

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.

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- 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.

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.”

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.

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.

“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.”