

Chapter 230

Terms of the Pact

“Those vampiric monsters were a bit disappointing,” Jason said. “They didn’t seem so much vampiric as hung over. A bit peaky, bloodshot eyes. They didn’t even summon any bats.”

“They’re spider vampires,” Neil said. “Why would they summon bats?”

“Well they didn’t summon any spiders, either.”

“I don’t think that’s how it works,” Belinda said. “Didn’t the spider kind of summon them?”

“That’s a good point,” Jason said.

The team had extricated themselves from the ring of dense jungle, returning to relatively intact streets and buildings of the overgrown city. They made sure they were well clear before putting up the cloud house and stopping to rest.

“Everyone take a good rest,” Humphrey said. “From here on out, our sole focus is on getting stronger.”

“It’s a shame there’s no movie essence,” Jason mused to himself. “A training montage power would be OP.”

“What nonsense are you talking now?” Sophie asked.

“I think I know this,” Clive. “There’s a fable from your world about learning to fight by cleaning an old man’s carriage, right?”

“There are different renditions of the story,” Jason said. “A lot of it comes down to your tolerance for power ballads. The message, though, is that everything we do is kung fu. That’s a term that, where I come from, has come to mean martial arts. What it really means, though, is accomplishment through diligent effort. Every action we take and every word we say is something that shapes us. The diligent person acts to improve and empower themselves.”

“Then why do you run around like a mad person, talking nonsense, instead of being all diligent?” Neil asked.

“Because everything is a weapon,” Jason said, “and there are few weapons as powerful as the way people look at you.”

Jason’s expression went through a subtle, yet powerful change. The cocky smile was suddenly sinister, his laughing eyes becoming predatory as they locked down on Neil. Neil shifted uncomfortably in his seat, unnerved as Jason watched him like a hawk eying a

mouse. Then Jason flashed a grin, eyes twinkling as he dissolved the tension as suddenly as he brought it about.

“Everything is a weapon,” Jason repeated, “if you know how to use it. There’s no better weapon you can hand an enemy than being predictable. Every one of you has, at some point, told someone to not bother trying to understand what I’m talking about. If someone doesn’t even try and understand me, that’s a weapon and shield they’ve just handed to me for nothing.”

“What about your allies?” Neil asked. “Don’t they need to rely on you?”

“They do need to, yes. Do you trust me, Humphrey?”

“Yes.”

“Clive?”

“Yeah.”

“Sophie?”

“Yes.”

Jason smiled at Neil.

“What about you, Neil? Do you trust me to stand at your back? That I’ll be there when you need me to be?”

“I guess I do,” Neil admitted.

“You grew up in a world of magical power,” Jason said, turning his gaze from Neil to address the whole team. “Direct, objective, honest power. I come from a political world, where power is nebulous and the wars are as much about ideology as territory. We grow up watching leaders who need to sway the populace in order to hold power, even as the populace can share information in ways that would be as amazing to you as magic was to me.”

Jason nodded at Humphrey.

“Humphrey’s mother encouraged our friendship because she recognised that I had a more political mind than is normally to be found in Greenstone. I’m sure it’s different in more cosmopolitan cities, but the politics here are amateurish and crude. Dangerous, yes, because power always is, but not especially complicated. She wanted Humphrey to get to know me so that he would see the next guy like me coming.”

Jason conjured his dagger into his hand.

“This,” he said, “is the weakest weapon there is. A blade can cut down a person but words can bring down a kingdom. Adultery can end a dynasty, greed can start a war and compassion can end one. People will die for strangers out of faith and kill their neighbours out of fear.”

He casually tossed aside the dagger and it vanished.

“Everything is a weapon,” he concluded. “The trick is learning to wield them without doing yourself an injury.”

The room fell quiet in the wake of Jason’s impromptu speech, until Sophie broke the silence.

“Gods damn, you like to hear yourself talk.”

The team fell into a regimented schedule of physical training, skill training, mental training and monster hunting. Days became weeks and Humphrey joined Clive at bronze rank, his square-jawed handsomeness becoming even more pronounced.

Clive had already reached bronze rank and was relegated to lowest priority during training. This afforded him the time to study the changes to the astral space’s ambient magic. He was trying to learn what was causing the changes and how it was preventing them from using portals or escaping. He didn’t find the answers he was looking for, but he did make other discoveries, which he laid out one evening in the cloud house.

“The magical density is increasing,” he announced to the team. “I’m not exactly sure why, but something seems to be forcing a highly dense magic into this astral space.”

“What does that mean for us?” Humphrey asked.

“A few things,” Clive said. “One, we aren’t getting out of here until we find whatever is causing this and stop it. Two, we need to keep up this training because the monsters are going to be getting stronger. We’ll see less iron-ranks over time and running into a silver will become more and more of an inevitability. Three, the rate at which this astral space will break down is on an increasingly steep curve. We’re still talking a matter of years, for the moment, but as the magical density goes up, the time frame will come down.”

“Well that’s only completely terrifying,” Neil said.

“What do you recommend we do?” Humphrey asked.

“We already have the right plan,” Clive said. “Improving our strength is more important than ever, and the cultists are still our best chance at getting a handle on what’s happening. We need to deal with that blood weaver and hopefully figure out what they were up to.”

“Alright,” Humphrey said. “Jason, Sophie and Belinda; we’ll be pushing all the focus onto you. Once Jason reaches bronze we’ll move immediately on the blood weaver. Sophie and Belinda, we’ll get you to bronze as quickly as we can. We can’t have you still at iron rank if we’re going to be meeting silver rank monsters with any regularity.”

Belinda's abilities were progressing at a steady, but not exceptional pace. She had reached the point where she could comfortably fight small groups of iron-rank monsters alone, using the abilities that gave her temporary skills. They found that she actually advanced more quickly from group fights, where more of her powers could be used effectively.

Belinda's jack-of-all-trades power set lacked the punch to jump ranks and fight a bronze-rank monster alone. Sophie had no such problems, relishing both the fights and the resulting rapid advancement of her abilities. The monster-infested city was eager to oblige as they saw as many fights in a day as an active adventurer in Greenstone would in a week.

Ranking up the latter stages of an ability was a harder, slower progress, but iron-rank monsters were getting harder to come by, being replaced with more bronze-rankers who offered enough challenge to keep their advancement proceeding at their original pace. The monsters started appearing in the kind of numbers the team had originally encountered the iron-rank ones in and the team was more and more required to fight as a whole instead of peeling off members to maximise the challenge.

Jason had expected his familiar ability for Shade to be the hardest to rank up. Colin and Gordon were both able to engage directly in combat, whereas Shade's power to attack amounted to little more than some mana draining. To Jason's surprise, Shade kept pace with Gordon, rapidly passing through the lower levels of advancement.

While not an attacker, Shade's utility as a shadow-jump target saw Jason heavily rely on him in combat. In hindsight, Jason realised that of course a utility-type familiar would advance from utility tasks. To help that along, he practised sharing the senses of one of Shade's remote bodies. It would be useful in allowing him to directly observe from safety whatever his familiar was scouting out. He could even speak through Shade, although his voice chat was still a superior communication method.

The cult hidden at the Vane Estate had a visitor in the form of Anisa Lasalle. Timos led her through the grounds, now dead and dry as the desert reclaimed them. The hedge maze was now more of a dry twig maze and the cult had cut a more direct path to the centre, through which Timos led the priestess. She had arrived alone, while Timos had a pair of iron-rank lackeys on hand.

"It's been a while, Priestess," Timos said, a smile playing on his lips. "How was your... sabbatical?"

Walking beside him, Anisa Lasalle glanced at Timos with disdain. The elven priestess was wearing extremely fitted adventuring gear, it's monochromatic white barely more pale than her skin. Her platinum hair was bound back in a simple and practical ponytail.

"I detest you and your kind," she said. "Frankly, I would rather have stayed in hiding than deal with you. Each indignity I have suffered over the past months can be laid solely at the feet of your failures."

"Your memory is poor, Priestess," Timos said. "I think you'll find that the impatience of your god has..."

Timos was cut off as Anisa's gloved hand clutched his throat, her thumb pressing savagely into his windpipe. His two lackeys moved to assist but a trio of searing orbs of light appeared to hover threateningly in front of them.

"You will not disparage my god," Anisa told Timos calmly. "In fact, it would be best for all involved if you never profaned his name with your tainted lips. Am I making myself clear?"

Timos nodded, choking all the more at the action, but she released him and he fell to his knees, coughing and spluttering. His eyes shot venom up at her as he rubbed his throat, but he nodded again.

"I understand," he said.

"See that you do. Now stand up; I'm not going to stand idle, waiting for you to recover from the latest in a long serious of errors."

Timos's people looked ready to act, but he stilled them with a head shake. The gesture was not unnoticed by Anisa, but she did not deign to comment. He staggered to his feet and they continued on, reaching what had once been the well at the centre of the maze.

No one had checked on the estate since the Rejector's party had passed through and the cult had decided excavating the well and the crawl tunnel at the bottom was an acceptable risk. One of the cultists with earth-shaping powers had created a set of stone stairs into what was originally a natural cavern. The wooden walkway once traversed by Jason had been removed and the walls and floor smoothed out. Stone walls had been put up to form a subterranean complex. They had no woodworker, so despite ample materials above, curtains were hanging in place of doors. Glow stones affixed to the walls lit the rooms and hallways.

Timos led the priestess through the complex, but she stopped halfway. Her eyes were boring into one of the cultists, a grizzled man moving a crate of supplies.

"You," she said to the man. "I know you."

“Yes, Miss. I’m Dougall. I let you out of the cage, when the blood cult had you captured.”

“A rat jumping ship,” she said. “You caught wind of Remore putting paid to your little branch of the Red Table and needed a new master. Clearly you knew much more of Landemere Vane’s loyalties than anyone in the household realised. The opportunistic loyalty of a cultist is revealed as base and self-serving in the face of adversity. Where does your faith lie?”

“I…”

“I don’t want you to speak. Or perhaps you should. I remember that you were looking for a taste of elf flesh. Are you still looking to feast on my bones, cultist?”

“I would never, Miss…”

“Pathetic. You aren’t worth the blood stain to kill.”

She swept off, Timos hurrying to keep showing the way. They went all the way to the metal door leading into Landemere Vane’s old ritual room. Everything had been stripped away to the bare stone, the only features being an archway in the centre of the room, the complex ritual circle around it and the mana lamps that artificially heightened the ambient magic, allowing the circle to function. The cult was charging a large number of lamps around the estate to keep the ritual circle operational.

The archway looked like it had been made from salvaged building materials, an irregular construction of cheap-looking, mismatched bricks, held in place with what looked like ordinary mortar.

The silver rank leader of the cultists, Zato, was standing with his back to the door, looking at an inert archway. He turned at their entry, eyes lingering on the marks on Timos’ neck but saying nothing.

“How long?” Anisa demanded, without preamble.

“Weeks,” Zato said. “Two and a half months, at the outside.”

“Two and a half months!” Anisa raged. “You have already had more than enough time!”

“And your church has nowhere near enough patience!” Zato yelled back. “Every problem you blame us for goes back to your church refusing to wait, the way you were counselled. Your insistence on acting so early cost us everything and gained us nothing. It’s like you somehow think you worship the god of time, able to make things happen whenever you want. If your church had been willing to wait, then the cult’s identity and your trafficking with us would both remain secret. We are still years away from the true beginning, but you had to be impatient children.”

Anisa fumed, but she was bronze to his silver rank and had her orders.

“I am here to inform you that your request is unacceptable,” she said, biting off every word. “We will not be acceding to it.”

“You go and tell your archbishop that not only will his people be joining us in the astral space, but so will he. The laxity of your church cost us every silver-ranker we had in this region. I’m the only exception and I had barely ranked up when your people led the Remores to the island. I hadn’t even been fully inducted into the leadership.”

“The blame for the island does not fall on us.”

“Of course it doesn’t,” Zato sneered. “Every success is your people and every failure is mine. I might as well argue with a child.”

“We lost a gold-ranker in the island attack, so do not come complaining to me,” Anisa said.

“I did not call you here to hear complaints,” Zato said, regaining his composure “I am invoking the terms of the pact. Nicolas Hendren will be leading his people to join us when the tunnel finishes forming and the portal opens. I expect all of you here in two months.”

Anisa gave him a smile that somehow perfectly encapsulated hatred, but said nothing. She turned on the spot and swept out of the room like an angry wind.