

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 there 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 dig 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 be 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."

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.”

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.”

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.”