

Chapter 174: Making an Exit

The shadow gate took Jason from the tower at the heart of the city to one of those at the city's edge. He emerged at the base of one of the archway towers, not far from where ruins gave way to sea. He was surrounded by other adventurers, milling about, regrouping or making their way up the stairs that wound their way around the tower.

He was immediately bombarded with messages as contacts and party members came into range. His team quickly contacted him through voice chat, relieved that he had come back alive. Humphrey had already arrived, surprised that Jason hadn't appeared first, and told the team about the tests they faced.

From the crowd gathered, Shade seemed to have sent everyone to the same tower to exit. Jason quickly found Humphrey, easily identified as he stood taller than everyone but the few leonids and draconians, for a face to face conversation.

"What happened?" Humphrey asked. "I left right after you, but you're only arriving now?"

"Shade wanted a quiet chat," Jason said softly, not wanting to draw attention. Humphrey raised an inquisitive eyebrow.

"Did you...?"

"Yeah," Jason answered and Humphrey shook his head.

"I never should have doubted you."

"You doubted me?"

"No, now that I think about it."

Jason laughed slapping Humphrey on the shoulder.

"Let's go track down everyone else."

Clive and Neil had teamed up with Beth's team, minus Beth herself who was absent along with Jason and Humphrey. While plenty of groups were taking their last opportunity to hunt treasure, they had taken it upon themselves to look for cultists. Clive had brought along everything he could think of to track potential cultist activity, but had come up empty.

Jason and Humphrey met up with Clive and Neil, who led everyone to where Jory and Sophie had set up a comfortable space to wait out everyone else. Rather than go off in search of fresh enemies or last-minute treasure, they had picked out a nice spot by the water, strung up a camp shade and a hammock, laid down a blanket and put out a folding chair. Sophie relaxed in the hammock as Jory sat contentedly in the chair, both reading books.

Jason and Humphrey converged on the little camp, arriving just after Clive, Neil and Beth's team. The greetings were warm with relief at having passed through weeks of life-threatening danger. The feeling of having survived everything and knowing they were safe for the moment was amazing, only heightened by the bitter knowledge that not every team was so lucky. Even Sophie joined in the welcoming hugs, at least for Humphrey. Jason she gave a look up and down and a simple, "you didn't die then."

"Disappointed?" he asked.

"I'm glad you're alive," she conceded. "There'd be a bunch of legal trouble with my indenture if you died."

"That seems harsh," Neil said. "And that's coming from someone who was vaguely hoping he would at least get maimed a little."

"Oh, I'm feeling the love here," Jason said.

"You did almost kill her," Jory said. "It took me and a priest of the Healer to cleanse that curse and the poison you loaded her up with. Even then, it was a near thing."

They expanded Jory's camp space with more chairs and a refreshments table filled with sandwiches and iced tea. As they settled in, Sophie sat next to Jason on a soft rug, casually knocking her shoulder into his.

"I am glad you didn't die," she said softly, as if the reluctant sincerity of her words were a skittish animal that would run off when startled. Jason flashed her a trademark impish grin.

"While our esteemed team leaders have been trying to get themselves killed over a scythe no one apparently got their hands on," Clive said, "the rest of us were looking into the cultist problem. I've been concentrating our search around the tower, because these towers ringing the city are the anchors that bind this astral space to our world. The cultists will have to disrupt them to sever that connection, so I've been looking for traces of magical interference. The towers are fascinating in themselves but, so far as I can tell, the one here is functioning unimpeded. It could be they're working on other towers, or using some kind of astral magic we've never heard of."

"Maybe the cultists didn't want to risk sending anyone," Humphrey suggested. "Emir's people were checking auras."

"No," Jason said. "The cultists could have either sent people who didn't have star seeds or people who've had star seeds so long that the aura imprint the Magic Society has for them includes the seed."

"You think the cult has been in Greenstone long enough for that?" asked Mose.

Mose Cavendish was Beth's cousin, an elf with destructive fire and wind spells who Jason and Humphrey had shared a contract with in the past. A classic glass cannon, he had worked hard since then to earn a spot on his cousin's team.

"They've definitely been in Greenstone for a while," Neil said. "You don't operate on the scale we've seen without people taking notice. Not unless you build up very slowly and very carefully."

"The question on my mind, then," Humphrey said, "is whether Clive not finding anything is good or bad."

"Definitely bad," Jason said. "We're all about to evacuate. If I was a deeply committed cultist – and the fact that they all explode when caught suggests they are – then I wouldn't try anything with everyone here. I'd stay behind and get the job done once we're all gone. Presumably, being trapped here only lasts until the astral space is cut loose and the Builder comes along to scoop it up."

"I'm not sure I'm following this conversation," said Hudson. He was the front-liner for Beth's team, even larger than Humphrey, with a propensity for conjuring walls of earth. Jason's team was unusual in how much they knew about the Builder cult and the threat they posed, Beth's team and Jory listening with horror as Clive took the time to explain.

During the explanation Beth rejoined her team. Valdis and Keane's teams also found their way to the camp, requiring Clive to backtrack his explanations a couple of times. That proved helpful, as the repetition helped those less quick at taking in the explanations of great astral beings, astral spaces and the idea of stealing them.

Some of the foreign adventurers already knew some of it, notably Valdis and Sigrid. Even they had little understanding of the mechanisms involved, however, and were impressed as Clive elucidated the various details.

"Are you sure you're happy with your current team?" Valdis asked him, earning a swat on the arm from Sigrid.

"Right in front of his team," Sigrid said. "You are shameless. Also, he's not going to agree to leave them while they're right in front of him. You have to take him aside, where you can explain how much better we are."

Jason burst out laughing. "And you say he's shameless."

Clive finished his explanation with the assumption that the Builder cult would be targeting the astral space they were currently in.

"So, what do we do?" Valdis asked. "It was clear, going in, that the cult would be after this astral space. Did anyone devise a plan to deal with that?"

“We had no idea what we would encounter,” Jason said. “Basically, we were told to keep our eyes open and trust our judgement.”

“In our earlier discussion, before you came along,” Clive said, “we concluded that the cultists among us will likely be stay behind while the rest evacuate before the astral space closes.”

“Leaving them free to do their work once everyone else is gone,” Valdis reasoned. “Disregarding the monsters those ghost-things and the flesh creatures, anyway. Could we try taking some kind of roster? All these teams were scoping each other out before we even came. I bet we could get a full list of participants, if we asked around.”

“Wouldn’t matter,” Sigrid said. “There’s no way of knowing who died or used their escape medallions to leave. We don’t even know if Shade sent people to other archway towers to leave. This looks like everyone, but we can’t be sure.”

“I don’t see anything we can do,” Humphrey said. “We don’t have much in the way of options that I can see, and we won’t have any once we leave. Staying behind as well is not an option, either. Success would mean being trapped here forever, while failure would leave us in the Builder’s hands.”

Valdis nodded. “I don’t see any worthwhile option, either. In which case, we may as well leave. There’s nothing left for us here.”

Jason, Beth and Humphrey looked at each other and shared a nod.

“Agreed,” Beth said. Keane’s team leader, Roland, did likewise..

They joined the steady stream of people already ascending the tower, chatting as they casually made their way around the spiralling stairs. The steps were stone pegs set into the tower wall, wide enough to go two by two. The teams mixed together, relaxing and chatting together now that they were almost out. The front cluster consisted of Valdis, Sigrid, Beth, Humphrey, Jason and Keane

“You know, I actually had a chance at the scythe,” Beth said.

“Really?” Valdis asked, shooting a glance at Sigrid.

“There was an extra room for people who figured out the last puzzle,” Beth said.

“What was the hidden trial?” Valdis asked.

“Best kept to myself, thank you,” Beth told him.

“That’s what Sigrid said,” Valdis complained.

“Then you should stop asking,” Sigrid told him.

“I was too late,” Beth said. “I was the fourth one there. I didn’t see who got the scythe because they’d already left. Unless Sigrid was lying and she took it before I got there.”

“I didn’t,” Sigrid said.

“According to Shade,” Beth said, “someone figured out the hidden trial before the rest of us knew there was one, which is how they went and claimed it so quickly.”

“That definitely wasn’t Sigrid, then,” Valdis said. “I was with her when she figured it out. Jason and Humphrey, you two were already gone. You practically leaped through that shadow gate.”

“I just wanted to get out before people turned on each other over the scythe,” Jason said.

“You say that,” Valdis said, “but if I recall correctly, Humphrey was wondering if you’d figured it out right before the pair of you made yourselves scarce. You were the first two through the gate.”

“Jason, did you get the scythe?” Keane asked.

“Of course not,” Jason said.

“He’s lying,” Sophie said from behind Jason. “You can tell when he’s lying.”

“How?” Valdis asked with eager curiosity.

“He’s awake,” Sophie said. “Even his body language is manipulative.”

“That’s true,” Humphrey said with a laugh.

“I’m feeling very put upon.”

“I know your pain,” Valdis said, giving Jason’s shoulder a commiserating pat. “My team gangs up on me, too.”

“You say gang up,” Sigrid said. “Somehow he always seem to outnumber us, even though there’s just one of him.”

“I can’t help having the virile verve of ten men,” Valdis said. “It’s just the way I am.”

“It’s a blessing and a curse right?” Jason asked.

“So true,” Valdis agreed.

“We should push them off the side,” Sigrid said.

“I don’t know about your guy,” Sophie said, “but ours has a slow fall power, so it’s no good.”

They reached the top, where Shade was guiding adventurers through the shadow gate in the middle of the flat roof. As Jason approached, Shade stopped him.

“Oh, what now?” Jason asked.

“You have the Reaper’s token,” Shade said.

“How do you know that?”

“I can sense it. I am connected to it.”

“Why?” Jason asked warily.

"I am a summoned being," Shade said. "I could be described as a familiar of this place, in the same way I was once the familiar of the man who built it. Like all familiars, I am an astral entity merely inhabiting this vessel. My true nature is a shadow of the Reaper."

"Wait," Jason said. "You mean the Reaper's actual shadow? As in, park a lamp next to the guy and whooshka, there you are?"

"The Reaper has many shadows," Shade said. "I am but one of a multitude."

"So, what does this token do, exactly?" Jason asked.

"Jason, we're holding up the line," Neil called forward. "People are getting grumpy."

"Go," Shade said to Jason. "Incorporate the token into your ritual of awakening."

Looking unhappily back at the press of adventurers, Jason went through the shadow gate. On the other side, in the once-drowned village at the bottom of the lake, Gary, Rufus and Emir's staff were greeting the adventurers as they returned through the archway. They sent the iron-rankers shuffling out of the way to make room for the constant stream behind them. Overhead, the magical dome kept out the water.

Jason spotted Emir, who was standing and talking with Constance. Next to him was his granddaughter, Ketis. A number of adventurers tried to approach but were turned away by more of his staff.

"Clive, go set up the air-bubble ritual," Jason said. "I'm going to chat with Emir and then we can go see some genuine sky, instead of the fake astral space one."

"I thought the astral space was quite nice," Neil said as Jason wandered off.

"Since when is he in charge?" Sophie asked.

"I'd give him this one," Humphrey told her.

"You mean," Sophie replied in little more than a whisper, "he really did get his hands on thing?"

"Yes," Humphrey said.

"Oh, no," Neil groaned.

"He's going to be so insufferably smug," Sophie said.

"He did beat all these people," Humphrey said. "This is not inconsiderable competition."

"I'd rather Beth won," Sophie said. "Or Sigrid. Anyone with some humility, really."

"So, anyone but Valdis, really," Clive exactly.

"I think you might want to follow his advice about setting up the ritual," Humphrey said to Clive. "We may welcome a quick escape very shortly."

“Good point,” Neil said. “Say what you will about Jason, I doubt it will involve the word understated.”

They headed in the direction of the closest dome wall. In the meantime, Jason approached the invisible cordon around Emir marked only by a pair of his staff.

“Greg,” Jason greeted.

“Asano.”

“Can I see him?”

Greg turned to glance at Emir, who nodded and Jason was allowed through. This did not go unnoticed by the other adventurers.

“Welcome back,” Emir said, wearily. “I heard that the arbiter of the trials refused the scythe to everyone.”

“He handed out plenty of books,” Jason said. “You’ll have no trouble filling the gaps in the young lady’s martial education. G’day, Ketis.”

“We’ve already heard that no one got the scythe,” Ketis said.

“Indeed we have,” Emir said. “We talked to a couple of people who passed all the trials and said it wasn’t given to anyone. Rufus thought differently, though.”

“Oh?” Jason asked.

“He said that you wouldn’t let something not being possible stop you. He bet me an exquisite bottle of wine that you’d come swaggering out, say something obnoxious and produce the scythe.”

“Well, of course I’m doing that,” Jason said. “I’m not a scrub.”

Jason held his hand out and the scythe appeared, immediately dropping to the ground. The shaft landing on its end smashed cobbles from the sheer weight, then it toppled over, cracking stone again as it crashed down.

“Watch out for that one,” Jason said. “There’s a bit of heft to it.”

“Constance,” Emir said urgently. Emir’s chief of staff took out a large black sheet and laid it on the ground. Emir was barely able to lift it, straining even his gold-rank strength to hold it up long enough for Constance to slip the sheet under it. After a moment resting on the sheet, gold and silver light started sparkling over it.

“The genuine article,” Emir said breathlessly, then looked up to see Jason had already strode off, his cloak now swirling around him as he made a beeline for his team at the edge of the dome. They were ready and waiting, their private air bubble like a growth on the side of the dome. Jason stepped into the platform with the rest of his team and they floated away.

While all eyes were on Jason, Rufus and Gary had moved to join Emir.

“What did I tell you?” Rufus asked Emir. “That man cannot help showing off.”

“You have to give it to him, though,” Gary said. “He knows how to make an exit. I don’t think he’s done, either. Are you seeing that?”

From within Jason’s cloak, blue-grey light was shining, emitting from beneath his skin. As he reached his team mates, the onlookers realised that the same light was shining not just from Jason but his entire team.

Quest: [Legacy of the Reaper]

- All objectives complete.
- Quest complete.

- Reward: Racial gift transfiguration.

Jason had been ignoring the objective completions of the quest because he had never expected to complete it. It was only now that he was willing to revel in the outlandish reward. He conjured his cloak to hide the idiotic grin so wide he felt it trying to unhinge the top of his head. Looking ahead to his team he saw the light start to shine from them and he hurried to meet them.

“It feels tingly,” Sophie said.

“I know you had that quest thing but I can’t believe I can actually do this,” Neil said.

“The paper I write on this is going to be so well-received,” Clive said.

“Well,” Humphrey said, putting a hand on Jason’s shoulder. “We’ve officially arrived now. You’d better believe word of this will be spreading around.”

“Let’s just go,” Jason said. They climbed on the ritual platform Clive had prepared and slid out of the dome. Light continued to shine from them as the assembled adventurers watched them drift away.

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- Outworlder racial ability [Map] has evolved to [Tactical Map].

Ability: [Tactical Map]

- Transfigured from [Outworlder] ability [Map].
- Self-updating map. Unveils as areas are explored.
- A small, semi-opaque map allows tracking of nearby allies and enemies. This is a tracking effect.

“Mini-map, not bad,” Jason said as his team members looked at their own abilities.

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- Party member [Clive Standish]'s human racial ability [Human Ambition] has evolved to [Thirst For Knowledge].
 - Party member [Neil Davone]'s elf racial ability [Life Affinity] has evolved to [Life Guard].
 - Party member [Sophie Wexler]'s celestine racial ability [Mana Integrity] has evolved to [Mana Wellspring].
 - Party member [Humphrey Geller]'s Human racial ability [Special Attack Affinity] has evolved to [Attack of the Mirage Dragon].
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“Look at that,” Jason said. “Neil really is an elf.”

“Shut up, Asano.”