

## Chapter 95: Punishment

The glass doors at the front of the clinic opened up. Deftly using his aura, Rufus pressured the crowd away without distressing them. He led the way outside, flanked by his adventuring companions, Jory, and Neil Davone. They stood in front of the doors and waited. Jory explained to the crowd that there would be a delay with the clinic opening. People started asking him to make exceptions, and Gary stepped out.

“It’s an unfortunate situation,” he said, daring anyone to disagree. “It might be a good idea for everyone to leave and come back later.”

“What for?” some yelled out. The crowd could smell a spectacle.

“That,” Gary said, pointing an arm along the boulevard. All eyes followed, seeing a multitude of robed clergy making their way down the street. People were scrambling to get out of their path. The crowd outside the clinic moved well away, although not so far that they couldn’t see what was happening. Their numbers even grew as others gathered to spectate.

At the head of the approaching religious expedition was the Chief Priest, blasting out his silver rank aura. The group came to a halt in front of the clinic making an impressive sight. The Chief Priest was flanked by bronze-rankers, with iron rankers and lesser clergy arrayed behind them. The basic robe of the Healer’s clergy was simple brown, but these all wore opulent silks of white and gold, with only brown embellishments.

Facing the Chief Priest was Rufus, flanked by Farrah, Gary, Jory and Neil. Panning his eyes across them, the Chief Priest sneered at Neil before his gaze came to rest on Rufus.

“Rufus Remove,” the Chief Priest intoned, his sermon-practised voice reaching all the gathered onlookers. “I’m not sure what brings you here, but is it your intention to stand with heretics?”

“I’m not sure what you mean by that, Chief Priest,” Rufus said.

“This place seeks to set itself up as a temple of healing, taking that which is the right of the Healer, and the Healer alone.”

“I’m not one to speak for the gods,” Rufus said. “I will say that Jory, here, is an alchemist, not a priest. So far as I can tell, he mostly advocates that people read the little labels he puts on the medicine bottles. He certainly isn’t claiming to be a priest. He’s just trying to help people by healing them. Surely your church would take no offence at someone doing precisely what you advocate.”

“The only truth in your words,” the Chief Priest announced, “is that it is not yours to speak for our church. Do you think that you, better than I, can interpret the will of the Healer?”

“I do,” a voice said softly, yet everyone present heard. Carried on a wave of aura that was benevolent yet overwhelming, the two quiet words somehow crashed into the crowd like thunder.

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Dean Truckell watched Jerrick approach the guest house where he and Asano had been talking on the porch. The burly man was the toughest of the thug adventurers Thadwick Mercer took under his auspices; the strongest of Thadwick’s lackeys, outside of the noblemen who followed him around in public. Unlike most of them, he was an active adventurer, regularly hunting monsters. He followed Mercer as a way to overcome his own humble beginnings, having no backing of his own. He had earned his essences through years spent in the Greenstone fighting pits.

“Dean, you’ll want to stay out of this,” Asano said.

“Mr Asano,” Dean warned, “watch out for...”

His warning came to late as Jerrick launched like a ballista bolt, crashing into Asano and through the door of the guest house. The door of woven reeds and bamboo smashed apart at their passage. Dean turned to look inside, seeing the pair already moving. They were both on the floor, Jerrick seeking to pin Asano down, but all he got was a handful of empty cloak. It vanished in his fingers, revealing Asano was already gone.

“YOU THINK YOU CAN HIDE FROM ME?” Jerrick called out as he pushed himself to his feet.

“Actually, yes,” Asano voice came from deeper in the house. Clementson’s detached guest house was generously-sized, with plenty of rooms to hide in. The outer rooms were well lit, but the interior of the brick building had plenty of shadows.

Jerrick threw a gaze at the door, pointing a finger at Dean.

“Don’t even think about running,” Jerrick said as iron plates started magically appearing around his body to encase him in heavy armour. Once it was in place, he started storming through the building.

Dean backed off the porch, winding up next to Clementson. Clearly the man had rushed off to fetch Jerrick the moment Asano had dismissed him. They stood side by side as they listened to the noises coming from inside. Mostly it was loud crashing, Dean easily able to picture Jerrick tossing around furniture. It was occasionally punctuated by Jerrick’s shouting.

“YOU THINK I WON’T FIND YOU?”

“YOU CAN’T HIDE FOREVER!”

“YOU THINK A SCRATCH CAN HURT ME? YOUR HIT AND RUN TRICKS WON’T LAST YOU LONG!”

“You should never have gone against Mercer,” Clementson told Dean. “Derrick is going to tear that adventurer apart.”

Dean frowned, then went back up to the porch with determined steps. He grabbed his dimensional bag from where he left it by the swing chair. Coming back down, he paused in confusion when he saw Asano standing behind an oblivious Clementson, even as Jerrick’s shouts continued to stream from the building. Asano was eating a sandwich.

Clementson saw the odd expression on Dean’s face and followed it to looked behind him, stumbling away in surprise on finding Asano there.

“Come on, Dean,” Asano complained. “What kind of a poker face is that?”

Asano’s sandwich vanished and a magical cloak of darkness and stars manifested around him. Clementson called out to Jerrick that Asano was outside and Jerrick’s armoured form came stomping out the door. He launched forward with incredible speed once more, but this time Asano seemed to bounce off, like a scarf tossed into the wind, his cloak fluttering around him as he drifted back to the grass some distance from where Jerrick had stopped.

Asano held up a hand toward Jerrick, chanting a spell.

*“Your blood is not yours to keep, but mine on which to feast,”*

Red light lit up from inside Jerrick, some of it siphoning off in a trail to be absorbed by Asano’s hand. As this was happening, Jerrick charged forward. It didn’t match the pace of his charge special attack, but was still fast for someone wrapped in that much metal. As he moved, Jerrick waved an arm, sending a wave of metal spikes ahead of him. Asano shielded his body with his cloak, but let out a grunt as most of the spikes punched through.

Jerrick conjured a huge metal pole with a spiked metal sphere on the end, an oversized morning star. He swung it down like a hammer and Asano danced back lightly from the crude swing, the sphere digging into the ground. He cast another spell.

*“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”*

Jerrick let out a painful yell as he let go of his weapon and staggered before righting himself. Dean couldn’t see the results of the spell under the armour, but he’d never actually heard Jerrick make a sound of pain before. Jerrick walked back to where his weapon was half-buried in the earth, yanking it out. Holding it horizontally, in spite of what

must have been enormous weight, the sphere shot away toward Asano, trailing a chain that linked it to the pole in Jerrick's hands.

The sphere shot through Asano's cloak, but he was no longer in it. Rising up behind Jerrick from his own shadow, Asano jabbed his ornate dagger into a gap at the bottom of Jerrick's thick breastplate. Jerrick whirled around, but the unarmoured Asano was much lighter. Almost comically, he moved to stay behind the spinning Jerrick's back. Jerrick stopped and Asano dropped through his shadow, vanishing just as myriad spikes shot out of Jerrick's armour.

While he was keeping an eye on the fight, Dean had taken a sack of salt from his dimensional bag and was pouring out a circle on the grass. Clementson saw what he was doing and tried to interfere, but Dean's forearm grew large, hairy and clawed, grabbing Clementson by the throat. He lifted Clementson into the air.

"I may not be the adventurer they are," Dean said, "but that doesn't mean I'll let the likes of you treat me like I'm nothing."

Dean tossed Clementson to the ground, where he scrambled away on all fours before getting to his feet at a safe distance.

"Mercer will make you pay for this," Clementson said, all but spitting his words at Dean. Dean looked over at Asano, dancing around Jerrick. Other than the two noblemen who followed Mercer around, all Mercer's lackeys were terrified of Jerrick, Dean included. He squared his shoulders, held up his hand and snapped his fingers.

The circle of salt glowed with a green light, then lines within drew out the shape of a pentagram. Runes appeared between the lines, then the lines and symbols turned gold as the circle filled with green light. Out of the light rose a bear-like creature, with savage claws and a body covered in bony protrusions. Dean pointed at Jerrick.

"Kill."

Dean refocused his attention of Jerrick. The big man seemed unsteady, but still whirled the sphere on its chain around himself, holding onto the pole at the base. The sphere sailed through the air, shooting out spikes as it did. Asano easily avoided the sphere itself but the spikes where landing hits. With the strange way Asano's cloak flowed, drifting on the air, it was hard to tell how many were ameliorated by Asano's cloak and armour.

The fergax came up behind Jerrick, clutching him in a bear hug. If it weren't for the heavy armour, the bony protrusions on the monster's body would have pierced flesh in a half-dozen places. Instead, spikes shot out of the armour, puncturing the fergax's flesh. It staggered back and Jerrick turned on it as the sphere, snaked back down to slam solidly

onto the pole. Jerrick lifted the pole up and brought it down on the monster. The weapon buried itself in the fergax, which fell dead at a blow. As it did, Asano chanted out a spell behind Jerrick.

*“Suffer the cost of your transgressions.”*

A horrifying groan came out of Jerrick, who dropped his weapon and started stumbling around. The plates of his armour fell away, vanishing before they hit the ground. The skin of his arms and face revealed black veins and patches of dead, withered flesh. Thick, dark blood trailed down from his eyes and nose.

Dean and Clementson recoiled at the sight while Asano moved closer. No longer able to stay upright, Jerrick toppled to the ground. Asano held his hand out and channelled another spell.

*“Feed me your sins.”*

Red light again glowed out of Jerrick, now massively discoloured with blue, purple and sickly white. All the discolouration flowed out and into Asano’s waiting hand as he absorbed the afflictions, leaving only the feeble, flickering red of Jerrick’s cleansed life force. The black veins visible through his skin had vanished, but Jerrick was beyond resuming the fight.

“Help me with him,” Asano said to Dean, and they pushed him into a sitting position. Asano took out an iron collar and snapped it onto Jerrick’s neck, before feeding him a potion and lowering him back down.

“He’ll live,” Asano said. “He’ll need a few more potions, but he’s a tough one.”

“Is that a suppression collar?” Dean asked.

“That’s right,” Asano said. “They’re supposed to be restricted, but the bad guys seem to get their hands on them anyway. This one was used on a friend of mine when some cultists tried to sacrifice us. I borrowed it in case you turned out stropky.”

“You’re not going to kill him?” Dean asked.

“That was my inclination,” Asano said, “but when a man turns his dog on you, you can’t really blame the dog. Is he an adventurer too?”

“Yeah,” Dean said.

“Well, not for long, I’m guessing. Sorry about your monster.”

They looked over at the dead fergax, Jerrick’s weapon already vanished from it.

“It’s a summon,” Jerrick said. “A new one manifests each time I use it.”

“I see,” Asano said. He turned to Clementson, who was cowering off to the side.

“Do you think this guy will lend us a cart?”

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The god appeared in front of Jory's clinic without fanfare; a small, middle-aged man, with ordinary features and plain, brown robes. Nonetheless, power radiated of him, affecting the crowd gathered on the street. Sicknesses were dispelled and injuries healed. Everyone in front of Jory's clinic fell to their knees as silence washed over the crowded street. Into that silence came the clattering of a wooden object falling onto stone, and a single, startled voice.

"My foot grew back!"

The god laughed, looking over at the man who spoke out.

"You have a new foot," Healer said. "Please, stand upon it."

A scrawny man stood up in the middle of the crowd, looking immensely nervous.

"You came to this clinic," the god said, "but the alchemist here could not regrow your foot."

"No, er... your goodness, sir. He helped me with the pain, and found someone to make me a wooden foot. It worked pretty well. Enough to get me back working, at least."

"Did you go to my temple?" The god asked, as if he didn't know exactly what happened in his holy places.

"They said I didn't have the money to grow a foot back."

"Yes they did," the god said, his gaze turning to the Chief Priest.

"It is my way," the god said, "to give those who follow me the freedom to do what is right. If doing what is wrong is not truly an option, then doing good isn't a choice; it's just obedience."

The god moved forward until the knelt-down Chief Priest was looking at the bottom of the god's robes.

"My ways have allowed my followers to go astray in the past, particularly in these outlying regions," the god said. "Rarely, however, has one of my temples fallen so far, and so completely. You should be not only ready but eager to help those in need. Instead, you use the gifts I have given you to garner power and line your pockets."

The god turned to look at the sign for the clinic, then back to the Chief Priest. As he continued talking, his voice was rising to an angry pitch,

"The fact that the proprietor of this establishment was forced to step in where you fell short was miserable enough. But to then turn around and try and stop him from the good works that should have been yours?"

The god gestured and lights started floating up out of the bodies of his assembled clergy, Some were cubes of various colours, others smaller spheres. The people they flew

out of collapsed to the ground, moaning in pain. The cubes and spheres continued to float over them, connected by a tendril of light.

“Many of you have taken what I offered, yet turned so far from my will that you travel in the other direction! These gifts I take back, for there are none among you worthy. Those who are, you have driven or cast out. Those who looked only to serve, to give help to those who needed it. As we speak, I am bringing the true faithful from distant lands to take your places in my temple. Those who you once shunned will now be welcome.”

The god turned to looked at Neil Davone, giving him a warm smile.

“This includes you, young man. I know you have your struggles, but you bear them as well as any could ask, including me. Let any who would bar you from my holy places again answer to me.”

“Thank you, Lord,” Neil said.

“Lord...” came the Chief Priest’s voice, weak and pained.

“...mercy,” he begged.

“That you are not shunned from my temples and their services, as you have shunned others is mercy enough,” Healer said. “You may not serve me again, but we will see to your ills. If you have the coin to pay.”

“With our essences gone,” the Chief Priest begged, “we are crippled.”

“For that, I shall give you no salve,” the god said. “But you may turn to another.”

A second god appeared next to the first, being very different from his fellow. His dress was regal, with a long cape, a sceptre and a crown. He was young and handsome, but with a look of disdain and faint cruelty behind the eyes, not than anyone was looking. His aura washed over the crowd like a wave of fire.

The newcomer nodded acknowledgement to the other god.

“Healer,” he greeted.

“Dominion,” healer said back, cordially, then gestured to his clergy. “These are of no use to me. I think, perhaps, they are more temperamentally suited to your worship.”

Dominion crouched down in front of the Chief Priest, rubbing a portion of the priest’s robe between his fingers.

“Very fine,” he said, standing back up. “You have some seekers of power and privilege, here; not your sort at all. I’ll take them off your hands, if they’re willing to submit. I can replace those essences and awakening stones.”

“Yes!” the Chief Priest exclaimed. “I’m willing to serve!”

“There is no service in my church,” Dominion said harshly. “Choose carefully before you enter into it. I am not Healer. There will be no freedom to choose the right path. There

will be no freedom at all. Under me, you will obey or suffer. Or both, as I choose, because you will not enter my service. You will belong to me.”

The now-former Chief Priest gulped, but nodded. The other behind him mostly did the same, although some did not. With a wave of the god’s hand the spheres and cubes floating over those who capitulated shifted in colour before returning to their bodies. With another gesture, Dominion summoned an arched gate, through which could be seen the interior of one of his temples.

“Go!” he ordered. The former clergy of the healer got up and scrambled through the gate, which closed behind them. Dominion turned to the group gathered in front of the clinic door behind Rufus.

“Your friend Jason isn’t here,” Dominion said. Rufus, Gary, Farrah, Jory and Neil were all still kneeling, but looked up, startled.

“You know Jason?” Rufus asked, uncertainly.

“I love that guy,” Dominion said with a grin. “The ones who won’t kneel are always the most fun. Seeing what it takes to make them capitulate, to put that knee down.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Gary asked. Dominion turned his gaze full bore onto Gary, who trembled under the force of it. Gary defiantly kept his eyes locked on the god, forcing himself onto his feet. Dominion laughed, and the pressure vanished.

“That is where monarchs come from,” Dominion said. “I love them most of all. I’ll be keeping an eye on you, Gareth Xandier.”

Dominion turned to Healer, nodding a farewell and then vanishing, as if he had never been there are all. Healer turned to those who had not accepted Dominion’s offer. One of them spoke out.

“Lord! Please allow this humble sinner to seek atonement in your service. I was led astray.”

“You blame others for your failings?” the god asked.

“I was weak, Lord! The failing was mine!”

The god looked over the remaining people, then gave a slight nod. Heads bowed, they couldn’t see it, but they felt their god’s assent.

“The path to redemption will not be easy,” Healer said. “A lifetime of humility and service.”

The essences and awakening stones floating over them returned to their bodies.

“I have restored those powers I gave you in the past, but sealed them away. They will not be available to you, and may never be. This you must accept.”

“Thank you lord!” they chimed out.



Healer turned to Neil.

“Neil Davone,” the god said. “Please lead these penitents back to my temple. You will find good people waiting to greet you.”

“Thank you Lord!” Neil said, getting to his feet. He was soon leading away Healer’s remaining clergymen.”

The god then turned to Jory.

“Stand and see me, Jory Tillman,” the god said. Jory got nervously to his feet.

“I am moved by what you have done here,” Healer told him. “If you are willing, I will give this place my blessing and declare it a sanctuary for healing.”

“Um, that would be amazing,” Jory said, then his face plummeted.

“Uh, Lord Healer... there are some things we make here that you might not entirely approve of. I’d stop, but they pay for a lot of the healing research.”

Healer chuckled.

“I’m not going to begrudge people a little... togetherness jelly,” Healer said.

Jory led out a nervous noise, then nodded.

“Thank you, Lord.”

“Very good,” Healer said. “I will have people come to this place for rituals of sanctification. They will be careful not to disrupt your alchemy. And if you are willing, I will maintain a healer here. Your friend had not been as present as in the past, due to his adventuring commitments.”

“Thank you, Lord,” Jory said.

“Then we are done here,” Healer said, and turned to the gathered crowd.

“Good people,” Healer said. “Know that this place has my blessing.”

A golden wave shone out of him, passing through the crowd and spreading to the city beyond.

“All in Old City are healed,” Healer said. “Jory Tillman, you have no need to open your clinic today. Rest, and take people in tomorrow.”

Healer vanished, leaving silence in his wake. Some time later, a shell-shocked Jory, Gary, Farrah and Rufus were sharing a drink in the clinic.

“I’m going to need new labels,” Jory said absently.

“Labels?” Farrah asked.

“For the Rumpy-Pumpy Good Time Ointment,” Jory said. “I’m definitely calling it Togetherness Jelly now.”