

Chapter 84: Injury & Death

For the first time, Jason walked past the one-star contracts in the jobs hall to the two-star notices further down. It was a much smaller section, and looking further he saw the solitary three-star noticeboard had no jobs at all.

Looking over the notices, most were regular monster hunts with some kind of complication. The most common was a requirement to avoid damaging whatever valuable thing the monster had chosen to nest in.

Jason frowned as he read a certain contract. He took it from the noticeboard and over to the desk manned by an Adventure Society functionary he didn't recognise. The man looked over the contract, then up at Jason.

"You aren't allowed to take this contract alone," the man said. "You need a team; minimum three."

"I have some people in mind," Jason said.

In an Old City alleyway, two women struggled to move. One was unharmed but weighed down by the other, who was heavily injured. Her all-black outfit had long, bloody tears across the arms, legs and torso. The black mask that had originally obscured almost her entire head was ripped, with silver hair spilling out.

The uninjured woman was not strong but she was determined. With her friend draped over her, she kept moving forward. It was daytime, and the alley was close to the Broadstreet thoroughfare. They could encounter people at any moment.

"We have to stop this," Belinda said. "It's a miracle we haven't been caught already."

"We keep going," Sophie said, her voice strained with the pain. "If we can play this out long enough, Ventress will be forced to show her hand. Once she does, that gives us options."

"Do you not realise the condition you're in right now? You can barely move!"

"But I can move," Sophie said. "The Duke's household guard laid a trap, but now we know to be ready. His bronze-rankers can fight, but they can't chase worth a damn."

"The Adventure Society has been pressuring the Duke to stay out of it," Belinda said. "I haven't been able to find out why, but it's been good for us. That's over, now. The complaints from his high-society friends must have outgrown his unwillingness to push back against the Adventure Society."

"We plan around it," Sophie said.

“Do you even understand how lucky you were to get out of there?”

“This time it was luck,” Sophie said. “Next time will be preparation.”

“Next time you’ll probably get killed.”

“The Duke getting involved buys us time,” Sophie said. “Ventress can’t accuse us of slacking if we take extra time to adapt. There’s only so blatant she can be about setting us up. Whatever she’s up to, she won’t burn her reputation to get it.”

“You do realise she’s not the only one trying to set us up now,” Belinda said. “The pressure is mounting and old friends aren’t as reliable as they used to be.”

They reached a solid metal gate in a high wall. Belinda leaned Sophie against the wall and cautiously pushed on the unlocked gate to peer inside. There were a handful of labourers in the yard, moving materials through a newly made hole in the wall to the yard next door.

“Those adventurers aren’t here,” she told Sophie, “but there’s some kind of construction happening. Just stay there, and I’ll go get him.”

She ducked inside the yard, the workers not even looking up as she walked past them and into the back of the clinic. She saw Jory escorting a patient out of his exam room.

“...just apply the salve every morning,” he was explaining, “and you shouldn’t have any trouble through the day.”

“Jory,” she called out him.

“Belinda!”

Jory’s eyes lit up as he turned around, then narrowed on the blood staining her clothes. He quickly ushered the patient through a doorway.

“Janice,” he said through the door, “no new patients for the moment. No one is to come back here until I say otherwise, understood?”

He closed the door and rushed over to her.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“Not my blood,” she said. “Sophie is out back.”

“Show me.”

In an old city restaurant, Jason was served a dish of rice dumplings in the shape of a three-sided pyramid.

“They have this shape because of how they’re wrapped in the bamboo leaves to cook,” he said, picking up his chopsticks.

"I could never get the hang of chopsticks," Humphrey said as the waiter placed bowls of dumpling soup in front of Humphrey and Clive. Cheap and easily-replaced chopsticks were the primary utensil in the delta and most of Old City, but Humphrey grew up with silverware. Jason had been amused to discover the most common utensil in the high-society was the spork.

They chatted lightly over their lunch. Their empty dishes were taken away and replaced with a tray of fried, sticky rice cake.

"So what did you really want to talk about?" Humphrey asked. "I'm guessing you didn't just call us out for lunch, excellent as it was."

"I have a contract," Jason said. "Two-star. They won't let me take it without a minimum team of three."

"Minimum team?" Clive asked. "That means the danger is either large or unknown." Humphrey's face darkened.

"Unknown usually means it's killed an adventurer already," he said.

"That's right," Jason said. "A solo adventurer took a one-star contract for something called a marsh wyrm. The tracking on his badge recorded his death mid-afternoon, the day before yesterday."

All three men looked soberly down. They were all adventurers, and even the less-active Clive knew that death was always a possibility.

"Alright, then," Clive said. "So the job is to find the body and clear the monster?"

"Yeah, that's the job," Jason said. "Kill the monster and find the body. If nothing's left, then we at least bring back the badge."

"Not much to return to the family," Humphrey said, "but better than nothing."

"I looked up the marsh wyrm," Jason said, "and whatever's out there, I don't think it's that."

"No surprise, there," Humphrey said. "Monsters don't always turn out to be what they're reported as."

"What does your ability say?" Clive asked Jason.

"It says the monster that killed him," Jason said. "Which doesn't tell us what it is, but means there should only be the one."

Quest: [Contract: Fallen Comrade]

An adventurer has fallen in the course of their duties. Complete their task and bring home their remains.

- Objective: Eliminate the monster that killed your fellow adventurer 0/1.
 - Objective: Retrieve the remains of your fellow adventurer 0/1.
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“It could be a lot of things,” Humphrey said. “There are quite a few giant worm and serpent-type monsters that appear in the delta.”

“There are a few that could be mistaken for a marsh wrym,” Clive said. “At least by someone who didn’t really know monsters. Most people only know monsters that commonly spawn in their area, and usually by description. Most run before they ever get a good look.”

“If it took down an adventurer already, we can’t dismiss the danger,” Humphrey said. “Any monster strong enough to take down someone who went looking for a marsh wrym alone will be at the top of the iron-rank power scale, or maybe even bronze. It won’t be some lesser elemental that anyone could punch apart with sufficient determination.”

Not all iron-rank monsters were created equal. Their rank was a function of their magical density, not actual power. If bronze rank damage reduction and resistances were ignored, the most powerful iron-rank monsters were stronger than the weaker bronze examples. The difference was usually made up in numbers, with weaker monsters appearing in greater numbers.

“So,” Jason said. “Are you in?”

“Of course,” Humphrey said. Clive nodded.

“It could be any of us, someday,” Clive said. “If it’s me, I hope I’m not left at the bottom of a bog somewhere. Do you know anything about the adventurer?”

Jason nodded.

“I asked Vincent about him.”

“I’d like to hear it,” Humphrey said.

Sophie stood under the shower in Jory’s clinic. Designed to wash less-abled patients, the shower had no walls or curtains and was open to the room. Arms out in front of her, hands against the wall, she leaned forward, letting the water spray down onto the back of her head and neck. After several of Jory’s strongest potions, spaced out to prevent toxicity, all that remained of her injuries was the blood the shower was sluicing off her body.

When she emerged, wearing spare clothes provided by Jory, the alchemist shoved a large bottle full of red liquid into her hands.

“Drink it,” he said, bluntly. “Now.”

“What is it?”

“It will stop your blood from responding to tracking abilities,” he said. “I made it up while you were getting clean.”

She looked at Belinda standing behind him.

“What did you tell him?” Sophie asked her.

“Don’t tell me anything,” Jory said. “Then I don’t have to lie if it comes to that.”

Sophie looked down at the bottle in her hands.

“If I wanted to deal with you,” Jory said, “all I had to do was not help you. Drink it, before whoever did that to you arrives at my door.”

“Drink it, Soph,” Belinda said. “We need to get moving.”

She frowned at the bottle but drained it dry.

“Let’s go, Lindy.”

Sophie made for the back door, Belinda in tow. Belinda stopped at the door, looking back at Jory, still standing in the hall. Their eyes met and his hard expression softened at the apology in hers.

“Wait,” he said, ducking through a door and coming back with a leather satchel, which he handed to Belinda.

“Just some random medical supplies,” he said. “It’s all labelled.”

She gave him a sad smile as she took the bag.

“Thank you,” she told him, then walked out the door.

On the top floor of the Adventure Society’s administration building, the director’s office occupied a large space in the corner of the building, the windows giving a panoramic view of the campus grounds. The director, Elspeth Arella, was looking out those windows as one of her officials made a report. Her name was Genevieve, and Jason would recognise her as the elderly elf who questioned him during his promotion hearing.

“Lord Vordis is refusing to say what the package contained, beyond that it was very valuable.”

“And the guards who set the ambush,” Arella said. “They were from the Duke’s household guard?”

“Yes,” Genevieve said. “Six bronze rankers and triple that in iron ranks.”

“And she still got away,” Arella chuckled. “The Duke won’t like how that makes his forces look. This thief is a resourceful girl, lucky for us. Set up a meeting with the Duke. I want to be very clear that the moment he fobbed this issue onto us it became an Adventure Society concern. He can’t take it back now.”

“He’s already sent a pre-emptive response,” Genevieve said.

“I’ll bet he has,” Arella said.

“He claims that since you have failed to complete the contract after the better part of two months, and refuse to raise the contract to the bronze-rank level, then he is duty-bound as the city ruler to intervene.”

“Send our response when you set up the meeting,” Arella said. “Make it clear that he is the one that placed this issue in the hands of the Adventure Society, that the Adventure Society will handle it when and how we see fit. Should he further intervene, either openly or covertly, then the city of Greenstone will be in violation of their arrangement with the Adventure Society. All adventuring activity will then cease until a new arrangement has been negotiated, confirmed and enacted.”

“Are you certain you want to take it that far?” Genevieve asked.

“He’s not stupid enough to renegotiate terms before the original agreement runs out,” Arella said. “Not with me.”

“But do you want to draw that arrow from the quiver?” Genevieve asked. “You can only make that threat once or he’ll have grounds to go over you to the central branches.”

“I need Lucian Lamprey gone,” Arella said. “So long as he’s in charge of the Magic Society here, trying to clean up our own house is bailing water from a sinking boat. Until the hole is plugged, the best we can do is stop things from getting worse.”

“And you think this will get rid of him?”

“If things drag out for long enough. He’s a man unused to restraining his appetites. Sooner or later, he will make a mistake we can use to oust him. When his patience comes to its limit, he will act.”

“So long as the thief remains at large long enough for him to do so,” Genevieve said.

“Yes. Which is why catching her must remain the responsibility of iron-rankers, with no interference from the Duke’s people.”

“Madam Director, do you know who this thief is?”

“Of course not,” Arella said. “That would be unprofessional.”

“We’re getting close,” Humphrey called out over the sound of the airboat. He pointed at a rise of earth in the marsh and Clive steered the airboat up onto it. Humphrey was guiding them with a crystal orb that lit up in the direction of the badge they were tracking.

He stepped off the airboat onto the soggy bank, Jason and Clive following after. They followed the tracking orb onto higher, drier ground, Jason hacking their way through tight scrub with a machete. The blade was enchanted for the task, a common tool that every adventurer learned to take into the delta. They progressed until Humphrey called them to a stop.

“Oh,” he said.

All three looked at the orb in Humphrey’s hand. The indicator light was pointing straight down into the wet, heavy earth.