," Clive told her.

"What?" She asked, looking over at him, distracted.

"The side room," Clive repeated. "Now."

"I feel fine," Sophie said. "Better than fine."

"Give it a moment," Jason said, stepping up next to Clive.

"I don't see what you're..."

Sophie's words cut off as her face went pale. She sprinted for the side room, slamming a hand on the golden mark that opened the door. She rushed inside and the others heard her violently throwing up.

"I'll go check on her," Belinda said.