

Chapter 242

Strong Foundations

By the time the team had spent almost a week in the camp of the former cultists, Belinda and Jason were assisting Clive almost full time in the basement, in the room with the large magical plate set into the floor. They were digging through the texts that Knowledge had given to Jason, finding anything that might be of value to Clive. They slowly gained a better idea of what it was they were looking at and how it might be useful.

“It’s clear that the goddess foresaw what we would need and prepared accordingly,” Clive said. “Without all this, we would have no chance of figuring out what was happening.”

“And how is that going, exactly?” Jason asked. “I’ll admit that I’ve learned more than I thought possible about astral magic in the last week, but what you’re looking at is way past my comprehension level.”

“It’s past mine,” Clive said. “We’re talking about principles of astral magic that go beyond anything we’ve managed to uncover in this world. It’s like everything I learned prior to accessing these books was stone tools and I’ve just discovered how to make steel.”

“How long until you figure it out, then?” Belinda asked.

“Oh, I think I had it yesterday,” Clive said. “I’m just trying to make sure I’m not missing something and completely wrong. Given how many new ideas I’m working with, I could have easily made a simple mistake that put my entire conception way off.”

“You figured it out yesterday and didn’t tell us?” Jason asked.

“I wasn’t going to put forward any ideas until I was confident in them. It’s been my experience that making tentative proclamations is more trouble than it’s worth. People have a habit of believe the thing they like over the thing supported by the evidence, so I don’t like to make statements I’m not confident in.”

“That’s fair,” Jason said.

“There is one thing I’m certain about,” Clive said. “Landemere Vane made this plate.” Jason looked down at the large plate in the floor.

“You’re sure?” he asked. “That means he was working on this before any of us knew this astral space even existed.”

“I’m sure,” Clive said. “Ritual magic is more than cold, studious calculation. There’s an artistry to it, and everyone has their own style. Even you two. Belinda’s magic is bold and inventive. Yours is clever, but overcomplicated. Landemere had his own style too.”

“And you knew it well enough to recognise now?” Jason asked. “Also, what do you mean, overcomplicated?”

Clive chuckled.

“Jason, it’s like you don’t trust simple solutions.”

“That sounds about right,” Belinda said.

“I do recognise Landemere’s style,” Clive said. “He and I were the astral magic specialists at Greenstone’s Magic Society. He was very reclusive, and secretive about his work. For reasons that have now become rather obvious. When he required assistance, though, I was always the one he turned to. From what little I saw of his work, I could tell it was incredibly advanced, and more than once I urged him to share it with the academic community.”

“I bet he loved that idea,” Jason said.

“He wasn’t receptive, no,” Clive said. “Of course, now I understand that he wasn’t as brilliantly innovative as I thought. He was good, don’t get me wrong, but he was working with what the Builder cult gave him, clearly.”

“It also means that he had this thing finished before I killed him,” Jason said. “That was months before Emir arrived here in Greenstone, let alone revealed the astral space. It means that the Builder cult knew about the astral space and the fact that someone was getting ready to open it up.”

“All they needed was for Emir to collect the pieces of the key and open it up,” Clive said. “For all we know, the person who commissioned him in the first place could be a Builder cultist.”

“That’s a scary thought,” Jason said. “A diamond-rank Builder cultist, having us all dance in the palm of his hand. I don’t think that’s what’s happening, though.”

“Why not?” Belinda asked.

“If the Builder cult had us over that much of a barrel,” Jason said, “they wouldn’t have suffered so many setbacks. They would have been much more on top of things.”

The team were gathered together in the lounge room of the cloud house. Everyone was sitting, except for Clive.

“It’s a beacon,” Clive said. “The cultists who came into this astral space with the rest of us didn’t need to do much more than bring it in here and set it up. That much only took the most basic knowledge of ritual magic. All they needed was someone with basic skills to perform a series of activation rituals. Very simple, just once every few days for about a month until the beacon locked itself into place, dimensionally speaking. After that, all the heavy magic takes places on our world.”

“To do what, exactly?” Humphrey asked.

“To create a tunnel. Or a bridge, whatever you want to call it. The point is that it connects our world to this astral space, bypassing the already established entrance.”

“That also means bypassing its restrictions,” Belinda added. “Including the upper limit on rank.”

“You’re saying more cultists are coming?” Neil said

“Yes,” Clive said. “That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“When?” Sophie asked.

“At least a month until the tunnel is complete,” Clive said. “It could be two months or more, but definitely less than three. Now that I know what I’m looking for, I used the knowledge in Jason’s books to improvise some tests, but the results are as imprecise as that suggests.”

“Can we leave before it opens?” Neil asked. “Find a way to get the regular portals back open and bring in reinforcements?”

“This tunnel they’re building is responsible for the changes in the magical density,” Clive said. “It’s affecting the dimensional membrane between this astral space and the deep astral. On the bright side, it means that it won’t keep escalating until the astral space breaks down. Less fortunate is the fact that we can’t use the regular portals until the ambient magic here reaches a new stable point. My best guess is that won’t be until some time after this tunnel has opened and closed again and the magic has had time to settle. At that point I can probably reconfigure the portals to the new level of magic and make them operable again.”

“Probably?” Neil asked.

“If you have a more reliable way out of here, speak up,” Clive told him.

“What if we destroy the plate?” Sophie asked. “Would that stop them from getting here?”

“Sadly not,” Clive said. “The beacon’s job was done before we ever arrived. Once they had it’s dimensional location on the other side, they would have been able to start working. They will have been at this for months already.”

“So, to summarise,” Jason said, “after a month or two, during which we will continue to be trapped here, an unknown force of unknown strength but very well-known hostility will be arriving in this astral space.”

“Wonderful,” Neil said. “Which makes our options what, exactly?”

“Obviously, we need to stop what they’re up to,” Clive said. “That may be detaching the astral space from our world or it may concern these giant golems, the world engineers. It may be both.”

“We don’t know what forces will be coming through against us,” Jason said.

“Hopefully, it will only be the remnants of the Builder’s forces from Greenstone. Just before we left, Elspeth Arella informed me of something the interrogators got from the cultists we were finally able to capture.”

“That you were able to capture, you mean,” Sophie said.

“Which is why they were willing to keep me looped in at all,” Jason said. “According to the captured cultists, the local cult leadership was all but eradicated by the attack on their main outpost on that island. The one Rufus and his parents went after. From the information we have, only a couple of mid-tier leaders came through alive to take over. They may have as few as a single silver-ranker left.”

“That’s good,” Humphrey said. “One silver we might have a chance against. If a gold comes through, we’re done.”

“So, what do we do?” Neil asked. “Set traps?”

“Actually, that’s not a terrible idea,” Clive said. “We have time, and we can be confident that they’ll be checking in on those golems. I could set up some traps in those hidden doors.”

“Until then, we train,” Humphrey said. “Even here, we can’t hit silver rank in that time frame. What we can do is get everyone not just to bronze, but consolidated at our new rank. We need to eke out every bit of strength we can muster for what’s to come.”

“That won’t just be a goal,” Clive said. “That will be a necessity. From what I can tell, the magical density will be increasing at an escalating rate as the tunnel draws closer to completion. Even if we never see the trap weaver again, we’ll be meeting silver-rank monsters sooner, rather than later.”

The team left the lair of the dead cultists behind and went back to the task of training. They returned to the frenetic pace of when they were preparing for the confrontation with the blood weaver’s brood, once again unsure of what kind of numbers they would be facing.

A sense of ominous danger loomed over them as they battled time and the fear that their struggles were hopeless. What came through the tunnel when it opened could very well be too much for them to handle, however strong they became. Even the most optimistic conjecture left them as a small insurgent operation against a force that had been preparing to arrive longer than any of them had been adventurers.

The result was that Humphrey never felt a need to push the team. As if a wolf were snapping at their heels, the team pushed ever forward, their only guide the soul compass

leading them from one flesh abomination to the next. Their aggressive schedule found at least one and sometimes two or even three in day. It neatly led them through the city and into the waiting embrace of monster after monster.

Their lives became a war waged on the monsters of the astral space. It was a desperate race against an enemy that, for all they knew, would be impossible to overcome whatever they did. Every passing day moved them closer to the cult's arrival, but every encounter moved them closer to ready. Every member of the team was honed like a knife, not just in ability but in attitude. There were no complaints as each day blended together, training, hunting, resting, over and over. The team burned with a fire to get stronger and they pushed themselves to their limits. Humphrey finally had to enforce a rest day at the end of each week to stop the team from burning out.

They encountered the first silver-rank monsters they actually fought. A pair of jungle cats with no heads, but large mouths on their bellies. Although physically weaker than some top-end bronze monsters, their speed was a danger. Even Sophie wasn't able to keep up, still at iron rank, and she suffered a number of dangerous injuries. Belinda was almost killed outright, only Neil's powerful healing bringing her back from the brink.

Ability: [Grand Renewal] (Renewal)

- Spell (healing, ritual)
- Cost: Extreme mana.
- Cooldown: 1 hour.

- Current rank: Bronze 1 (14%).

- Effect (iron): Conduct a powerful healing ritual that cleanses all afflictions. This ability takes the place of the ritual's material components.

- Effect (bronze): The ritual circle is magically drawn, allowing the ritual to be more quickly enacted and in less ideal conditions.

Neil was able to draw out a ritual circle much like Clive was, although the glowing ritual lines were green and it was only for the one, specific, ritual. That ritual, however, was extremely potent. Importantly, it did not require the normally costly resources of non-essence ritual healing.

A monster surge lasted weeks and was famously a time for active adventurers to advance their abilities by leaps and bounds. Not only did the team experience this phenomenon for longer than even the lengthiest monster surge, but they were not caught

up defending vulnerable population centres. They had nothing to do but strike out, pushing themselves harder and harder, like an adventurer surge visited upon the monsters.

Sophie inevitably reached bronze rank. Her abilities continued to follow a theme of not being flashy individually, instead requiring skill and judgement to draw out their true potential. They were largely improvements and iterations on the iron-rank effects.

Belinda also reached bronze, enhancing her eclectic collection of powers. Unlike Sophie, she had a number of powers whose bronze-rank effects would have a significant impact on the way she operated and, true to form, were useful in support of the team. Her pit of the Reaper ability would no longer cause allies to fall in, meaning that the team's most vulnerable members could stand on top of it while anyone seeking to attack them would fall right in.

Her various powers to replicate different kinds of adventurers also gained important advancement. Her agility power, instant adept, gained magical movement effects such as wall-running and water-walking. Her warrior-replicating power, counterfeit combatant, now gave her access to some simple special attacks. Her specious sorcerer power no longer just gave her the power to wield wands and staves, but also cast some simple spells. While the power was active, she would have access to a force bolt spell and the same life bolt spell that Neil could use.

The team did not just spend their time mindlessly hunting down and killing monsters. Training was also a crucial part of their preparations, delving into things that had been put aside when the blood weaver's army had still been ahead of them. One of the most important aspects of that training was adjusting to their new bronze-rank attributes.

While they had all seen their abilities increase as their attributes moved up through iron-rank, there was a jump in capability as their abilities crossed the threshold of mortal potential and moved into bronze.

Their new strength levels were fairly easy to adapt to, although someone already strong like Humphrey had an easier time than someone like Belinda. The real adjustment was the speed attribute, which governed agility, flexibility, dexterity, coordination and proprioception. The two attributes combined to give the whole team a level of athleticism that was staggering, and would take time to learn to its full potential.

Training to make the most of their new potential brought some much-needed levity to the dour days of regimented training and ceaseless violence. They all had the agility of acrobats and Neil became obsessed with standing back-flips. The whole team took to parkour training with a new verve. Their capabilities meant not just new levels of agility, but also the power to jump further and endure longer drops than ever before.

Sophie took the lead in that training, assisted by Jason. He finally pulled out the bronze-rank skill books for his Way of the Reaper combat system they had won on their last trip to the astral space. They included movement techniques for speed, stealth and the acrobatic traversal of terrain. Sophie learned from the same books the long way. They were enchanted with magical projections to act as guides, although those guides were of distinctly secondary value to Shade. The familiar was well-versed in Order of the Reaper techniques, serving as guide to both Jason and Sophie.

“Miss Wexler, I am certain that at its height, the order of the Reaper would have placed immense value on you as a recruit,” he told her.

“What about me?” Jason asked.

“They may have accepted you as well, Mr Asano.”

Jason had long wondered about the higher-ranks of his martial art, which were skills rather than essence abilities. He knew theoretically that it was the techniques requiring more than human capability, but it was only getting to learn them that he truly understood. It wasn't just the strength of the power attribute and the agility of the speed attribute. There was a situational awareness that came with the spirit attribute that added a dimension to fighting that simply wasn't possible under the limits of mortal senses.

As he watched Humphrey and Sophie spar, he realised that their combat had an almost choreographed feel. They thought faster, had a better sense of their opponents and their surroundings, their spatial sense much sharper. Combat was less fumbling, more precise. Mistakes were punished but so was hesitation.

None of the bronze-rank techniques were reinventing the wheel, replacing existing methods wholesale. The large majority were contextual, for fighting in various circumstances and environments only made possible by bronze-rank attributes.

It was the movement techniques that underwent the more fundamental change. It felt awkward at first, breaking old habits that were ingrained over a lifetime. He and Sophie pushed the team through practise techniques designed to break those habits until new ones took hold.

The comprehensive movement techniques of the Way of the Reaper included techniques that incorporated many common movement abilities. Jason was amused to discover a long distance running technique similar to one he developed himself early in his career, using the weight-reducing power of his cloak. Magical vehicles and access to Shade's mount forms had caused him to largely leave the method behind, but the Reaper technique allowed him to refine it, should he have need of it again.

It was only after working to make use of their new attributes that the team truly understood how transformative bronze rank really was. It wasn't just about the increase in power, but in learning to use it to full effect. It was during this training that Jason realised just how much the bronze-rankers he had seen in the past had squandered their potential.

He thought he had understood why Rufus, Gary and Farrah had looked down on Greenstone's adventurers, having seen for himself how much stronger they were than the bronze-rankers around them. It was only on reaching bronze-rank himself, though, that he fully comprehended the difference. Their training had built a foundation over his iron-rank career that now, at bronze-rank, allowed him to build something truly grand upon it.

Assuming the team somehow managed to overcome the cultists and find a way out of the astral space, he would have to thank Rufus and Gary properly, only now understanding just what a great service they had done for him. As for Farrah, the most he could do was raise a quiet glass to the sky in her memory, one night as he stood alone on the roof of his cloud house.