

## Chapter 661

### Triage

In the worm-breeding facility hidden under the town, Jason and his team gathered around as Belinda prepared to open the hidden door. Inside could be anything from an empty room to a wildly dangerous entity, so they were prepared to spring into action. When she finally triggered the door, a whole section of the slate brick wall shifted backwards and to the side, revealing a large opening.

The room inside was dark, with only the floating lights from the main chamber outside the door providing any illumination. That didn't stop Jason's eyes as he took stock of the room. The chamber was large, at least half the size of the facility's central space. Cages were set out in rows, overstuffed with squalid, miserable elves.

Motes of starlight lifted off from Jason's cloak and floated into the room, filling it with a soft, silvery light. Not only did this allow the rest of the team to see, but caused a stir amongst the prisoners. Few of their auras flickered with hope, however, and the sounds were mostly fearful whimpers.

The elves were dirty from living in their own filth; men, women and children with barely room to sit, their knees pulled up against their chests. Their auras shouted out their misery and suffering, but also that they were alive and not worm hosts. There were dozens of survivors, all crammed into cages.

Jason noted that if the cages were absent they would have been no less trapped, but conditions would have been far more humane. They would have had room to lay down for what sleep they could manage of the cold slate floor. They could have relieved themselves on one side of the room and stayed on the other, instead of being forced to go where they sat.

Jason felt his rage echo through the auras of his companions, but none of them let it leak out. They were not going to spook the prisoners that had been through more than enough already. Instead, they took joy in the fact that anyone survived, even if it was just a fragment of the town's population.

The team immediately went to work, Neil taking charge as the team healer. Humphrey and Neil used their superior strength to pull open cages. Sophie heavily pushed out her aura while the others withdrew theirs. Out of everyone in the team, Sophie's was the most reassuring and calming of the group.

- Aura (recovery).
  - Base cost: None.
  - Cooldown: None.
  
  - Current rank: Silver 4 (12%).
  
  - Effect (iron): Allies within the aura have increased resistance to curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. Cleansing abilities used on allies within the aura have increased effect. Toxins are purged from the air within the aura.
  
  - Effect (bronze): Allies within the aura are continually cleansed of curses, diseases, magic afflictions, poisons and unholy afflictions. Mana and stamina recovery effects on allies have greater effect.
  
  - Effect (silver): When this ability cleanses an affliction from an ally they gain an instance of [Integrity].
  
  - [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.
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Despite the name, Sophie's aura didn't create a literal breeze. Instead, a refreshing spiritual wave passed over the caged prisoners, purging the toxins and diseases that had accumulated while they were all crammed in together. It was an incongruous power within Sophie's set, which primarily focused on speed and violence.

The aura was the most direct expression of her soul, but also shaped by the tools used to unlock her aura power. The essence and awakening stone involved were large factors, but even so, aura powers were considered to be the ones most impacted by the nature of the person awakening the power. For Sophie, most of her power set reflected the face she showed the world; swift and untouchable. Yet the power that should represent her the most was nurturing and protective.

An awkward expression crossed Sophie's face as she pushed her aura out, as if exposing a vulnerability. Belinda gave her a quick, reassuring hug from behind and Humphrey flashed her a beaming smile.

The others also employed the power of their auras, careful to avoid being imposing. Sophie's aura turned the diseases and toxins the elves suffered in their squalor into healing boons, and Belinda's aura enhanced those boons. Humphrey's aura gave them a much needed boost in strength and stamina. It seems they had been fed and watered, but just enough to keep most of them alive. The team found dead amongst there number as well, two elderly people and a young child.

The team's auras were far from enough to settle the prisoners after all they had been through. Even though the team was clearly not the messenger, the prisoners became agitated at the new intruders into their hell. Sophie's aura especially at least managed to prevent things from escalating; a panicked stampede could easily have led to deaths. Most of the people in the cages were normal townsfolk, without the constitution to endure such conditions for long.

The way the team had been built from the outset, back in Greenstone, meant that leadership did not always fall to Humphrey. The team took Neil's directions as he started the process of triage. His abilities, along with Sophie's aura, would help the initial management of the prisoners as they extracted them from the tight cages.

Neil specifically had Jason not help, despite the usefulness of his cleansing power. The nature of Jason's powers would do more harm than good when dealing with these people, already teetering on a ragged edge. What they very much did not need was an ominous man feeding on their sins.

Jason joined the others, helping to clear space in the main room. Jason, Rufus and Humphrey shifted tables and equipment under Clive's direction, as only he and Belinda could point out which things were dangerous to move. Belinda started by conjuring tarps that she tossed over the worms vats, now empty courtesy of Colin. They still contained sickly yellow fluid, streaked with red.

They made a space at the side of the room near the stairs, where Belinda conjured bunks and a treatment table for Neil to use. The team was not ready to lead the people up those stairs, for two main reasons. One was that many or most of the prisoners weren't in a state to climb them. The other was that the space upstairs was filled with dead, which was bad for both mentality and hygiene.

Despite the horrifying conditions, and the doubtless horrifying circumstances that brought them about, the prisoners were the lucky ones. The people above, who had already been implanted with worms, would never get any chance to recover.

Most of the people the prisoners knew were scattered around the town above, not just dead but violently torn apart while fighting the team. Jason and the others were not going to let them see that, and a gruesome stew of pity, anger and shame sat heavy in their bellies.

Aside from one special group that Neil had quickly assessed as being in no danger, they started moving patients to the treatment and recovery area the team had set up. Neil went to work in earnest as he directed the rest of the team to manage patients. First step was a cursory assessment by Neil, followed by a quick shower. A simple cistern shower

was about as much complexity as Belinda could conjure, but it was enough. Jason pulled out a barrel of crystal wash to fill it, making the shower cool but effective. Priority went to the next person on Neil's triage list for focused treatment, followed by anyone else who had been through his initial assessment. A few he determined too weak for the shower, so Belinda conjured a bath. While she managed the shower, Jason washed the more delicate people, his telekinetic aura more gentle. It didn't disturb those being washed, because they were the ones too far-gone to notice what was happening to them. As for the onlookers, it was hidden by the deep bath.

The recovery beds were bunked by necessity of space. Bottom bunks went to the most delicate patients, usually after Neil was done with them. Others had been deemed by Neil to not require treatment. A few were able to climb the bunk ladders, but most were carefully assisted onto the higher bunks by Humphrey and Rufus.

Clive had been directed by Neil to warm up the cold room with ritual magic. The adventurers were unconcerned by the cold chamber, but the prisoners were mostly normal people covered in filthy rags. Clive drew out a ritual in the air over the treatment area. The golden light of the ritual drawing turned to a warm glow as Clive chanted out the final element of the ritual.

"Is that the Healer's Hearth ritual?" Neil asked him, neither his hands nor eyes leaving the patient on his table.

"Yes," Clive confirmed. "Rather than radiate warmth, it will gently impart it directly into their bodies."

"Good job."

Once they had processed the bulk of the prisoners, Humphrey pulled Rufus and Jason aside to discuss their next move. Humphrey activated a privacy screen so the prisoners wouldn't overhear them.

"What are we going to do with these people?" Humphrey asked. "Those beds will do for now, but we can't leave them there. We can't take them upstairs, though. Should we leave them here until support arrived from the city?"

"I agree we can't take them up into the town," Rufus said. "If they see what's happened to their town, their friends and their families, they'll suffer all the more."

"Their reaction to that would be unpredictable," Jason concurred. "We need to keep them as calm as we can manage, under the circumstances. We got lucky with Sophie's aura power being so out of character for her."

"It's not out of character," Humphrey said. "It's who she is behind all the spikes and walls. She's always wanted to be good, but the world never gave her that chance."

He looked at Jason.

“You gave her that. I wish it had been me.”

“You shouldn’t,” Jason told him. “It sets up an uneven power dynamic. If you’d been the one to get her out of her old life, that would hang over you your whole lives.”

“He’s right,” Rufus said. “It creates an imbalance that I’ve seen poison relationships, but this isn’t time for that conversation; stay on task.”

Humphrey nodded.

“We need to open the floor in case there are more prisoners,” he said. “But we can’t do that while the prisoners we’ve already released are still here. It could be anything down there, and if something comes out, looking for a fight, we can’t guarantee their safety. We also have to deal with any complications from the prisoners we left in the other room.”

“Sending them to Yaresh with your team’s ridiculous number of portals and teleport powers has to be the way to go,” Rufus said.

“Portalling them is the obvious solution,” Jason agreed. “Assuming they can handle the trip.”

Humphrey queried Neil through voice chat after glancing to make sure the distraction wouldn’t be harmful.

“They should be able to endure it, once I’m done,” Neil said. “We can space out the most delicate ones and make sure I’m waiting on the other side.”

They left Neil to his work, resuming their private conversation.

“We need somewhere to portal them to,” Humphrey said. “Somewhere that we all know well enough to set as a destination.”

“That pretty much means the camping ground where the vehicles are parked,” Jason said.

“It’s not a bad choice,” Rufus said. “Open space, away from the heart of the city. We just need to have them make some room and set up a camp. The Church of the Healer are the people to approach for that.”

“That’ll work,” Jason said. “I’ve had to portal survivors out of a wiped-out town before, and that’s how we did it. Shade, you know what we need. Can you get Rufus’ mum to light a fire under the Church of the Healer?”

“I already have, Mr Asano.”

“Good man.”