

## Chapter 528

### The Pile of Disturbing Things

The fortress town was a tragic disaster. The gates were intact but the high stone walls were coated in deep gouges where the monsters had scrambled over them. Once the magic dome atop the walls had failed, the monsters had swarmed inside, turning a safe haven into a meat grinder. Inside the fortress town, buildings made of sturdy desert stone were half-collapsed, blood painting macabre murals across the pale yellow brickwork.

Jason's group of three adventuring teams searched the ruined fortress town for survivors but didn't find a single living aura. It was hard to sense anything at all with the pall of death left behind by so many souls departing their bodies in quick succession. The two healers, Neil and one from the local guild team, Paola, had been given the grim task of checking the dead for survivors hidden amongst them. That much death could mask the living aura of a normal ranker who themselves were barely alive. For that reason they also took Jason who had the strongest aura senses of anyone in the three teams. In the unlikely scenario of there being survivors not rooted out by the monsters before they left, Jason had the best chance of finding them.

Most of the dead were gathered in the town dormitories. The thick walls had held up for a time but eventually, the monsters had torn down doors and smashed through the heavy brick to get inside. For Jason and the healers, it was a painstaking and grisly task to sort through the bodies but their efforts paid off when they found a single survivor.

It was a young man on the verge of death, even Jason barely detecting his waning aura amongst the corpses. Neil and Paola performed a powerful healing ritual that brought the man back from the edge of death but left him comatose. Forcing that much healing magic into the body of a normal person was almost as dangerous as the wounds the magic healed. Neil and Paola successfully dragged him from the brink of death without overloading his body but he would remain unconscious for hours, possibly days.

As the members of the three teams finished searching their designated zones, they reconvened in the town square, one of the few open spaces in a fortress town where space was at a premium. With their stricken patient strapped into a floating gurney commonly carried around by healers, Jason, Neil and Paola expected to be the last ones to gather. This wasn't the case with Belinda, Farrah and Clive still absent. Jason could sense their auras, reading curiosity and worry from their emotions but no distress. Like all the adventurers, they were pushing down the horror they felt at the town of the dead so as

not to fall apart while potential danger was still around them. Since Belinda, Clive and Farrah weren't showing signs of trouble, the group discussed what they found from their searching as they waited.

"We have a problem," Neil said after explaining the unconscious survivor. No one else had found one.

"We didn't find anyone else," Paola said, "but every corpse we found in the dormitories was normal-rank. There might have been some amongst them with an essence or two but none with the full set of essences necessary to bring them up to iron rank."

The difference between the physiology of a normal person and an essence user was easy to spot at mid-to-high rank but less pronounced for low-rankers. As healers, Neil and Paola had the skills, powers and experience to reliably tell the difference, which was one of the reasons they'd been sent to the dormitories.

"Some of the silver-rankers might have gone up in rainbow smoke," One of Rosalie's team members suggested.

"Not all of them have bodies like ours," Neil said. "Proper training accelerates the process of the body becoming more magical, but the majority of the essence-users here were civilians. Even the silver-rankers were just core users with no adventurer training. Few, if any, would have their entire bodies dissolve."

"There are corpses scattered all around the fortress," Rufus said. "You only checked the clusters of bodies. Any essence users are more likely to have died trying to push back the monsters than hiding with the normals, so they're likely amongst the individual bodies."

"We had the same thought," Paola said. "We did some checking outside of the dormitories and found a couple, by which I mean actually two. There should have been many more. Even just some iron-rank civilians with farming or ranching powers."

"Unless there are a lot more corpses gathered somewhere I can't sense," Jason said, "they aren't in the fortress. Dead or alive, I would notice a bunch of essence users clustered together unless they're behind something that blocks aura senses."

"But that isn't the worst part," Neil added. "We checked the two essence-users we did find closely to see if we could find any clues as to what happened. At first glance, they looked like they'd been taken out by monsters, but the obvious wounds had been made after death. We think someone mauled their corpses to hide whatever really killed them."

"Why?" Humphrey asked.

“We were thinking necromancer,” Paola said. “Someone may have come in after the monsters came through, killed any survivors and taken away the essence-user bodies. Those are the most valuable to necromancers.”

“Then why leave any behind?” Rosalie asked. “Why not take them as well instead of spending the time to mask how they were killed?”

“We have no idea,” Paola said. “We’re just guessing.”

“Hopefully our survivor can give us some answers once he wakes,” Jason said.

“Will he remain stable if we linger here a while?” Rufus asked.

“He’s fine,” Neil said. “He just needs a lot of rest.”

“Then we go through the whole fortress,” Rufus directed, the other team leaders nodding their agreement. “It won’t be pleasant but we’ll see if there is some kind of sealed area that Jason can’t sense. In the best case, there are survivors holed up inside it that don’t realise we’re here after sealing themselves off.”

“Paola, Neil,” Rosalie said. “Check every single corpse to see if there are any more essence users and if we can learn anything more. If something strange is going on here, any information we take back to Rimaros will be valuable, even if we don’t know what it means yet.”

Paola and Neil nodded as Jason turned to where he sensed Farrah, Belinda and Clive finally approaching.

“We have something to add to the pile of disturbing things I’m sure you’ve all found,” Farrah said as they rejoined the group. “We’ve looked over the defence infrastructure and made an extremely unpleasant discovery.”

The trio had checked the defences because the discovery of the fortress town having been sacked by monsters was unexpected. The information they’d been given in Rimaros was that the town should have had sufficient supplies and resources to hold out for weeks, even in the face of increasing monster activity.

“Someone went to considerable effort to make it look like the defences were exhausted from overuse,” Clive explained. “That isn’t what happened, though. Someone with access to the control nodes drained the power from the defences and falsified signs of excess strain.”

“You’re certain?” Rosalie asked.

“We started by having Farrah map out how the defences should be operating,” Clive said. “We wanted to find out what went wrong. At first, it looked like the protective magic had been burned out through overuse, but Belinda picked up on the signs that not everything was as it seemed.”

“I’ve run enough magic scams to know when someone has been fiddling about,” Belinda said, drawing looks from Rosalie’s team.

“Once Belinda pointed us in the right direction,” Farrah said, “Clive was able to dig out exactly what was done.”

“I took measurements using some tools I have and recorded everything,” Clive added. “I can definitively demonstrate that someone sabotaged this fortress town from the inside.”

“You’re suggesting a traitor?” Humphrey asked.

“Oh, it’s worse than that,” Belinda said.

“What was done to the defences was neither a quick nor subtle process,” Clive explained. “It would take a significant portion of the town’s defenders to be in on it to hide this level of activity over the duration what we found would require. Even then, it would be a huge risk. The more likely scenario is that most of the town’s leadership and their staff were involved or at least complicit.”

No one spoke as the ramifications of what Clive was describing sank in. They all looked around the already horrifying remains of the town that was all the more sinister for what they had learned. There was no sound; neither the dead town nor the desert around it revealing anything but emptiness and death.

“Not a necromancer,” Jason said, breaking the heavy silence. “The essence users betrayed the town and left it to the monsters. The ones Neil and Paola found left behind were probably the ones who didn’t go along with it and fought the traitors. Their wounds were masked to hide the fact that they were killed by other essence users.”

“Let’s start searching all over again,” Humphrey said. “This time not just for survivors.”

“Be thorough,” Rosalie added. “This might represent some new threat. Any piece of information we uncover might be the one that saves lives.”

\*\*\*

The teams returned from their expedition and handed their report to the jobs hall. The team leaders, Humphrey, Rufus and Rosalie, had requested an immediate debrief which was swiftly approved when they revealed the circumstances. While they were informing the Adventure Society as to what they found, the rest of Humphrey and Rufus’ team portalled back to the cloud house.

Arabelle took the time to speak with the group, both as a whole and individually. She hadn’t been going out monster hunting as the church of the Healer and Adventure Society had her helping adventurers not lose their minds in the wake of recent events.

Most of Jason's companions had seen massive casualties amongst adventurers before. Many of them had been through the disastrous expedition where Farrah was counted amongst the dead, so the deaths during the Builder battle were still shocking, but something they could handle.

The massacre of civilians in the fortress town was something else. These were the very people whose protection was the core tenet of being an adventurer. Farrah and Jason had seen the massive death toll at Makassar on Earth and had already been working with Arabelle to process that lingering trauma, but it was new for most of the others. In the moment, in the fortress, they had been able to push it aside, but it struck them once they had downtime to spend in safety.

Clive was one of the hardest hit. He hadn't been part of the expedition where Farrah died or seen the population of a whole town fall to undead like Gary, Farrah and Rufus. The worst he had seen was the loss of his mentor during the previous monster surge and that had pushed him off the adventuring path for years until Jason pulled him back onto it.

Coming from a long talk with Arabelle, Clive entered Jason's spirit realm to look for him. Jason left an archway up permanently in the cloud house for his team and Jason himself to come and go as they liked. Unlike earlier iterations of the spirit vault, the archway that led into it emerged not at the centre of the realm but the outskirts, set into the dark walls by the bridge gate. The high walls were darker than obsidian, almost seeming to devour light.

Overhead, the sun shone from a clear tropical sky, a reflection of the day outside the spirit realm. Through the pair of massive gates forged of dark metal, Clive could see a bridge of shifting rainbow colours extended into the distance. It moved beyond the light coming from the sky and extended into a dark void, reaching further than even Clive's silver-rank eyes could make out.

Clive turned his attention to the realm inside the walls, which was set out like a garden palace or expansive parkland neighbourhood. Cloud building throughout looked friendly and inviting, linked by garden paths and covered walkways with open sides. Some pathways were made of clouds and others wood, while some were cool stone. There were even walkways that were ponds with stepping stones set into them.

Looming at the centre of the realm was a tower of dark smoky crystal. Within the crystal speckles of gold, silver and blue light shifted about, visible even from the outskirts like blood flowing under translucent skin. Atop the ominous tower was a massive cloud nebula in the shape of an eye; a larger version of the one possessed by Jason's avatar of doom familiar, Gordon. It was also a reflection of Jason's own eyes.

Turning his gaze from the sinister sight, Clive set out along one of the garden pathways. The gardens had different sections that he realised were derived from Jason's four essences. They were not split into simple quadrants but intermingled, running into one another across the span of the realm. Areas inspired by the blood essence were narrow, long and marked with vibrant red flowers, winding through the estate like veins in a body. There were arching trellis tunnels covered in the flowers, letting in just enough light that, walking under them, Clive felt like blood passing through an artery.

Moving into a cave entrance set into the ground, Clive descended into a natural stone tunnel on a wooden staircase wet from cave damp. Coarse sand had been adhered to the wood, providing plenty of grip. The dark essence was represented by a network of natural tunnels and caverns below the ground, offering alternate pathways around the spirit realm. The subterranean network was accessible through many cave entrances around the gardens, as well as stairways within the various buildings. The tunnels themselves were dotted with luminescent fungus that dimly lit the tunnels like stars in the night sky. Underfoot, more of the grippy wood was set in pathways over the natural stone floor to provide reliable footing.

The caverns were larger and brighter than the tunnels, the walls coated in luminescent fungus glowing with radiant, rainbow colours. The air was thick with polychromatic, glowing butterflies that would land on anyone who entered. The tunnels were like passing through the starry expanse of space, while the chambers were glorious nebulas, giving the underground areas a sense of space exploration. That was how Jason felt when he used the tunnels but Clive hadn't seen any *Star Trek*.

Clive roamed through the estate, more exploring than trying to find Jason in any hurry. Jason's presence was everywhere, giving an odd sense of him always watching, his presence looming like the tower at the heart of the realm. Although he had no reason to, Clive had the sense that if he wanted to find Jason quickly, he would do so almost immediately, as if the realm knew and understood his intentions.

Heading out of the subterranean tunnels, Clive found himself in one of the sections based on Jason's sin essence. It was a carefully manicured garden of black and white flowers with regimented pathways that navigated around with an oddly inefficient design. The layout seemed to be tempting the walker to step between paths that ran close to one another, which could easily be done by stepping over low flowers without causing any harm. The moment the mind drifted in that direction, however, an intense sense of danger welled up for no discernable reason.

The final kind of garden making up the vast estate was a complete contrast to the rigid landscaping of the sin essence garden. These areas were wild and untamed, with tight, meandering paths under a heavy jungle canopy. A sense of dread permeated and Clive was constantly seeing movement in the periphery of his vision; shadowy shapes amongst the dense trees and undergrowth. Whenever he tried to look at them directly they were gone. More than once he half-convinced himself he imagined it only for the movement to once more tease at his eyeline.

Of all the areas of the garden, the wild areas based on Jason's doom essence were the most ominous. While Clive felt completely safe, it was the safety of a man just found not guilty in court who had yet to be released from the shackles and jumpsuit.

Clive was taking the chance to properly roam about Jason spirit realm, which he had not yet done. Part of that was that it was an intimidating place. Jason had been evasive about the nature of it, simply claiming it was a power he had picked up somewhere. Amongst the team, however, Clive was the only one who had yet realised its true nature. He was roaming around inside Jason's soul.